

SIX MIDDLE-AGED FEMALE ARTISTS
REVEAL PERSONAL AND POLITICAL REALITIES IN THEIR ART

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado
Spring 1997

Susan Sontag, in 1972, labeled the perception of female aging in American society, "a process of becoming obscene.... That old women are repulsive is one of the most profound esthetic and erotic feelings in our culture."¹ As women in western societies reach middle age (usually starting in their late 40s) they are perceived as invisible and asexual. Joanna Frueh describes the experience for many women as "frustrating, demeaning, and shocking."² Even women who have at a young age rejected the power and seduction of the male gaze and its implicit validation find that upon becoming older women, they are startled at the consequences of its withdrawal.

A large group of artists who came of age in the feminist wave of the 1960s and 1970s are now traveling the path of aging, past the years of maternity and menopause. As artists, they give form to personal and political realities through their work. For a young woman, the most brutal of realities is the devaluation of her physical, spiritual, emotional, and intellectual wholeness in favor of the objectification of her body. On becoming older, the middle-age female body no longer measures up as a valued object, and the older woman experiences the further brutality of being discarded and ignored.³

¹ Susan Sontag, "The Double Standard of Aging," Saturday Review September 23, 1972: p. 37 in Joanna Frueh, "The Erotic as Social Security," Art Journal 53 (Spring '94): p. 66.

² Joanna Frueh, Erotic Faculties (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996), p. 148.

³ Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth (New York: W. Morrow, 1991) For a more complete discussion of this subject .

In this male defined system of objectifying women, everyone is shortchanged. The male community divorces itself from the intact, complex female and the possibilities of mutual growth. The female community must spend an inordinate amount of time redefining itself. Making art is one of the ways women are able to state their realities for themselves and for the community as a whole. This paper will examine the work of Joanne Segal Brandford, Mary Kelly, Anne Noggle, Orlan, Joan Semmel and Hannah Wilke, who as young and middle-aged women produced art relevant to women's experience. Their works provide windows into their realities which can serve as vehicles for understanding the experience of being a contemporary middle-aged woman.

I have chosen these six artists because I am drawn to their work. All are contemporary middle-aged artists, with the exceptions of Brandford and Wilke who were both active until their recent deaths; Brandford in 1994, at the age of 61, and Wilke in 1993, at the age of 53. As a group, these artists produced work in a variety of media; fibers, installation, multi-media, painting, photography and sculpture. Their work represents a variety of solutions to the problem of representing the female reality in light of hostile ambient values.

The art described in this paper displays a great deal of intelligence and vulnerability, since the artists take risks and expose themselves both literally and metaphorically. The work produced can be separated into two loose

categories. The work of Mary Kelly, Hannah Wilke, and Orlan is more conceptual in nature. It stems at least partially from an intellectual evaluation of the fields of philosophy and psychology that have colluded in defining women's place in society. The work of Joan Semmel, Anne Noggle, and Joanne Segal Brandford is more visceral. Although each is informed in the discourse of feminism and the work is intellectually challenging, the image-making employs the female form in a more traditional format.

Mary Kelly's work is based on psychoanalysis, especially on her understanding of Freud and Lacan. Since the 1970s, her work has been postmodern in that she has "sought to deconstruct the western art historical tradition's positioning of women as the object of the male gaze."⁴ She has categorically refused to use the image of women in her art. Women are referred to metaphorically by depicting the objects of women's lives such as used diapers in *Post Document*. (fig. 1) and garments folded and not worn in *Interim* (figs. 2 & 3).

From 1973 to 1979, Kelly worked on *Post-Partum Document*. It is an examination of the mother/child relationship based on her own experience but not meant to be autobiographical. Kelly presents a series of framed objects from

⁴ Mara A. Witzling, ed., Voicing Today's Visions: Writings by Contemporary Women Artists (New York: Universe, 1994), p. 197-219.

her son's early years. She calls them "mothers memorabilia."⁵ These objects are not meant to be fetishistic or nostalgic, but rather are transitional objects. Texts, which can be lists, memories written like journal entries, or graphs that analyze the objects are also presented to the viewer. The components of the work are put together in a manner that invites the viewer's participation in constructing the story of motherhood and its complex expectations and results. The presentation of this work is conceptual, however, the texts and objects are of ordinary life and are quite personal.

