



Hannah Wilke

by Katerina Gregos

Hannah Wilke's recent exhibition, six years after the artist's death from cancer, provided us with an opportunity to re-evaluate the work of a multi-faceted artist who was one of the driving forces in feminist art of the 1970s. Throughout her career, Wilke centred on the exploration of female identity and experience, focusing on the construction, representation and consumption of the image of woman.

This exhibition included sculpture and other work from the first twenty years of the artist's career, from the clay box-shaped sculptures of female and phallic imagery of the sixties and continuing through her trademark chewing gum 'sculptures' of the seventies to her clay sculptures of the eighties. In these, one can trace Wilke's preoccupation with biomorphic forms that allude to sex and female genitalia; throughout there are references to the experience of female sexuality, and articulations of a very specific feminised sculptural idiom in which process and gesture are equally as important as form.

The 176 *One-Fold Gestures* (1973–4), displayed on the floor at Ronald Feldman, are a series of understated pink ceramic vaginal sculptures; the pieces are similar but no two are alike. In contrast to the minimalist geometry and austerity so prevalent during that time, these objects are fleshy, sensuous, luscious, curvilinear and boldly suggestive of female sexuality. Here Wilke unabashedly reveals that which is normally concealed, and makes public a woman's intimate experience of her body in a corporeal sculptural landscape that is as visually enticing as it is upfront. In *Rosebud*, on the other hand, a large wall piece in which delicate layers of latex flow over one another in an accumulation of flesh-like folds that seem to develop organically, Wilke is more

suggestively sensual, hinting at a kind of abstracted eroticism. *Needed Erase-Her* is also a comment on gesture and variation. Wilke has transformed grey erasers into a variety of vulval forms. Applied to old postcards of cities and monuments, they mark what the artist considers to be predominantly male spaces and structures with very private symbols of female presence.

The show also included works from Wilke's well-known *S.O.S. – Starification Objects Series*, photos of Wilke herself in a variety of glamour-girl poses that reference fashion photography and pin-ups, and attempt to challenge stereotypical representations of femininity while also commenting on the commodification of desire. Wilke's otherwise picture-perfect image is disrupted by a multitude of vaginal, scar-like shapes sculpted from chewing gum; affixed to her body, they stigmatise it and disrupt the pleasure of the gaze.

Despite being relegated to a strictly feminist discourse, Wilke's work reveals a plurality of strategies and methods which continue to be relevant today in the post-feminist nineties. Her use of a wide range of media, from video and performance to photography and sculpture, makes her one of the first cross-media practitioners. In her use of autobiographical references and personal narrative strategies, in the deployment of her own body as a fetishised object and her willingness to expose herself and make art out of her life, she reflects concerns that lie at the forefront of artistic production today. In a formal language that is specifically female, she manages to transcend the issue of sexual politics, pointing to the wider complexities of gender and identity. Profoundly humanistic, Wilke's work is an affirmation not only of her sex but of life in general. It may be seven years since her death, but Wilke's work and courage continue to haunt, intrigue and inspire.

Hannah Wilke was at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 16 October – 13 November

HANNAH WILKE,
Rosebud, 1976, latex rubber and metal snaps, 61 x 234 x 20 cm. Photo: John Lamka. © Donald Goddard. Courtesy: Ronald Feldman, New York