



Laia Abril: The ingrained evil of “rape culture”

NEWS - FEB 5, 2020

by [Michaël Naulin](#)

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The young Barcelona-based artist presents the second segment of her project *A History of Misogyny: On Rape*. It is a powerful, poignant testimony to the violence suffered by women around the world and to the institutional responsibility for the crisis.



Chastity Belt, 2019. From series *Historical Rape, On Rape*. © Laila Abril / Courtesy Galerie Les filles du calvaire

In the summer of 2016, a young woman was raped by a gang of five during a Pamplona festival. The perpetrators were condemned in a Spanish court of first instance for sexual abuse rather than rape, because the victim had not tried to defend herself. This is the starting point of Laia Abril's new project, entitled *On Rape*. The young Spanish artist follows her award-winning exhibition *On Abortion*, featured at the Rencontres d'Arles in 2016, with a second segment devoted to institutionally sanctioned "rape culture." "It is hard to prevent rape, to get ahead of it. But suffering the ignorance of the authorities is like being violated a second time. I have chosen this angle of approach because this is what can be most easily remedied," explained the photographer.

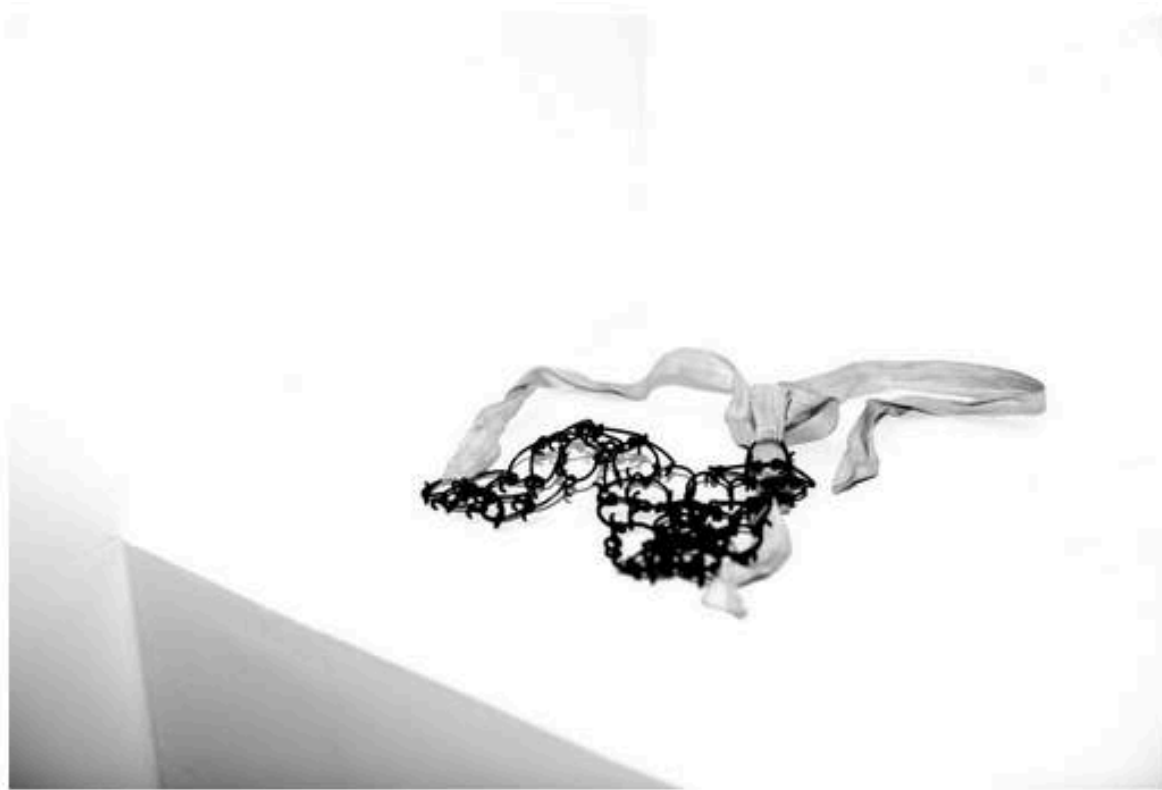
Combining photographs, archives, sound installations, and videos, Laia Abril has produced a well-researched, poignant body of work. Born in 1986, the artist was not seeking, however, to develop a documentary or journalistic project; rather, she says, "it is a visual essay."



Thousands of testimonies

The first piece in the exhibition is striking. Eight oversize frames occupy every stretch of the wall: an American army uniform, a burqa, a traditional Kirghiz wedding dress, a nun's habit... All these garments were photographed in the same way: laid out on the ground and shot in sparing black and white. Above each image, we can read the testimony of the victim. Most of the garments belonged to women who had been sexually assaulted. The images are symbolic, eloquent, and avoid showing the women's faces: "I did not make the victims' portraits in order to show that this it is not about single cases, but a widespread phenomenon," explained Laia Abril.

Among these items of clothing we find a schoolgirl's pinafore. Both touching and terrible, it belonged to Melissa's daughter. This Colombian mother relates how her five-year-old girl and some twenty others were sexually abused by their schoolteacher. The school did everything to cover it up. These stories are painful and lend a tragic dimension to these images of lifeless pieces of fabric. "[These garments] are but the tip of the iceberg. You can't imagine the quantity of testimonies I received, thousands of emails," commented the artist.



Cibicó, 2019. *Domesticação: Punishment, On Rape*. © Laia Abril / Courtesy Galeria Les Filles du Calvaire

A sober, well-documented perspective

The second part of the exhibition is the result of meticulous research and takes the viewer on a journey through time. It offers a historical survey of violence against women perpetrated around the world and across centuries. "The whole makes it possible to understand how myths are perpetuated and why certain countries apply such and such laws. This doesn't come out of nowhere, it's not a coincidence," said the artist.

The black and white makes the images bleak and unpolished. Photographs of a chastity belt and an iron bridle used to silence "loose tongues" seem to come straight from a museum of torture. These images and sound documents are complemented by equally heart-wrenching quotes. "If it's inevitable, just relax and enjoy it," said, referring to rape, a candidate running for governor in the state of Texas in 1990. To Laia Abril, "this says it all. It's not as if you were reading them in an article: these words are as important as the images, if not more."



Shinky Recipe, 2019. From series "Testing Myths, On Rape" © Lolo Abdi (Courtesy Galerie Les Blancs du Corviale)

Carrying on the struggle

Another remarkable achievement are the 3,000 portraits of priests accused, and sometimes found guilty, of sexual abuse, rape, or assault. Screened by smoked glass, their faces are hard to make out, even up close. "This is a metaphor meant to show that these people escape punishment in our society. When you try to put them on trial, they become invisible and get away with it," noted the artist.

Laia Abril makes an impassioned plea for a change in attitudes, notably through the prism of photography: "[Photography] allows me to make the issue of rape more accessible." It is a necessary way of broaching a subject that is all too often passed over in silence. The artist concluded: "We must not just talk about it, we must act. It takes time and courage."



War Rape, US, 2019. From series: Power Rape, On Rape © Laila Abril / Courtesy Galerie Les Filles du calvaire

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A History of Misogyny. Chapter Two: On Rape

Until February 22, 2020

Galerie des Filles du Calvaire

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