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Artist Martha Wilson at P.P.O.W., New York: Aging gracefully, with political consciousness, “beauty” and sass

*NEW YORK* - The artist, cultural activist, freedom-of-expression advocate and educator Martha Wilson is well-known as the founder of an important contemporary-art institution. In 1976, in New York, Wilson established the Franklin Furnace Archive, an alternative-space museum, whose purpose, its mission statement explained, was “to champion ephemeral forms neglected by mainstream arts institutions” and, in particular, with regard to the still-new genre of artists’ books that was emerging at the time, “to serve artists who [chose] publishing as a democratic artistic medium and who were not being supported by existing artistic organizations.”



Above, left to right: Artist Martha Wilson at her P.P.O.W. exhibition's opening with photo-collage, *Mona/Martha* print on canvas; *Name = Fate* (2009), two black-and-white photographs, showing former U.S. President William Clinton and Martha Wilson dressed and groomed to resemble Clinton; and *Invisible* (2011), a color photograph showing Wilson in a typical New York City corner food shop. *First two photos by E.M.G.; third photo courtesy of P.P.O.W.*

By the time it closed its doors at 112 Franklin Street, in downtown Manhattan’s TriBeCa district, in late 1996, Franklin Furnace had presented many memorable exhibitions and a wide-ranging program of performance art events. It also had built up a renowned and definitive collection of artists’ books and ephemeral material that was often related to performance art, including photographs, videotapes, posters, pamphlets, collage works and limited-edition printed material of all kinds. In 1993, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired that collection. In 1997, after closing its physical space, Franklin Furnace launched its website, which has served as a platform for webcasts of performance and other Internet-based works of art. Under Wilson’s direction, the organization has continued its grant-making program in support of artists from around the world and has won major grants in support of its ambitious, ongoing project, the Franklin Furnace Database, which contains information about every performance art work, temporary installation, exhibition or benefit presented by the institution; it also offers images of events presented during Franklin Furnace’s first ten years.

Now, in a solo gallery exhibition (“I Have Become My Own Worst Fear,” on view through October 8) that opened yesterday at P.P.O.W., in Chelsea, Wilson’s own new, performance-and-photography-based works are being showcased; with their interweaving of candor, humor, psychological analysis and subtle, social-political critique, they revisit themes she first began examining in the early 1970s as a younger, unabashedly feminist artist. Among them: the ways in which clothes and make-up shape a woman’s perceived identity in the world (and of herself); how our Western, developed societies “allow” or perhaps expect women to age; and how, in contexts that are sometimes beyond her control, given a society’s definition of what feminine “beauty” can or should be, a woman’s body may serve as a powerful platform for self-expression—or a battleground for a contest between a woman’s courageous sense of herself and the forces of Mother Nature (whose own feminist credentials sometimes seem dubious at best; what’s with all the macho-aggressive earthquake- and hurricane-making lately?).

“I’ve always mixed humor with politics and the analysis or critique of social norms, values and trends,” Wilson told me at the opening of her P.P.O.W. exhibition yesterday evening. Standing next to a photo of herself dressed as an elegant, older matron (with great gams) in a red skirt suit, on which was printed the title “The Legs Are the Last to Go,” the artist added: “A sense of humor is especially worthwhile when self-identity and aging—your own inevitable process of getting older, that is—are your subjects.”



In the multi-image work *Growing Old* (2008-2010), Wilson uses the fading color of her own dyed hair as a meta-calls subtle attention to society's expectations about how a woman, in particular, should appear as she ages; pigment on Hahnemühle bamboo paper.

As much as I admire and respect Wilson for her accomplishments as an institution-builder and, most significantly, as a champion of free expression for artists and all supporters of democratic values in these chilling, paranoia-loving times, I also regard her as a remarkable locus of many of the intellectual, cultural and aesthetic currents that have evolved around her over the years and, in one way or another, have crossed the paths of the places, events or creative, collaborative efforts with which she has been associated. Examples: Wilson’s presence as a teacher at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax in the early 1970s, when numerous, prototypical conceptualist artists were passing through to lecture and create event-based works;

her involvement with the Guerrilla Girls, those tireless fighters of sexism in the cultural world; and her in-the-eye-of-the-storm advocacy for free speech, a civil right protected by the U.S. Constitution (remember that old thing?), during the “culture wars” of the 1990s.

In 1998, following the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision upholding the so-called decency test for awarding federal arts grants, which the conservative Republican Senator Jesse Helms had demanded, Wilson wrote: “I believe the net effect of this law will be that artists will continue to take sexuality as their subject (as they have been doing for 30,000 years), but many presenting organizations will become frightened off by controversial content. Sigh.”

Alas, maybe Martha Wilson is something of a venerable institution herself.