

**VIOLATION OF WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS:**  
THE DOCTRINES, LAWS, AND HABITS THAT CREATE THE FOUNDATION OF OUR  
SEXIST CULTURE

by

Alison C. Flegel

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Director of Thesis: Seo Eo, MFA

Major Department: School of Art and Design, Ceramics

**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this written report of my thesis is to discuss the visual element presented as partial fulfillment of the Master of Fine Arts degree. My creative work proposes a dialogue about the violation of women's reproductive rights in our culture. I am focusing on the inequalities set in place for all women through the interweaving of religion, politics, and visual culture.

The extended scope of the church's belief system is fueled by the media and threads itself throughout our politics affecting all women in our culture. My visual work specifically addresses the church's intrusion into women's reproductive rights. In my creative work, I juxtapose iconic symbols of the Catholic Church with contraceptives, not only to show the violation of women but also, the way in which power is abused.



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A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Department of The School of Art and Design  
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

by

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Alison C. Flegel

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF  
DISSERTATION/THESIS

\_\_\_\_\_  
Seo Eo, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER

\_\_\_\_\_  
Jim Tisnado, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER

\_\_\_\_\_  
Robin Haller, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER

\_\_\_\_\_  
Daniel Kariko, MFA

COMMITTEE MEMBER

\_\_\_\_\_  
Holly Garriott, MFA

DIRECTOR OF SCHOOL OF  
ART AND DESIGN

\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Draught, MFA

DEAN OF THE  
GRADUATE SCHOOL

\_\_\_\_\_  
Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CULTURAL IMPACT ON WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>THE POWER TO CONTROL CONTRACEPTION: RELIGION SETS THE</b>	
<b>STAGE.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Highly Effective Forms of Contraception Not Approved.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Denying Mandates of the Affordable Care Act.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Catholic Affiliated Hospitals Limiting Reproductive Choices.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>THE POWER TO CONTROL ABORTION ACCESS: POLITICS FOLLOW</b>	
<b>SUIT.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Restrictions on Abortion Clinics.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Defunding Planned Parenthood and Other Family Planning Centers.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>“PROTECT”: METHOLDODOGY.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>REMAPPING THE AWARENESS; PROJECTED OUTCOME.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>18</b>

## **INTRODUCTION**

The focus of my research is women's reproductive rights and how they are affected by religion and politics. Through my research on this political agenda I found that the Catholic Church is a crucial player in enabling the violation of women's reproductive rights. I was raised Catholic and attended mass until I was eighteen but I am no longer a practicing Catholic. As a teenager, I began questioning the ideology of the church although I had no idea of the extent of the hierarchy's power in our world.

In my research and creative work, the Catholic Church is emphasized although it is not the only religion in our country that hinders women's rights. In many cases the men and women in powerful positions take advantage of their authority in deciding reproductive doctrine and laws and use their religion to make this violation of women seem moral and just.

## **CULTURAL IMPACT ON WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**

The cultural structures negatively affecting women's reproductive rights and the attitudes surrounding these rights are acquired through a circular relationship between religion, politics, and visual culture. Ideologies maintain their power and momentum in several different ways. Religion begins with a doctrine; visual culture perpetuates ingrained beliefs to manipulate and persuade the population, this in turn affects our federal, state, and local legislations, as well as our personal opinions whether or not we are religiously affiliated.

