



School of  
VISUAL ARTS®

## Art Criticism and Writing MFA Program

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### **Martha Wilson at P.P.O.W.**

by Aldrin Valdez



Martha Wilson, *Beauty and Beastly*, black and white photographs, text, 17 by 23 inches, 1974/2009. Courtesy P.P.O.W., New York.

A big part of Martha Wilson's work has been to question identity as a given, fixed state of being. In the 1970s she took on stereotypes of women, performing them in photographs to reveal the illusion of gender roles, the portrayal of which in the media often hinges on posture and clothing. In "I Have Become My Own Worst Fear," her current solo show at P.P.O.W., she continues her exploration of appearances, looking at how her own body is changing as she ages. What does it mean for an artist, so aware of images, to grow old?

In *Deformation*, a nine-minute, black-and-white video from 1974, a 20-something Wilson applies make-up to her face and neck, accentuating what she perceives as her deformities: baggy eyes, a double-chin, a lump on the side of her nose. "If I call attention to the things I fear the most, then I know that I don't really look this way most of the time," she says, her gaze fixed on a mirror off-screen. She's both unflinchingly direct and self-conscious. When Wilson was 26, she wrote: "I am creating my resource out of an absence that I feel in the 'real' me. All my

values have been contributed from the outside, from my parents, my lovers. How do I know what 'I' like, what I don't like?"

Fast-forward to a 2009 self-portrait photograph printed large on canvas, hanging on the adjacent wall. Wilson's toothy smile beams under a heavy flash; her short hair is parted down the middle. Her expression in this image mirrors her appearance in the last few seconds of *Deformation*. It seems that she has, as the caption reads, become her own worst fear, but as the term "make-up" suggests, fear, like identity, is something she—we create for ourselves. Here, all made up in her fear, she looks ridiculous and defiant, sure of herself.



Martha Wilson, *I Have Become My Own Worst Fear*, photographic print on canvas, video projection, 65 by 43 inches, 2009/1974. Courtesy P.P.O.W., New York

These two works herald the comparative format of the other ten pieces in the show. In some instances, an older self-portrait is paired with a more recent one; a caption explains the contrast. *Beauty and Beastly* (1974/2009) is a small, intimate double-portrait that positions a bare-shouldered Wilson face to face with her younger self. In *Growing Old* (2008-09), a series of nine profiles laid out symmetrically in a row, the artist tracks the transformation of her hair in the span of a year. As the date progresses, Wilson's paprika-colored hair turns silver. In profile, she looks somber and heroic. In the same room hang portraits of Wilson as Bill Clinton and Cruella Deville; in another, she's collaged with Mona Lisa and Marge Simpson.

Wilson's work is funny but not unserious. She's trying to counter the structure of an art historical narrative which can be reductive in its attempts to make sense of an artist's body of work. That body, as she shows, is actually in continuum.