

9 Artworks That Respond to the Fight for Abortion Access

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The U.S. Supreme Court appears to be preparing to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 ruling which established a constitutional right to an abortion, according to a leaked draft majority opinion **published by Politico Monday night**.

While the Court's final ruling this summer could change, the decision, if it holds, would leave the legality of abortion to state legislatures, or could open the door to a federal ban being passed by a future Republican-controlled Congress. Though constitutional protections for abortion access have been slowly chipped away at in recent years by successive state laws and prior court decisions, the Supreme Court's draft ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* would have dramatic effect.

"The shift in the tectonic plates of abortion rights will be as significant as any opinion the Court has ever issued," the ACLU said in a statement Tuesday.

The linked issues of women's rights and abortion rights are no stranger to the art world, which has always had artists, curators, and others use their practice and platform for the activist battle.

Beginning in 1989, Portuguese artist Paula Rego responded to a failed referendum to legalize abortion in her home country with *Abortion* (1989-1999), a series of pastel paintings on the consequences of restricting safe abortion access. Her unflinching depictions of women contorted in pain were so affecting, it was cited as swaying public opinion for Portugal's second, successful referendum in 2007.

“[The series] highlights the fear and pain and danger of an illegal abortion, which is what desperate women have always resorted to,” Rego **told the Guardian**. “It’s very wrong to criminalize women on top of everything else. Making abortions illegal is forcing women to the backstreet solution.”

In 2021, artworks by Amy Sherald, Nicole Eisenman, Sam Gilliam, and Simone Leigh, among others, were featured in Choice Works, a fundraising auction jointly presented by Planned Parenthood of Greater New York and Planned Parenthood of South, East, and North Florida at Art Basel Miami Beach to raise funds for abortion access. Later that year, artist Michele Pred launched her own auction with works by Michelle Hartney, Christen Clifford, Amy Khoshbin, and Shireen Liane to raise funds for organization including **Whole Woman’s Health**, the group that that challenged Texas’s abortion restrictions in the Supreme Court.

After Alabama’s 2019 Human Life Protection Act, which partially criminalized performing abortions, was passed, Jasmine Wahi and Rebecca Pauline Jampol, director of the Project for Empty Space co-curated the exhibition “Abortion is Normal”, with support from artist Marilyn Minter; Gina Nanni, a founding partner of the public relations enterprise Company Agenda; artist Laurie Simmons; and art historian Sandy Tait. The show included work by some 50 artists—including Barbara Kruger, Catherine Opie, Wangechi Mutu, Shirin Neshat and Nan Goldin—responding to health and reproductive justice. As the assembled artists illustrated, the issue of abortion doesn’t exist in a vacuum: it intersects with queerness, classism, and racism. It is a matter of body sovereignty.

Below is a selection of artworks which were featured in “Abortion is Normal” that represent the diversity of perspectives on abortion.

Marilyn Minter, 'CUNTROL', 2020



Work by Marilyn Minter. Photo : Courtesy the artist and Downtown for Democracy

Marilyn Minter is best known for her glossy, sensual enamel-on-metal paintings that abstract the female form through close-up views of feet, lips, eyes, and other body parts. These facsimiles of high-fashion editorials examine pleasure and attraction, and the inherent voyeurism of artist and muse. The subject of *CUNTROL*, from a 2020 print series, is caught behind a steamed pane of glass, her setting and identity unknown. The name is spelled out in the condensation and dripping at the edges like the title card of a horror movie.

Nan Goldin, 'Geno by the lake, Bavaria, Germany 1994', 1994



Work by Nan Goldin. Photo : Courtesy the Artist

Nan Goldin's snapshots have always centered the intimacy, dependency, and volatility of the human experience. A pioneer of diaristic photography, Goldin has presented the worst of her times, drug addiction, domestic abuse, with the same candor and empathy afforded her brightest, freewheeling experiences. *Geno by the lake, Bavaria, Germany 1994* is shot like much of her work, with rich hues and focus on the vulnerability of the human form. Viewers are given a glimpse of a private moment, and the subject is afforded the privacy of her unknowable expression.

Barbara Kruger, 'Who will write the history of tears', 2011



Barbara Kruger, *Who will write the history of tears*, 2011.
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Barbara Kruger gained worldwide recognition in the 1980s for her prints that juxtaposed black-and-white imagery with bold, graphic, and pithy critiques of commercialism and the patriarchy: “Your body is a battleground,” reads one work in her signature white Futura lettering set against bright red strips. *Who will write the history of tears* is a coda of sorts; after the battle is decided, will the pain of the survivors earn a place in history? Will the winners care to remember?

