

Feminist Avant-Garde Of The 1970s, The Photographers' Gallery Galvanising

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I wish I could take you all by the hand and give you a guided tour of this show. If I could, honestly I would because, simply, I can't remember the last time I was so inspired by a photography show. At every point in this impressive exhibition, I felt galvanized and emboldened. If, like me, you are a tired feminist, wounded and depressed from years of battle, this is a show that will put the fire back into your veins.

The exhibition itself is vast in content - there are over two hundred works

of art on display here from forty-eight artists. It's of such a size that it takes over two floors in the Gallery. But more than this, the works tackle big themes. It's all here, from representation of the female form, ownership, domesticity and sexuality, to violence and female identity.

And don't for a second think that somehow because these are female artists directly tackling cultural issues that, in some way, these are lesser works. No way. We'll have none of that casual misogyny here, thank you. This was a period of creation and innovation, as well as protest, and that is ably represented here.

There are big names, of course. I knew I was going to love seeing more photographs from Francesca Woodman; I could immerse myself in her haunting works for hours. And the likes of Cindy Sherman, ORLAN and Hannah Wilke are well represented with some of their more iconic images. And there's one of the most famous feminist works on display too with Martha Rosler's masterful A-Z of domesticity and violence, [*Semiotics of the Kitchen*](#), running on loop. And after seeing some of Alexis Hunter's work at Tate Britain, it's great to see more of her 'burn it all down' style here.



But one of the real pleasures in the show is seeing more from less familiar names.

I was particularly drawn to video footage of performance art pieces from Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz. In the last few years of the 1970s, these two women collaborated on a series of large-scale public actions in LA addressing violence against women, and the sensationalism and sexualisation of many of the victims of the Hillside Strangler, a

serial killer who raped and murdered many women in the city at the time.

Male violence against women remains prolific today - as does the media frenzy in sexualising and eroticising these crimes - and as I watched the footage of these powerful performances where performance meets protest - a stream of anonymous women shrouded in black parading through public squares - I thought, where are these protests today? Is it time to bring back feminist performance art? Is this a way to relight those fires?

In fact, for all the impressive photography on show, it is the film in this exhibition which is its most surprising highlight. Lydia Schouten's *Sexobject* is another example of this. Here, Lydia has strapped herself into a web of bondage ropes; in front of her a wall with 'how does it feel to be a sex object' graffitied across it. And Lydia whips this wall again and again, tiring noticeably with every single strike.



That these artists should seek to include so much of themselves in their works should not be a surprise. Just showing yourself and your body as it really is is, for women, a mighty political act. And there is nothing in this world more politicised than the female body - men seek both to desire and control it, legislation exists to restrict the autonomy women have over it. It is both a means for creating new life and a prison that it is impossible to escape.

It would be possible to write a piece about each work, such is the depth of quality in this display. However, not only would no one ever read all those articles I would write (and I'm not sure where I would find the time to do it!) but I would much rather you visited the show, explored it and connected with those pieces that resonate the strongest with you.

Suffice to say that The Photographers' Gallery has curated a terrific show that demonstrates how fertile this era was for female artists and their willingness and ability to use their work to engage on gender roles and sexual politics. It

was a ground-breaking time but it also ably demonstrates the power that art can have, and the role it can play in not just tackling issues but shaping the discourse around them too. Provocative stuff? Absolutely. Pioneering works? Unquestionably. Could we do another wave of this for the 21st century? Hell, yes.

The Photographers' Gallery, London, to January 15, 2017

Admission £4 (free before 12 noon)

Image credits:

1 Hannah Wilke S.O.S. Starification Object Series. One of 36 playing cards from mastication box, 1975 Post card Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon, and Andrew Scharlatt /Bildrecht, Vienna, 2015 / SAMMLUNG VERBUND, Vienna

2 Renate Eisenegger Hochhaus (Nr.1), 1974 © Renate Eisenegger / SAMMLUNG VERBUND, Vienna

3 Karin Mack Zerstörung einer Illusion, 1977 © Karin Mack / SAMMLUNG VERBUND, Vienna

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Hannah Wilke

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS

Fifteen years after Hannah Wilke's death, her oeuvre still confounds the desire to find in it a purely critical impulse. Though now firmly installed in the feminist canon (however oxymoronic such a concept may be), Wilke doesn't rest easily there. Some still argue that she developed a practice whose bedrock—though veined with resistant acumen—consisted primarily of whatever was necessary to sustain its own gaze-baiting operations. But it is less Wilke's detractors than her advocates who, in some ways, continue to register the clearest anxiety about her work. Indeed, those that most vehemently railed against her supposed navel-gazing or essentialism have for the most part made their reductive cases and moved on. On the other hand, supporters, even while arguing against accusations that Wilke's practice was narcissistic, tend nonetheless to invoke the terms of that concept, thereby to some degree reinvigorating the very narrative they hope to lay to rest.

Yet one body of work is nearly universally acknowledged for its rigor and seriousness, to say nothing of its complicating any easy ideas of self-interest. Wilke's series "Intra-Venus," 1991–93, first exhibited at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in 1994—one year after the artist died of lymphoma—was met by critical acclaim and something else rarely seen: a kind of critical recanting. In large-scale photographs of a vulnerable, ill, alternately hopeless and hopeful Wilke, critics saw clearly what had been more ambiguous in the artist's earlier images incorporating her then young, lithe, easily "beautiful" self. Astonished that the artist continued to ruthlessly document the texture of her life and body even as they both came undone, critics posited—with what might be read as a kind of strange relief—that in seeing the end of Wilke's lifework, one could radically resee the earliest. Commenting on "Intra-Venus" in *Art News* in 1994, one reviewer went so far as to claim that "in the context of Wilke's art as a whole, it not only becomes more meaningful but also cancels out the narcissism of her earlier work, imbuing it with more purpose than could be seen at the time."

"Intra-Venus" is comprised of several parts: the aforementioned color photographs, as well as drawings, objects, and sculptures by Wilke. But the project had another component, too: over thirty hours of video, shot by Wilke, her husband Donald Goddard, and various family members and friends, documenting the last two and a half years of her life. Wilke always intended for this to be part of "Intra-Venus," but it has taken until this year for the *Intra-Venus Tapes* to



Hannah Wilke,
Intra-Venus Tapes,
1990–93, 16-channel
color video, 1 hour
57 minutes. From the
series "Intra-Venus,"
1990–1993.

find the light of day, owing to funding issues and other obstacles. Now finally installed as Wilke had wished, in a grid of sixteen small monitors, the tapes chronicle the day-to-day living involved in dying. Here is Wilke talking with friends, playing with her pet birds, vomiting, crying, laughing, bathing, primping, posing, marrying Goddard.

