

# British Journal of Photography

*Published on 9 November 2017  
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## In Paris : On Abortion by Laia Abril



Every year, some 47,000 women die from backstreet abortions; Laia Abril wants to blow the veil of secrecy off the experience, and is talking and signing books at Paris Photo this weekend

Laia Abril is no stranger to themes of distress. Bulimia, coping with the death of a child, the asexual community, virtual sex-performer couples – these are all topics that the Barcelona-based photographer has explored and attempted to demystify with her multi-layered, story-based practice. The subjects she tackles are complex and provocative, but ones she is able to connect with by way of female empathy, “where I can be involved emotionally”, she says.

Her most extensive work to date explores the struggle of eating disorders and is divided into chapters, starting with a short film titled *A Bad Day*. Next came *Thinspiration*, a self-published fanzine exploring and critiquing the selfie culture used by the pro-ana community; and finally *The Epilogue*, which follows an American family in the aftermath of losing their daughter to bulimia.

Separating the work into sections allowed her to approach different aspects through different platforms, not only in the multiplicity of perspectives but also in a constantly evolving visual stimulation. Her new work, *A History of Misogyny*, also adopts the use of a layered representation. “The ‘history’ part is important,” she told BJP for our May 2017 issue, which focused on the ‘female gaze’.

“Every time I tried to talk about female issues or any kind of situation that I saw was not right, I was confronted with people telling me that it was in the past and it doesn’t apply to the situation we are in now. But just because something is now the law, that doesn’t mean it’s fine. There’s always a risk.” For Abril, looking back is necessary to “highlight the long, continuous erosion of women’s reproductive rights”.

She begins with *A History of Misogyny*, Chapter One: *On Abortion*, the first episode of a project that will attempt to “visualise the comparison between the present and the past, so we understand that we have always to be conscious that things are not as certain as we think”.

In the UK it has been legal to terminate a pregnancy of up to 24 weeks since 1967, yet it was only in March this year that MPs voted to decriminalise it entirely, regardless of circumstance or time constrictions. Western society is considered to have liberal views on cases of abortion but in the Republic of Ireland and in Poland it is illegal, with the exception of cases posing a risk to the health of the woman or in the event of a pregnancy arising from rape or incest. In Malta, it remains forbidden altogether.

The project is not about the experience of abortion itself but about the repercussions of women not having legal, safe or free access to the procedure, often forcing them to use dangerous alternatives and causing physical and mental harm. “A woman was using a coat hanger to perform a DIY abortion in Uganda and I hear the same story in Tennessee. [The problem] is everywhere, with pretty much the same consequences.”

Rather than focusing on one story in one location, as has been the tendency, she casts her net wide, “trying to create a conceptual map to connect the repercussions so that we can empathise more with these women”.

A series of black-and-white portraits accompanies personal, graphic testimonies of women who have had to turn to illegal terminations. Marta from Poland was 29 when she went through the traumatic ordeal, which lasted 15 hours, for example. She recalls how, on telling her boyfriend of her experience of the stuffy, overcrowded van used to transport her to Slovakia, he responded: “That seems right, murderers should be treated like cattle.”

There is also a series of images of ‘DIY Abortion Methods’, such as a steaming, scalding-hot bath and a bunch of ruda and chiplin herbs, as well as ‘artistic’ still lifes of instruments made in Vienna’s Museum of Contraception and Abortion, a collection of Peruvian ads for helplines and clinics that “regulate” menstrual delays, and an image of a drone used by Dutch pro-choice organisation Women on Waves to fly packages of abortion pills from Frankfurt to Słubice, Poland, in June 2015.

But despite a stint in reportage that followed her degree in journalism from the Ramon Llull University, Barcelona in 2008, Abril insists that her work is not documentary. Photographing the harsh realities of post-war life in the Balkans not long after starting out, she realised she was “never going to be able to understand” the region. “So I started working on stories that were closer to me,” she says.

With her previous work, Abril experienced an overwhelming reaction from her audience. Sufferers of eating disorders and their families wrote to her to share their experiences; observers called to empathise with devastating realities. Not so with On Abortion.

It may be that the exhibition and series has not yet reached a wide enough international platform; she had hoped to display it in Ireland this year but was refused space by all the galleries she approached (“Even those that liked my work”). But she also believes it is partly due to the illegality of abortion and that women are scared to come forward and share their experiences.

Nevertheless, she has travelled and held meetings about the repercussions of abortion in India, Nepal, Turkey and Brazil among others – countries where the subject is still taboo. Sometimes she shows a small selection of images but mostly it is about the action of conversation. “I’m trying to adapt the project for the opportunity to go to places where I can’t have an exhibition because it’s too uncomfortable. At least we can talk about it.”

As she prepares to manifest this first chapter in a book, published by Dewi Lewis this summer, she starts work on the second episode with the working title of On Hysteria. She

plans to focus on the historical tendency to accuse women of being crazy or possessed as a form of dismissal, together with analysis of menstruation myths and other constructed 'mental' and 'female' illnesses used as a justification for control.

"I'm not an activist," she says. "I'm not trying to change anyone's mind or fix the situation because I don't have the power to do that. But maybe I do have the power to shed some light on the stories that we don't think about or that don't get the same audience that I'm reaching." She describes her method of working as being "like a strategy", not wanting to "shout" but instead materialise what is invisible and give prominence to the overlooked.

"I'm trying to visualise a history of misogyny so we don't forget what's in the past and don't get too comfortable in the present; so we take a look at things that sometimes we don't want to – in a visual way that doesn't make you just turn the page but makes you engage somehow and think a little bit."