

Reproductive: Health, Fertility, Agency

Note to the reader: We recognize that the intersections of gender identity, reproductive physiology, and experience are vast and infinite. We have chosen to use the words “woman” and “female” as umbrella terms, fully recognizing that feminist-minded variants such as womxn and femme are meaningful ways of revealing gender bias in language and society at large. The discussion about gendered language is constantly evolving. Our use of the terms “woman” and “female” is intended to include all cis, non-binary, and trans women and any other person who identifies as a woman. See Breena Kerr, “What Do Womxn Want?,” *New York Times*, March 14, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/14/style/womxn.html>.

The female body has long been a site of injustice, and throughout history issues relating to women’s reproductive health have been shrouded in shame and hobbled by bad science and discrimination. From the fraught history of birth control, to the inequities surrounding care for women of color, to the struggles of non-cis individuals trying to conceive, and the near silence in our culture surrounding miscarriage, menstruation, and menopause, fertility has been either overtly politicized or rendered invisible for too long.

This exhibition features works by eight artists that explore the psychological, physical, and emotional realities women experience surrounding fertility. Fearlessly tackling topics such as pleasure, pregnancy, trauma, infertility, and abortion, these artists also shed stark light on the patriarchal systems of oppression that inhibit reproductive justice.¹ The exhibition’s title, *Reproductive*, refers to both the act of copying something, like a photograph, and the biological creation of offspring. Additionally, the active tense of the verb “to reproduce” points to the capacity that these artists are at once demonstrating and demanding: *agency*.

The exhibition begins with an installation by **Carmen Winant** (American, b. 1983) titled *A History of My Pleasure* (2019–20). Acknowledging that women’s historical lack of autonomy over their bodies is inextricably linked to sexuality, Winant presents dozens of assembled images featuring individuals experiencing pleasure. The images—many of which were found in alternative publications and journals produced during the 1970s feminist movement—counter false media depictions of the erotic. Their sheer number reflects the impossibility of visually representing such nuanced experiences as pleasure (as well as other under-represented transformative experiences women share, like childbirth) in a single photograph. Images are integrated with excerpts from two essays: Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic” (1978) and Linda Williams’s essay “Make Love, Not War: Jane Fonda Comes Home” (1968–78). Williams’s essay details the revolutionary shift toward a growing understanding of the female body in the 1970s based on solid sexology research over previously ascribed masculinist standards. The text also analyzes media portrayals of sex, including the first mainstream Hollywood film, *Barbarella* (1968), starring Jane Fonda, to realistically, and radically, depict a woman experiencing orgasm. Lorde’s essay argues that in harnessing the erotic, women are able to live more fully and empowered lives, striving towards a greater level of excellence. Collectively, the installation presents the female body as one able to enjoy sex and hold power, conveying the two as interlinked and in opposition to those who seek to politicize and subdue a woman’s libido.

Historically, misconceptions of female sexuality have influenced public health policy, science, and political actions concerning reproductive health care and access to safe forms of contraception. Governments, religious organizations, medical professionals, and pharmaceutical corporations have long exerted control over a woman’s right to make choices about her health. The first birth control pill, invented in 1953 by two men, was a landmark moment in the history of feminism, as it would eventually allow women to more easily prevent unwanted pregnancies.² Yet this progress is complicated. Human

tests of the first birth control pill, Enovid, were conducted, with little oversight, on low-income women of color in Puerto Rico, sometimes involving them in trials without their consent in a larger effort to control the population on the island. Of the twenty women included in the initial trials, three died, but no autopsies were conducted. Still, in 1960 the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved this pill in the United States at a smaller dosage, and after a lengthy Supreme Court battle, it became legal to prescribe nationwide starting in 1965—for married women only. Even today, most hormonal forms of birth control are distributed without proper long-term studies, with nearly every form of pharmaceutical contraception on the market decreasing female sex drive and negatively impacting mental health, along with many other significant side effects.³ Meanwhile, no male birth control pill exists, with prototypes showing identical (or even fewer) notable side effects.⁴