Each channel has its own sound track, but rather than always being audible simultaneously, sound often seems to move from one monitor to another, so that viewers find themselves leaning in for snippets, banal and breathtaking, seemingly dropped and then whisked away. Watching Wilke moving closer and closer to death—and very bravely giving this progress over to documentation—is tremendously moving and difficult. But to privilege her decision to present this process of her life as her art—which is to say, to insist that it is somehow more serious or inherently critical than the rest of her work—is to discount the terror and rawness of her early experiments (which were, for the record, met with more than a little aggression) or, worse, to harness it for some teleology only borne out in tragedy and aesthetic breakdown. For in "Intra-Venus," however heartbreaking it is, Wilke intentionally enacts nothing inherently more "meaningful" or any less "narcissistic" than before but continues to resist such hard-and-fast distinctions.

—Johanna Burton

Hannah Wilke, in Her Prime

By TAYLOR HOLLIDAY

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 wrestling 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.

ART VIEW/Roberta Smith

An Artist's Chronicle Of a Death Foretold

HANNAH WILKE SPENT MUCH of her life posing for the camera in ways that raised eyebrows. In 1954, when she was just 14, she had her picture taken wearing nothing but her mother's mink stole, vamping coyly in front of a wall on which her name was spelled in big letters: Arlene H. Butter.

By the early 1970's, after art school and a failed marriage, Wilke began taking pictures of herself stripped to the waist, her well-shaped torso dotted with little folded shapes of chewing gum that had a none too vague clitoral aspect. (These tiny objects, miniaturized versions of Wilke's sculptures made of fired clay and then latex, were part of her pursuit of a "formal imagery that is specifically female.")

Over the next two decades one became accustomed to seeing photographs of Wilke, usually partly or entirely nude, in magazine articles and books about feminist art or performance art, as well as in her gallery shows and on her exhibition announcements. Good-natured, almost girlishly awkward, these images blended feminism, narcissism and exhibitionism in unsettling ways. They seemed to be little more than the artist's enthusiastic exploitation of her own dark-haired good looks.

■ Eyebrows may elevate once more over the photographs Wilke made during the two years before her death, from lymphoma, early in 1993. And if they do rise, the heart will probably go with them, right into the throat.

Working with her second husband, Donald Goddard, Wilke left a searing record of her final illness. It consists of nearly a dozen large, brazen-as-ever color self-portraits that dominate her posthumous exhibition at the Ronald Feldman gallery in SoHo (through Feb. 19). In a bit of characteristic Wilke wordplay, the show's title is "Intra-Venus" — the goddess

In a dozen large self-portraits that combine honesty and artifice, Hannah Wilke left a searing record of her final illness.

of Love on medicinal drugs. The stark power of these images is nearly physical; it can keep you hesitating at the door, reluctant to step into the gallery.

In them, Wilke's beauty lies in waste, but her spirit is strong, as is her desire to keep on working or living, whichever comes first. As always, her artistic materials are her own life and body; her goal, self-exposure and the concomitant unease it arouses in the viewer. But now she has company — the specter of her own death — which adds a new dimension to her courage and her art.

Are these last Wilkes art or documentary? Are they good or just sensational? They tend to push such questions aside brusquely with an unusual combination of honesty and artifice. In them Wilke, shown nude or partly dressed, alternates between ignoring death and staring it in the face, while at the same time refusing to obscure any signs of its approach. As she strikes her poses, sometimes imitating the Old Masters, sometimes her own work, her face and body give a full account of the ravages of disease and treatment.

In many instances her head is bald, her body swollen, her face puffy, her eyes sunken, her skin darkened by chemotherapy. Tubes extend from her chest and arms; ban-



Dennis Cowley/Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

"July 26, 1992/February 19, 1992 No. 4," a Wilke diptych on view at the Ronald Feldman gallery—A simple pride of being.

dages, the result of painful bone marrow harvesting, pad her spreading hips. In one image, she mutely sticks out her tongue, so the camera can record how its surface has been split open by chemotherapy. The larger-than-life scale of the images makes the facts of her condition unavoidably palpable. (They virtually eliminate, and therefore underscore, the esthetic distance operating in similar works, like Cindy Sherman's made-for-the-camera grotesqueries or Andres Serrano's morgue pictures.)

The photographs are dated and frequently juxtaposed in diptychs that contrast emotional and physical states, usually from bad to worse. In one work, an image of the artist as a smiling Greek caryatid, standing nude with a vase of flowers crowning her thinning hair, is juxtaposed with one taken several months

later. Here she sits immobilized, swollen almost beyond recognition, a white shower cap on her seemingly hairless head, her bare chest more trussed than bandaged. Heavy with sadness, she looks right at the camera as if to say: "Look. See what I'm going through."

■ In another diptych, Wilke spreads her manicured hands coquettishly across her face in a pose typical of her earlier work, except that now no long dark tresses complete the effect. The second image shows her head and shoulders wrapped in a blue blanket, like the Madonna; her eyes are lowered, her ashen features so still they seem more like sculpture than living flesh.

There is plenty that is unbearable about

these images, plenty that makes one want to turn away. Yet something about Wilke's presence is steadying and soothing. "You looked at me then," she seems to say. "Well, look at me now." Her challenge makes us consider once more, the way women are objectified by society and discarded as they become old or ill.

But it also invites us to look at the essence of her art and her self — which was not her beauty, or her liberated sensuality or her narcissism. Rather it was an extraordinary degree of self-love, a simple pride of being that is difficult for anyone, but especially women, to muster. It fueled Wilke's art throughout her life, and in the end it flared into a torch with which she illuminated her farewell performance.



Hannah Wilke, June 10, 1992/December 10, 1991, #5, from "Intra-Venus," 1991-93, two panels, chromagenic supergloss prints, 71½ x 47½".

NEW YORK

HANNAH WILKE

RONALD FELDMAN
FINE ARTS

"Nowadays us pretty white girls have to watch what we say," Hannah Wilke remarked when I first met her several years ago. The triumph of her final exhibition, and of her entire career, is that she never heeded this advice. "Intra-Venus," 1991-93, is a microcosm of the forms and concerns of Wilke's oeuvre, as well as a document of the last few years of her life during which she underwent treatment for lymphoma.

The images that quite literally dominate the exhibition are the 13 larger-than-life-size self-portraits, done in collaboration with her husband, Donald Goddard, which depict Wilke at various stages of her illness and treatment. Most often grouped into diptychs or triptychs, these photographs are unsparing and severely test the viewers' endurance. A particularly arresting diptych shows Wilke at an early stage of her treatment with a shirt tied around her head and a bright-red tongue sticking out of equally red lips, with an exaggerated half-laughing/half-screaming expression, alongside an image of her, head tilted back to reveal cotton plugs completely closing and distorting her nose, her open mouth holding a tongue that is a mass of blood, loose skin, and pus. Perhaps the most chilling is a single image of Wilke staring directly at the viewer, long wet strings of hair coming down over her head and face, revealing her mostly bald scalp. What separates these photographs from other artists' portrayals of disease and impending death is the seamlessness with which they fit into the body of

Wilke's artistic production.