Her next major work, *Interim*, (fig. 2-3) was made between 1984 and 1989. It utilizes the same format as the previous major piece in that it is an installation of many units and does not literally depict her subject. There are no photographs of women, instead, the story is to be constructed by the viewer from objects and texts. This piece was to be "a consideration of the woman-as-subject as she enters middle age," a time of "increasing invisibility and powerlessness in the masculine world."⁶ The objects that Kelly uses, like a leather jacket, are not depicted on a female form. Rather the leather jacket becomes a metaphor for woman as its old wrinkled surface is folded or twisted in ways that subtly suggest positions and emotions. The text is "a compilation of conversations with women — women who are *listened to* rather than *looked*

⁵ Mary Kelly, Post-Partum Document (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. xvi.

⁶ Witzling, Voicing Today's Visions, p. 200.

at.”⁷ Kelly's art insists that her experiences be viewed through her thought process, grounded in feminist and psychoanalytic theory, rather than through a feminine form already categorized by the male gaze of patriarchy.

As opposed to Kelly, Hannah Wilke chose to use her own body extensively in her work (figs. 4 & 5). Wilke was a very beautiful woman by any standard as a young feminist in the early 1970s. She employed her body to represent Venus, a metaphor for all things female. Her signature sculptural form, which she called a one-fold gesture, was done in many materials including clay (fig. 6) and chewing gum. The chewing gum was placed as scarification marks, which she calls “Starification Marks”, all over her body (figs. 4 & 5). These forms have been called cunt/scar forms by critic Lowery Sims.⁸ Joanna Frueh writes that, Wilke “originated vaginal imagery, as signature, as feminist statement, and as universal symbol.”⁹

Using her model-like body, Wilke left herself open to charges of narcissism, exhibitionism, and colluding with the patriarchal male gaze in defining women as objects. According to Joanna Frueh, Wilke's art “both diverts and rivets the viewer with eroticism....[not] only with sexual desire, but rather...

⁷ Jo Anna Isaak, Feminism and Contemporary Art (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 202.

⁸ Lowery Sims, “Hannah Wilke: The Body Politic or The Adventures of a Good-Looking Feminist,” Art & Ideology (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), p. 48, in Frueh essay in: Thomas H Kochheiser, ed., Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), p. 15.

the erotic, in a more embracing sense, operates throughout her work.”¹⁰ This erotica is defined by poet Audre Lorde as including “those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us.”¹¹ Wilke’s work was not only visceral, erotic and about the living of life at its most ordinary level, it was also well-grounded in intelligent discourse on the philosophical and social issues of her time, especially as related to women. She demanded the right to self-definition even if it would be misunderstood as frivolous and pornographic by some critics and peers.

When her mother was suffering from the effects of breast cancer, Wilke did a series of works that included many photographs of her mother and herself (fig. 7). This process documented and honored her mother as a complete woman of body, mind, and spirit even through aging and illness. Amazingly, but not surprisingly, from the time that Wilke herself was diagnosed with cancer in June, 1987, until her death in 1993, she continued to use her own body as subject matter for her art. Her last piece contains photographs of herself in the process of aging rapidly through the fight with cancer. She called this work *Intra-Venus* (fig. 8). Here is a damaged and aged Venus, yet continues to be valid and proudly self-defined. As a young woman, using her beautiful body to deliver a message of strength and multi-dimensional existence, Wilke was open

⁹ Frueh, essay in : Thomas H Kochheiser, ed., Hannah Wilke, a Retrospective (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), p. 15.

¹⁰ Frueh, essay, p. 12.

¹¹ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 56, in Frueh essay, p. 12.

to accusations of flaunting it inappropriately. As a dying middle-age woman, using her medically battered and fallen flesh to deliver virtually the same message, she opened herself to the recoil of the viewer. It took great passion, and emotional, mental and spiritual wholeness to enable this artist to do such work.

