

# Hannah Wilke, in Her Prime

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*New York*

Sporting nothing but high-heeled sandals and a small handgun, the nude Hannah Wilke prowls the room. In slow-motion action, she flips her long brown hair off her shoulder and slinks past the deserted school room, the school yard, the bathroom, the rooftop, the dumpster. She points her shiny gun and stalks her prey—and we are ensnared.



*Self-image*

Wilke carried out this bit of performance art for the camera in 1978 in New York, where it was first shown and can be seen again now at her gallery, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts (up through Oct. 26). It's the midcareer work of an American artist who in her teens began to photograph herself in the nude and who made the female body—her own, specifically—the subject of her life's work, which ended in 1993 when she died of cancer at the age of 52.

She worked on this project, titled "So Help Me Hannah," from 1978 to 1985. In the 48 black-and-white "performalist self-portraits" (her husband, Donald Goddard, held the camera), her audacity—and her appealing body—get our attention; her attractive face, and obvious sense of humor, hold it, as we try to figure out just what she's up to. She's playing a role, maybe James Bond's Pussy Galore but without the tease. Her look is not come-hither or pouty, but sometimes deadly serious, others mildly amused. In one shot, she huddles on the ground, arms wrapped around her legs, gun in hand, staring up at us, faintly frightened but defiant. Is her art about her body or her mind?

If the photos aren't clear on this point, 100 individually framed quotations from various artists and critical writers help to focus Wilke's intentional ambiguities. Across the room, they all come together, as 10 video monitors play five different versions of a similar performance, with Hannah's monotone voice-over repeating the wall quotes. Here she again graces an empty room with the heels-and-gun-only look; in a slow-motion dancelike series of poses she writhes, twists, reaches out and lolls on the floor, ending up in a sprawl of death as the last quote rings in our ear.

In 1985, Wilke told an interviewer: "In the 'So Help Me Hannah' performance I am nude for 28 minutes, and after a few minutes people forget the nudity and begin to listen to what I have to say in the quotations by Nietzsche, Hitler, Oldenburg, or other artists and historians."

For me, first seeing the piece in 1996, it did work that way. But it had a very different effect on people who saw it in the '70s, when it was first exhibited. Wilke was one of the first and most controversial of the artists who used their own bodies in the creation of feminist art. Sex and violence were certainly not new to art then, but the way in which Wilke presented them was. Exploiting her own body to comment on the history of exploitation of women in both high and popular culture didn't go over that well with either the mainstream art world or the mainstream feminist camp.

"Narcissistic" was the popular judgment of her work at the time. And the second room of this exhibition gives it some credence. In this 1976 work, "Through the Large Glass," she performs a seductive striptease behind Marcel Duchamp's plate-glass sculpture "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even"; stripping away a man's white silk suit she plays the roles of both bride and bachelor, once again wresting back control of the female body.

Those who said she was just an exhibitionist insisted that she couldn't or wouldn't use her body in her art if it weren't traditionally beautiful. Were they ever wrong. And Hannah proved them so with her last project, "Intra-Venus" (first shown posthumously, and now on view at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography), a series of large color portraits of herself, once again nude, as she loses her life to lymphoma. Now she is bloated, bald and violated by intravenous tubes, but she is ever the in-your-face exhibitionist, exploring the realm of the forbidden.

"The image of the artist was always male," she once explained, and his subject female. "But why should we have this mind-body male-female duality? The mind and body are one, so I tried to make art an expression of that connection."

Her photos are deliberately of pedestrian quality, the video production values low, so that no slick technique, no beauty besides her own, detracts from Wilke's message, which is the sole aesthetic of her art. That message was always ambiguous, if not ambivalent. However, viewing her work from a hindsight of almost 20 years, one can finally get past the scandalous aspects of her art and reflect on the conditions that compelled her to make it. This work is a product of its times, and in many ways it seems almost laughable now, it's only because women's roles as artists, and their artistic freedom, are taken for granted. But for that very fact, we have Wilke and a few other fearless pioneers to thank.

The nude Hannah Wilke gets the last laugh after all.