A journalist by training, **Laia Abril** (Spanish, b. 1986) investigates 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* (2016). Abril traveled the world to compile the stories and photographs that make up her extensive archive, meeting with doctors, historians, and women who have had harrowing and life-threatening experiences while seeking to terminate a pregnancy. These stories, told in text and images, straightforwardly chronicle the agonizing choices made by women who seek abortions for various reasons ranging from having a medically unsafe pregnancy, to having been the victim of rape or incest, to not having the financial means to support a child, to simply seeking access to the right. Abril's installation presents these stories next to photographs of historical methods of birth control—such as condoms made of animal parts and medicinals used to create an inhospitable environment for a fetus—as well as dangerous DIY methods of pregnancy termination, such as drinking poison and using sharp objects to puncture the amniotic sac. Together, the installation illuminates the acute desperation of women throughout history to determine the conditions for whether or when they

choose to become mothers or not, and the consequences of not being able to do so, including being imprisoned, nearly dying, and having long-term medical or psychological trauma. Abril also traces the root causes of restrictive policies, from monarchies and dictatorial governments that made abortion illegal in order to increase the population of laborers and soldiers, to the present where access to safe abortions decreases under authoritarian leaders, as we see in the United States today. Tragically, approximately 68,000 women die worldwide each year due to unsafe abortions.⁵² Abril includes out-of-focus portraits of some of these women, plus women who were forced into abortions, sterilizations, and even jailed in the process for breaking the law, preserving their privacy while creating a memorial to them as victims of dangerous medical practices sought in places and under circumstances where safe alternatives didn't exist.

The history of violence on women's bodies in the name of health care is similarly addressed in large-scale sculptural and printed works by **Doreen Garner** (American, b. 1986). Her work, *Betsey's Flag* (2019), hauntingly suspends from the ceiling and addresses trauma experienced by Black women in the name of medical research. One side presents what appears to be swaths of dark skin forming the colonial US flag, patched together haphazardly with staples and embedded with a circle of pale stars. The reverse side reveals an intricate, textured surface made of glass beads in flesh pink and blood red that conjures what lies underneath the skin. *Betsey's Flag* pays tribute to three women who are largely unacknowledged in the history of gynecology—Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey—all of whom were enslaved and were subject to the medical experiments of J. Marion Sims, a nineteenth-century doctor who is often referred to as the “father of modern gynecology.” From 1845 to 1849 Sims kept women diagnosed with vesicovaginal fistula, a condition that can be caused from childbirth, in his backyard in Montgomery, Alabama. Sims conducted dozens of experimental surgeries on each woman, without anesthesia, until he developed a successful treatment. By titling the work for Betsey from Sims's

experiments, Garner makes a satirical but also deadly serious nod to Betsy Ross, the creator of the first US flag. Instead of representing the thirteen original US colonies, Garner's flag features sixteen stars, signifying the number of beds in Sims's laboratory and profoundly commenting on the ways the field of gynecology and the United States at large are built on Black lives.

Sims's interest in gynecology and fixing women's vaginal fistula stemmed in large part from his desire to foster female reproductivity among enslaved women to benefit slave owners, whose profits increased as children were born into their enslaved workforce. At other points in history, however, gynecologic developments had opposite aims. Take, for example, the case of the implant Norplant, which, like the birth control pill, was tested on women in developing countries, and after being approved in 1990 was marketed and aimed at poor women of color in the United States and abroad in order to curb their reproductivity.⁶ In this way it was a form of de facto sterilization, another method of control with a sordid legacy that has been used by governments worldwide to control population growth among already marginalized and oppressed communities. Even today in the United States forced hysterectomies have been performed on women of color by doctors working for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).⁷

As these cases reveal, in the Western world recent injustices regarding female autonomy over one's body traces directly back to systems of government, and in particular to capitalism. Capitalist societies rely on social oppression with sexism and racism endemic to their structure. A small minority accumulates wealth, and a much larger group must work for wages, disproportionately comprising people of color and women. And as many feminist theorists have observed, the stock of workers necessary to support the system depends in large part on the unpaid and undervalued birthing and raising of children performed by women.⁸

In her installation *Labour* (2017, ongoing), **Candice Breitz** (South African, b. 1972) probes the many meanings of the word “labor,” from the actual act of giving birth to the labor that is inherent in mothering and nurturing a child, and the domestic labor that has historically been assigned to women. Breitz’s installation features individual pods for viewing video footage of women during childbirth. However, the footage is shown in reverse, creating the sensation that the women are absorbing babies back into their wombs. Breitz created this work after witnessing a friend give birth during January 2017, in the week leading up to the inauguration of US President Donald J. Trump. Struck by the embodied strength and power exerted by the mother and concerned about the state of a world that is embracing patriarchal authoritarians such as Trump and Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro, she began to fantasize about harnessing female power to remove harmful members of humanity—and to create alternative instruments of justice that might be rooted in matriarchal principles. The titles of the videos cleverly reveal the exact targets of her removals—*LABOUR (PMURT)*, *LABOUR (ORANOSLOB)*, and *LABOUR (MIK)*, *LABOUR (NITUP)*. The videos are accompanied by the “Matricial Decree,” a futuristic document calling for volunteers to protect society by recalling, or aborting, these dictatorial agents of harm, who in addition to other crimes, are guilty of attempting to deny women autonomy over their bodies.

