

HANNAH WILKE
at Gallery 400,
through September 21

By Fred Camper

MULTIPLE EXPOSURES

If she were really the simple mercenary many have accused her of being, Hannah Wilke wouldn't have become the kind of artist she did. Wilke, a self-declared feminist who often performed and photographed herself in the nude, inspired reverence in the 60s and 70s both because of her beautiful figure and because many feminists looked askance on any imagery of female nudity, feeling that such imagery was too loaded with a history of male usage to be redeemable. Such concerns were not likely as Wilke's ended in the mid-50s, however, when she had herself photographed at 14 wearing only a milk maid. "I was always asking people to take pictures of me," she later recalled, also acknowledging that in that early picture she was being "sexually silly." But there's nothing sexually silly about *Genesis* (1974-76), one of 13 Wilke works—photographs, sculptures, videos, and a watercolor—now at Gallery 400.

The classic nude body, in her view, has long been used to express that

love in life, in art, or in both. But the women in the multiple photographs of *Genesis*—grids of 9 or 12 photos arranged on three sheets—is hardly lovable at all. She thrusts her hands

against her face, compressing the skin, or stretches her face by pulling at it; she covers her eyes, or places her hands beside her face as if about to

pinch it. Mostly she's rebuffing the viewer, denying the erotic pleasure usually sought in images of women by the male gaze. But the multiple

shots have another effect as well. Many of the different poses seem expressions of differing personalities. As the eye goes from one image to another in the grid, they begin to cancel one another out. "Woman," so often judged by her appearance, here eludes the camera's defining eye. Each pose is a momentary mask, a superficial glimpse contradicted by the next one. Wilke's essence lies elsewhere, beyond imagery.

The photos in *Genesis* came from a video of a 1974 performance of the same name, also on view. But as is often the case with artists who try to add film or video to their oeuvre, Wilke doesn't make very good use of the moving image. Her simple framing of herself doesn't capture the time and space of a live performance, though her slowly changing postures are rather intriguing, as the performance must have been.

Wilke did a variety of performances, almost all involving her body. In one she donned behind Marcel Duchamp's famous *The Large*

I OBJECT

Memento of a
Nude Woman

Hannah Wilke

shirt

Glass in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In addition—part of her “S.O.S. Stratification Object Series”—she chewed gum, curled wads of it into the shape of vaginas, then stuck them to her body and had herself photographed. These photos are not on view here, but we can see the two panels of *Mastication Box Sculpture* (1975), in which Wilke remained those wads on paper, grids of 16 pages on each panel. These small gum sculptures—usually of two or three colors and formed into an inverted U whose each cross, creating a tiny hole at their center—are surprisingly elegant. If the vagina of male imagination is a mysterious and chaotic space, hidden by hair and somewhat foreboding, Wilke’s striped objects are amazingly precise. Varying from one large shape on a page to groups of as many as six similar smaller shapes, they are weirdly fetishistic but also playful and humorous, their colored stripes curiously assertive. They have some of the power of the more solid, phallic objects that male sculptors often make but without mimicking them.

These works are rich in associations. Wilke called them “cumbrous” forms, and her series title is a play on stratification, the practice (common in Africa) of marking important women by burning patterns into their skin. These wads of gum are

doubly naughty: they recall the childhood sin of random gum storage (memorialized in popular songs like “Does Your Chewing Gum Lose Its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?”) as well as the adult naughtiness of depicting vaginas. Wilke wrote: “Since 1960 I have been concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female, a new language that fuses mind and body into erotic objects that are namable and at the same time quite abstract.” These vagina shapes manage to avoid the phallic thrusts into space of conventional sculpture, while at the same time they remain power objects. Curved, handmade, their color bands twist the straight lines of minimal art—which Wilke, a New Yorker with many art-world contacts, would have known well—into female curves. “You can say a Gothic church is a phallic symbol,” she once wrote, “but if I say the nave of the church is really a big vagina, people are offended.” Despite their multiple references, these wads of gum are visually unlike anything I’ve seen before. They have the feeling of a new beginning.

It’s apparently a beginning the date’s follow up on, so judge from this exhibit, which includes only a tiny portion of Wilke’s vast output between 1965 and 1992. Many of the other works here are more commentaries on existing attitudes than



DETAIL OF “MASTICATION BOX SCULPTURE”

fresh starts—which is not to say that they’re ineffective. The photographic *Diptych I Object: Memento of a Sugar-giver* (the title a pun on “eye object”) is rich with references to Marcel Duchamp. “Sugar-giver,” which perhaps refers to herself, is one

clue: Duchamp, like Wilke a lover of wordplay, called himself *Marchand du Sel*, or salt seller. The photos themselves—which suggest a book jacket, since the title and Wilke’s name are printed on one of them—depict Wilke lying nude on the ground

in poses that both recall and refute *Etats d’Amour*... Duchamp’s last work.

In this Duchamp (permanently installed near *The Large Glass* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), one looks through a peephole in a wooden door at a magical miniature scene. In the foreground of a barren setting with an optical waterfall a sculpted female figure lies nude on a bed of twigs, her legs spread, shaved genitalia facing the viewer. By contrast, Wilke photographs herself from above, with her feet at the top of the shot, one no longer gazed directly into a vagina, and the inversion defamiliarizes the nude, preventing its easy assimilation into a long history of images of female genitalia. What’s more, the clothes she’s taken off in order to pose nude lie scattered about, distancing us further from Duchamp’s mythic mannequin: the way you get a naked lady, Wilke seems to say, is by having an actual woman undress. A small bottle of what seems to be women lotion marks the point that nudity poses not only spiritual and cultural problems, but real risks to real skin.

The Duchamp itself (which I recently had the good fortune to see again) is magnificently complex. Seductive and repellent at once, it not only critiques its own apparent sexism but the voyeurism inherent in

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