Orlan, a French self-described multimedia artist, also has refused to be defined by society's biases and expectations. Her body is her art, literally. In an effort to "absorb and act out society's demands for omnipotent perfection,"¹² Orlan, a woman of middle age, has used plastic surgery to change her image. As of 1995, there have been nine operations. Her chosen features include the chin of Botticelli's Venus, Diana's eyes, Europa's lips, Psyche's nose, and the forehead of DaVinci's Mona Lisa, all from mythological and Renaissance art. Orlan claims that these features are not chosen for their beauty but for the stories of the women they represent. "Each operation-performance has been constructed around a philosophical, psychoanalytic, or literary text."¹³

The term operation-performance is an accurate one. The operating rooms are theaters ; Orlan calls them her studios. Sets are constructed in which the artist and medical personnel are costumed, and extravagant, sensual offers of sterile, plastic food are available. The patient, using local anesthesia in order

¹² Leigh George, "Orlan: Omnipresence," Art Papers Vol. 18 (1994): p. 3. The quote is ostensibly from Orlan in this review of her work.

¹³ Orlan, "I do not want to look like...", Women's art magazine May/June (1995): p. 8.

to be awake and involved, interacts with the medical personnel and the audience. A videotape of the performance is transmitted by satellite to galleries in cities around the world. Viewers can watch as many of the bloody, medical details as possible and communicate with the artist while she reads texts and empathizes with the spectators' discomfort (figs. 9 - 11).

Orlan is dealing with many issues, including the pressures on and definitions of the female body. Who defines and evaluates the image? Orlan, like Wilke, provocatively claims that prerogative for herself. The work of these two women is difficult. We are not used to seeing such images in daily life, unless we are medical personnel. The young nude, the middle-age nude, the ill nude, and the blood and disfigurement of the body, are lurid or taboo images in our society. They remind us too much of sex and death. Orlan's art is about resistance and confrontation as well as self-definition and power. In the end, this work begs the questions: Is this older woman resisting or succumbing to society's pressure? What price beauty and what price art?

In her forties, after a twenty year career as a pilot, Anne Noggle began taking photographs. She says that for the most part her photographs are about aging.¹⁴ Noggle works in black and white portraiture and often uses herself as the model. The photographs are not about flattery, which makes it difficult to use models who do not have an affinity for her message. In documenting the

¹⁴ Anne Wilkes Tucker, "Anne Noggle," an interview Art Journal Spring (1994): p. 59.

realities and fantasies of aging women, Noggle presents portraits of complexity and acceptance. She does it in a beautifully straightforward manner. Her *Face Lift*, 1995 (fig. 12) is in complete contrast to Orlan's approach to the same subject. In a clear, frontal, black and white self-portrait Noggle presents herself unflinchingly, with the stitches still visible around her eyes. In a 1993 interview with Anne Wilkes Tucker, Noggle says, "What I see in people's faces is most important. Certainly it is not the wrinkles, but the summing up of what's happened to us and of our giving up self-consciousness. By the time you are older, you are what you are."¹⁵ *Stellar by Starlight* of 1986 (fig. 13) is a fantasy self-portrait in which the artist portrays herself in a fog, surrounded by two attentive young men. Except for a crown on her head, all three are nude, and she is clearly enjoying this arrangement. One senses the strength of the women Noggle photographs as well as their vulnerability, humor and wit.

Barbara Hershey writes that Noggle's portraits are both "intimate and disturbing."¹⁶ The disturbance in this context is both different from and similar to the documentation of Orlan's work. In Orlan's work, there is shock value in viewing the skin of a face being separated from its structure. In Noggle's work, the disturbing part is also an act of exposure. But in this case, the exposure is of an ordinary human being, an older woman as she appears in her ordinary existence or in her fantasies. What does this say about the value of a woman,

¹⁵ Anne Wilkes Tucker, p. 60.

¹⁶ Barbara Hershey, "Reconstructing the Self: Notes on the Photographs," *Reflections* (Oxford, Ohio: Miami University Art Museum, 1988), p. 17.

either young or old, if without her youth she becomes disturbing to look at? Noggle's use of the female portrait is confrontational only because of the phenomenon described earlier: that in this society, older women are deemed obscene. Does it take another older woman to feel the depth of these portraits because only she is able to see it?

