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Faith Wilding | *Lingua Ignota*
Written by: Benjamin Lord
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Faith Wilding, *The Dream of Eating Leaves* (1988). Watercolor and ink on paper, 9.5 x 13 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena.

In the early 1970s, various groups of female artists in Los Angeles examined the role of gender in art as never before. They were spurred by a mood of general crisis. Late modernist art was perceived by many to have run its course. The bombing campaign in Vietnam was at its apex. The counterculture was foundering. These women protested the near-total absence of women from the art-historical canon and institutional exhibition circuits, but they also probed deeper, asking fundamental questions about the nature of authorship, the role of collaboration in art production, and the gendering of material and form. Debates could be intensely fractious; none of the early collectives were long-lived. They posed such questions as: Is conventional object-making simply obsolete? Is mainstream formalist criticism inherently sexist? Should female artists emulate masculine models of art making, or work in distinctly female modes? Should female artists seek out their own distinct sphere of reception and distribution, or attempt to insert themselves into existing patterns of distribution? It is important to understand that these were not merely theoretical questions, but pressing personal concerns.

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Contemporary art in California has a strange, hydra-headed relationship to this local history. Feminism was decisive in extending more opportunity to women (though it's still nowhere near parity 1). Female artists today can take an expanded range of options for granted without bothering to directly address the mantle of feminism. For many, feminism is logged in the books as a movement, another "ism" encountered in survey literature. Meanwhile, the formal achievements of first-wave left coast feminism have ironically been assimilated into the formal vocabulary of mainstream commercial contemporary art discourse, largely through the work of male artists. These men, consciously or not, selectively employed historically feminist forms in ways that have been read as symbols of abjection, emasculation, or the pathetic. Mike Kelley (or rather the influence of Mike Kelley, which is a different thing) remains the prime example of this development. This sleight-of-history was perhaps unwittingly abetted by internal debates within feminist art of the '80s, in which new voices dismissed women artists who used traditional craft materials as "essentialist."

Faith Wilding is an artist, educator, and writer whose early career was formed in the crucible of this "first-wave" movement. Her short book *By Our Own Hands* is the definitive firsthand social art history of feminist art in L.A. between 1970 and 1976. (Unfortunately, it's been out of print for years.) Wilding sits in the enviable yet sometimes awkward position of having made two legendary, career-defining pieces in the very early years of her work. Both pieces were realized within the context of *Womanhouse*, a collaborative project in 1972 consisting of performances, sculptures, and immersive environments created by a CalArts student group in an old deserted Hollywood mansion.

The first piece was *Waiting*, a first-person poem about a woman who is perpetually bound to the timelines of others. Wilding performed the poem as a reading at *Womanhouse*, and the chord that it struck still resonates. (She still receives fan mail regularly from young people who are discovering the work.) *Waiting* adapts the melancholic, existential poetics of deferral commonly associated with English playwright Samuel Beckett, and applies it to the daily experiences of women. Its critique of learned female passivity is quietly devastating.

Wilding's second piece at *Womanhouse* was *Crocheted Environment*, a room-sized web of crocheted patterns that formed an organic, cell-like body that encompassed the viewer. The original sculpture was mysteriously stolen from *Womanhouse*, but when Wilding remade the work for a show at the Bronx Museum in 1995, she titled it *Womb Room*. I've never seen either the original or the remake in person, but the work was crucial to handicraft's re-emergence in art, a major trend over the last few decades.

Wilding is 72 now, but *Fearful Symmetries*, at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena is, incredibly, her first museum retrospective. The Armory show was organized by Shannon Stratton, and appeared in its first iteration in 2014 at *Threewalls* in Chicago. The Pasadena incarnation of the show is buoyed by the significant addition of early works loaned from local private collections. Wilding's work was also recently on view in a concurrent show of watercolors, from her *Imago Femina* series, at *Loudhailer* gallery in Culver City.

Both Los Angeles shows have focused on Wilding's two-dimensional work, a surprising turn for an artist best known for her performance and sculpture. Almost all of the work in both shows has been largely unseen until now. These exhibitions confirm Wilding as a committed object maker, determined to integrate her evolving conception of feminist practice into traditional media and exhibition circuits. *Imago Femina*, a numbered series of watercolors from 1978, depicts abstracted chrysalises and other womb-like floral forms.

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Their theme is nurture. Their interlocking webs are a formal metaphor for a biological universe of mutually supporting structures. In these pieces, she achieves an unlikely but lucid fusion of botanical drawing, biomorphic Surrealist abstraction, manuscript illumination, and flower-power hippie doodling. Valves and twisting tubes wind and weave between chambers. Tendrils and buds symbolize the first delicate moments of life. As presented at Loudhailer, vintage frames sport thin, gold-leafed inner mat boards, evoking the material richness of illuminated manuscripts. In other large drawings, like *The Rising* (1979) at the Armory, the gold bands are integrated into the body of the drawing itself, as a kind of latticework for the vines to navigate. Georgia O’Keeffe’s watercolors of enlarged flowers are a clear point of reference, though *Imago Femina* is less observational, and more concerned with a negotiation between geometric abstraction and organic line. *Imago Femina*’s symmetric forms are also unmistakably indebted to the work of Judy Chicago, Wilding’s early mentor, and Chicago’s theory of vulvic imagery—what she termed “central core” composition—as historically central to female expression in art. Ultimately, Wilding’s muted and delicate technique is in a class of its own. In these works, the student eclipses the sensei.

