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Review: A feminist artist, revisited: Faith Wilding at Armory Center for the Arts

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The only work of Faith Wilding's that I was familiar with was her "Crocheted Environment," originally created for the feminist exhibition "Womanhouse" in 1972. That piece recast domestic craft as art medium, a gesture now so common as to be unremarkable.

The rest of Wilding's career, which has spanned 40 years and also includes drawing, painting and performance, has been largely ignored. But a gorgeous retrospective, originally organized by Chicago art space Threewalls and now on view at Pasadena's Armory Center for the Arts, does much to rectify that lapse.

Wilding was a key participant in Judy Chicago's Feminist Art Program at Fresno State University and California Institute of Arts in the early 1970s. Since then, she has also been a prolific writer, educator and activist, most recently working with the collective subRosa on projects related to the impact of biotechnologies on women. Wilding delved into this part of her practice during a brief residency at Occidental College in Eagle Rock in November. The show at the Armory focuses on her lyrical, often stunningly beautiful paintings and drawings.

To be sure, this is feminist art of a certain age, rife with organic imagery and diaristic annotations. Yet it refreshingly gets at something that is often forgotten in more coldly intellectual endeavors: what it feels like to observe one's body as it changes, evolves, and eventually withers away.

The influence of Chicago and Georgia O'Keeffe is clear, not only in Wilding's focus on natural subjects, but in her up-close, often concentric or bilaterally symmetrical compositions. "The Great Spiral" from 1979 is a luscious whorl of tendrils, some spiky, some vein-y, that fills the frame. It powerfully evokes a swirling life force that is simultaneously animal and vegetal.

Nearby, beautifully painted and nearly body-size cutouts of dried leaf shapes float across a light blue wall. They are oddly fleshy, streaked in autumn colors that suggest hair or skin as much as leaves. In their sinuous twists and crevices, one finds not only a visual reference to the body but something harder to define, perhaps the delicate shape of a feeling.

The correspondence between human bodies and the rest of the natural world is more explicit in several works in which women emerge from chrysalises or innards take on the shape of plants. The myriad small watercolors in "Tears Wall" from 2009-10 depict teardrop shapes that variously suggest glands, wombs and plant bulbs. These indeterminate forms incubate tiny figures, or generate new shoots.

There is a sense throughout the show, not just of the physicality of the body, but of its impermanence, a point driven home by video documentation of a 1974 performance. In "Waiting," Wilding sits, rocking back and forth as she recites a series of phrases. The statements, which all begin with the words "Waiting for..." progress from a baby waiting for a diaper change to an old woman "waiting for the pain to stop." They simultaneously trace the course of a life while reinforcing its relentless monotony. The performance is a document of frustration at frittering away one's existence in moments of powerlessness and boredom. But it is also a poignant meditation on transition. Waiting may be inaction, but it is the pivotal moment when one thing might become another. Throughout her career, Wilding has gracefully inhabited this in between space of radical potential.

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