Considering that a woman’s worth is often measured by her maternal contributions, it is no surprise that in many societies worldwide, women who cannot or choose not to bear children or who suffer from other reproductive health issues can often be made to feel ostracized or shamed. *Under the Knife* (2018), a book project by **Krista Franklin** (American, b. 1970), intimately details the artist’s perceptions of her own body, inheritance, sickness, trauma, and loss through the lens of her long struggle with uterine fibroids, a condition that can cause infertility and disproportionately affects Black women.⁹ Through text, image, and collage, this diaristic work looks back at trauma experienced by Franklin’s

mother, grandmother, and aunts, touching upon the struggles her relatives endured through her maternal line, and exploring the idea of cellular memory and information being passed down over generations through the womb. In her own words, the book is a “speculative exercise (speculative, speculation, speculum . . .) about the long-term effects of systemic racism and misogyny on families, and women in particular.”¹⁰

Like Franklin, **Joanne Leonard** (American, b. 1940) makes deeply personal work about her own family. In her *Journal of a Miscarriage* series (1973), made while Leonard was grappling with the loss of her first pregnancy to miscarriage, she uses collage to explore a topic that even today is rarely openly discussed. Statistically 10 to 15 percent of all pregnancies end in miscarriage—and one woman in a hundred experiences repeat miscarriages.¹¹ Yet few people publicly address this form of loss, which causes many women to feel ashamed or to grieve alone. Although Frida Kahlo was making paintings about her miscarriages in the early 1970s, the Kahlo works were not yet widely known (and unknown to Leonard) when she made this series. Leonard created one collage per day, over the span of thirty days. Some appear almost violent, with the artist using the blood she shed from the miscarriage itself as paint on the page and standing as evidence for a physical loss; others seem whimsical, such as images of shells appearing to be impregnated or pierced by other phallically shaped shells. These collages were groundbreaking, in step with her larger art-making practice focused on bringing women’s issues to light with unabashedly autobiographical works. Though Leonard is widely known for her straightforward photographs of women’s lives, she is often drawn to collage—a historically common medium for activists and feminists. Using disparate, found elements to forge new narratives around taboo issues such as miscarriage is a fitting metaphor for Leonard’s view that “Feminism is a tool for looking at what’s missing.”¹²

Continuing on themes of what is missing from the larger public narrative, the short film *Mariposa* (2017) by **Candy Guinea** (American, b. 1984) depicts the heteronormative childbirth industry from the perspective of a queer Latinx couple. Guinea documents her journey with her partner, Castro, as they attempt to conceive their first child through insemination. The film documents the couple's numerous trials and errors with the process, considering the larger emotional and social realities of those who undergo this often-arduous form of conception. As the film progresses, we follow the couple as they attempt to find gender-neutral maternity clothing to LGBTQ+ friendly prenatal care, revealing prevailing gender binaries surrounding maternal health care.

Finally, the exhibition concludes with the work of **Elinor Carucci** (Israeli, b. 1971), whose intimate images show her current stage of life as a woman approaching the age of fifty and entering menopause—the last cycle of female reproduction. In this work photographs of attempts to remain psychologically balanced and youthful in appearance are coupled with close-up images of blood, a longtime symbol of fertility and the female body. In one poignant image, Carucci's uterus lies starkly on a medical cart just after her hysterectomy. Her name on a tag reveals her connection to the now unneeded organ that once housed her two children. As a meditation on the cycles of life and mortality, this image is a powerful metaphor for aging and the grieving that often accompanies it. Also included in the series are images of Carucci's sexual intimacy with her husband, augmenting her bold look at the physical and mental struggles of losing fertility with a hopeful meditation on the longevity of sensuality and pleasure.

Though this exhibition is not a comprehensive look at the many issues surrounding reproductive health, the eight artists whose works are presented here address key topics in the larger history of discrimination against women's bodies. From depictions of pleasure and pain, to images of birth, miscarriage, and menopause, we are reminded that current struggles reflect persistent expectations for

the female body to be chaste, silent, and dominatable. Barriers of age, gender classification, and race further exacerbate the journey to progress, despite the many advances of feminists over decades to move the needle toward justice. The artists featured in this exhibition create space for themselves—and for others—to claim their power, revolutionizing the prevailing sense of what it means for a woman to be (re)productive.

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1 The term “reproductive justice” was originally coined in 1994 by a group of Black feminists, who later called themselves the Women of African Descent for Reproductive Justice. The Atlanta-based organization SisterSong provides a framework for reproductive justice that calls for the rights for every human to:

1. Decide if and when they will have a child and the conditions under which they will give birth.
2. Decide if they will not have a child and their options for preventing or ending a pregnancy.
3. Parent the children they already have with the necessary social supports in safe environments and healthy communities, and without fear of violence from individuals or the government.
4. Bodily autonomy free from all forms of reproductive oppression.