Joan Semmel is a painter who has been challenging the objectification of women in her work since the 1970s. She, like Wilke, has chosen to use her nude body in her work in a frankly erotic manner. This puts her at odds, like Wilke, with peers who judge that decision as tantamount to colluding with men in the objectification of the female body. But Semmel sees this art making as a way of taking control of her reality. By painting her eroticism and sexuality, she presents a true picture of a woman's sexual pleasure and claims it for herself. In her own words:

We must create images that nurture us - make our own pornography, if you will. My work of the 70s was an attempt to feed other kinds of sexual images into the mainstream. It is not repression which will answer our need for pride and autonomy, but an intelligent building of strong egos, id quotient in tact, nourished from a reservoir of pleasurable experience, respectful of our needs and desires.¹⁷

Semmel's work of the 1970s was painted in a photorealistic style. The images are either of the nude self or of couples engaged in sexual activity. Her perspective is that of a participant and not of a viewer. In an attempt to get to the

¹⁷ "Between the Censor and the Muse?" Woman Artists News Winter (1986/1987): p. 5.

unself-conscious, unposed truth, the artist uses what she calls a "devise to deal with the body." She paints figures as seen from the figure's eyes. Therefore In a painting of her own body the head is not painted, because one can not see one's own head, except in a mirror (fig. 14). The image becomes intimate, has a feeling of first person involvement, and is not removed as if seen by a voyeur.¹⁸

In the 1990s, Semmel is still painting her own body and those of other older women. Her style has changed along with the body's form. She now depicts the folds, creases, and changing shapes of aging women in locker rooms, on the beach, and in other public places in a looser, more abstract style. These women have a lightness, achieved by the use of color, despite the greater bulk of their bodies. In *Greenfield*, Semmel paints the back of an older nude woman over a fragment of one of the earlier photorealistic couples (fig. 15). The painting is quite beautiful: It portrays physical and sensual differences in the two scenes while managing to maintain the older woman's dignity and comfort with her body. Semmel validates the sexuality of older women by painting their nude bodies in a truthful and beautiful manner.

The art of Joanne Segal Brandford was ostensibly produced in fiber, although she said that her materials were fiber and air.¹⁹ This art differs from the

¹⁸ *Joan Semmel*, prod. James Johnson, U. of Colorado, Academic Media Services, 33 min., 1990, videocassette. The description of the artist's devise in this paragraph is paraphrased from Joan Semmel's descriptions in this video.

¹⁹ Pat Hickman, "My Kind of Sound," *Joanne Segal Brandford* exh. cat. (Royal Oak Michigan, The Sybaris Gallery, 1995) p. 9.

preceding work in that it is very quiet and understated. Although Brandford's art is not as obviously confrontational as many of the previous pieces, it is "subversive, in the sense that it makes its point obliquely."²⁰ The work is strong in its quiet dignity. Brandford was a middle-aged woman with degenerative heart disease. She knew that her life would not be long and tried to come to terms with a failing body in ways that would not interfere with her making art. She took fiber materials and used techniques that her body could manage, to "breath life into them"²¹

Some of her work was figurative and clearly autobiographical. Both of the figures illustrated here (figs. 16-17) are made of rattan in a technique called sprang. The technique dictates that the construction be completed before the forming takes place, so that the work does not unravel into the original pile of rattan. After the construction was solid, Brandford would come to the form. She said that the forms were very easy; that they were dictated by the technique and the materials.²² This was for her a typical understatement. The clear sense of female presence in *Self* (fig. 16) and the weight of *Reclining Figure* (fig. 17) are not merely serendipitous. These pieces present the reality of a middle-aged artist facing herself and death, as does Wilke in her *Intra-Venus* series.

²⁰ Paul Brandford, the artist's husband, in conversation with the writer, April 24, 1997.

²¹ Hickman, p. 9.

²² Joanne Segal Brandford, in conversation with the writer, Berkeley, CA, March 1994.

Brandford did not demand self-identification in her art; she took it as a given. She was aware of the subtle and not-so-subtle brutalities perpetrated against her as a woman in this society. Brandford chose to accept and honor her reality as if there could be no question about its validity. Her artwork reveals the multi-dimensionality and strength of the artist, as does the work of the other artists discussed. The difference in Brandford's work is its passionately serene composure.

