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## The Cultural Invisibility of Reproductive Health

Kristin Taylor and Karen Irvine

The end of federal protections for abortion in the United States on June 24, 2022, shook the nation. Thirteen US states immediately curtailed or outright banned abortion access, putting the health and well-being of women at risk and essentially ensuring that many women will die from unsafe abortions moving forward.

As a result of this momentous political shift, people are openly sharing personal stories that they perhaps previously kept private. Many social-media posts reveal stories of medically induced abortions due to miscarriage or experiences of choosing abortion for nonmedical reasons. This type of open discussion is significant since, throughout history, issues relating to female reproductive health have been shrouded in shame and discrimination. From the fraught history of birth control to the inequities surrounding care for women of color, to the struggles of non-cisgender individuals trying to conceive and the near silence in our culture surrounding miscarriage, menstruation, and menopause, fertility has been rendered invisible for too long. And this invisibility breeds inaction and complacency.

In 2021, as curators at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago (MoCP), we attempted to tackle this silence and fill gaps in the public understanding of reproductive rights and healthcare with the exhibition *Reproductive: Health, Fertility, Agency*. We decided to organize the exhibition because we saw a void in visual representation of issues relating to reproductive health both in the art world and in our culture at large.

Together, we have thirty-five years of experience in curatorial work and review thousands of artworks every year, yet when we sat down in early 2020 to discuss then-recently exhibited works about birth, we were barely able to count them on one hand. Even when we expanded our conversation to consider works about miscarriage, infertility, abortion, menopause, menstruation, and contraceptives, our list remained meager. It is no shock that we mostly see idealized depictions of the pregnant body throughout art history—the Madonna and Child, for instance—but even the contemporary art world, which typically embraces provocative works, has largely shied away from issues of reproduction. We argue that over the past fifty years, this culture of invisibility has contributed to the imminent loss of reproductive rights in the United States.

In our exhibition, we featured eight powerhouse artists whose work engages issues surrounding reproductive health, challenging this historical trend. Most fitting to the

current moment is the work of Laia Abril, who investigated the history of birth control and the consequences of restricting women's access to safe and legal abortion in her massive project *On Abortion: And the Repercussions of Lack of Access*, made in 2016 (fig. 1). Abril's project outlines a long history of fertility control worldwide by including photographs of historical forms of birth control and dangerous methods of pregnancy termination, such as drinking poison and using sharp objects to puncture the amniotic sac. Also included are photographs and harrowing testimonials by people who have performed, sought, or been punished for having illegal abortions, such as a Salvadorian woman who was imprisoned for homicide after losing her wanted pregnancy to miscarriage. Protecting the privacy of her subjects, Abril also added out-of-focus portraits of women who died from botched abortions, creating a memorial to them as victims of dangerous medical practices in places and under circumstances where safe alternatives did not exist.

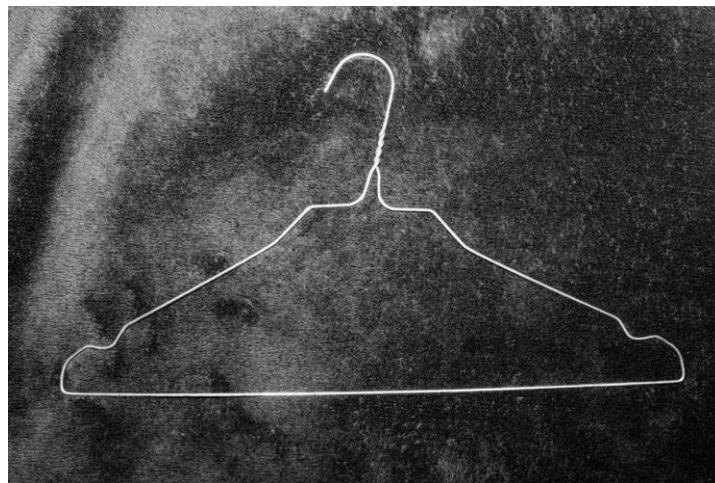


Fig. 1. Laia Abril, *Coat Hanger*, from *On Abortion: And the Repercussions of Lack of Access*, 2016. Inkjet print, 21 x 29 inches. Image courtesy of the artist

A large-scale sculpture by Doreen Garner titled *Betsey's Flag* (2019) addresses trauma experienced by Black women in the name of medical research, confronting viewers with the gruesome history of racism in reproductive healthcare. The work pays tribute to three women who are largely unacknowledged in the history of gynecology—Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey—all of whom were enslaved and suffered under the practices of J. Marion Sims, a nineteenth-century doctor who is often referred to as the father of modern gynecology. From 1845 to 1849, Sims conducted numerous experiments on women who suffered from vesicovaginal fistulae, a condition that can be caused from childbirth, in his backyard hospital in Montgomery, Alabama. Sims performed experimental surgeries on the women, without anesthesia, until he developed a successful treatment.

Other works highlighted the often-invisible struggles of the reproductive body, including Krista Franklin's *Under the Knife* (2018), which intimately details her long struggle with uterine fibroids, a condition that can cause infertility and disproportionately affects Black women. Joanne Leonard explored a different kind of trauma in a series of collages that grapple with the loss of her first pregnancy to miscarriage. Artist Candice Breitz contributed *Labour* (2017–ongoing), an installation that imagines a world where birthing mothers have the power to remove dictatorial leaders who have quashed women's rights,

including those that pertain to their own bodies. Looking closely at the contemporary moment from an LGBTQ+ perspective, Candy Guinea depicted the artist's journey with her partner as they attempted to conceive their first child through insemination, revealing the pervasive gender binaries surrounding maternal health care. Elinor Carucci explored life during and after menopause, and Carmen Winant created a site-specific installation of images of sensuality and sexuality to highlight the agency of the libidinous female body.

Many of the people who saw the exhibition felt compelled to share personal experiences with us. Their response to the exhibition reaffirmed our belief that people crave a forum for community, openness, and visibility surrounding reproduction. This human inclination to tell the untold story can make a difference. Every person in this world was born from a uterus, and every individual who has ever had a uterus has dealt with some sort of psychological, physical, or emotional journey surrounding aspects of fertility. Until we become more comfortable seeing the reproductive body, until we end the invisibility and silence, we cannot hope to secure reproductive justice for all. The artists featured in *Reproductive: Health, Fertility, Agency* understood this truth well before the US Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, and we should heed—and amplify—their call.

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