

Marion Wilson

playing war

A Solo Exhibition in the Project Room

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Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center
Saturday, April 17 - May 28, 1999
Opening Reception: Saturday, April 17, 1999, 9-11 p.m.

Hallwalls
2495 Main Street, Suite 425
Buffalo, NY 14214
(716) 835-7362

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Artworks

<i>Guns for Newborns</i> , bronze, detail	1998
<i>Knight</i> , bronze, plaster	1997
<i>Transmogrification</i> , digital print	1999

State of the Arts



NYSCA

Marion Wilson makes installations that recall historical museums' arms and armor wings; those strange haunted-seeming parts of a museum in which art history and military history commingle. While these cabinets of artifacts remind us of a time when pomp and artifice served as living symbols of fearsome might and power, the symbolic content of Wilson's sculptural work is more complex and points to arguably, the most universal, natural, and human task. She examines what bearing, nurturing and protecting the next generation entails in our particular times.

Marion Wilson's work starts from the biographical fact that she is an artist and a mother; a dual role that decades after Mary Kelly's Post Partum Document project, is still not unproblematic or resolved. For while we have grown comfortable with the category of artist being infinitely redefinable and open-ended, on the whole, even at our most socially conscious and evolved, we want the category of mother to remain a transhistorical and relatively unchanging constant. Although many of the side issues and circumstances around motherhood have radically changed, the central concepts of motherhood, (that the center of the mother's universe and reason-for-being have to be embodied in the child's flesh and psyche) are non-negotiable.

This dialog between the actual realities of modern motherhood and the reified, essentializing concept of transhistorical motherhood, with which the artist-mother must silently negotiate, is addressed in Wilson's choice of a language of the past, that of armor, to deal with contemporary issues. The past and present are locked in these works as intricate negotiations with no sense that resolution is near. Plastic toy horses and cast bubble wrap become a bronze chariot. Chariots are at best a romantic way of travel. Hanging atavistically to this familiar archetype, despite their impracticality and unsuitability for modern highways, the artist points us towards some confounding truths. One is always retrofitting historical ideals, those that we were raised to believe would be transhistorical, for the present, and that is rarely an easy translation. Likewise her armor, which, with its implied crippling weight, decorativeness and inability to stop a bullet, is an anachronistically useless symbol of protection, but Wilson reminds us that sometimes symbolism is the only protection we can offer. Over decorated, and therefore simultaneously male and female, her hemaphroditic armor is called upon to stop not only guns and knives but also such abstract threats as compulsory Alpha-male aggressiveness, future sexual harassment, and enforced female self-crippling behaviors such as bulimia and the inability to over-talk any male voice.

The dialog between that past and the present gets even more complicated when considering *Guns for Newborns*, a row of six small guns. These are diminutive toy guns, yet as fossils they seem ever more real.

We know that our attempt to raise children, particularly boys, away from representations of masculine violence is futile, but nonetheless must be attempted. Boys are more often than not encouraged to play with guns, and some argue today that they are genetically predisposed towards finding "war games" to be amusing diversions. Wilson questions why we have not been able to leave such violent enculturation in that archaic past, while acknowledging the inherent contradiction in such a query. We know intellectually, that dangers for children today are not statistically greater than in the past - disease, child labor, famine and accidents claimed a much higher percentage of young lives. That being said, we intuitively cling to the notion that the type of violence they face today is more horrific and specifically linked to the ready availability of handguns. The silhouette of the gun holds the less logical portions of our protective psyches forever hostage.

In her new photoworks, Wilson brings the child as an abstraction and the child as flesh-and-blood into juxtaposition. Children are simultaneously incredibly resilient and fragile. The occasional skinned knee reminds us that their blood flows right below their beautiful smooth skin. But a child's face always reminds us of the relentlessness of time. Once we were their age and they will too soon be ours. They too will know tragedy and loss as we have. For our parent's generation, that idea was wrapped around the comforting unpredictability of the future, and vague notions of fate. We have lost that and gained a new type of fatalism in genetics. We know that most of the dangers these small bodies face are already locked into their genes and that such differences, as being a tortured schizophrenic or a genius, are but a few bits of minute, coded, genetic information apart. When Wilson grants us the ability to look inside their bodies, we see only that we cannot, and perhaps, do not want to see what lies ahead inside their flesh. Old fashioned fated events - dying in an accident, winning the lottery, or finding or not finding true love - seem almost comforting by comparison.

Motherhood is already the most complicated role that society expects any human to perform, and adding the requirements of the artist's life to it seems simply unfair. Merely coping with that burden seems to already deserve kudos. To transform it into an installation like this, so that it might act as a catalyst for us all to consider our own relations to our mothers, our own maternal sides, and for some of us, our children, goes way beyond the call of duty and deserves cultural commendation, although in what we must admit remains a patriarchal culture - I won't be holding my breath.

Bill Arning, NYC March 1999





