

Hannah Wilke, Reclaiming the Female Form in London

Anya Harrison | 7 September 2018



Hannah Wilke, *Untitled*, c. 1964-66. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA at Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York, DACs, London

Having made a name for its championing of women artists, Alison Jacques Gallery in London follows its two most recent exhibitions dedicated to solo presentations of Birgit Jurgenssen and Michelle Stuart, with a show of the late American artist Hannah Wilke (1940-1993), on view September 26-December 21. The past year has revealed in multiple painful ways the extent to which inequality — whether according to gender, race, class — still persists as a systemically entrenched presence across mindsets and institutions. The art industry is no

different. While this should not provide the sole, or even primary, framework in which to now view exhibitions of women artists, Wilke's sixth presentation at the gallery may be the first to take place at a moment when gender politics finds itself reinserted into a wider public agenda. A timely moment to revisit works by an artist who left behind a legacy as a pioneering, often controversial, feminist figure.

The works gathered in this exhibition span the early 1960s through to 1987, and include drawings, paintings, sculptures and performances-to-camera. Together, they draw out the sensuality that was a dominant force in Wilke's work, and which — in the artist's own words — fed into her quest for "a formal imagery that is specifically female," but which was no less conceptually rigorous in its approach. Even at her most abstract, Wilke's drawings and paintings retain a distinct fleshiness, compositions of intimate body parts. Consider, for example, the row of blue- and nude-colored phallic oblongs in a mid-1960s pastel and graphite drawing or the more sketch-like lines and paler hues of an even earlier pastel and pencil work (both untitled) whose apricot tones and gentle curves suggest a buttock.

This gentle palette teamed with visceral hints turns up again in a 103-strong set of miniature terracotta sculptures ("Untitled," 1974-77), one of Wilke's largest installations. These vaginal forms, which Wilke began creating in the early 1960s, and returned to throughout her life in myriad materials — porcelain, ceramic and terracotta — could be so many delicate folds of Chinese fortune cookies. Here, they appear scattered on a board in a haphazard fashion, yet they keep hold of a strong resemblance to the minimalist square grid, one of the quintessential forms to have emerged from the East Coast in the '60s. This may not be a bad way of summarizing Wilke's wider practice, taking the aesthetic rigor of 1960s/'70s Minimalism and Conceptualism and injecting it with a heavy dose of bodily presence, in the process subverting the former through a refusal to conform to its strict rules and strictures. Wilke's vaginal sculptures might be visually circumscribed within a strict geometry, but each one retains its own individual shape and the texture of human touch, whether in the terracotta series or in another untitled work from the mid-1970s, which overlays 32 erasers that have been kneaded into vulva-like shapes onto the text found at the bottom of a postcard.

Given Wilke's propensity to turn any material that came her way into so many traces of the human (specifically female) body, it comes as no surprise that she was not averse to using her own body as material in her multidisciplinary practice, and her performance photographs remain some of the best-known aspects of her work. In "Gestures (Triptych)," 1974-'76, Wilke stretches and contorts her face directly to camera. She presses, pokes, stretches and twists her skin in a manner not dissimilar to the way she might treat those same erasers, chewing gum, cookie dough or lint, all of which made it into her repertoire at one point or another. In Wilke's works, feminism and femininity are not just abstract, theoretical domains, they are an extension of female flesh.