Laurie Simmons, 'Mother/Nursery', 1976



Work by Laurie Simmons. Photo : Courtesy the artist and Downtown for Democracy

For this series, Laurie Simmons created elaborate dollhouses rooms in the style of a mid-twentieth-century American suburban home; the intimate sets were then blown up to large-scale. In most frames, a female figure occupies the space alone. She sits on the couch or in the kitchen, a testament to the brunt of the work traditionally expected of women in raising children and tending a household. In *Mother/Nursery*, the woman is the sun at the center of a constellation of scattered baby toys. They surround her, crowd her, in a dizzying display.

Wangechi Mutu, 'Heeler II', 2016



Photo : Courtesy the artist and Downtown for Democracy

Many of Wangechi Mutu's imagine a matriarchal alternative present—sometimes in a far-off world, other times right here—in which women of color shape their lives without malignant, external pressures. Her sculptures touch on the insidious legacy of colonialism on our government and social dynamics and posit that it must be combatted through imagination. Heelers, a series of anthropomorphic clay sculptures embedded with resin and wood, calls on her spiritual foremothers and supernatural rites; organic material rises, somehow, from hostile ground.

Lyle Ashton Harris, Billie #21, 2002



Work by Lyle Ashton Harris.

Photo : Courtesy the artist and Downtown for Democracy

[According to a 2021 study](#), Black women in the United States are 3.5 times more likely to die giving birth than non-Black women. They are also less likely to have health insurance or easy access to health care, making obtaining birth control difficult. IUDs, one of the longest-lasting and most effective birth controls, are among the most expensive. Factor this into the social and economic determinants stemming from institutional racism faced by minority groups, and it's clear women of color are the most imperiled by abortion bans.

Billie Holiday, featured here in a portrait by Lyle Ashton Harris, once recounted to a journalist her own harrowing experience with an at-home abortion as a teenager. Holiday, a jazz singer of a singular talent for expressing anguish, was a teenager in the 1930s, and in lieu of a licensed medical doctor performing a sterile operation, soaked in a bathtub of hot water and mustard to induce a miscarriage. You can only ban safe abortions, as the saying goes.

Elektra KB, 'Queer Alterations For A Post-Nuclear Kin', 2020



Work by Elektra KB. Photo : Courtesy the artist and Downtown for Democracy

Until recently, feminist conversations around reproductive health have centered the experiences of cisgender white women at the expense of people of color and those who are gender non-conforming — despite the latter having the least access to informed health care providers. Thankfully, that's been changing. Elektra KB is one of the artists leading the conversation-shift around the outsized role LGBTQ folks have been forced to take in their own health care, and how that fraught relationship with reproductive health affects the individual identity. KB's photo series *Queer Alterations For A Post-Nuclear Kin*, centers the body, exploring the reality of transition and pregnancy today.

Miguel Luciano, 'Barceloneta Bunnies', 2007



Work by Miguel Luciano .Photo : Courtesy the artist and Downtown for Democracy

As illustrated lately, the history of reproductive medicine in the U.S. is rife with shameful chapters. Among the lesser-known, but most egregious, was a **mass sterilization campaign** by the U.S. in Puerto Rico. Between 1930s and the 1970s, around one-third of Puerto Rico's female population, largely those living in rural areas, were coerced to undergo the operation. The government-appointed eugenics board cited it to control the island's population.

Miguel Luciano's painting *Barceloneta Bunnies* (2007) references a town in Puerto Rico particularly targeted by the campaign amid a broader critique of the historical mainland abuse of Puerto Ricans as cheap laborers. The Trix rabbit, an allusion to racist misconceptions of reproductive rates, bursts from a riff on the Louisiana farms Puerto Ricans were settled on to work. Scattered throughout are Viagra pills, a nod to the foreign-owned pharmaceutical industry currently using the island's resources.

Catherine Opie, 'Nicola', 1993



Work by Catherine Opie. Photo : Courtesy the artist and Downtown for Democracy

Catherine Opie is best known for her warm, detailed portraits of the queer community in Los Angeles, where the personal easily becomes political. She has since traversed out to document those settled outside the American nuclear ideal, and the ambiguities and liberations of that life. In *Nicola*, the subject is alone but not lonely in the frame. Their dress is gently unzipped to bare their scars; their gaze is forward and vulnerable. There's an ease in restricting the rights of others, the image seems to say, when you can't look them in the eyes.