

## VISUAL ARTS

**Hannah Wilke:  
Elective Affinities***Alison Jacques Gallery, London*

There is a soft curving shape, like a shell or a hood, that you will see repeated over and over in the work of the late American artist Hannah Wilke. These forms are like many different species of rose – heavy folds of petals, in floral shades. In rubber, lustrously glazed ceramic, and even chewing gum, this sculptural form reappears constantly, like an army of icons, every one based on the female vulva.

A large low plinth carries several gleaming oyster-like pockets made from white porcelain in 1978, placed in grid-like formations. A self-portrait of the artist watches over the scene in a black-and-white image from her *S.O.S. Stratification Object Series* (1974-75). These photographs of Wilke usually show her posing, topless, with some sort of prop, but also covered with small scar-like objects all over her body. These are, in fact, made of coloured chewing gum, smoothed and folded into those little vulvas. She believed that gum was the perfect analogy for the American woman, and the way she was consumed. Chew her up, spit her out.

A little history: our rose, like Blake's, was sick, and the invisible worm that flew in the night was lymphoma, claiming the artist's life in 1993. She documented her body as the disease ravaged it in the series *Intra-Venus*, and posthumously a new seriousness descended on her work.

Thankfully this appears to have lifted for this show, where pleasure and female sexuality is foregrounded. A large latex sculpture of hundreds of layers of latex, like an enormous open book of tea rose pink waves, is named *Pink Champagne* (1975), and what could be more frilly, silly, gushing, extravagant, than pink champagne? Likewise *Hannah Manna* (1985-86) is a garden of AstroTurf from which bright sculptures spring up like the food of the gods.

A series of nude photographs of Wilke with guns continues to vex. In one she is surrounded by guns, head in her hand, knees up and legs apart, exhausted, accompanied by the words "What does this represent? What do you represent?" It seems Wilke felt like she could take on a macho representation of women, and offer a representation of female sexuality that she owned, that could not be gobbled up and spat out. **LAURA McLEAN-FERRIS**

*To 14 August (020 7631 4720)*