

ART REVIEW

# Where Hannah Wilke's feminist art flowered into friendship

By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated March 24, 2021, 2:00 p.m.



Hannah Wilke's "Untitled (Flowers)" JULIA FEATHERINGILL/COURTESY HANNAH WILKE COLLECTION & ARCHIVE, LOS ANGELES/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) NEW YORK

The pioneering feminist artist Hannah Wilke had a solo show at Boston's Genovese Gallery in 1990, and I was lucky enough to see it. Her tiny pink chewing gum sculptures of vulvas floored me — they were so daring, intimate, funny, and feminine. The fruit-flavored bubblegum pieces embodied a continuum of sensual delight beginning in childhood.

More than 30 years later, her second Boston solo exhibition, “Hannah Wilke: Friendship” at LaiSun Keane, also features squibs of chewed and folded gum. Two works from the “S.O.S. Starification Object Series” feature them arrayed in grids on paper — a fleshy adornment to the spare structure that undergirds modern art.

The passing decades have discolored the gum and the paper. Wilke anticipated the decay.

“You identify your existence with your material. Your body is a material,” she said of the gum sculptures, as quoted in Nancy Princenthal's 2010 monograph “Hannah Wilke.” Eros was her subject matter and mortality was in hot pursuit. The artist died of lymphoma at 52 in 1993.







A self-portrait by Hannah Wilke. JULIA FEATHERINGILL/COURTESY HANNAH WILKE COLLECTION & ARCHIVE, LOS ANGELES/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) NEW YORK

This show spotlights the collection of Deena Axelrod. It includes many gifts Wilke made to her friend and patron, such as “Untitled (Flowers),” a sheet filled with sensual watercolor squiggles and blossoms.

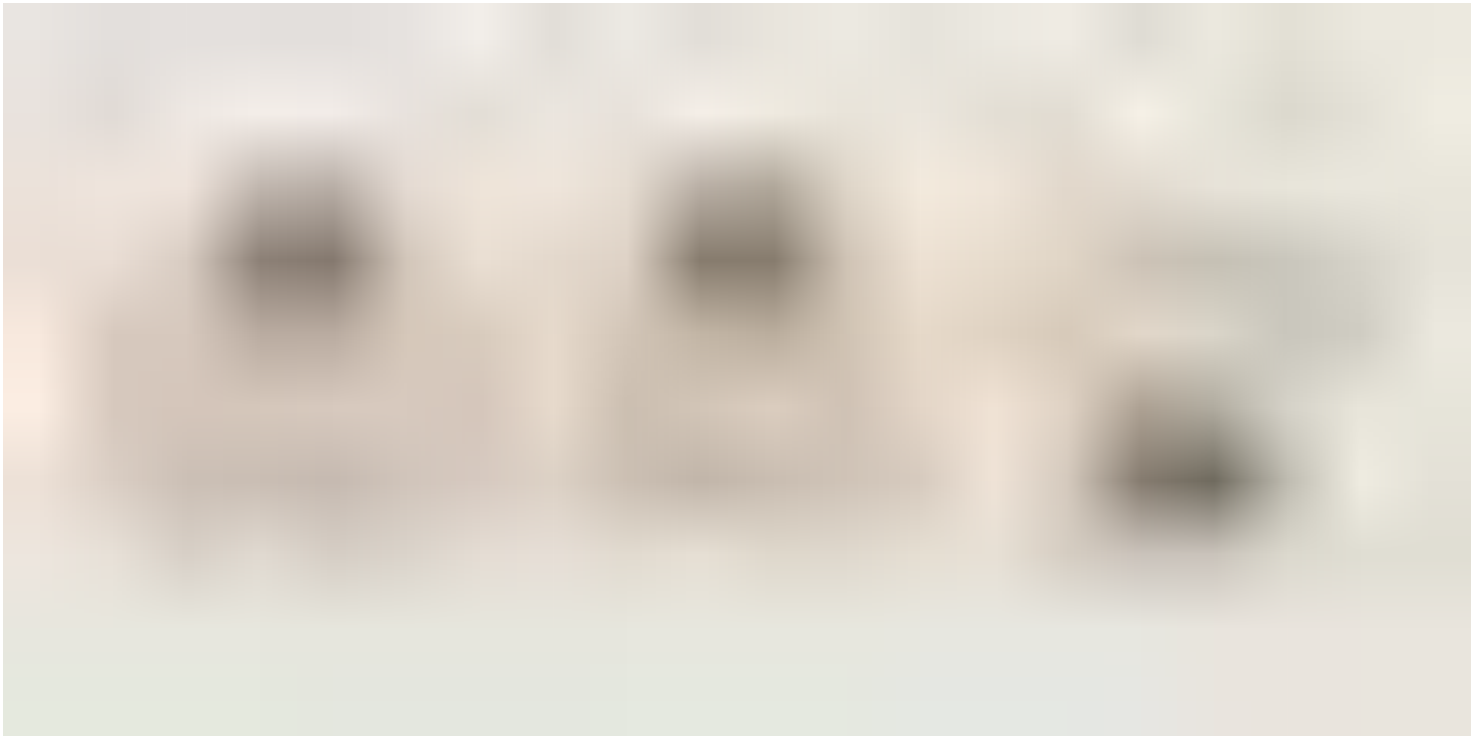
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There's a loose, expressive freedom to Wilke's gestures in drawings such as "Sweet Sleeping Mayan," depicting Axelrod's son snoozing, and in the watercolor "Self-Portrait (BC Series)." That "BC" refers to "before cancer," as if the ailing artist were conjuring her former vigor, evident in lush lines of teal, burgundy, and ocher that loop and cascade down the contours of a narrow face.

Wilke exhibited in the Rose Art Museum's pivotal 1996 group show, "More than Minimal: Feminism and Abstraction in the '70s." At 5 p.m. on April 3, LaiSun Keane presents a Zoom talk about Wilke by Gannit Ankori, the Rose's director and chief curator.

"Friendship" celebrates the artist's significant contribution to feminist art, but the personal slant of Axelrod's collection makes it affecting on another level. When Mayan was Bar Mitzvahed in the 1980s, Wilke festooned the event's invitation with bubblegum sculptures and returned it to the family, marking the boy's ritual passage into manhood with abstract art that slyly encompassed the complexities of that age.



Hannah Wilke festooned this Bar Mitzvah invitation for her friend and patron. JULIA FEATHERINGILL/COURTESY HANNAH WILKE COLLECTION & ARCHIVE, LOS ANGELES/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) NEW YORK

## HANNAH WILKE: FRIENDSHIP

*At LaiSun Keane, 460 Harrison Ave., through April 10. 978-495-6697,*

[www.laisunkeane.com](http://www.laisunkeane.com)

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