

Tracing the Legacy of an Artist Who Made Yonic Forms from Chewing Gum

Hannah Tindle | 23 October 2018



S.O.S. Starification Object Series, 1974. Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London and Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/ DACS, London

Hannah Wilke's work is currently on display at Alison Jacques Gallery, London. Here, we trace her enduring impact

Who? Hannah Wilke was born Arlene Hannah Butter in New York, 1940, the granddaughter of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. Demonstrating an artistic flair from a young age, at just 14 years old she posed for photographs wearing her mother's fur stole in front of a wall featuring her name in large typography, a precursor to the self-portraiture she would create later in life. Naturally, Wilke went on to study art, enrolling at Stella Elkins Tyler School of Fine Art, Temple University in Philadelphia. It was here she met designer Barry Wilke who she married in 1960, receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts and a teaching certificate two years later. The brief marriage broke down and ended with a divorce in 1965, culminating in Wilke returning to New York where she remained until her untimely death from lymphoma in 1993.



Untitled, 1974-77. Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London and Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/ DACS, London

What? In 1969, Wilke began a relationship with American artist Claes Oldenburg, which lasted until the mid-70s. Wilke frequently photographed Oldenburg, and also had Oldenburg take photographs of her. These included one of her earliest self-portraits *Advertisement for an Exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts* (1970), where Wilke had staged her first solo show in 1972. Heavily associated with second-wave feminism, Wilke's artistic production was focused on direct representations of her body, used to critique gender relations both within society at large and the history of art itself, she is credited with being one of the first female artists to utilise explicit vaginal imagery in their work, crafting terracotta and porcelain into gestural, yonic forms. "All the sculpture is done in pointed allusion to the female genitalia," wrote Michael Andre in *ArtNews* in 1975. The pieces "provoke an irrepressible desire to touch them," continued critic Douglas Crimp. "Touching them confirms their sensual appearance, achieved through luscious colours, all on the hot sexual side of the spectrum."



Gestures (Triptych), 1974-76. Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London and Hannah Wilke Collection and Archive, Los Angeles. © Marsie, Emanuelle, Damon and Andrew Scharlatt, Hannah Wilke Collection & Archive, Los Angeles. Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/ DACS, London

Wilke also experimented with a variety of artistic mediums from performance, video and the manipulation of unconventional materials such as erasers, cookie dough and chewing gum. The latter, she moulded into miniature vulva (although Wilke preferred to call the nubs of sticky substance "cunts" or "wounds") attaching them to her body for *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974. "I chose gum because it's the perfect metaphor for the American woman – chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in a new piece," she said.

“Since 1960 I have been concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female... Human gestures, multi-layered metaphysical symbols below the gut level translated into an art close to laughter, making love, shaking hands... Eating fortune cookies instead of signing them, chewing gum into androgynous objects... Delicate definitions... Rearranging the touch of sensuality with a residual magic made from laundry lint, or latex loosely laid out like love vulnerably exposed... continually exposing myself to whatever situation occurs...”

Wilke was diagnosed with lymphoma in 1987 and documented her battle to beat the disease in a highly intimate series *Intra-Venus* (1994-1997), as well as *Brushstrokes*, drawings made from her own hair as it fell out during chemotherapy. The series, which included drawings, photos and video footage, documented the invasive treatments she undertook and the effects they had on her body, and photos was published posthumously as a poignant record of Wilke’s illness.

Why? Although Wilke is now considered a revolutionary artist, often spoken about in the same breath as Eva Hesse and Alina Szapocznikow, her work was often misunderstood by other feminist critics of the 1970s, who saw it as narcissistic and reaffirming of women’s position as an object of desire. After re-examination today, it is appreciated as a radical attempt to regain control of the representation of women inspiring generations of future artists. Wilke once answered the critics who commented on her body being too beautiful for her work by saying, “People give me this bullshit of, ‘What would you have done if you weren’t so gorgeous?’ What difference does it make? Gorgeous people die as do the stereotypical ‘ugly’. Everybody dies.”

A retrospective of Wilke’s work is now on display at Alison Jacques Gallery in London, with pieces made during a 30-year period. “Wilke’s firm legacy as a pioneering, often controversial, feminist and conceptual artist is evident not only in her early use of vaginal imagery as a feminist intervention but also in her radical choice of materials,” writes Alison Jacques. “The use of terracotta and ceramic, latex, chewing gum and erasers was unusual for this time period and their characteristics of malleability and fragility reflect the sense of vulnerability that is consistent throughout Wilke’s practice.”

Hannah Wilke runs at Alison Jacques Gallery, London until December 21, 2018.