The six artists described in this paper represent themselves, or metaphors of themselves, in an effort to personally and universally explore the reality of a contemporary woman. As these artists evolve and address the issue of middle age, their signature, forms, and methods remain consistent. Only their subject changes. The artist is still the same person with the same sensibilities. She views the world from a wizened capacity and continues her inimitable growth as an artist. The world sees her as an aging female with all the personal and social ramifications of that state. The artist's response is to reject the social order that defines her in a way which is not consistent with her reality. She gives form to her reality, no matter what age she is.

Two commonalities revealed here are that each of these women takes for herself the responsibility and pleasure of defining her own strengths, vulnerabilities and possibilities, and each manages to bring her experiences to form in art that is clear, interesting, provocative, and honest. Lucy Lippard has

written that, "Artmaking of any kind is a means of asserting the artist's existence."²³ In asserting themselves in a clear manner, these artists provide information instructive about the middle-aged feminine experience. If Western society becomes open to learning about the middle aged woman and subsequently reassimilating her into the community in her full capacity, a good place to start would be to inform oneself about the art of middle-aged women.

The fact remains that in western societies older women's appearance is generally problematic. As was the case in their youth, women are still being objectified, seemingly in a more negative manner because the result is exclusion. The truth is that, young or old, objectification is exclusionary because it only addresses one small aspect of the complex human female. Mary Kelly referred to her work, *Post Partum Document*, as "archeology of everyday life."²⁴ Each of these women have offered something similar in their art: Noggle describes that something as the "summing up of what's happened to us,"²⁵ Semmel has offered the validation of women's sexuality at any age, Wilke plays with eroticism in an intellectual as well as visceral manner, Orlan shocks us into confronting the expectation of physical beauty in women of all ages, and Brandford portrays her passionate dignity. These women have been revealing their authenticity in their art for approximately twenty five years. Some of the art is difficult, some of it is easy, most of it is somewhere in between. These works,

²³ Lucy Lippard, Forward in Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley, 1983), p. xi.

²⁴ Mary Kelly, *Post Partum Document*, p. xvi.

in addition to many others by talented women artists, truly comprise a compendium of contemporary women's feelings and experiences; their hopes, joys, and dissappointments as well as their strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, politics, and place in western society. What a gift !

At a sixth grade girl's soccer game recently I heard the following cheer:

Mirror, mirror on the wall
Pretty girls dont play ball.
So lets get UGLY
Really, really UGLY!

This is palpably different from my 1950's-1960's childhood when girls were cheerleaders, rarely players, and we certainly didn't want to "get ugly." If we look at art as a means of communicating our existence and this cheer as representative of the archaeology of everyday life, the art of the generation of young women represented on that soccer field will tell a different story when they become middle-age. Hopefully they will be free of the need to repeatedly redefine themselves just for visibility, and can move on to audaciously redefining their lives and their futures.

²⁵ Anne Wilkes Tucker, p. 60.

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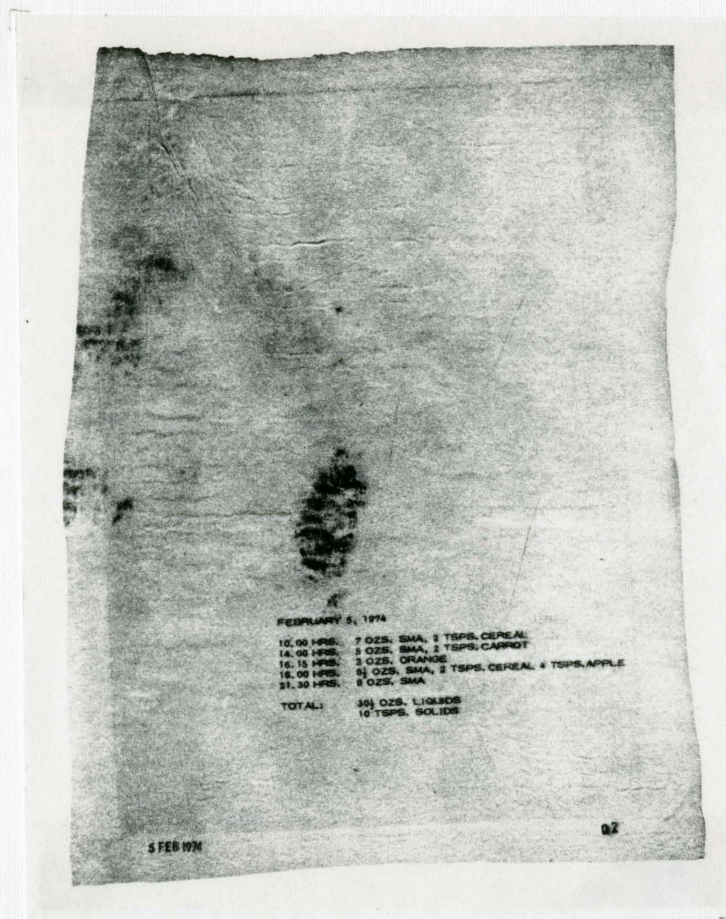


