

Wanda Ewing

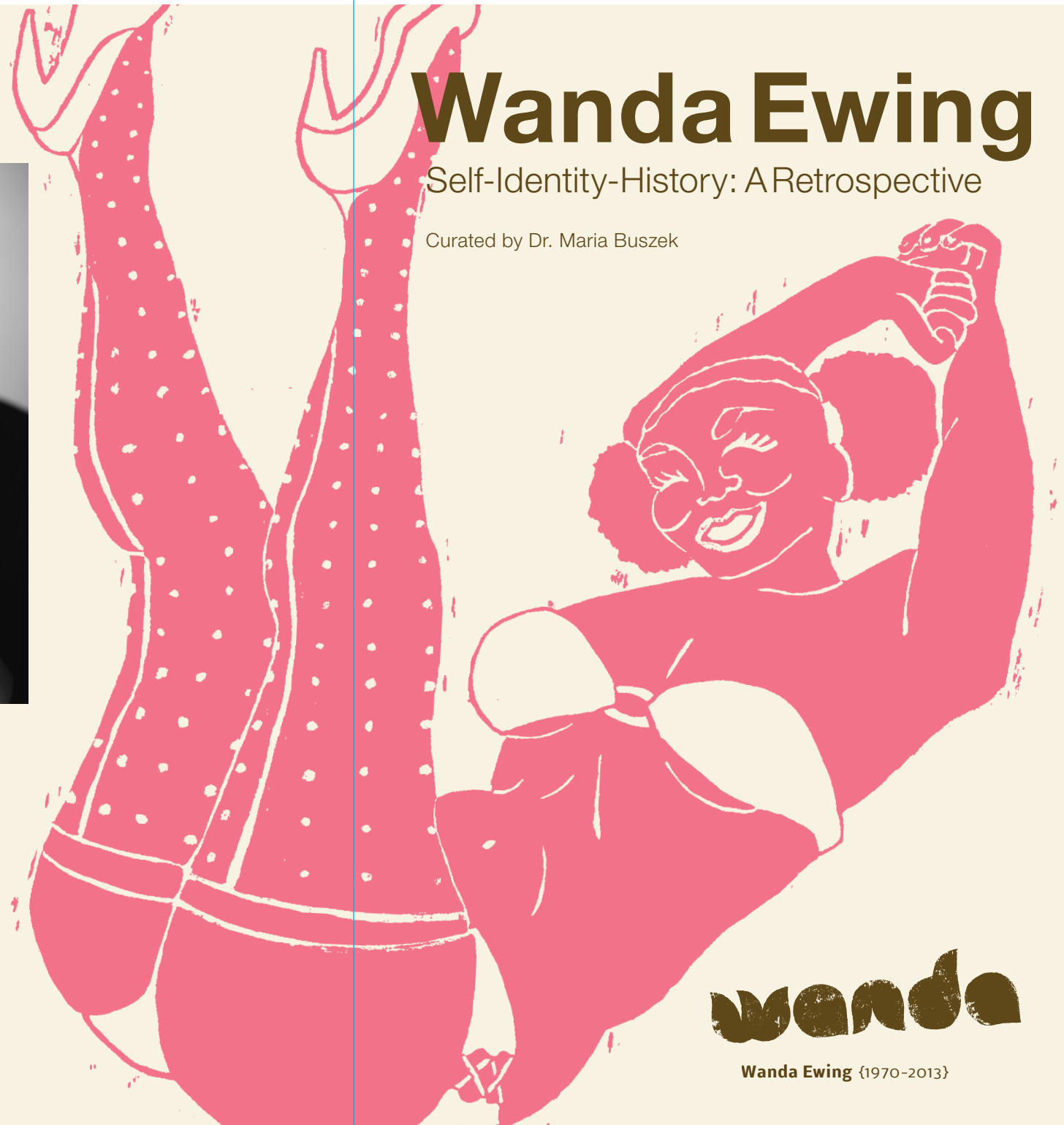
Self-Identity-History: A Retrospective

Curated by Dr. Maria Buszek



The late artist Wanda Ewing's work ranged from traditional print media to painting, sculpture, and fiber arts, and was influenced by folk-art aesthetics and the depiction—and lack thereof—of African-American women in popular culture and the canon of art history. Throughout her career, she represented the connections between autobiography, community, and history, often with a biting, comical edge.

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Wanda Ewing {1970-2013}

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Self

From Ewing's earliest student work, she used her own image and experiences for frank meditations on everything from the mundane to the surreal. Wanda was her own best model, and she knew it—tall and strapping, with dark-cocoa skin and striking features softened by large, expressive eyes and a full, quick-to-smile mouth. Even when her narrative works illustrated her struggles with self-image or even survival—scraping by in San Francisco during art school with little money and wild jobs—she recognized the strength in her character, and even her foibles, representing them with often disarming candor.

In this exhibition, we see myriad ways in which Ewing found power in self-portraiture. She alternately used her non-traditional beauty as a case study in how black women are vilified or invisible in society, and as a celebration of difference and self-love. Her *100 Hairdos* series, for example, poked fun at women's anxieties

over “good hair” and “bad hair,” each representing a uniformly-printed Wanda sporting unique, hand-painted hairstyles ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, occasionally (and convincingly!) usurping the power of her European or masculine hairstyle models in ways that demonstrate how easily images of authority might be confiscated. Ewing's series of dresses, shoes, and jewelry were studies of her own careful costuming—like herself, big, colorful, and bold—rendered as sensuous, occasionally abstract studies in self-portraiture-through-still-life. But, even as the artist's indomitable spirit and optimism are palpable throughout these images, she was unafraid to lay bare her own neuroses, sometimes deep-seated, in works like her *Dream Series*, which referenced surrealism's dreamscapes to reveal the fear and doubt beneath her seemingly unflappable exterior.