Wilke chose to begin her 1989 retrospective at the University of Missouri with a nude photograph of herself at age four, and one of her first works of art was a self-portrait, again naked, at 14. Wilke used her body in the guise of pinup, Playboy centerfold, and classical goddess. This was part of a complex discourse that refused to deny the pleasure of both narcissism and of being the object of voyeurism, while maintaining control of production and representation. But two sets of earlier work that directly presage the "Intra-Venus" series more obviously reference the harsh social realities that underlie these presentations of herself. In the "S.O.S.—Starification Object Series," 1974-82, Wilke photographed herself with her body covered by her signature folded vaginal shapes made of chewing gum. She referred to herself as the "S.O. (Starification Object)" in recognition of the fragility and the consuming nature of the bubble-gum fascination with beauty and celebrity. The "So Help Me Hannah Series: Portrait of the Artist with Her Mother, Selma Butter," 1978-81, juxtaposes Wilke—bare chested, fully made up, and with a come-hither expression—beside her mother, whose bare chest is marked by a long mastectomy scar and lesions, looking shyly away from the camera. Wilke covers her chest with small metal objects, "scars" she called them, "To wear her wounds, to heal my own."

While the photographs in "Intra-Venus" form the last link in a consistent chain, the drawings and sculptures construct a parallel dialogue with other kinds of artistic production. A box made out of a wire birdcage and plastic medicine bottles and syringes is a witty reference to Marcel Duchamp's *Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy?*, 1921, while a series of exquisite

abstract drawings made from the artist's hair as it fell out from chemotherapy give new meaning to the notion of process. Two matching, lead-alloy neck blocks (used during radiation treatments) perform a function Wilke had often set for her work: using gesture to turn Minimalism into Abstract Expressionism.

To critics who often denigrated her work for being too narcissistic or exhibitionistic, Wilke had and deserves the last word, "It was risky for me to act beautiful, but the scars representing the ugliness of society sometimes went unnoticed. People often give me this bullshit of, 'What would you have done if you weren't so gorgeous?' What difference does it make? . . . Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical 'ugly.' Everybody dies."

—Andrew Perchuk

Hannah Wilke, 52, Artist, Dies; Used Female Body as Her Subject

By ROBERTA SMITH

Hannah Wilke, a sculptor and Conceptual artist who made the body and female sexuality the subject of her work, died yesterday at Twelve Oaks Hospital in Houston. She was 52 and lived in Manhattan.

She died of complications from lymphoma, said her husband, Donald Goddard.

In the late 1960's and early 70's, Ms. Wilke startled the art world with beautiful sculptures made of latex or ceramic whose layered and folded flowerlike forms were both abstract and yet highly suggestive of female genitalia. This fortune-cookie-like configuration became the artist's signature; it was sometimes small and made of homey materials like chewing gum or laundry lint, or it could be larger and painted with Abstract Expressionist brushstrokes. These forms could hang on the wall, or be marshaled in great numbers across the floor, or be stuck directly to the body of the artist herself, as they were in some of her Conceptual photographic pieces.

In some ways, Ms. Wilke was part of the Post-Minimalist soft-sculpture esthetic that emerged in the early 1970's and that included artists like Eva Hesse and Keith Sonnier. But she brought to this esthetic a stronger sense of the erotic and an often witty political edge. Striking in appearance, she forthrightly made herself the primary subject of her videotapes, performance pieces and photographs, often posing nude or partially clothed in ways that ridiculed the role of the female nude in art. While some critics called her work narcissistic, others saw it as probing the mechanism of narcissism and voyeurism.



Les Wollam

Hannah Wilke in the 1970's.

In the late 1970's, Ms. Wilke's involvement with the female body became even more personal when her mother contracted cancer and the artist began to photograph the physical ravages of the disease and its treatments. In 1986, when cancer was diagnosed in Ms. Wilke, she began a series of daily watercolor drawings of her face, her hands or flowers. With the help of her husband, she also turned the camera on herself, documenting her illness in a series of large-scale color photographs.

Ms. Wilke, whose original name was Arlene Hannah Butter, was born in New York City on March 7, 1940. She earned a bachelor of fine arts degree



"B.C. Series," a 1988 watercolor self-portrait by Ms. Wilke.

and a teaching certificate from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia in 1962 and taught sculpture at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan for many years. Since her first one-woman exhibition in 1972, she has been represented by the Ronald Feldman Gallery in Manhattan.

Her work is represented in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Jewish Museum in New York

City, the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, the Milwaukee Art Museum and the Allen Art Museum in Oberlin, Ohio. A retrospective of her career was organized at the University of Missouri at St. Louis in 1989.

In addition to her husband, she is survived by a sister, Marsie Scharlatt of Los Angeles, and two stepdaughters, Katie Goddard of Minneapolis and Nellie Goddard of Chicago.

Hannah Wilke

*Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street
Through Oct. 7*

Like Ronald Jones's sculptures, Hannah Wilke's latest works deal with illness, but in Ms. Wilke's case the illness is her own and it is deeply felt and movingly expressed. Since the 1950's, she has been making sculptures and has produced photographs, films and drawings that deal with issues of sexuality and, in particular, with images of women. Ms. Wilke has appeared in many of her own works. Narcissism, voyeurism and feminism have been among the themes of central importance to her and she has addressed them in ways that are both biting and funny.

In 1986, Ms. Wilke was diagnosed as having cancer and around that time she began the series of watercolors that are on view in this show. They are self-portraits composed of swirling, multi-colored lines. Some of them cohere into an anguished expression, others look more at ease. Each of Ms. Wilke's watercolors was done on a separate day. Together they form a diary of unusual perception and vivacity. It is as if, by making these works, Ms. Wilke was continually rejuvenating herself.

The show also includes, among other things, photographs of Ms. Wilke's mother, Selma Butter, who underwent treatments of chemotherapy that left her bald. The artist has fixed, underneath the photographs, sketches of birds that affectionately caricature her mother's appearance. To Ms. Wilke, cancer may disfigure but it does not dehumanize. Her show is filled with compassion and dignity.



Lisa Kahane

"B.C. Series," April 24, 1988, a watercolor self-portrait by Hannah Wilke at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

HANNAH WILKE

—Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

ENTITLED "Support, Foundation, Comfort," this remarkable show of photographs and abstract polychrome sculpture was dedicated to the memory of Wilke's mother, Selma Butter, who died of breast cancer in 1982. The juxtaposition of the seemingly unrelated mediums told volumes about what it means to be both an artist and a woman.

