

LAISUN KEANE
460C Harrison Ave
Boston MA 02118
T: 978 495 6697
E: info@laisunkeane.com
www.laisunkeane.com

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LaiSun Keane

HANNAH WILKE: *FRIENDSHIP*

Feb 18 - Apr 10, 2021

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Hannah's Gifts by Anya Ventura

In the drawing "Sweet Sleeping Mayan," the lines are quick, lively, and sparse. There is an energy and intimacy in the work's bareness: the child's loose form, swaddled, obscured by blankets, his eyes closed. In 1985, Hannah Wilke sketched the drawing on newsprint while Mayan, her friend's adolescent son, was sleeping in the living room of the family house in East Hampton. It was not far from the place where, six years later, she would be buried.

The exhibition *Hannah Wilke: Friendship*, on display from February 18 to April 10, 2021 at LaiSun Keane gallery, illuminates the story of Hannah Wilke's friendship with Deena Axelrod. Wilke and Deena Axelrod befriended one another in Philadelphia in the late 1960s. Both women, coming of age against the cultural revolutions of the era, were charismatic, creative, and ambitious. The friends eventually settled in New York, Wilke in Soho, the Axelrods on the Upper West Side, where Deena and her husband Neil launched a successful company selling handprinted t-shirts. For the decades that followed, until the end of her life, the Axelrods were patrons and supporters of Wilke's work, and their deep, long-standing friendship found its way, as so much else did, into her body of highly personal art.

The works on display are tenderly miscellaneous. The Axelrods often helped Wilke when she struggled financially—they once gave her their old Lincoln Continental—and in return received artworks. For Wilke, who seemed to be continuously creating, making art as a function of living akin to other necessities like eating or breathing, gifting her work was a natural and inevitable outgrowth of friendship. As such these gifts represent what Lewis Hyde calls an "erotic commerce," a mode of exchange based in reciprocity and care, manifesting a set of intimate relationships. Emerging from the overlap of lives, given in the spirit of celebration, they are the expression of love.

To say the boundary between Wilke's art and life was porous would be an understatement. Her life, the pure force of her presence, exploded into her art—provocative, funny, vain, and vulnerable at once. In her monograph on the artist, Nancy Princenthal writes, "Certainly no one who knew her describes her as anything less than brimming, spilling over, with vivacity—with glee, anger, pride, curiosity, courage." Wilke regularly conscripted family, friends, pets, lovers and colleagues into her sculptures, photographs, videos, and performances. Today, when the line between public and private is increasingly blurred, Wilke's aestheticization of the personal might seem commonplace, but at the time it was radical. Her use of others as artistic material, people like her mother and famous lovers like Claes Oldenburg, is well-known, but just as important to her work were the sustaining friendships like those of the Axelrods.

Spanning from the early sixties to the nineties, these works reflect different moments in Wilke's wide-ranging oeuvre—from Warholian pop art silkscreens to quick contour drawings to her vulval ceramic works. The vagina sculptures, displayed here speckled and painted black, distilled feminist critique with a sculptural attention to material and form. The objects assert an abstract elegance that conveys technical mastery as much as conceptual audacity. Wilke pioneered this visionary vaginal imagery in her search for a distinctly female form, anticipating the abundance of breasts, vaginas, and uteruses that would define seventies feminist art. "Since 1960 I have

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been concerned with creation of a form of imagery that is specifically female," she once wrote, "its context is always related to my own body, reflecting pleasure as well as pain, translated into an art close to laughter."

By the mid-seventies, Wilke began translating these vaginal forms into banal, everyday materials like chewing gum, erasers, and lint. Her canonical "S.O.S Starification series," features the chewing gum sculptures, mouth-wetted and fashioned into tiny pink vaginas, placed on a minimalist grid. In addition to mounting them on grids, postcards, and boxes, she also attached the sculptures—playful, libidinal, abject—to her own naked body, contorted into model-like poses. These unsettling protrusions, combined with the unavoidable fact of her beauty, produced a dissonance. The bulges of gum appeared as both scar and adornment. "As a Jew, I would have been branded and buried had I not been born in America," she said in a 1978 video performance, connecting the scars to the trauma of the Holocaust. A decade later, she used the same chewing gum sculptures to embellish Mayan Axelrod's Bar Mitzvah invitation, marking the ritual induction into manhood and the death of childhood.

Even Wilke's drawings, the sketches of flowers and animals that she drew compulsively throughout her life, embrace a fugitive or ambiguous beauty. The drawings, less commonly exhibited than her media work, are agile and buoyant. They seem to emerge from the same eros, the same passion for the world, that fed her performances. As Princenthal writes, "Her observations were acute, bringing to life every particularity of texture and form, blooming health and decay without sacrifice to the delicacy for which flowers are treasured." There is a poignance now in their casual ease, the quickness of the thin and fragile line. She would continue to produce these flower drawings until her death, some of the last ones inked on hospital pillowcases as a kind of *memento mori*.

At the end of Wilke's life, as she was consumed by lymphoma, the Axelrods installed a stall shower in her downtown loft, so it would be easier for her to bathe. At Sloan Kettering, Wilke drew and photographed her dying body, leaking and bandaged, often in the sultry pin-up poses that recalled her earlier glamor shots. Included here is a 1990 watercolor from the self-portrait series *BC*—before cancer—in which she returns to abstraction, her face pared down to a few thick, vivid lines, in the bright urgency of primary colors, that dissolve into empty space. In 1992, she died at the age of 52.

The ancient Greeks tell us that eros is the desire for an unreachable beauty, a loveliness so transcendent that its allure is also its lack. For her entire career, even in the last self-portraits, Wilke played with the idea of eros as a form of fragile exuberance, a category of beauty that also edges close to death. Her work, in celebrating both the ecstasies and degradation of the body, reveals the tenuity of the border between lust and grief, eroticism and elegy, pleasure and pain. Wilke's art was erotic not only in its sexual frankness but in the sense that eros implies a generosity, a continuous reaching toward the other, the object of desire. In both Wilke's life and her art, she gave the gift of herself.

Notes

1. Interview with Mayan Axelrod. Online interview by author. December 5, 2020.
2. Princenthal, Nancy. *Hannah Wilke*. Munich: Prestel, 2010.