

# No Choice

## Elise Harris Reviews Repro Rights Representations

*First, we have to restore women to a central place in the pregnancy scene. To do this, we must create new images that recontextualize the fetus, then place it back into the uterus, and the uterus back into the woman's body, and her body back into its social space. Contexts do not neatly condense into symbols; they must be told through stories that give them mass and dimension.*

—Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, author of *Abortion and Woman's Choice*

The anti-choice movement has always relied on idealized visual images of the “threatened, vulnerable” white, male fetus to ensure fanatic adherence to its cause (not unlike the way images of Baby Jesus, that most notorious product of unplanned conception, have been used to enlist the following of millions). The pro-choice movement, by contrast, has relied on legal and philosophical arguments, which makes the current, brilliant show at Artists Space, *Choice Histories: Framing Abortion*, doubly invaluable. Combining a heavy-on-the-Foucault New Historicist understanding of the politics of the body with visual representation that reenacts the history it represents, *Choice Histories* plots out a new strategy for activist art in the '90s. Following the lead of the historical briefs submitted in *Webster* and *Casey*, REPOhistory, a group of over 40 artists, covers 500 years of reproductive histories in the Americas. Only now, the visual is fast becoming crucial terrain in the battle over abortion. And with decisions like *Russ v. Sullivan* being used against artists as well as health-care providers, political alliance between the common targets of the religious right grows even more urgent.

Divided into four main objects of study—race and class, the history of medicine, law and morality, and issues of sexuality—the show has much to teach even the most seasoned activist. Especially effective at interweaving personal narrative and recuperative history is the race and class collective. A kitchen table invokes both abortions and domesticity as a voice intones, in a tremendously moving video, *Choice Voices*: “This is where she can rest. This is where she counts the days. This is where she thinks in the morning. This is where the women gather.”

Each drawer of the table (done by different artists) contains a secret reproductive history of women of color: Dr. Sims (inventor of the Sims Speculum and founder of the Women's Hospital, who bought female slaves to experiment on, operating 30 times unsuccessfully on a slave woman named Amarcha); illegal abortionists in 1966 Harlem, Bed-Stuy and the Bronx (18 beauticians, 7 auto mechanics and a veterinarian); Margaret Garner (the model for Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel of infanticide, *Beloved*). The walls are covered with wallpaper composed of images and phrases like “Mississippi Appendectomy,” “la operación,” “breeder woman” and “excess population control,” with contemporary words from Angela Davis above the faded texts.

Some of the best historical work, done by the law and morality collective, charts three historical periods in the legal history of abortion in America: the early period when abortion was legal (or not recognized as a legal issue) “prior to quickening” (the fetus' movement); from the late 1800s to 1973, when abortion was illegal in most of the country; and from 1973 to the present, an embattled era that won't end with last week's Supreme Court decision on *Casey v. Planned Parenthood of Pennsylvania*. All individual artistic contribution is completely effaced, perfectly mirroring how the individual is erased when enlisted into the national pro-

ject. The viewer sits on a bench and is instructed by three simultaneous sets of constantly shifting slides containing texts and images from the three periods. The formal, pedagogical quality of the installation is particularly effective in mimicking the construction of a “collective” legal history that conceals its strategic exclusion of women, gays and people of color from the social contract.

The other two installations are somewhat less successful in balancing the interest of the individual artist and the collective. Though the history of medicine collective cleverly breaks down a clinic wall (revealing all the technologies that exist outside of the formal medical discipline: menstrual extraction kits, the male pill, RU 486, the Reality female condom and herbal abortifacents) and the issues of sexuality collective reveals interesting historical tidbits (19th-century use of abortion-inducing corsets), viewer

participation works least effectively in these simulations of medical and sexual surveillance/resistance.

The show is most rigorous in its critique of the political motivations behind abortion restrictions, such as when it sanguinely notes that Protestants were worried about keeping up with Catholic rates of reproduction when banning abortion in the mid-19th century, and that the American

Medical Association wanted to ban abortion to discredit non-certified health-care providers and corner that market for itself. *Choice Histories* is most powerful in the panic it strikes in the heart of the viewer as the taped voices of women keep repeating, “I almost died”—a terrifying premonition of things to come.

*Choice Histories* runs through July 11 at Artists Space, 223 W. Broadway (between Franklin and Grand), accompanied by videos about sterilization abuse in Puerto Rico, the feminist self-help movement, and some pro-choice agitprop.

