

ANAT EBGI

Memphis Flyer



Work by Faith Wilding at Clough-Hanson

Written by: Eileen Townsend

September 25, 2014

Faith Wilding wants us to remember that we have bodies and that those bodies can feel joy and pain and terror. And so she makes drawings. “We search for signs of the body,” she wrote in a recent essay. “We need constant affirmation ...”

Wilding’s most recent drawings, a watercolor series of deeply hued leaves and ovary-shaped tears, are lightly sketched and loosely colored. They are unframed and feel informal, like vivid excerpts from a four-decade-long diary. Their small scale is personal and, as a result, the works are powerful in the way that things made privately often are. As a part of Wilding’s current retrospective “Fearful Symmetries” at Rhodes’ Clough-Hanson Gallery, these works on paper offer a radical solution to the problems of the world: Make things with your hands. Share them with other people.

Wilding is a founder of the feminist art movement, a multimedia and performance artist. Her long career includes activist work with cyber-feminists, a series of graphic and elegant “cyborg bodies” paintings (she calls them her “recombinants”), and a sustained focus on the female anatomy as a potential image for both beauty and terror. Her early work is currently experiencing renewed interest in museums and galleries — a 1972 crocheted installation work, “womb room” (originally built in a dilapidated Hollywood mansion as a part of the well-known Womanhouse installation) is soon to be reinstalled in the ICA Boston. “Fearful Symmetries,” which debuted at the Threewalls art space in Chicago, is a retrospective of her lesser-seen work, with a few better-known early pieces to provide context.

In one of the earlier pieces on display, Wilding’s 1978 *Imago Femina*, the artist invents a gilded herbological guide — an illuminated manuscript — around one or several fantastical plants. In these drawings, half-grown stalks and shoots wind upward, negotiated through dark purples, crimson reds, and gold leaf. The images are framed with black rectangles and seem as if they could have been pulled from old text.

With *Imago Femina*, Wilding wants to make sacred — to make canon — the shapes of women’s bodies. To do this, she (in the company of many feminist artists) invokes flowers, not only for their signature similarity to women’s vulvas, but because their center-tending forms — their “fearful symmetries” — make them feel like corporeal descriptions of incorporeal things. The *Imago Femina* drawings are excerpted pages from a book of symbols that was never written, or has been erased.

Wilding’s 1974 *Moth Triptych: Emergence of the Moth, Debut of the Moth, and Dissolution of the Moth*: for Virginia (a reference to Virginia Woolf’s essay “Death of a Moth”) goes along similar lines, but the penciled forms are not as easily identified as plants. The drawings’ half-ovals and long lines recall warped light along the horizon at dawn, distance bent by perspective.

6150 Wilshire Blvd
Los Angeles, CA 90048
+1 (323) 272 3418

anatebgi.com

4859 Fountain Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90029
+1 (323) 407 6806

ANAT EBGİ

Virginia Woolf is one of Wilding's idols, perhaps because Woolf's characters so often understand their lives as bound to soil and water: "My roots are threaded," says Louis in Woolf's *Waves*, "like fibers in a flower-pot, round and round about the world." Across the gallery from *Imago Femina*, Wilding's drawing, *Wait-with Virginia* depicts Wilding with Woolf crouched behind the artist's shoulder, whispering in her ear.

Wait-with Virginia is a companion piece to Wilding's most famous performance work, a 1974 poem called *Waiting*, and to her 2007 revision of that work, *Wait-With* (both on view as a part of the exhibition). Wilding's original performance of *Waiting* is a well-known recorded example of the early feminist performance. In the film, Wilding wears a long skirt and rocks slightly back and forth in her chair, her eyes bolted to an indeterminate point in the distance. Her audience sits on the floor, surrounding her, sharing silently in her indignation as Wilding pronounces the passive phases of a woman's life: "Waiting for him to make the first move ... Waiting for my baby to come ... Waiting for my friends to die." The poem and its recording are effective, in part, because Wilding seems not to just recite her poem, but to divine it in sympathy with her community of listeners.

In *Wait-With*, Wilding reimagines the act of waiting as a space of meditative, unfilled, non-capitalized time/space. "Waiting," says Wilding, " ... open space between action." Forty years after the original performance, *Wait-With* comprehends something *Waiting* did not anticipate — that American women's ascension in the workplace has not inspired the sort of structural change early feminists envisioned. *Waiting* in *Wait-With* is held up as the opposite of constant capital production, as a sacred time in which we make art and create community, not one to be taken for granted.