Fig. 1. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, "Documentation I: Analysed faecal stains and feeding charts," one of 28 units, 1974



Fig. 4. Hannah Wilke, S.O.S.—*Starification Object Series*, 1974



Fig. 5. Hannah Wilke, S.O.S.—*Starification Object Series*,
Mastication Box, 1974-1975



Fig. 6. Hannah Wilke, *Color Fields*: Model for Large-Scale Sculpture at Federal Plaza, New York, 1985



Fig. 7. Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah Series*: Portrait of the Artist with her Mother, Selma Butter, 1978-1981

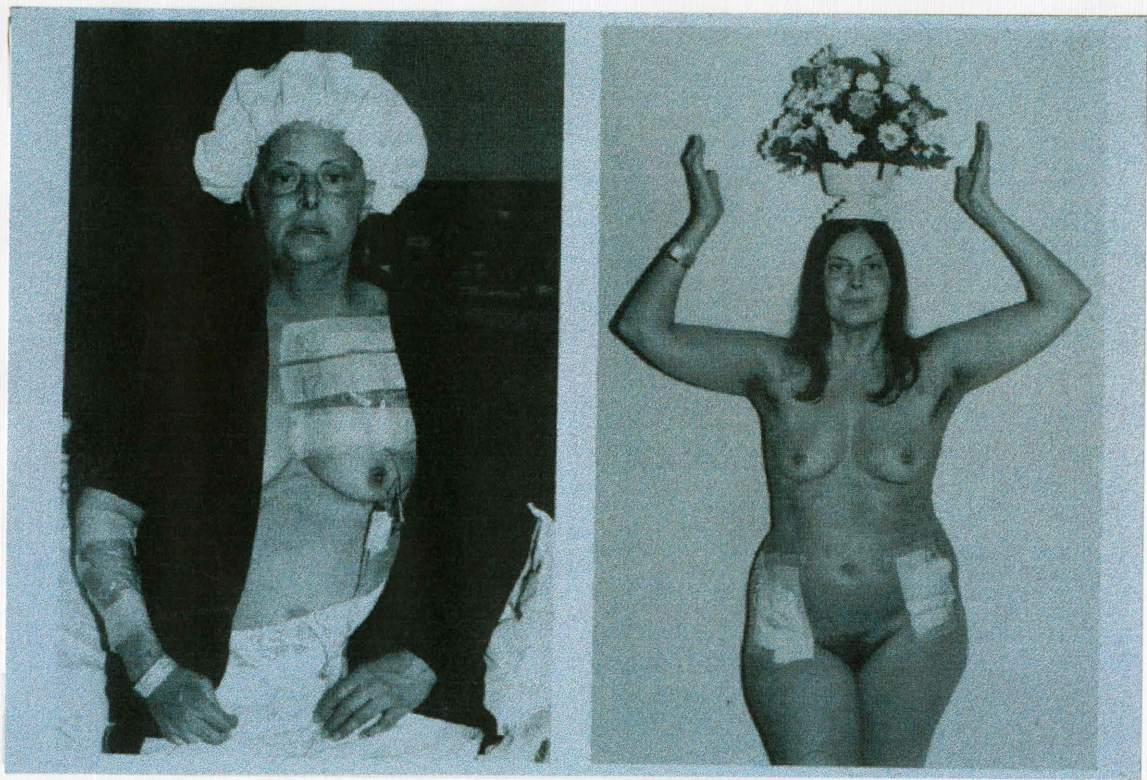


Fig. 8. Hannah Wilke, June 15, 1992/ January 30, 1992: #1 from *Intra-Venus 2* panels, 1992-1993



