

ART VIEW/Roberta Smith

# An Artist's Chronicle Of a Death Foretold

**H**ANNAH 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.

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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

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

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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."

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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.