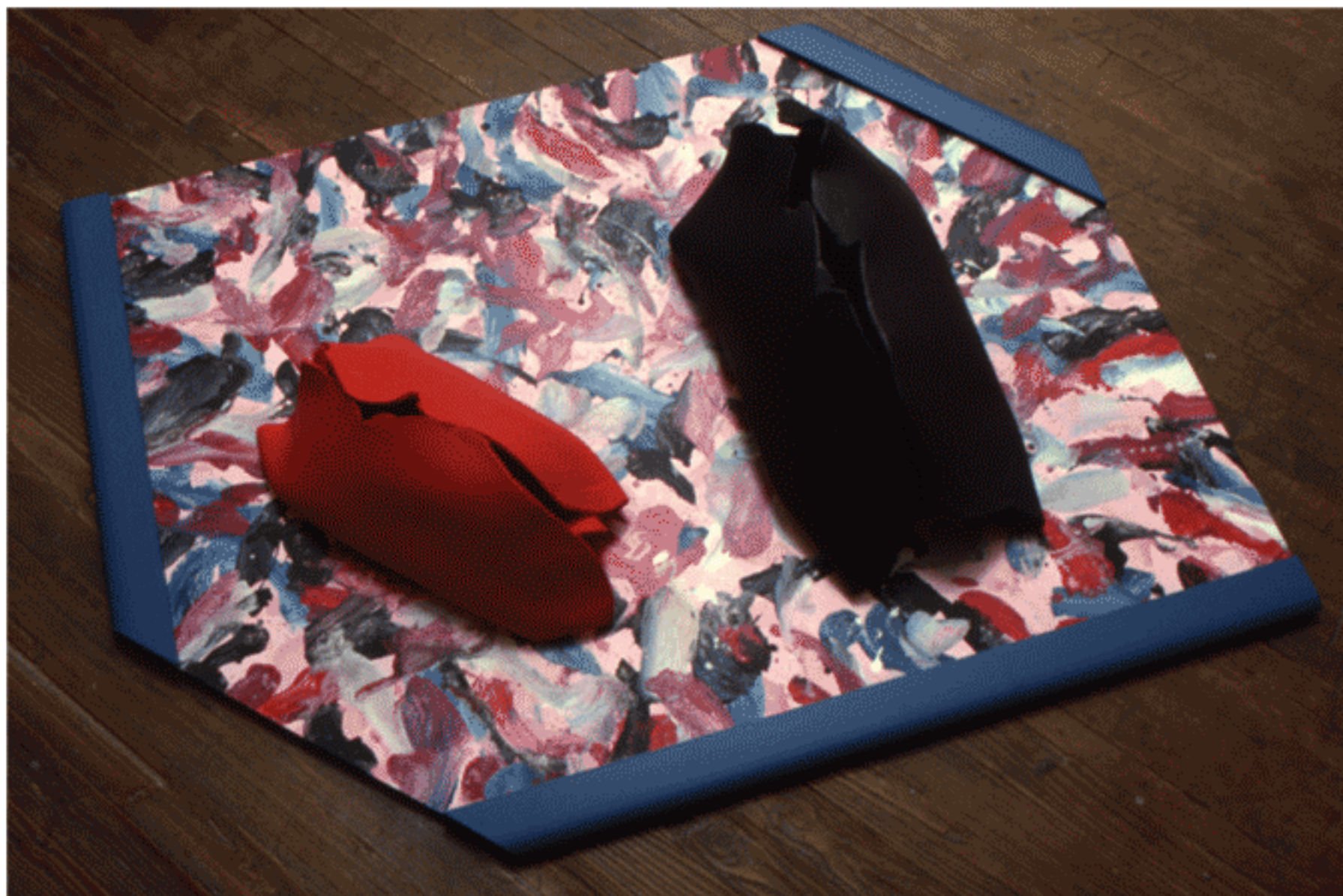
Part of the "In Memoriam" series, *Support, Foundation* (1983) consists of eight tabletop pieces, each of which is composed of two elegantly curved podlike clay forms on a polygonal hardboard base. Each combination of base and sculpted forms is painted with lush daring colors—pinks, aquas, violets, reds, yellows, blacks and creams—sometimes spattered or speckled, sometimes matt, sometimes brushed on with abstract-expressionist abandon but ordered by hard-edged stripes at the borders of the bases. Likewise, the much larger floor pieces in the "Of Relativity" series (1980-84) exploit the contrasts and affinities of one, two, three or four folded and painted forms to the rich painting of their geometric bases.

Bypassing the traditional categories of carved or modeled sculpture, Wilke rolls her clay into flat, round discs. She folds

the pieces by hand into forms that are unique despite the similarity of their facture. Anyone familiar with her earlier work will recognize allusions to female genitalia, yet there are also allusions to a myriad of natural objects, floral and even vegetal.

If the sculptures evoke the generation of life through the female principle, the photographs come to terms directly with the relationship of mother to daughter. Unflinchingly, Wilke photographed her mother in her hospital bed dressed up in a pretty nightgown and smiling for the camera, somehow responding to the love and concern of her daughter and acting as Wilke's collaborator and helpmate to the very end. Only in an occasional side view—taken perhaps when she was unaware—do we see sadness and bitterness in the old woman's face.

Likewise, Wilke did not hesitate to include a large Cibachrome diptych—a beautifully colored, erotically suggestive portrait of herself, her bare breasts decorated with gunlike ornaments—next to a photo of her dying mother, whose mastectomized chest is ornamented with the sores of the recurring cancer. This may not be easy to take, but it is courageous work that says something important about ideals of beauty and the ways that women are valued and devalued in this society. —R.B.



Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, from "Of Relativity" series, 1980-84, acrylic and ceramic on hardboard, 48 by 84 by 12 inches. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

D. JAMES DEE

Feminist ideas play a key role in the art of HANNAH WILKE, soloing in New York for the third time at Ronald Feldman, 33 East 74th Street, and MARY BETH EDELSON, a recent transplant from our nation's capital, who now has her first one-woman show in New York at AIR, a women's co-op at 97 Wooster Street. Wilke is an ingratiating abstractionist with a developed sense of style, while Edelson is a Conceptualist whose work conveys more than one message. Both present works that incorporate photographs of themselves (yes, nude), in which they strike poses that deliberately allude to traditional sex objects or archetypal goddesses.

Wilke, like her good friend Claes Oldenburg, specializes in soft sculpture, latex-and-metal reliefs (about the size of place mats) that she mounts in rows on gallery walls. Her seductively tactile constructions remind many people of vulvas. Gallery-goers with less limited imaginations might also think of heads of lettuce, corsages of "shattered" carnations, and cloth rosettes. In order to make her "rosettes," Wilke pours colored latex (of the consistency of pancake batter) onto a plaster of Paris surface. When the "pancakes" have set, she gathers about 20 of them, fastens them together with metal snaps, then pins the cluster of

latex leaves to the wall. Fifteen of these "rosettes" in faded-looking tints of yellow, blue, and pink, line one wall.