Fig. 9. Orlan, an operating room scene

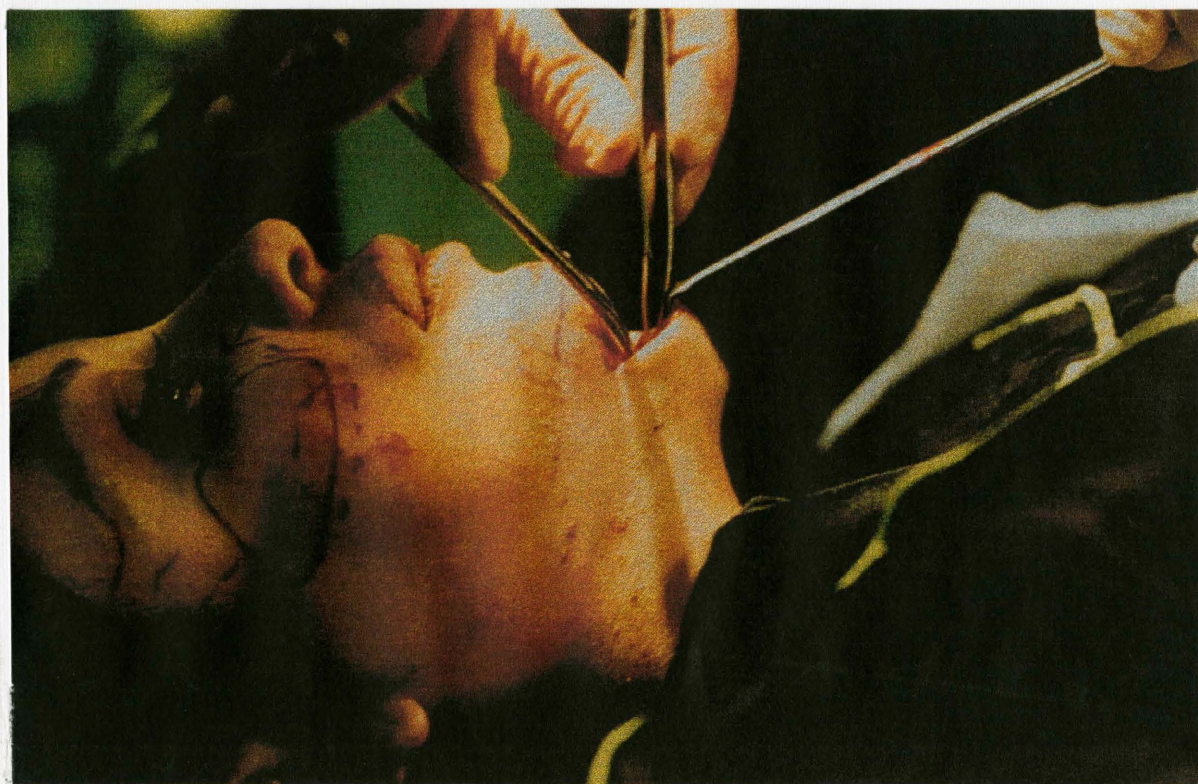


Fig. 10 Orlan, mid-operation



Fig. 11. Orlan, one day post-operation



Fig. 12. Anne Noggle, *Face Lift*, 1975, #3 from a series, silver print, 20" x 24"



Fig. 13. Anne Noggle, *Stellar by Starlight*, 1986, #1 from a series, silver print, 24" x 20"