## **THE POWER TO CONTROL CONTRACEPTION: RELIGION SETS THE STAGE**

### **Highly Effective Forms of Contraceptives Not Approved**

The hierarchy of the Catholic Church has not sanctioned editing of the church's doctrine concerning women's reproductive rights and so it remains irrelevant to current times. One example is the Church's opposition to all forms of contraceptives for both married and unmarried women. Natural Family Planning or rhythm method is the only form of birth control approved by the Catholic Church. It relies on periodic abstinence based on the woman's menstrual cycle. According to The U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's study in 2012, the NFP is only 75% effective, being one of the least reliable forms of contraception. Although this is the only method the Catholic Church approves, the ineffectiveness is unacceptable when dealing with an issue that affects a woman's health, her economic status, her career, and her family. It is not surprising that women take it upon themselves to obtain more effective means of birth control. According to the Guttmacher Institute in a study released in 2011, 98% of Catholic women have used contraceptives at some point in their lives. Currently, 68% of Catholic women at risk for unintended pregnancy use a highly effective form of contraception and 87% of Catholic women use a form of birth control other than NFP (Jones, p. 6-8). This number does not include women who are pregnant, trying to become pregnant, or postpartum. Only 3% of married Catholic women who do not want to become pregnant use natural family planning (Jones, p. 7). My installation titled "Protect" is influenced by these statistics that show women's need for affordable and accessible contraceptives. This need as well as this restriction is not based on religion, demographics, race or economic status, but on gender alone.

## Denying Mandates of the Affordable Care Act

Treating contraceptives as a necessity for women and family health is part of The Affordable Care Act that passed in March 2010. One mandate in this Act requires all employers to provide their employees with a health insurance plan that includes birth control coverage. Although 87% of Catholic women already use a form of contraception, the Catholic Church has refused to abide by this mandate claiming it is against their religious freedom, it promotes sex, and goes against the Church's teachings. As a compromise to these claims, the federal government changed the Church's mandate; the insurance companies will pay for the birth control coverage rather than the Church affiliated employer. The Church was also given a year extension until August 2013 to comply. The Catholic Church has refused to acquiesce, and as of May 2012, forty-three Catholic dioceses, schools, social service agencies and other church affiliated institutes across the US had filed lawsuits in twelve federal courts. Eleven other Catholic and Evangelical organizations had already filed similar suits prior to May 2012 (Goodstein). If the Church wins in the federal courts, the ruling will affect all women who work for a church affiliated institute, not just Catholic women. These women will continue to pay full price for birth control. The Church is threatening to close hospitals, schools, and social service agencies if they lose in the courts. According to *U.S Catholic*, larger healthcare networks run many Catholic hospitals, and not all are against the mandate. Some Catholic Universities already include contraception in their employees' insurance plans and others are willing to compromise. Although some universities are against the mandate, mass closings are not likely (Alessi). Social Service Agencies will not be jeopardized because they are incorporated separately from the diocese and receive funding from other government agencies so they are not dependant on the church to function (U.S Better Business).

## **Catholic Affiliated Hospitals Limiting Reproductive Choices**

As Catholic hospitals are expanding, taking over smaller hospitals, the Vatican has control of what services will be provided. Not only does this limit abortion access, but also access to contraceptives and sterilization. Without affordable and accessible contraceptives, the numbers of unwanted pregnancies increases, as well as the number of women who seek abortions. According to the Catholic Church's Ethical and Religious Directives, physicians in Catholic hospitals must wait for permission from the overseeing bishop to treat a patient that is miscarrying and must send rape victims elsewhere to receive emergency contraceptives (*The Ethical*).

In 2010 physicians at a Catholic hospital in Phoenix had a life and death situation with a woman who was eleven weeks pregnant. They concluded that if she continued with the pregnancy, she would die. The official church mandate in this position would be to let both the mother and child die (Hagerty). A nun approved the abortion based on the Catholic Church's ethical guidelines, which allows healthcare providers, in some circumstances, to save the mother even if it means killing the fetus (Hagerty). The local bishop excommunicated the nun and cut ties with the hospital. This case shows that the bishop in control of the hospital is exercising his power over women as well as the physicians trained to save lives. Similarly, denying the Affordable Care Act mandate, the Catholic Church is also denying women, religious or not, access to abortion based on the approval of a bishop rather than a trained physician. This will continue to affect more and more women as Catholic hospitals continue to expand and potentially a Catholic hospital may be the only place in many towns to receive emergency health care (*The Ethical*). This is already the case in many rural areas in our country (*The Ethical*).

