

ARTFORUM

Hannah Wilke

TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

Hannah Wilke's art was always one of intimate gestures. Sculpting gum she chewed into vaginal voids, photographing herself nude in various poses, and drawing watercolors that detailed the deterioration of her body from cancer treatments, Wilke used touch and extreme candor to explore feminine form. Tibor de Nagy's exhibition included examples of these well-known bodies of work, yet, most interestingly, it also shed light on the way in which intimacy came to inflect Wilke's practice through a foregrounding of her personal relationships: namely her friendship with a single family, the Axelrods, whose collection of Wilke's art, much of it given to the family by the artist as a gift, constituted the majority of this small show. Signed dedications by Wilke to the Axelrods' son Mayan in many of the pieces gave a sense of the decades-long rapport between the artist and these collectors/companions. With the Axelrods' consignment of their Wilke holdings to Tibor de Nagy comes a distinct lens through which to view the artist's deeply personal practice and the provocations that mark her influence.

Creating her first vulval works in the late 1950s, Wilke was one of the earliest and best-known artists to explicitly deploy this imagery as a feminist intervention. To make the two 1975 works from her "S.O.S. Starification Object Series," 1974–82, that were displayed together at the exhibition's entrance, she chewed bubble gum, then stretched the elastic material into the aforementioned folds. Wilke's palate became the palette for her artmaking

Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1975, chewing gum on rice paper mounted on rag board, 33 1/4 x 26". From the series "S.O.S. Starification Object Series," 1974–82.



process. The gum wads, arranged in grids, speak to a rather obsessive use of that gendered form throughout her career; Wilke sculpted thousands of labial folds from standard materials such as terra-cotta, latex, and ceramic as well as for more demotic ingredients, including laundry lint, cookie dough, bacon, and Play-Doh. Nearly four decades after their making, Wilke's signature sculptures resonate as essential examples of "central core" imagery, reclaiming female genitalia from its objectification in the history of art and perhaps prefiguring the work of other feminist foremothers, such as Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

These forms took on a personalized touch with *Bar Mitzvah*, 1985, referring to the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony of Mayan Axelrod. Wilke used the three-sheet invitation for Mayan's bar mitzvah and placed a single chewing-gum fold atop each card. *Bar Mitzvah* stands as a tongue-in-cheek gesture about the rite of passage into manhood and maturity; the folds function as a metonym for Wilke's practice as a whole, serving, in effect, as a signifier that stamps the (presumably gifted) work with an individualized thought that counts.

Four photographs from Wilke's series "So Help Me Hannah—Snatch Shots with Ray Gun," 1978, provide another perspective on her artistic use of intimate relationships and put an ironic spin on the battle of the sexes. In these works, which were produced a year after Wilke's eight-year relationship with Claes Oldenburg ended, the titular weapon refers to her former partner's Ray Gun Manufacturing Company, but also has, of course, additional connotations. Each photograph shows Wilke, nude except for kitten heels, teetering with gun in hand. Her unsteady pistol is never pointed in the same direction as her gaze; she positions herself less as a femme fatale than as a figure wavering under the power and presence of her own feminine wiles. Just as Wilke's self-aware and humor-inflected repurposing of the images and symbols of femininity interrogate their relationship to gendered power dynamics, this exhibition made manifest the equally productive effect her playfully self-reflexive approach to personal relationships had on her art.

—Alex Fialho