At the time of their making, Wilding’s early watercolors received a chilly, even hostile initial reception. In the milieu of CalArts in the 1970s, her watercolors were considered retrograde. Even some fellow feminists were averse to the work’s apparent commitment to visual pleasure, detecting a suspicious overtone of conservatism. Post-studio practice and performance, epitomized by John Baldessari and Allan Kaprow, were in vogue. (As a student, Wilding found only one painting faculty member at CalArts with any interest in figural representation, who suggested without irony that she paint from Playboy centerfolds.) Today these categorical hierarchies seem outmoded, and merely quaint. In retrospect, it’s hard not to conclude that the CalArts faculty were simply afraid of Virginia Woolf.

Her next body of work, also on view at the Armory, is less successful. Pages from the *Scriptorium* (1983) and *Hildegard Book* (1985) are one-of-a-kind artist books made with gouache on heavy paper. They are homages to Hildegard von Bingen, the medieval German composer, author, playwright, and visionary. The draftsmanship is rushed, schematic, and indifferent, and the handwritten texts are an all-caps scribble complete with weird hyphenated breaks that appears layered onto the image after the fact. Wilding’s attraction to Hildegard’s grand allegorical visions of female figures is palpable, but her choice of such a lofty and historically majestically illustrated subject sets her sights beyond the limits of her own technique.

In the Armory show, Wilding’s technique visibly evolves in an exquisite group of smaller drawings from the late 1980s, which flirt with Surrealism. In *Godot’s Tree: The Dream of Eating Leaves* (1988) a naked woman straddles what looks like a giant cactus paddle, both apparently levitating. One of its spiky thorns rises up between her buttocks. Another thorn sprouts a leaf at its tip, which the woman bends towards her mouth, as she prepares to lick it. Here Wilding’s nature worship verges on self-satire. In *The Dream of Long Beautiful Hair* (1989), a nude female figure huddles in a fetal position inside the skeletal carcass of a bull, itself careening through an egg-like ovoid portal. The poetic connection to *Waiting*—with its grown woman forever waiting to be born—is unmistakable, and the technical combination of stippling, wash, and hatching is masterful.

This period of drawings includes the one note of outright aggression in the show: the watercolor and ink piece *I Dream I Eviscerated my Father* (1989), which depicts a naked man, arms and legs spread, his body sliced open from neck to crotch. The pink and golden tendrils in the earlier work here become gray entrails, twisting out of the man’s torso.

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While the ink rendering is meticulous, the watercolor pigment, with faint pink highlights, is applied indifferently, staining the paper in no discernable pattern. The tension between these two modes of application in this piece is puzzling. This is the space of dreams, and the subject matter is as close as Wilding comes to violent revolt.

Wilding's drawing practice is in many ways close to writing, especially journaling and letter writing. Most of her drawings have accompanying texts or annotations alongside illustrations of her favorite motifs: leaf, shell, cocoon, womb, heart, and spiral. Two vitrines at the Armory display unframed, loose-leaf sheets from the course of her career. The use of text, at times singsong and exuberant, at others tentative and probing, is partly a legacy of her formal training. Judy Chicago asked her students to pay close attention to personal feelings and sensations that they might not normally consider appropriate material for art. Persistent note taking was a form of consciousness-raising, and also an homage to everyday labor.⁵ Wilding's use of text also recalls the work of William Blake, whom she claims as a feminist and quotes on occasion. Like Blake, Wilding is drawn to ancient wisdom traditions, and seeks to reconcile her own personal visions with her conservative Christian upbringing, and a evolving sexual politics. Her syntheses are less systematic in character than Blake's; she offers no grand unified theories. One suspects this is by design, part and parcel of a critique of masculinist notions of mastery.

There are some false notes among the large works in the Armory show. The main wall of the space is painted a grayish country blue, and hung with shaped cutout oil-on-canvas paintings of leaves, twisting and turning as if tossed by the wind. The materials listed come as a surprise; from a distance, the works look like adhesive vinyl graphics. The individual pieces are competently realized, but the wall doesn't gel as an overall composition. The colors are dark and slightly muddy, and the cumulative effect is strangely heavy handed. Wilding is capable of an extraordinary lightness of touch, and here that lightness is absent.

In the Armory's "Vault" space (a corridor, really) in the corner of the exhibition galleries, documentary footage of *Waiting* plays on a loop. Where, however, are the rest of Wilding's performances and collaborative projects? This is the show's main lacuna, a serious gap for an exhibition that presents itself as a retrospective. The nearly exclusive focus on two-dimensional work in this survey, which from a distance could easily be mistaken for provincial conservatism, brackets away the discussions of craft, sculpture, and performance that were so crucial to early feminism. No matter—for most viewers this work will be a welcome bolt from the blue.

Canonization is just now fully catching up with Wilding. A major monograph is being published next year by Intellect Books (UK), based in Bristol. She is currently writing her memoirs. The Getty Research Institute is negotiating the acquisition of her archive. That institutions are still in the early phases of identifying, locating, and documenting feminist discourse nearly 50 years on should be taken as a sign of movement's intense productivity. Given these developments, why does unabashed femininity in art still often have the power to raise eyebrows? The longstanding institutional mistrust of art like Wilding's, and the millennial generation's occasionally amnesiac relationship to early feminist history, suggest that there is critical work left to be done.