

## Hannah Wilke

Hannah Wilke was pretty, like my mother. I spend a lot of my time trying hard to say what else my mother was.

Just recently I was able to experience decades of Wilke's work at New York's Ronald Feldman Gallery. Her thirteenth solo show since the gallery started representing her in 1972, the year I was born. The show, *Force of Nature*, was filled with images of her, most were photographs she directed others to take of her, including her final work, *Intra-Venus*, which is and isn't a performance, she's literally dying.

In one of these portraits she looks straight at the camera, she's already dramatically altered by her illness, her eyes are exhausted, her mouth hangs open, her nostrils are plugged with cotton, her hair has fallen out.

"Thrush," my wife, Rose, tells me from over my shoulder. Rose is a nurse.

Wilke died a year later at 52.

I stepped back from the portrait and went toward the desk and started asking questions about the show, I was just floored, seeing all of her work together like that. I don't collect art, I make art, but sometimes, at a show like this, being as moved as I was, I'll imagine choosing a work I would actually want to take home and live with, it's a very different way to think about an artwork, suddenly a work you thought you liked isn't a work you'd actually want to spend your life with, and it's that, your life will happen around this work.

As I walked away from the desk and toward another work, *Why not sneeze...*, a bird cage filled with empty orange pill bottles, also made the year before she died. I told Rose that I could live with any of these works, any of them, even that terrifying final photograph of her. I could wake up to that, live with it, see it everyday and it would always matter to me.

It's my favorite way to see works of art, in homes and lived with.

The first time I visited Marguerite's collection. I was happy and even relieved when I saw one of Hannah Wilke's works on paper, I hadn't seen much of what was there yet, Marguerite had just acquired a few of my works from Harlan Levey Projects and I was curious about the collection, seeing the Wilke was all I needed to know. And from there, of course, it soon became clear to me that I was in a very special place.

The work I saw was *Untitled #4*, 1976, pieces of twisted chewing gum pressed to single sheets of rice paper and arranged in a grid. These are tiny sculptures Wilke made with her mouth and fingers, sexy and playful, but also sly, and even shrewdly sophisticated.

Receiving the images of Wilke's works in the collection, I knew I was going to see the gum work, but I hadn't seen any of the other works on view at Marguerite's. The ceramic sculptures and the latex wall work were familiar to me, but I'd never seen the watercolor or the early drawing.

The drawing was fascinating, 1965, she's only 25. There's echoes of DeKooning, who I read actually bought a work of Wilke's, which is interesting. I always see things in abstractions, I can't

help it, I was seeing male and female anatomies in the drawing, I asked a curator friend, Megan Reich, who studied Wilke a lot, was I crazy, it's all sex to me, she said I wasn't crazy.

Hannah is always singularly Hannah. There's sex, there's humor, there's pathos, defiance, and then sometimes, suddenly, delicacy. Like the little untitled watercolor, these champagne colored petal-like plumes.

The show at Ronald Feldman made it clear to me that to fully grasp Wilke's contribution you have to start at the end. With the *Intra-Venus* work. Then work your way back again. It's a total commitment.

Now knowing Marguerite better than I did that first visit, of course there would be Hannah Wilke's in her collection. This mercurial figure of the crazy 60s, 70s, 80's, and sadly only a little of the 90s. She was pretty and so much else.

Taken all together these works do exactly what Hannah herself did, they're nakedly performative, they move, dance, shift, there's a filmic rhythm to each of them, they fold, twist, soften and harden, bend inward and outward, you can feel the work think, emote. You're witnessing a mind connected to a heart.