

# frieze

Hannah Wilke

Alison Jacques Gallery, London, UK



On entering the central space of Hannah Wilke's solo show at Alison Jacques, one is left with little to the imagination: the exhibition presents early work that is diverse in its use of material but persistently uniform in its iconography. As a key player in the feminist institutional critique of the late 1960s, Wilke defined her position by using the aesthetic language of her opponents (that is, the male sculptor), submitting it to the sexual charge of the female organ.

The exhibition comprises a selection of Minimalist arrangements, comparable to those of Carl Andre or Walter de Maria, made out of ceramic and latex 'vulvas'; a series of old postcards of landmarks are covered with equivalent shapes, now made of kneaded pencil erasers (Inspiration Point, Haverstraw, Dublin Castle 1974-75). The kneaded forms are arranged so as to enhance the dramatic depiction of the landscapes, efficiently linking these pieces to the Land Art proposals and photography of Robert Smithson.

These examples are just a tip of the iceberg when it comes to Wilke's ideological antagonism between surface and gesture, using male-centred forms of representation as her target. In a pre-Cindy Sherman age, appropriating the male eye in this way often startled contemporary feminists, ultimately giving way to a more generalised criticism of Wilke's work as straightforwardly narcissistic and even self-institutionalising. It is only later on in Wilke's work that the artist's determination and direction becomes evident, when she begins to photograph every aspect of her own battle against cancer – a not touched upon by the selection at Alison Jacques. However, the subtle symbols of Wilke's preoccupation with her own decay shouldn't be overlooked: the bubble-gum vaginas stuck to her naked body in S.O.S. Starification Object Series (1974) loosely refer to the spots on her mother's body while recovering from a mastectomy (So Help Me Hannah Series, 1978-81). These Minimalist sculptural arrangements turn, as a result, into scars on the surface of the gallery space and its cultural identity at large.