“As an artist, I am constantly striving to make connections with the viewer and have open exchanges about life in contemporary society. The subject matter of my work depicts my personal experiences. In doing so, I set the stage for possible dialogue with as many different people as I can about concerns we all share as a collective on a basic, human level.”



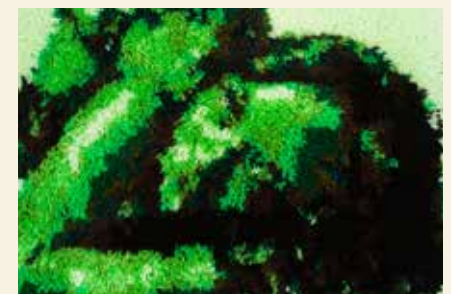
“I have been extremely interested in the issue of identity. Who do I identify with? How do I see myself? How am I viewed in society? What is my contribution as a contemporary black artist to the conversation of ‘what black is and what it ain’t’?”

Identity

Fiercely feminist, Ewing's work reflects the movement's oft-repeated assertion: “The personal is the political.” Much of her work tangles with identity politics, aware of the ways that representation both reflects and bends how and with whom we identify. She was particularly interested in popular culture, and how black women both were and weren't portrayed there. Some of her best-known series, like *Black as Pitch*, *Hot as Hell* and *Wallflowers*, appropriated famous pin-up illustrations by post-WWII illustrators like Peter Driben, whose outrageous, impossible bodies and costumes the artist found simultaneously repulsive, progressive, and comical. Ewing transformed the kitschy source imagery—in whose full figures and theatrical fashion sense she read parallels to the ideals of contemporary hip-hop or indie-rock culture—to insinuate a black, feminist beauty (often portraits of herself or friends) into the lily-white repertoire of pop-cultural imagery she referenced.

However, Ewing did not shy away from the more sinister end of this spectrum. In much work, Ewing confronts the racism and self-loathing occasionally found in the subcultures of the African-American

community itself. Whether holding up European ideals of beauty (as in works like *Shhhh...Testing* and her *Bougie* faux-magazine covers) or dangerously submissive and hyper-sexualized ones (as represented in her *Super Head* series), Ewing carefully scrutinized and critiqued all stereotypes that she felt limited “the conversation of ‘what black is and what black ain't.’” And, while she offered liberating alternatives rooted in her own experiences, communities, and fantasies, her ambitious, final series of latch-hook rugs suggest Ewing's sophisticated ability to implicate herself in her analyses, toying as she does with the seductive appeal of the very imagery and identities she critiqued.



“My subjects focus on issues that I feel are prominent within the black community; these topics are also very universal.”

History

Unsurprisingly, Ewing's keen awareness of the politics of representation extended to her studies of art history as well. As rendered in her *Body Map* series, the artist felt strongly about the fact that where one has been in the past—literally and figuratively—affects how one proceeds in the future, which frequently led her to the subject of history in her work. This often led her to historical representations of black women in popular and folk expressions, such as post-WWII “Mammy” dolls and “exotic” African-styled figurines likely aimed at middle-class white audiences. But, as with her pin-ups series, Ewing longed to see positive reflections of herself, not just in popular culture but in the canon of art history—and so put herself there. In sometimes-humorous, sometimes-serious appropriations of works by white, male artists like Caravaggio and Manet, she meaningfully recasts the figures in ethnic

and gendered configurations that require viewers to rethink the originals.

In her referencing the rich symbolism of these art-historical influences we also understand Wanda's attraction to them—perhaps nowhere more clearly than in *After Frida*, where she pays homage to that pioneer of psychological, political self-portraiture Frida Kahlo. Following Kahlo's lead, in a pair of self-portraits that would be among Ewing's last, the artist depicted herself as fearsome, funny, fantastic hybrid creatures—the Narwhal of sea legend, and Ewing's own astrological symbol, Capricorn. These late self-portraits beautifully summarize the humor, imagination, and intelligence that inform the best of her work—which, with her too-early death, now passes into the realm of art history that so inspired her in life.



Omaha-born artist and educator Wanda D. Ewing (January 4, 1970 - December 8, 2013) received her BFA in Printmaking from the San Francisco Art Institute, and later both an MA and MFA in Printmaking from the University of Iowa. She was Associate Professor of Art at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where she began teaching in 2005, leading courses in foundations and senior capstones for studio majors.

Ewing's work has been included in exhibitions and purchased for collections throughout the world, and reproduced in such publications as *The Paris Review*. She was, perhaps, proudest of her inclusion in the 2010 exhibition *A Greater Spectrum: One Hundred Years of African American Artists In Nebraska* at the Museum of Nebraska Arts (MoNA), where her work was included alongside that of luminaries such as Aaron Douglas, and highlighted her roots in the state. A dynamic public

speaker, she also lectured on her work and participated in scholarly panels at galleries, museums, and conferences around the United States.

She was a longtime member of the College Art Association, on whose Committee on Women in the Arts she served at the time of her death, as well as the Southern Graphics Council, where she was the International Board of Directors' Secretary. Ewing was the recipient of residencies, grants, and honors from the Women's Caucus for Art, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, Proyecto 'ace, and the Nebraska Arts Council, among other accolades. She was also an excellent educator, beloved and respected by both colleagues and students at UNO for her rigorous curricula, no-nonsense critiques, and outreach to the regional arts community. Her legacy at UNO lives on in the form of the Wanda Ewing Scholarship Fund.