In addition to the latex-and-snaps pieces, Wilke presents other series of works that incorporate a multitude of chewed gum (looking like candy dots on sheets of paper) or picture postcards, adorned with platoons of kneaded erasers. She finds still another use for gum in a prototype for a "mastication box," a game containing 36 playing cards, chewing gum—and photographs of her topless self, embellished with wadded gum "beauty spots." Wilke, who has the most eloquent bare shoulders this side of Rita Hayworth, sees herself as a liberated woman who does not need to deny her own beauty. She compares the wadded gum ornamentation to African scarification designs. However, she spells it "starification." (Through October 11.)



THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MARCH 24, 1978

By JOHN RUSSELL

Hannah Wilke (Ronald Feldman Gallery, 33 East 74th Street): Not many works of art made in this century have as vast a bibliography as the large transparent work by Marcel Duchamp that is called "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even" and has been for many years in the Philadelphia Museum.

Yet not one of those learned explainers has had the wit to do what Hannah Wilke lately did: to see what actually happens when a beautiful woman gets on the far side of the Duchamp and takes off all her clothes.

Miss Wilke volunteered for the job, all bachelors were kept at bay, the entire event was put on film, and we can see the result at the Feldman Gallery. Like the other videotapes that make up the bulk of the show, this one is very well photographed and not at all exhibitionistic. Marked *adagio* throughout, it leaves us with the kind of satisfaction that we got from a first-rate short story in the days when the short story seemed to be one of the highest forms of literature.

For further confirmation of that, see "Intercourse With . . .", which has to do with the way in which the stumbling announcements of an answering machine can return to haunt us. Through April 1.

HANNAH WILKE, Ronald Feldman Gallery; NIELE TORONI, John Gibson Gallery; KEITH SONNIER, Leo Castelli Gallery downtown:

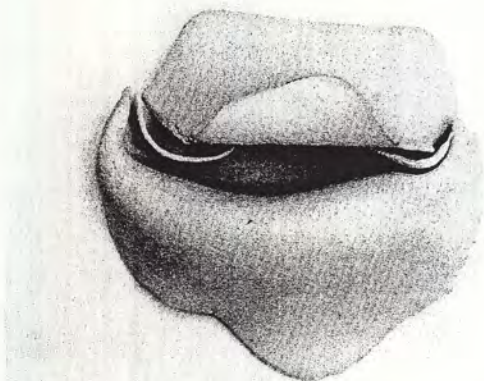
"Since sexual issues still frighten, and male superiority still flourishes leaving cunt queens quite lonely . . . could we possibly find a better name for my kittens?" HANNAH WILKE charmingly asks this in reply to *Art-Rite's* recent question to several women artists: "Do you think there is a shared female artistic sensibility in the work of female artists?" Nancy Graves, Sylvia Stone, and Joan Jonas said "No!"; Laurie Anderson and Judy Chicago hedged; and Agnes Martin rejected the question. But Hannah Wilke's answer is the one I remember. It's the

one I tell friends. And that's the point. I *remember* it! Like it or not, I can never look at Wilke's sculpture in the same way again. Irrespective of whether it's her earlier large latex wall hangings, or her present small terra-cotta and lint folds, or her video gesture pieces, her rhetoric has stuck on her art. She may, or may not, live up to her claim to be a "Pubic Princess of the new movement Pubism," but every time I see her work I think of pussy.

I don't give a shit about radical differences between men and women's art — the more androgynous the better — so I enjoy immensely Wilke's outrageous and witty rhetoric and the way it enlivens quite traditional sculpture. Just as I like her narcissistic infatuation with her own unquestionable good looks in her video here. I also remember her going on stage at the recent Joseph Beuys lecture and doing a nice "We should touch each other more" number as she held out her hand to him — The American Feminist meets The German Socialist! Great theater! To me Wilke's rhetoric and personality are inseparable from her art. The more personality she can get in it the better. Myth, I'm gradually learning, is not outside artworks to be ignored but actually part of looking at them. Perhaps the more myths artists get round their "dumb" objects the better?

What's interesting about Wilke's present show is how her rhetoric changes the work. Knowing what she's said, what are you to make of her beautifully made, pink, ragged edge, "one-fold-gesture" terra-cotta sculpture, of which there are 176 equally spread over the floor? Looking like hollow cabbage forms with turned-over edges, the group of single pieces occupies a floor area about 8' x 12'. Ranging in size from finger to palm scale, the pieces can be read two ways. You can either read them as metaphors for genitalia or as Process sculpture — one fold, two fold and so on. Wilke would clearly like both.

Wilke explores aspects of the terra cottas in an even more Process way with her double-fold lint pieces, of which 12 are in a soft line, *again* on the floor — although I don't know whether I should read anything into that. Subjugated kittens perhaps? Unlike the *hard* single-fold terra cottas — only soft in a Bernini-like appearance sense—these lints look soft, and feel soft. You can, if you like your kicks vicariously, play around with them, because they're just two bits of lint loosely draped in crotch forms. Made, I understand, from lint col-



Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, 1973, terra cotta dipped in liquitex.



Hannah Wilke, *Gestures*, 1974, videotape.

lected from red and pink towels from Wilke's clothes dryer, à la Joel Fisher, each piece of lint is a beautiful faded pink or red. The lint folds are nice, casually fragile, sensuous things.

Although there are other things in the show, I like the terra cottas and lints best. I don't understand the rationale of the geometric layouts. A parody of the regimentation of women as sex objects? Seems too obvious. Obviously what interests Wilke most is the idea of *folding*, although I don't know what comes first, folding in art, or folding in life. Clay, lint, erasers and even cookies are all folded with loving care. But there is a problem with disembodied folded genitalia in art — as in life. If Germaine Greer is right, people persist in loving people not shapes. And to be erotic sex should have a context. Cunts without women and cocks without men tend to be boring. You avoid all the interesting questions like "Who?" "Why?" "When?" etc. Although Wilke's objects are a step in the right sexual direction, the most erotic questions are still raised verbally.

Erotically, Wilke's video *Gestures* were more successful — or "hornier" in America, and "randier" in England — than the sculpture. Why? Well she's actually in them for a start. The video is probably the best thing in the show, because by being in the pieces, using just her head and hands, she gives the folding gestures, particularly, more meaning. Stroking, kneading, preening and slapping her face were interesting but the folding mouths gestures were the naughtiest. Because she's sensuously breaking a cultural rule and that's one definition of erotic. Pushing at her lips and then folding them back to expose the under-

side, very slowly, and deliberately, as well as pushing her tongue out were powerful images. Using her mouth as a surrogate vagina and her tongue as surrogate clitoris, in the context of her face, with its whole psychological history, was strong stuff! Like a tasteful 42nd Street 'spread snatch,' but thankfully at the other end of the body. Hannah Wilke with the video appears to be moving into areas of sexuality hardly begun to be explored.

