



I first met Hannah Wilke on March 23, 1992.

As the director of the Philippe Staib Gallery in New York City, I was organizing what turned out to be our penultimate show, a group exhibition called *Body & Soul*.

Although body parts were indeed represented, the show was not ultimately intended to be simply about "body art" or process, although those were important elements, but rather an attempt to bring together six very different artists, their common ground, work that through body imagery sought a sense of place: physical, emotional, spiritual. Billy Holiday's voice ran in a constant loop in my head.

Hannah's name came up fairly early in the deliberations about "who," "how many pieces" and "what can we get it," and I must admit that her name and work had filtered so well into the back of my mind that seeing it again was a revelation. Suddenly, the show's thrust and direction took shape.

We chose a work from 1973 entitled *So Help Me, Hannah*, which consisted of six captioned black-and-white photographs, each measuring 3 x 4 feet. Arranged in a large rectangle, this 9 x 10' wall presented a very naked and very attractive young woman in six different settings. A tough and terrific piece.

Hannah was enthusiastic and eager to have the works seen again, and with Ronald Feldman's gracious cooperation, *So Help Me, Hannah* became the philosophical anchor for the show, and all the subsequent choices were measured against it.

Hannah herself, because of the susceptibility her lymphoma subjected her to, skipped the opening, but slipped in several days later, with a friend. It was a quiet afternoon, and we sat and talked a long while. She was by turns flirtatious, intelligent, funny, outrageous, incisive, witty, and despite of a list of medical problems and operations that would have fit snugly into its own appendix in a medical journal, amazingly full of life, optimism and adventure.

I fell in love immediately.

She was full of ideas, chief among them to come back to the gallery and shoot a series of photographs posed nude against the photos of her younger nude self. I thought, and still think, it was great idea, and I regret that time, health and circumstance left the project undone.

Hannah was a pioneer whose work paved the way for and touched a generation of other artists, and her influence can be seen in artists as diverse as Barbara Kruger, Karen Black, Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith. She was completely of her time, if slightly ahead of it too, and her work has lost none of its impact, in fact perhaps gaining even more with the painful realization that its content is unfortunately still all too relevant today. We have so much further to go.

She made us angry, she made us laugh, but most of all she made us think — and in the end, isn't that what the best art is made of and for? So help me, Hannah, you will be missed.

*René Grayre*  
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