

# Art in America

INTERNATIONAL ● REVIEW

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

NOVEMBER 2011



Martha Wilson: Growing Old (detail), 2008-09, pigmented ink prints on paper, 8 works: 21 inches square and 1 work: 35 inches square; at P.P.O.W.

## MARTHA WILSON P.P.O.W.

"At 50," George Orwell declared, "everyone has the face he deserves." Plastic surgery and Botox notwithstanding, age leaves its imprint, a fact that continues to impact women in our culture more powerfully than men. In this hilarious and pointed exhibition, Martha Wilson revisited her youthful fear of growing old and found that aging well is the best revenge. A sometime artist whose early performance career was curtailed when she founded the legendary New York alternative space Franklin Furnace in 1976, Wilson has returned with a set of photo-based works that give a comedic spin to the feminist critique of our society's infatuation with female youth and beauty.

The inspiration for this show was Wilson's 1974 video *Deformation*, in which, at the ripe age of 24, she remade herself into a much older woman with the aid of jowl-enhancing makeup, deliberately dowdy hair-styling and unflattering camera angles. The video was paired with a photograph of Wilson today, appearing much as her younger self imagined she would. The new work's title provided the theme for the entire show: *I have become my own worst fear*.

Except that, in fact, she has not. Wilson rejects a drab persona, refusing to be socially invisible (though this possibility is acknowledged in a staged photograph in which she pushes a cart through a bodega like a homeless person). Instead, as she did in performative works shown in 2008 at Mitchell Alguo Gallery, she plays dress-up in a variety of attention-getting ways that mock social stereotypes, this time of older women. Here she is as Cruella De Vil, with sinisterly outlined eyes and exaggerated expressions of glee and anger; there she melds with the Mona Lisa, her not-so-mysterious smile overshadowed by a towering Marge Simpson wig. In *The legs are the last to go*, she dons the persona of an older suburban matron revealing her still-shapely gams. A number of works focus on hair as a means to wrestle with age, including a sequence of images recording a patch of bright red henna as it slowly grows out and is replaced by standard-issue white hair. Wilson also remakes herself to resemble Bill Clinton, reminding us that mature men may be acknowledged as still sexy when their female counterparts are not.

While the humor here is certainly accessible to all viewers, it has particular resonance for women of a certain age.

This exhibition represented a welcome return of Martha Wilson the artist, who most certainly is not going to become invisible any time soon.

—Eleanor Heartney