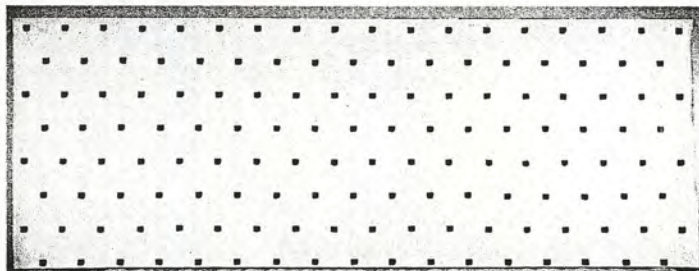
Wilke's position in the art world, then, is a strange paradox between her own physical beauty and her very serious art. She longs to fulfill her sexuality in an almost Marilyn-Monroe-like way; but her attempt to deal with this dilemma within the woman's movement has an air of touching pathos about it.

American artists of both sexes will have problems with the single brush-stroke paintings of NIELE TORONI because it's difficult to fit him into any category. Toroni has been doing the same thing for the past seven years — exactly the same thing! In Bernar Venet style of a five-year strategy and then out, Toroni's only difference is he's serving life with the system he adopted in 1967. But times have changed. If he'd shown these paintings in 1967, the reception might have been different. Throughout those seven years separated from dramatic developments in the States Toroni has used a static system to paint by. Static, in the sense that although there might be variables of location or material, the principles stayed the same. Toroni's system is that he uses the same size brush to make single marks, the same distance apart, on any available material. That's it! Claiming no emotional preference for color

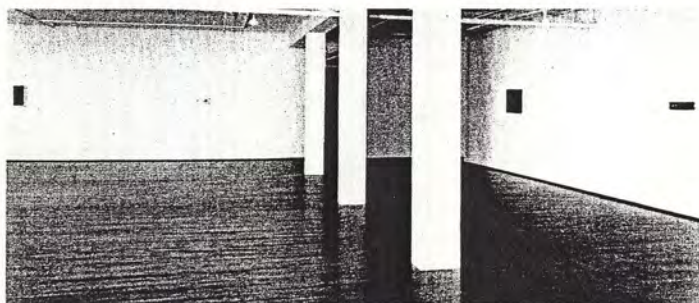
Toroni chose a No. 50 brush in 1967 and he's been repeating its mark at regular 30 cm intervals on different surfaces, including both canvas and walls, ever since. (I take this on trust.)

Toroni still comes up with nice things, almost in spite of a system unfortunately accepting architecture as part of

its ideology. (One painting "jumps" a door, and another "folds" on the floor doing dire things to the rigor of the brush-marks.) Toroni though has one very nice big red painting about 6 feet by 15 feet on white, unstretched cotton duck. Casually tacked to the wall, with lines of red gloss marks (No. 50 brush at 30 cm



Niele Toroni, *Untitled*, 1973, enamel on unstretched canvas, 6'6" x 18'.



Keith Sonnier, *Amplified Local Time: Radio Installation—Part I*, 1974.

intervals, of course), it makes the show well worthwhile. You don't care what generated it. Visually it takes you on to other levels. I also like the smaller paper pieces in the back room, and even more the small books of *single* marks. I wonder what part of Toroni's system decides the size of a work?

Even though I'm aware of his sizable reputation for other things, I consider KEITH SONNIER'S early flocking pieces his best. Sympathetic to Sonnier's use of videos as a "historyless" medium par excellence, I've never understood what he's about. Respected but not understood. Perhaps it's my bias against the general tedium of video in a gallery situation, which few videos except, say, Wegman's stories, Serra's game theories, or Accorci's confessions avoid. I thought Sonnier used video more to generate *static* images — as a present-day Rosenquist of video. Sonnier's video with its fragmentary juxtapositions of sliced, tinted, positized, negatized elements seems a way of generating beautiful visuals. For this reason, I can only watch bits. The bits of *Animation 1* I saw look and sound like a self-orchestration of what appeared to be a computer print-out screen; I thought it beautiful, not demanding. There are voices giving instructions, discussing and changing the color, shape, location, axis, etc. of lines of computer numbers and shapes on the screen. Color video as color video is just beautiful; you could have Mickey Mouse there and it would look good. Print-out screens, like airport ones, are also beautiful! Sonnier's animations look like a computer taking a visual inventory of itself: adding, subtracting, deleting, superimposing and so on. Plenty of voice-over: "Initial C, preparing, zero, zero, zero, Start, Stop. Play," or more ordinarily "We still have to keep this formation." All in all, too McLuhanish for me. Beautiful, but a bit empty. Sonnier extracts large, stunning red and green prints from the video.

Sonnier's radio piece — a sound equivalent of video feedbacks — occupying the whole front gallery is simpler and more effective. Scrambled sound is more interesting than scrambled images, if a bit simplistic. Walking into the huge gallery and having your eardrums viciously attacked by four car radios, turned on loud, coming at you from each of the four walls is great. The only stipulation Sonnier made, I understand, was each pair of radios should be on the same channels; and they should face each other. You have the same channel on the east as the west wall, and the same, but different, channels

on the south as on the north. You're in the middle of soft fighting against hard rock for your attention. Auditorally it's pleasantly stupefying, and visually—the radios each with a square speaker spread out and perched on the wall, like a dog on a chain—is powerful too.

— JAMES COLLINS

HANNAH WILKE: THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

MARK SAVITT

Hannah Wilke, S. O. S.
(Starification Object Series),
1975. Photo Les Wollam. Courtesy
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.



By now everyone is quite well aware that Hannah Wilke does cunts. What her show at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts will reinforce is the wide range of her interlocking concerns and the multi-level evocative quality of her work.

