e-flux Criticism

Wendy Vogel

Laia Abril's "On Rape and Institutional Failure"

A decade ago, Laia Abril embarked on a series of interconnected works under the title "A History of Misogyny." Examining the cultural histories of topics like abortion, menstruation, and mass hysteria, Abril's series uses photography as evidence and symbol to show how law, medicine, religion, folktales, art, and the media collude in sanctioning gender-based violence. "On Rape and Institutional Failure" presents work from the second chapter of Abril's "History of Misogyny." Though she made these works in 2019, at the height of the #MeToo movement, the presentation is devastatingly timely today.

The show opened at a moment reviving #MeToo's activist strategies of confession and outrage in response to sexual violence and domestic abuse. The discourse erupted online weeks earlier, after reports broke of a civil lawsuit brought by a woman, anonymized as Jane Doe, against Cornell University and seven men she alleges gang raped her at a fraternity house in 2024. The day that Abril's exhibition opened, federal prosecutors charged a man, in a separate incident, with drugging two students at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology with fentanyl and raping one of them—who later died from an overdose—in March this year.[1] What distinguishes the emerging conversation (much of which has consolidated online under the hashtag #IAmJaneDoe) from #MeToo is its understandable furor about how the system betrays survivors. Many recent testimonies focus on how organizations intended to protect victims (schools, medical establishments, law enforcement) have dismissed them, if not shamed them into silence.

Abril's show shines a light on such institutions through exposing cultural artifacts related to rape and its myths. Her exhibition shows tonal restraint, consisting mostly of black-and-white photographs of objects paired with explanatory text. Abril avoids the exploitative pitfalls of the documentary genre, purposefully avoiding imagery of survivors, perpetrators, and sexual crimes. The show opens instead with an austere series of eight "conceptual portraits" of rape survivors. These photographs portray "uniforms," laid flat against a seamless background, accompanied by paragraph-long vinyl-printed testimonies from subjects interviewed globally. They include a former inmate at a US men's prison, nuns violated by a Mother Superior in Argentina, a lesbian subjected to "corrective rape" in South Africa, a woman "ravished" and kidnapped in Kyrgyzstan, and a little girl abused in Colombia. The images of the survivors' lightly rumpled clothing, printed life-size, have a profound, symbolic impact, like shells that hold the imprint of bodies and their trauma.

The remainder of the show is organized around photographic clusters of smaller black-and-white images and texts. Most are crowned by an outrageous framed quote from a lawmaker regarding sexual assault or purity culture (former president of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, for example: "I'm not going to rape you, because you're very ugly," 2014.) Abril skillfully points the finger at cruelly



View of Laia Abril's "On Rape and Institutional Failure" at International Center of Photography, New York, 2026. (Left) *Refugee Rape, Dignity Dress, Africa*, 2019. Inkjet pigment print, 63 × 42 inches. (Right) *Corrective Rape, South Africa*, 2019. Inkjet pigment print, 63 × 42 inches. Image courtesy of International Center of Photography. Photo by Jenna Bascom.

ignorant public figures—US lawmakers' words appear repeatedly—rather than sensationalizing victims' pain. Underneath Bolsonaro's words, she has arranged pictures of a Rape-aXe prototype (an anti-rape female condom with plastic "teeth" invented by South African doctor Sonette Ehlers), a merkin, and chastity belt. Small text panels alongside the photos elucidate the objects' histories and their relationship to international folklore about *vagina dentata*.

Elsewhere in the show, Abril's pictures include a bloody sheet, a grisly-looking medical device meant to measure erections, a blowup doll, a metal-chain cilice, an artificial hymen kit, and exterior views of "rape camps" used by Serb forces for sexual torture during the Bosnian War. Her wall labels do not always describe the specific provenance of these items. Rather, they link them to global histories and beliefs, from ancient laws about women's bodies as property to falsehoods around the concept of virginity to Catholic doctrine to the ethics of chemical castration as a punishment for sexual offenses. Abril likewise employs a systematic approach to her photographs. Largely a series of object close-ups, they create visual continuity alongside her written historical narrative.

The show is heavy on didactics, and a cavalier viewer could skim—if not ignore—the small printed labels. But they'd be stopped in their tracks by *Rape Chat,* a large vinyl text piece adhered to the wall . The piece collages messages from several group chats, including WhatsApp exchanges among five men who drugged and gang-raped a woman in Abril's home country of Spain in 2016. Dubbed the "La Manada" (Wolf Pack) case, the crime motivated Abril to create this series about rape. Presented here, the

messages ring closely to the group chat among the "Cornell 7" gang rapists and their fifty fraternity brothers. As *Rape Chat* makes clear, these perpetrators view sexual violence as fantasy, as dehumanization, as social bonding. One message reads, "I'd rather f--- a fat girl with all of you than a hot one by myself."

Abril's exhibition concludes with a face-off of two starkly different materials that suggest possible avenues for justice. On one wall, she has tacked up a fifty-nine-page memorandum by judge Lewis Kaplan upholding the verdict of the civil suit *E. Jean Carroll v. Donald J. Trump.* The document denies Trump's request for a new trial and confirms him responsible for sexual abuse and defamation. On the opposite wall, Abril shows *REVENGE TV* — her only work addressing sexual assault in feature films. A color Ektachrome slide projector presents grainy stills from rape-revenge films, spanning the years 1971 (*Hannie Caulder*, a Western starring Raquel Welch) to 2020 (the #MeToo-inspired horror flick *Promising Young Woman*). Though she still uses the language of the archive, Abril shifts the focus here: to survivors, in full color, fighting back.

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Wendy Vogel is a writer based in New York and is a part-time assistant professor at Parsons School of Design. She is a recipient of an Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant in Short-Form Writing.

1
See Michael R. Sisak and Larry Neumeister, "A New York City College Student Died After Being Drugged and Raped in Her Dorm, Prosecutors say," *AP News*, October 16, 2026, https://apnews.com/article/fit-drug-death-charges-4c70052fb8874da8482cced4a012d996 .

Notes

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