## **THE POWER TO CONTROL ABORTIONS: POLITICS FOLLOW SUIT**

### **Restrictions on Abortion Clinics**

The Catholic Church has abortion exceptions in some cases of rape, incest and if the woman's life is in danger. This might not continue to be the case as more and more politicians come into power with strict Catholic views. For example, Catholic Senator and former Republican Vice Presidential Candidate, Paul Ryan, believes in no exceptions for abortion. He has supported bills that would allow hospitals to deny abortions to women even in the cases of rape and incest. Ryan is not alone. Illinois' Representative, Joe Walsh, and Indiana's 2012 Republican Senate candidate, Richard Mourdock both oppose abortion in all cases. Texas Governor, Rick Perry changed his original stance on abortion rights in 2011 to one which did not include any exceptions.

Although it became illegal to deny women abortions in 1973 with federal court case, Roe vs. Wade, politicians and Catholic hospitals are playing a role in the closing of abortion clinics throughout the country. Five states now have only one abortion clinic left. State legislatures are finding loopholes in the laws making it more difficult and in many cases impossible for abortion clinics to remain open. As of July 2012, clinics in Mississippi, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Arkansas have been forced to close because of cuts in funding and overregulation. In Mississippi the new TRAP law (Targeted Regulation of Abortion Providers) requires anyone who performs an abortion to be an OBGYN with privileges to admit patients to a local hospital. Out-of-state OBGYN's cannot obtain these privileges. In Mississippi both OBGYN's are out-of-state. Mississippi's governor, Phil Bryant wants Mississippi to be abortion free and these TRAP laws are specifically designed to do just that. A federal judge upheld the law and the Jacksonville

clinic remains open while it tries to comply with the new regulations without facing penalties (Phillips). Although the clinic's physicians have contacted several hospitals about applying for admitting privileges, religiously affiliated hospitals in the area refused to even view the applications from the physicians (Phillips). Six hospitals agreed to accept the physician's applications but did not grant them admitting privileges, not based on the qualifications of the doctors but on the political agenda of the hospital and the disruption it could cause for the hospitals business within the community. Owner of the Jackson Women's Health Organization, Diane Derzis said the local Catholic affiliated hospital told the clinic "not to even bother" (Phillips). On January 11, 2013, the clinic in Jacksonville was officially in violation of the law because it could not comply with mandates that were designed to be impossible to fulfill. On January 25, the clinic received a notice from the State Health Department stating that it intends to revoke the clinics license to operate as an abortion clinic (Pettus). The clinic can appeal to state or federal court but, if the courts do not intervene, women in Mississippi will lose their constitutional right to abortions. A trend is beginning as North Dakota follows Mississippi's lead, also requiring physicians at its one remaining abortion clinic to acquire admitting privileges to the local hospital (Bassett, *North Dakota*). Also, in North Carolina a similar bill was filed March 13<sup>th</sup> that, if passed, will require abortion physicians to have admitting privileges to local hospitals. The bill would also require them to remain with the patient for the procedure and recovery (Leslie).

### **Defunding Planned Parenthood and Other Family Planning Centers**

The agenda focusing on impeding women's reproductive rights also appears against Planned Parenthood Federation of America. PP is a non-profit organization providing reproductive health and maternal and child health care services. Along with abortion clinics, PP

is also seeing cuts in funding because 3% of their services are abortions (Robertson). Federal funding is used by PP for abortions only in the cases of rape, incest, and if the woman's life is in danger, which goes along with Catholic and other Christian beliefs.

In 2011, Pro Life activists pressured the Koman Foundation to cut off \$700,000 in funding to PP that would go towards cancer screening for poor women. After three days of protests, online petitions, and \$3 million in independent donations to Planned Parenthood, Koman reinstated funds. During the same time, “getting rid of Planned Parenthood” was a top priority for the Republican presidential candidates who fallaciously claimed that Planned Parenthood uses federal funds for elective abortions. However, private donors fund these abortions and not federal money (Robertson).

