

Petzel

HANNAH WILKE

Abstract Bodies

September 4 – October 18, 2025
520 W 25th Street

“Since 1960, I have been concerned with the creation of a formal imagery that is specifically female, a new language that fuses mind and body into erotic objects that are namable and at the same time quite abstract.”—Hannah Wilke, 1976¹

Petzel is pleased to present *Abstract Bodies*, an exhibition of works by American artist Hannah Wilke (1940–1993), opening Thursday, September 4, 2025. Organized in collaboration with the family of the artist’s late husband Donald Goddard, which is managed by Schwartzman&, the show will be on view through October 18, 2025, at 520 West 25th Street. *Abstract Bodies* features a number of Wilke’s canonical ceramic sculptures together with a group of rarely seen works on paper, including sculptures that have never been exhibited publicly.

Born in New York City in 1940, Hannah Wilke used various media including sculpture, drawing, photography, performance, and video to reframe constructs of feminism, gender, and sexuality. Both prolific and unrelenting in her practice, she repeatedly used her own body as an instrument to explore personal and emotional experiences, spurring controversy throughout her lifetime among art critics and second-wave feminists. As Chris Kraus writes in her 1997 novel, *I Love Dick*, in a chapter devoted to Wilke, “Hannah willingly became a self-created work of art,”² living through her work and “brilliantly feeding back her audience’s prejudice and fear.”³

“I’m honored to have the opportunity to present this outstanding group of works from the estate of Hannah Wilke in my Chelsea space,” says Friedrich Petzel. “An artist I have long admired, Wilke is a foundational figure in contemporary art whose courageous use of her body and innovative use of materials made a profound impact on me as a young gallerist in New York.”

Abstract Bodies includes a selection of Wilke’s signature painted ceramic works (1970s–1990s), representing a pivotal development in the artist’s oeuvre. Starting in the late 60s, Wilke began to craft a distinct iconography of organic, folded forms, creating sculptures that directly invoked vaginal imagery. One of the first artists to use yonic content to address feminist concerns, Wilke often placed these sculptures directly on the floor in a serialized, methodical order, as in *Untitled, 1987–1992*, which includes thirty-eight painted ceramic folds arranged on a painted, wooden grid surface. Using the language of abstraction, Wilke created complex expressions of beauty, sexuality, desire, vulnerability, and pain, challenging objectified representations of the female body and offering a sensual counterpoint to the pristine visual codes of Minimalism.

The exhibition will highlight a suite of watercolor self-portraits, including a selection from Wilke’s “B.C. Series,” made between 1989–90, representing large scale works on paper. In swirling gestures, Wilke interlocks arcing lines in sweeping brushstrokes to form abstracted faces,

¹ Excerpts from complete text originally written for Guggenheim Memorial Foundation grant, 1976; text used in *Intercourse with ...* videotape performance and lecture at the London Art Gallery, London, Ontario, Canada, 1977. Published in *Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 139.

² Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles, California: Semiotext(e), 2006), 213.

³ Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick* (Los Angeles, California: Semiotext(e), 2006), 215.

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repeated across her “B.C.” portraits. Wilke started these in late 1986, following her mother’s death from breast cancer in 1982, and before her own cancer diagnosis in 1987. She titled the series “B.C.” for “before cancer” but continued to create the drawings until the year before she died, well past the initial diagnosis. A sense of endurance and obsessive repetition emanates from the pictures, manifest in Wilke’s hand. The show also includes a watercolor self-portrait from Wilke’s “Intra-Venus” project (comprising multiple series of drawings, photographs, sculpture, and videos), which documents the final years before her death in 1993 from complications of lymphoma. Charting the progression of Wilke’s illness, the series documents bodily changes with a vulnerability that is at once confrontational and banal, standing as testament to “the day-to-day living involved in dying,”⁴ and Wilke’s dedication to artmaking in the face of adversity.

About Hannah Wilke

Emerging in the 1960s alongside the rise of second-wave feminism, Hannah Wilke (b. 1940, New York, NY, d. 1993, Houston, TX) developed a multidisciplinary practice that probed social and cultural constructions of femininity. She transformed provocative, often vulvic forms into a language of empowerment, using materials as unexpected as latex, erasers, and chewing gum across sculpture, drawing, performance, photography, and video. Frequently positioning herself as both subject and medium, she created work that was deeply personal. For Wilke, art became a site of resistance and revelation, a space where vulnerability met strength and intimacy met spectacle. She continued to create with unflinching honesty until her untimely death at 52, leaving behind an enduring legacy that continues to influence artists across generations.

Wilke’s work has been featured in solo exhibitions at major institutions, including The Pulitzer Arts Foundation, St. Louis (2021); Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase (2008); Artium Museoa, Vitoria-Gasteiz (2006); New Society for Visual Arts, Berlin (2000); Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen (1995 and 1998); Bildmuseet, Umeå (1998); Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, Tokyo (1996); Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco (1995); P.S.1 Institute for Art and Urban Resources, New York (1978); among others.

Wilke’s work is included in collections such the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, USA; Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; Colección Jumex, Mexico City, Mexico; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, USA; Helsinki Art Museum, Helsinki, Finland; The Jewish Museum, New York, USA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, USA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA; Moderna Museet Malmö, Malmö, Sweden; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, USA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA; The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA; Tate Modern, London, UK; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA; among others.

Petzel is located at 520 West 25th Street New York, NY 10001. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10:00AM–6:00 PM. For press inquiries, please contact Karolina Chojnowska at karolina@petzel.com, or call (212) 680-9467.

⁴ Johanna Burton, “Hannah Wilke: Ronald Feldman Gallery,” review of *Intra-Venus Tapes 1990-1993*, by Hannah Wilke, *Artforum*, December 2007.