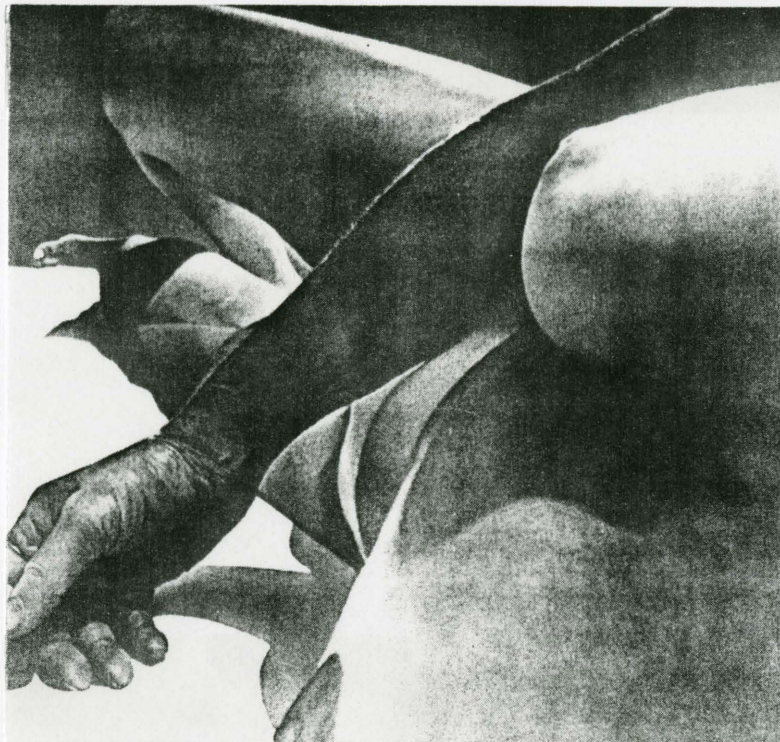


Fig. 14. Joan Semmel, *Mythologies and Me*, middle pannel of three, oil on canvas, 60" x 60"



Fig. 15. Joan Semmel, *Greenfield*, 1992, oil on canvas, 69" x 69"



Fig. 16. Joanne Segal Brandford, *Self*, 1993, Rattan, mixed media, 20" x 13" x 18"

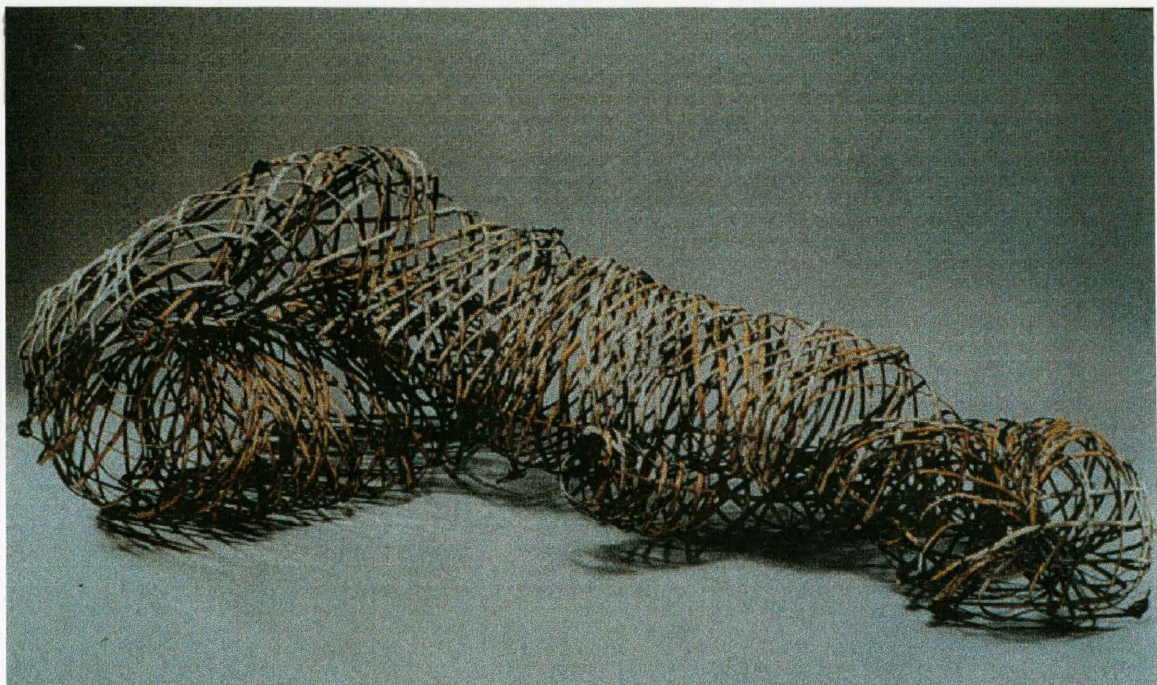


Fig. 17. Joanne Segal Brandford, *Reclining Figure*, 1992, Rattan, paint, 60" x 32" x 21"

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