The *Ponder-r-Rosa* (1974) latex wall pieces use opaque, roughly circular modules arranged in a number of ways. The most satisfying are the first in the series in which the modules form circular clusters which float on the wall. These are further grouped by color into sections that become circular, square, and triangular arrangements. Unlike her earlier, more translucent latex and snaps works which sagged down with the burden of gravity deeply expressed, these works dot the wall with light and color. Like floating disks denying any sense of weight, they remind one of water lilies swimming in the

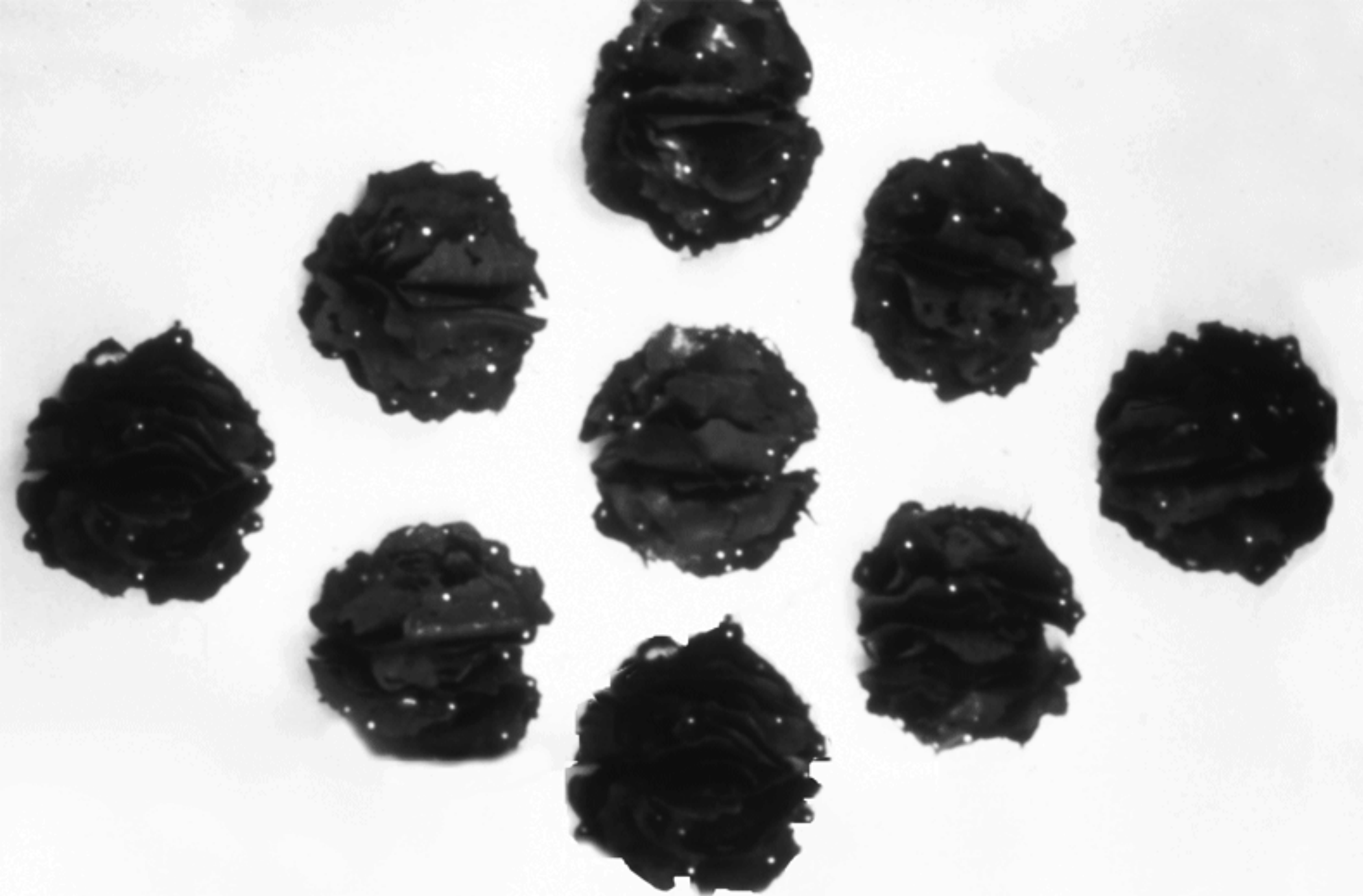
expanse of the dematerialized wall, as the wall becomes both a literal structural anchor and a metaphorical reservoir of space. They also have a playful quality reminding one of pastel-colored candy dots on huge rolls of white paper.

Another more recent member of the series transforms the circle into a sculpted line. The green color with orange-speckled accents of the pieces, folded one above another, confirms one's desire to read this piece as a stem complementing the flowers. Taking up an idea embodied in her 1972 *Chocolate Pancakes* (in the collection of Claes Oldenburg), the new piece drops the anal associations of the earlier work to deal more playfully with associations to organic forms. At the same time, Wilke maintains a more assured formal rigor.

Her childlike playful attitude is most fully apparent in her bubble gum system S.O.S. in which a delicately colored curve of the chewed materials, evoking perhaps a disembodied nipple, the head of an erect penis, a clitoris, or a collar, is put on a piece of paper. In this manner, an evocative, composed form is fashioned by the artist with a perfect economy of means. It takes more effort to chew the gum than it does for Wilke to transform it into an art object. Noting the many hundreds of these curves produced, one sees that it is with the obsessive determination of an Abstract Expressionist that she achieves the purity of planar shape. Her new work, as pure embodied gesture, achieves the goal of

immediacy of Abstract-Expressionist desires without the labored look of many Abstract-Expressionist sculptural works. Going beyond the existential torment of action painting and the cool indifference of Pop and Minimal art, Wilke's work exudes a kinky come-on, an engaging wistfulness which may well define the positive pole of 1970s sensibility.

Wilke explains that her art is "seduction." In her S.O.S. performance, she sits semi-nude and flirts while she has her audience chew for her. Wilke then proceeds to decorate her body with the bubble gum "stars." In the ceremonial aspects of the piece and in her treatment of her body as a decorative surface, the work relates to African cicatrization



to achieve liberation.

In reading the recent *Art-Rite* issue on painting, one is struck by the humanistic tone of many of the artists' statements. While they are by no means becoming sentimental, there does seem to be a renewed concern with the communication of human experience. While anti-illusionism is still championed, artists no longer seem interested in maintaining a militant stance against an academic painter's conjuring tricks. Instead, there is much talk about allusionism, perhaps a new catchword for 1970s art ideology.