In July 2012, the North Carolina Republican controlled state legislature voted on a state budget that strips money from Planned Parenthood because of their abortion services (Bassett, *North Carolina*). Planned Parenthood of Central North Carolina estimates that it will lose \$200,000 in funding which will affect the clinic’s ability to provide affordable birth control, cancer screenings, and pap smears among other services for low-income women in the state (Bassett, *North Carolina*). Arizona, Ohio, Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Indiana are other states that are in the process of defunding Planned Parenthood; already many clinics in these states have closed.

Targeting Planned Parenthood has had catastrophic effects on other women’s health programs because Medicaid forbids discrimination. Texas lost all Medicaid funding for women’s health centers, which provide cancer screening, contraceptives, and basic health care to 130,000 low-income women annually (Bassett, *Texas*). On the same grounds, Ohio could lose the entire

9.8 million it is allocated for all family planning and prevention care providers (Leonidas).

In 2012, 22 provisions against women's reproductive rights were enacted in forty-two states and the District of Columbia. This is the second highest number of reproductive provisions in a single year. In 2011, ninety-two restrictions were authorized that dealt only with abortion (2012). Out of the 122 provisions related to women's reproductive rights, not one was implemented to help facilitate or improve access to abortions, family planning or comprehensive sex education (2012). Our culture's framework allows for women's access to essential and many times basic rights to be violated, whether it is contraceptives, abortion access, family planning, cancer screenings or STD testing. Religion, politics and the media share a very similar agenda in motivating and implementing these restrictions on women.

## **“PROTECT”: METHODOLOGY**

My research of the violation of women’s reproductive rights is visualized in the form of an installation. Repetition is a core component in this installation and is found in the actual objects as well as in the physical labor of making. It is also present in my research where women’s reproductive rights have been infringed upon throughout our history.

Installations rely on the structure for support and all elements depend on each other to function. They are ephemeral and can be disrupted and altered. The issues surrounding women’s reproductive rights contain similar characteristics. Certain cultural elements such as laws, provisions, doctrines, beliefs, traditions, and visual culture must all work together to create and maintain a framework that controls women’s reproductive rights. By disrupting these cultural habits positive changes can occur.

Functioning within current visual culture, my installation encompasses and delivers an idea, which reveals the hypocrisy in the hierarchical structure surrounding women’s reproductive rights. It portrays a small fragment of the world in which we live. As a society, we are all working together as active participants in the persuasion of ideas, beliefs and reactions.

The concept behind “Protect” is the oppression of women by the Catholic Church in the area of reproductive rights. Currently bishops are using their power against women and the federal government by refusing to include contraceptive coverage in health insurance plans available to their employees, including those who are not Catholic. My installation shows the need for reproductive choices and access to these choices specifically within the Catholic Church.



*Fig. 1, Clay Nuva Rings*

I have chosen clay as my core material for its permeable quality, its ability to be both fragile and permanent and for the many clay biblical references. Slip cast ceramic Nuva Rings are used as the symbol for reproductive choice (*fig.1*). Like clay, the actual Nuva Ring is permeable. The need for birth control is permanent and women's access to these methods is a fragile issue for all women, not just for those belonging to the church. Women employed by a Catholic institution, or being treated in a Catholic hospital, or those who rely on Planned Parenthood for contraceptive services are all at the mercy of the men in power in the Catholic Church.

The eighty-seven rings in "Protect" represent the percentage of Catholic women who currently use contraceptives that are banned by the church. The Rhythm Method is the only form of birth control the Catholic Church approves.

To symbolize the overwhelming need for protection, thousands of clay seeds surround the rings to represent sperm (*fig.2*). I chose seeds for the biblical reference, “...he wasted his seed on the ground...” I carved seed shapes into a plaster slab and filled them with casting slip. When the slip begins to dry more slip is added to create a rounded form, then the seeds are removed from the plaster mold (*fig. 3*).



*Fig. 2, Seeds Surrounding Nuva Rings*



*Fig. 3, Plaster Molds*

To expedite the seed making process, I hosted several “Seed Parties” (*fig. 4 & fig. 5*). I provided food and drinks in exchange for seeds. These “girls only” parties brought women together and created a platform for discussion about my research as well as other current topics pertaining to women’s rights.



