

Is It Punk To Grow Old Ungracefully?

by Emily Colucci on September 19, 2011

Martha Wilson, "I have become my own worst fear" (2009), photo by Michael Katchen



On a rainy Thursday in Chelsea, I could hear the cast of the *Real Housewives* screeching in horror and running for their emergency stash of botox as I walked through visual artist and alternative space powerhouse Martha Wilson's new exhibition *I have become my own worst fear* at PPOW Gallery. Characteristically bold, Wilson's exhibition seems to delve into one of the last taboos of our times: women aging.

Probably best known as the founder of Franklin Furnace Archive, Inc., an alternative space dedicated to preserving artist books, temporary performance art and installations, Wilson has been a staple on the New York alternative art scene since the 1970s. This exhibition at PPOW is made up of photographs and one video that all seem to comment on the realities of aging as a woman.

Investigating all forms of aging, Wilson's work in *I have become my own worst fear* presents an in-your-face truth: the deterioration of the idealized female body and the social repercussions of being an older woman. All I could think of in the exhibit was how her work at PPOW was extremely punk. To stare back at both the young pretty gallery workers and the plastic surgery-laden collectors with a photograph like "I have become my own worst fear" (2009), Wilson places herself as the future and the rejected present of these gallery goers.

Delving into the reality of a woman's body and presence as she ages, the works in *I have become my worst fear* totally lend themselves to some serious feminist critique. As someone who just graduated with a degree in "Humanities and Social Thought," I've got to restrain myself to not start thumbing through some Helene Cixous, which would be utterly ridiculous. However, these works do present strong statements about the realities of an older women's changing body and the reflection of these changes in her role in society.

Martha Wilson, "Beauty and Beastly" (1974/2009), photographs/text (photo by author)

Presenting the changes in age, Wilson's "Beauty and Beastly: (1974/2009) combines photographs from Wilson's youth and current photographs. Under the older photograph, the text reads "Beastly" and under the younger photograph, it reads "Beauty." The self-deprecating humor in the exhibition do mask a real



questioning of age and the transformation of the body. Studying this photograph, I found myself comparing different parts of Wilson's face, looking at her sagging chin-line. The changes in her form are more obvious in comparison. Where these works could be perceived as depressing, Wilson's humor makes the show a bit lighter and works to mask the serious feminist critique.

Martha Wilson, Name-Fate, 2009, photographs/text (via ppowgallery.com)



Name - Fate
WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON



Name - Fate
MARTHA STORY WILSON

Dressed up like former President Bill Clinton, Wilson presents the masculinity in the aging woman. As we age, both men and women become more like each other. Almost like a more radical Cindy Sherman, Wilson dressed up like Bill Clinton is both hilarious and actually serious. Besides the aging theme, the title of the piece reflects Wilson's fascination with their middle names "Jefferson" and "Story," which oddly seem to mirror their lives.

Martha Wilson, Installation of "Growing Old" (2008-9), pigmented ink print on hahnemuhle bamboo paper (photo by author)

In her *Growing Old* series of photographs with the beautiful "Growing Old (Chrysanthemum)" in the center, Wilson documents her greying hair over a period of time as she lets the color grow out of her hair. Having seen Wilson in person a few times at lectures and various gallery openings, her punky half-white, half-reddish orange hair is unquestionably her trademark. Looking at the progression of her dyed hair growing out, it's almost as if she is barely recognizable with the grey hair.



Martha Wilson, "Invisible" (2011), color photograph/text (photo by author)

In "Invisible" (2011), Wilson, hiding her recognizable hair, dresses in sloppy clothes in a bodega. Unreadable as male or female, Wilson does appear to recede into the

dingy background. Many older women, or so I've been told by a few family members, feel completely invisible.

Martha Wilson, *Marge/Martha/Mona*, 2009, pigmented ink print on canvas
(via ppowgallery.com)

Even though Wilson does explore serious topics about feminism and age, Wilson's sense of humor like in "*Marge/Martha/Mona*" (2009) really shines through these works. The ability to make light of what could be a possibly shrill, whiny exhibition about aging is why Wilson is such a strong artist and personality.



While other artists such as Marina Abramović have confronted their own aging, Wilson's humor makes it more palatable. Blunt and in-your-face, Wilson's take on aging seems to be fairly punk. Not trying to appear beautiful or perfect, Wilson presents some of the most horrible photographs of herself in the PPOW exhibition.

This raises my question: Is it punk to age ungracefully? Certainly most, if not all, of the male punk musicians have managed to do it. For a woman, it seems like throwing your aging body in the face of the general public like Wilson has done is completely punk.

Now I know my plans for when I'm older: forget the botox and bring on the Manic Panic.

Martha Wilson's I have become my own worst fear will be at the PPOW Gallery until October 8, 2011