In this respect Hannah Wilke's works are exemplary. Rather than representing cunts, cock heads, flowers, stems, or breasts, her terra-cotta folds, kneaded erasers, *Ponder-r-Rosa* series, and bubble gum curves allude to one's experience of their shapes and textures when encountered in nature. Using elements of the joke—Freud's powerhouse of compacted allusion—Wilke explores a range of evocative images and presences which affirm with a new sense of openness the purr humanistic pleasure principle (Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, September 13-October 11)

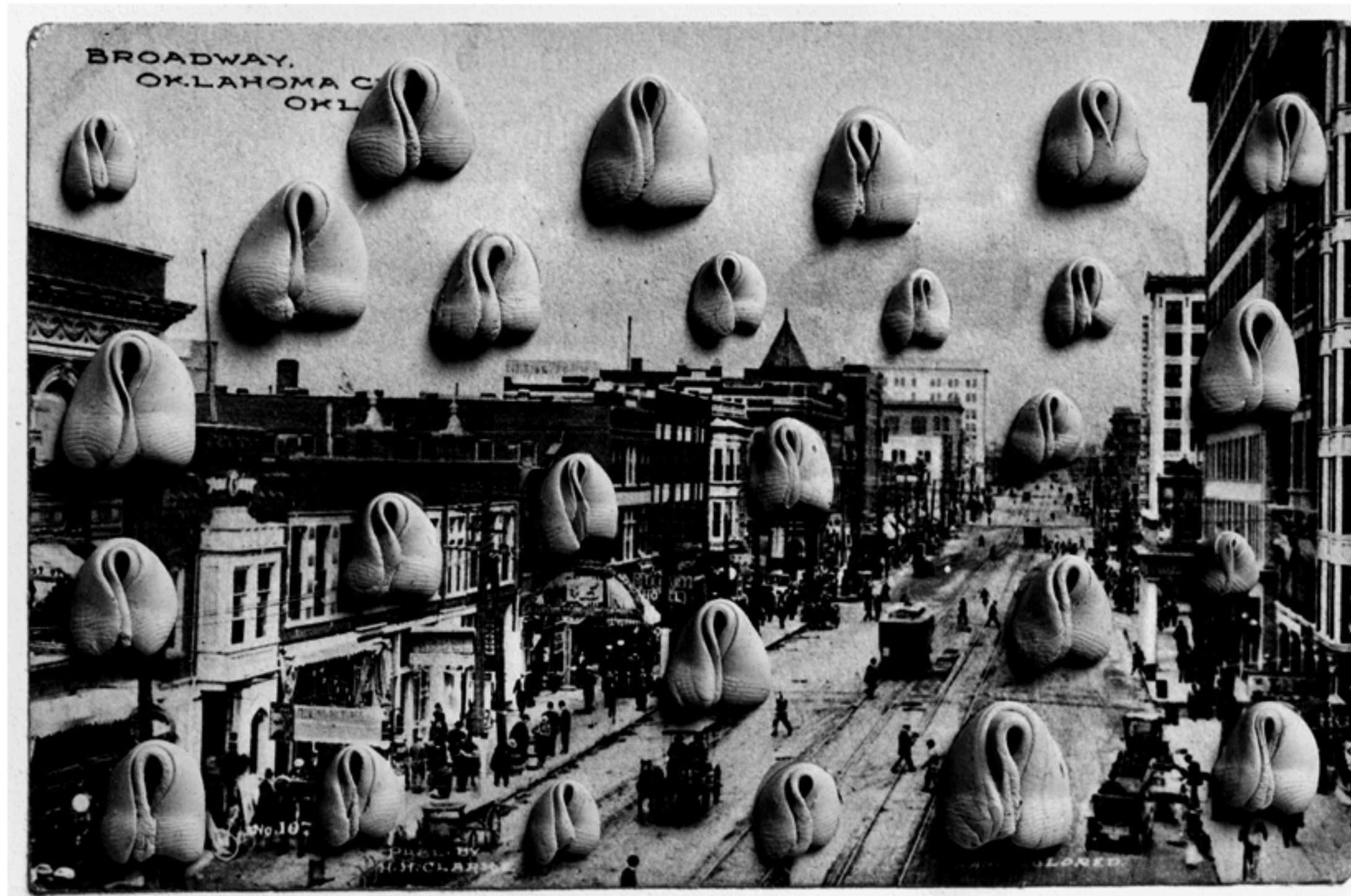
decoration, a reference held in mind by the artist. The dual nature of the African custom (it enhances beauty and is a sexual come-on, and also relates to the status of the woman behind the markings) is reflected in the seductiveness of Wilke's performing persona and the playing with women's roles as evidenced by the poses recorded on the playing cards. The performance only alludes to one's real inner scars. Since the "stars" are removable, Wilke experiences (and gives) more pleasure than pain.

In her last New York show, Wilke exhibited a series of kneaded erasers whose somber, drained gray tone and minute obsessiveness exhibited a sort of morbid humor (contained as well in the puns in the titles *Need It-Erase Her, Need to Erase Her*) expressive of our culture's anti-feminist stance. In her new drawings she puts some life into these works by sending them out into the deep perspective of old post cards, thereby causing Dada-Surrealist disruption of scale and meaning. The erasers pour out en masse into an otherwise deserted street scene invading the landscape. Like alien creatures in a sci-fi film, they overtake the sculptural base, thus wreaking havoc on our sense of limits and bounds. Wilke is an artist of transgression challenging our cul-

ture's veneer of high seriousness and offering an anecdote—pure pleasure.

Wilke, who, unlike fellow soft-sculptor Claes Oldenburg, is "for an art that sits on its ass in museums," fantasizes, repeating the performance process in the Museum of Modern Art's projects area where she could gleefully hand out gum to young chewers. One imagines the liberating aspect of Wilke's pleasure of offering being countered by the reprimanding reaction of hostile parents, "Didn't I tell you never to accept candy from a stranger?"

Indeed Wilke herself is often the content of her art. Her activities in a variety of media often relate directly to this. In addition to *S.O.S.*, one sees Wilke's face in her first videotape *Gestures* (her body in a series of new tapes made with the cooperation of Paul Tschinkel), one hears her voice in her telephone tapes, and one sees her do a campy crucifixion in sandals and loincloth at the Kitchen. By manipulating the image of a sex kitten (female sex object), Wilke manages to avoid being trapped by it without having to deny her own beauty



Hannah Wilke, *Broadway-Oklahoma* (Kneaded Eraser Postcard Series), 1970. 3 1/2 x 5 1/2". Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

HANNAH WILKE is clearly involved with the sensualist approach to sculpture. In her first one-woman exhibition after years of crafts-world obscurity as a ceramist, she shows remarkable assurance and facility. Her sensibility and her material seem to have fused perfectly and immediately into one strongly expressive whole. Wall sculptures of fleshy pink latex sheets hang on pushpins, bunched in groups of overlapping, snap-fastened flaps. They are so lusciously tactile that it is all but impossible to resist the urge to run their soft, spongy petals through your fingers. The five works range in coloration from a rich lobster orange through a pink spectrum down to palest natural latex yellow. They are made by pouring dyed or undyed liquid latex out on a wide bed of plaster. The latex thus picks up the dusty white grit of the plaster on its downside and is smooth and shiny on the upside. The works are assembled in either horizontal or vertical massings of a few to a dozen or so units. The best advantage is taken of the tactility of their alternating texture and color, of their bumps, and bubble holes, tears and irregular edges.

The submissive sagging of Wilke's material, its natural liplike ruffling, and the unavoidability of vulvic connotations conjoin to create an almost mesmerizing state of sexual-visceral vulnerability. It is very honest work. Her problem may be that it is too effortless, too facile. But only time will tell.