*Fig 4, “Seed Party”*



*Fig 5, “Seed Party”*

The seeds are spread out onto a full sized mattress creating the image of the pope's hat, or mitre (*fig.6 & fig.7*). The mitre, often referred to as a helmet of protection, represents power and hierarchy in the church, being worn only by bishops and the pope. The rings are placed along the bottom and up the center of the mitre representing the upside down cross on the pope's mitre (*fig. 6 & fig. 7*). The upside down cross is the personal trademark of the first pope, Saint Peter, who requested to be crucified upside down to show that he was unworthy of dying the same way as Jesus. This symbol is also carved into the pope's throne, the very seat of the church's power.



*Fig 6, Installing the seeds and rings on the mattress*



*Fig. 7, Seeds and rings creating the Pope's mitre*

By using a mattress, the church is literally in the bedroom, a private dwelling, an intimate space. Two kneelers are positioned at the foot of the bed to represent the couples that are affected by these rules and laws (*fig. 8*). The kneelers are constructed of medium-density fiberboard (MDF), which is a combination of softwood fibers, wax and resin and is considerably inexpensive when compared to hardwoods. The MDF is covered with many layers of Pure White auto paint, and glossy clear coat, creating a pristine illusion on the surface. With the finish and ornate details of the kneelers, the MDF structure represents the Church's own façade. To encourage the viewer to kneel the kneelers are cushioned and upholstered in white velvet. The viewer's participation is recorded in the fibers of the fabric.



*Fig. 8, Kneelers*

A strong light is directed towards the foot of the bed to cast the shadow of the viewer onto the mattress whether he or she decides to kneel or remain standing. The viewer's shadow, like the knee imprints on the velvet, presents the observer as a participant in this issue either as the violator or as the one being violated. The kneeler shadows reiterate the controlling presence of the Church.

The bed is covered in white linen, which is the same material that the pope's mitre is traditionally made. Along with the linen, the seeds, rings, and kneelers are also shades of white. White is a symbol for many things in the Catholic Church as well as in our culture. White symbolizes purity, piety, chasteness, reverence, virtue, and loyalty. In "Protect", the color white emphasizes the hypocrisy of these symbols in the Church.

## **REMAPPING THE AWARENESS; PROJECTED OUTCOME**

As a society, our sexist habits collectively sustain attitudes that negatively affect women. Often times this perspective is justified based on the propagation of the current visual culture, the political agenda, and religious teachings. If not addressed, these sexist habits become the cultural norm. We expect and accept sexist ideas and behaviors and we become numb as both the abused and as the abuser.

With this project I am revealing the hypocrisy of the Catholic Church and questioning its bestowed authority to infringe upon women's basic human rights. The beliefs and teachings against contraceptive use by the Catholic Church, as well as in other religions, is only a fraction of the problem in the enormous arena of sexism in our society. But as religion, politics and the media continue to intertwine, our culture is becoming more ingrained with sexism and women are losing rights instead of gaining them.

I am showing this injustice in my creative and written work to present the options we have as a society: to continue the sexist epidemic or to plant a seed of change.

## **CONCLUSION**

This project brings awareness to the way our culture treats women as second-class citizens. Women continue to have to fight for our basic human rights, for our private lives, for control over our own bodies, and to prove again and again that the doctrine-inspired laws, put into place to supposedly help women, have harmful effects on us and our families. The control over women's rights and the misuse of power starts with the hierarchy in the Catholic Church. This violation of women's rights not only emanates from within the Church but also radiates out into all aspects of our lives affecting us all, regardless of religious beliefs, gender, race, or class.

To visually encourage awareness, the installation format is effective in presenting my research. The overall appearance of the structure sets the stage for discussion about the issues surrounding contraceptives by containing a balance between the subtle and the blatant. The installation is embedded with many symbols, but the viewer may not immediately recognize all of them. The importance is the dialogue that the piece provokes, and the questions the viewer is faced with as a participant in our world.

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