

New York Galleries: What to See Right Now

A survey of Hannah Wilke's self-portraits; Tyree Guyton's "Faces of God" series; and Tiona Nekkia McClodden's tough and tender sculptural objects.

Jillian Steinhauer | November 13, 2019



The artist Hannah Wilke in "Intra-Venus Series No. 5, June 10 and May 5, 1992," part of a series documenting her physical and mental transformation while undergoing chemotherapy. Credit Donald and Helen Goddard and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

Hannah Wilke

Through Nov. 30. Ronald Feldman Gallery, 31 Mercer Street, Manhattan; 212-226-3232, feldmangallery.com.

The signature work of the second-wave feminist artist [Hannah Wilke](#) has also been the source of its criticism. In the 1960s, Ms. Wilke used vaginal imagery for empowerment, sculpting various materials into shapes that evoke the female anatomy; today, they can seem essentialist about gender. She also performed and posed nude, the radicalness of which was somewhat undercut by how conventionally attractive she was.

These criticisms, although valid, fall away before her art. What struck me most in the exhibition "[Force of Nature](#)," which provides a two-room overview of Ms. Wilke's career, was the range of emotions she elicited. She reveled in and grappled with pleasure, but always with a dose of humor, as in the famous "S.O.S. Starification Object Series" (1974-82), in which the artist, appearing topless with bits of vulva-shaped gum stuck to her body and face, looks both seductive and ridiculous. And there's searing pain in "[Intra-Venus](#)," made while Ms. Wilke was battling lymphoma. (She died of the disease in 1993 at the age 52.) These final self-portraits are excruciating.

Yet, even in her depleted state, the artist retained her magnetism. Ms. Wilke's gaze is so direct and uncompromising, it turns her viewers into witnesses. The show is a testament to a career and life spent going — as a text in the series "So Help Me Hannah" (1978) states — "beyond the permissibly given."