To learn more about the history of reproductive justice, please visit <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>.

2 This effort was spearheaded by Margaret Sanger, who founded Planned Parenthood and the birth control movement. Though Sanger dedicated her life’s work to developing and legalizing contraception, she is a controversial figure because she also made statements that supported eugenics. See also “Opposition Claims Against Margaret Sanger” fact sheet, [plannedparenthood.org](https://www.plannedparenthood.org/uploads/filer_public/37/fd/37fdc7b6-de5f-4d22-8c05-9568268e92d8/sanger_opposition_claims_fact_sheet_2016.pdf), accessed November 23, 2020, https://www.plannedparenthood.org/uploads/filer_public/37/fd/37fdc7b6-de5f-4d22-8c05-9568268e92d8/sanger_opposition_claims_fact_sheet_2016.pdf.

3 Jennifer Block, *Everything Below the Waist: Why Health Care Needs a Feminist Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019), 13–51

4 NPR staff, “Male Birth Control Study Killed After Men Report Side Effects,” [npr.org](https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/11/03/500549503/male-birth-control-study-killed-after-men-complain-about-side-effects), November 3, 2016, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2016/11/03/500549503/male-birth-control-study-killed-after-men-complain-about-side-effects>.

5 Every year, worldwide, about 42 million women with unintended pregnancies choose abortion, and nearly half of these procedures, 20 million, are unsafe. Some 68,000 women die of unsafe abortion annually, making it one of the leading causes of maternal mortality (13%). Of the women who survive unsafe abortion, 5 million will suffer long-term health complications.

[Reviews in Obstetrics and Gynecology](#). 2009 Spring; 2(2): 122–126. “Unsafe Abortion: Unnecessary Maternal Mortality,”

[Lisa B Haddad](#), MD, MA, Clinical Fellow in Obstetrics* and [Nawal M Nour](#), MD, MPH†
Accessed 11.4.20.

6 Terri Kapsalis, *Public Privates* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 49. See also American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), “Norplant: A New Contraceptive with the Potential for Abuse,” [aclu.org](https://www.aclu.org/other/norplant-new-contraceptive-potential-abuse#:~:text=Norplant%20is%20a%20new%20contraceptive,in%20a%20woman's%20upper%20arm), accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.aclu.org/other/norplant-new-contraceptive-potential-abuse#:~:text=Norplant%20is%20a%20new%20contraceptive,in%20a%20woman's%20upper%20arm>.

7 Caitlin Dickerson, Seth Freed Wessler, and Miriam Jordan, “Immigrants Say They Were Pressured into Unneeded Surgeries,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/ice-hysterectomies-surgeries-georgia.html>; Rachel Treisman, “Whistleblower Alleges ‘Medical Deglect,’ Questionable Hysterectomies of ICE Detainees,” September 16, 2020, [npr.org](https://www.npr.org/2020/09/16/913398383/whistleblower-alleges-medical-neglect-questionable-hysterectomies-of-ice-detainee), <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/16/913398383/whistleblower-alleges-medical-neglect-questionable-hysterectomies-of-ice-detainee>; Miranda Bryant, “Allegations of Unwanted ICE Hysterectomies Recall Grim Time in US History,” *The Guardian*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/sep/21/unwanted-hysterectomy-allegations-ice-georgia-immigration>; “Ice Whistleblower: Mexcio Investigating US Immigrant ‘Sterilisations,’” BBC News, September 23, 2020,

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-54265571>.

8 For a fuller discussion of these issues, see Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019).

9 Elizabeth Stewart, Wanda K. Nicholson, Linda Bradley, and Bijan J. Borah, “The Burden of Uterine Fibroids for African-American Women: Results of a National Survey,” *Journal of Women’s Health* 22, no. 10 (October 2013): 80716, <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2013.4334>.

10 Krista Franklin, email correspondence with the authors, November 16, 2020.

11 Plannedparenthood.org, “Miscarriage,” accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/pregnancy/miscarriage>; Jennie Agg, “My Four Miscarriages: Why Is Losing a Pregnancy So Shrouded in Mystery?,” *The Guardian*, May 5, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/05/my-four-miscarriages-why-is-losing-a-pregnancy-so-shrouded-in-mystery>.

12 Sidonie Smith, “Behind the Pictures: An Interview with Joanne Leonard,” ed. Ricia Anne Chansky, *a/b: Auto/biography Studies* 29, no. 1 (2014): 11–25, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08989575.2014.921761>.