HANNAH WILKE: ELECTIVE AFFINITIES

4 JUNE – 14 AUGUST 2010
OPENING: THURSDAY 3 JUNE 2010, 6 – 8PM

I become my art, my art becomes me. My art is becoming my heart in my art. My heart is hard to handle, my art is too. I want to overwhelm you. I want to touch your feelings I want to give you tender strength. Feel! Feel the folds; one fold, two folds, expressive precise gestural symbols. Multi-layered metaphysics below the gut level, like laughter, making love, or shaking hands.

From: Hannah Wilke, A Letter to Women Artists, 1975

Hannah Wilke (1940 – 1993) was an artist whose body of work was intimately bound to her body. She pioneered from the start of her career a feminine formal language centring on vaginal imagery, and deployed a range of media and practices to explore the pleasures and pains of contemporary female experience. Wilke’s work exemplified a powerfully gendered critique not only of society but also of art. This new exhibition is the first show outside the USA of work from the Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles, which comprises the largest body of work left by Wilke following her tragic early death. Featuring a number of iconic works as well as a range of pieces rarely seen, the exhibition explores the continuous terrain mapped by Wilke between language, image and object, incorporating performance, photography, drawings, collages and sculptures rendered in materials as diverse as ceramic, gum, latex, erasers and bronze. Wilke was one of the very first artists to confront female sexual agency, fulfilment and frustration, and certainly foreshadowed the dynamic confluence of Conceptualism and Feminism that has characterised much important art by women since the 1970s. However her radical investigations into the stuff of sculpture, and how the body can be remade and repeated in art, lend her a significance beyond the bounds of her sex and time. By turns amusing, angry, tender and troubling, the exhibition reveals Wilke to be one of the most influential and under-acknowledged artists of the late twentieth century.

The centrepiece and unifying theme of the exhibition is Elective Affinities (1978), a work comprising 86 white glazed porcelain sculptures, each one evocative of vaginal and labial imagery, set in grids across four painted boards. The formal strategy of arranging the sculptures (six by six, five by five, four by four and three by three) recalls the structures of manly Minimalism, yet such a tradition is undermined by the uniqueness and organic shapely nature of each individual sculpture. Moreover the title of the work, taken from Goethe’s Romantic novel of 1809, refers to an irresistible and chemical attraction between particles, and people, and functions as a guiding metaphor for the exploration of desire, in all its delight and despair. Elective Affinities epitomizes the feminising of artistic practice, in terms of both subject and substance, that is typical of Wilke’s art, and as autobiography (the work was made in response to a particularly difficult romantic episode in Wilke’s life), it similarly exemplifies the urgent dissolving of the private and public, and so the personal and political, that is also everywhere evident in her work.

The insistent way in which Wilke challenged received notions of the profanity and secrecy of women’s sex organs, repeating with unswerving commitment the folded labial and vaginal form, can be seen in a number of other key works in the exhibition. Taken from the celebrated S.O.S. Series, S.O.S. Starification Object Series (Veil) (1974-75) sees Wilke striking a revealing yet enigmatic attitude, an affectation owing much to a stereotyped glamour pose, but which is transformed into something more powerful and unsettling by the presence of small chewing gum sculptures stuck to Wilke’s flesh. These small vaginal gestures recur in other works, such as Lincoln Memorial (1975), where a postcard of a shibboleth of American patriotism has the female presence ironically yet undeniably inscribed into its being by 40 kneaded and folded erasers. The imagery of the gum and eraser sculptures is also manifest in larger single ceramic and bronze works, and latex pieces such as Pink Champagne (1975), a large-scale petal-like structure which in all its fleshy pink and tactile softness becomes a highly sensuous and seductive evocation of the female form. Vaginal shapes also make up the installation of Hannah Manna (1986) in the upper gallery, the climax of the exhibition. Wilke
described the arrangement of brightly coloured sculptures, which were originally installed on real earth and grass as ‘womblike blossoms resembling Venus mounds, a centrefold evolving from a circular plane, universally existing in both primary and secondary colors. Food from heaven, hence spiritual nourishment. Called angel’s food.’ The work also plays on the artist’s name, ‘Hebrew Hannah: grace; Japanese “hana”: flower; Chaldean “ana”: heaven; Sanskrit “ana”: mother; Assyrian “anu”: all-father’, indicating the centrality of Wilke’s personal identity in much of her work, but at the same time standing as an affirmation of universal womanhood.

The sculptural forms Wilke applied to her body are not only representative of female genitalia, for they also evoke open wounds and damage done to the body. As ‘wounds’ the gestures not only problematise pejorative and vulgar constructions of the vagina, but also situate the body as a mutable and contested site, where discourses of beauty and experiences of sickness and health are played out. This signally important theme in Wilke’s work is explored with devastating honesty in the drawings and photographs from the Intra-Venus series, which document the ravages of the cancer which ultimately ended her life, and the Brushstrokes pieces (1992), drawings made with the artist’s hair that fell out following chemotherapy. The punning titles of these works, however, are also testament to the love of language and word play and an ongoing sense of humour that also characterised Wilke’s work, and express a singular sensibility that though often acerbic, brutal and uncompromising, was also unquestionably life-affirming.


Hannah Wilke is the subject of two important new publications, both of which are available at the gallery. Hannah Wilke: Gestures, written and edited by Tracy Fitzpatrick is published by Neuberger Museum of Art, and a major new monograph, Hannah Wilke by Nancy Princenthal, published by Prestel, will be launched during the exhibition.

The exhibition has been organised in collaboration with Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles

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