

CRITIC'S PICK

Donna Ferrato's Camera Is a Weapon for Women

Best known for unmasking domestic violence, the pathbreaking photojournalist has a show timed to coincide with the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

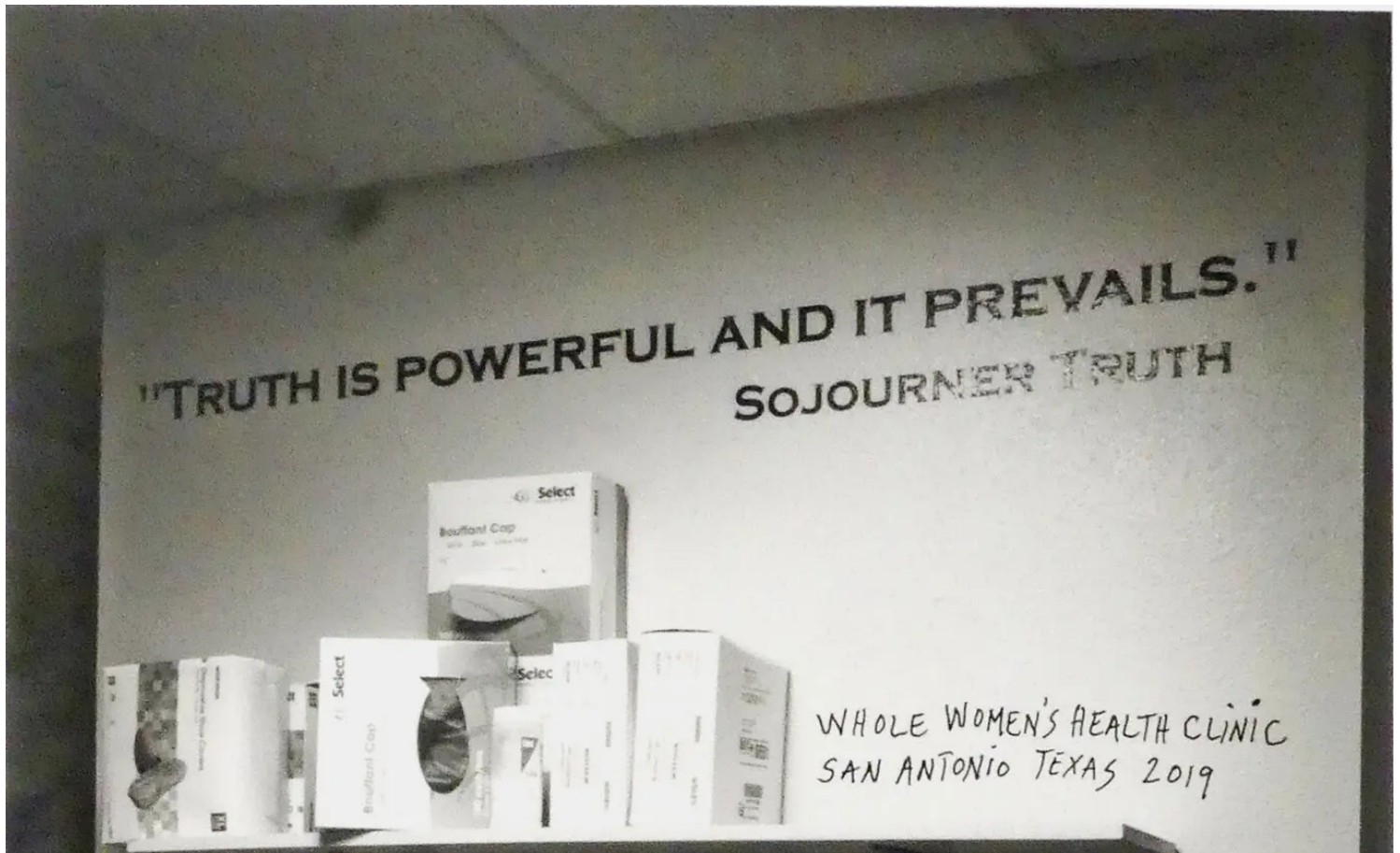
By Arthur Lubow

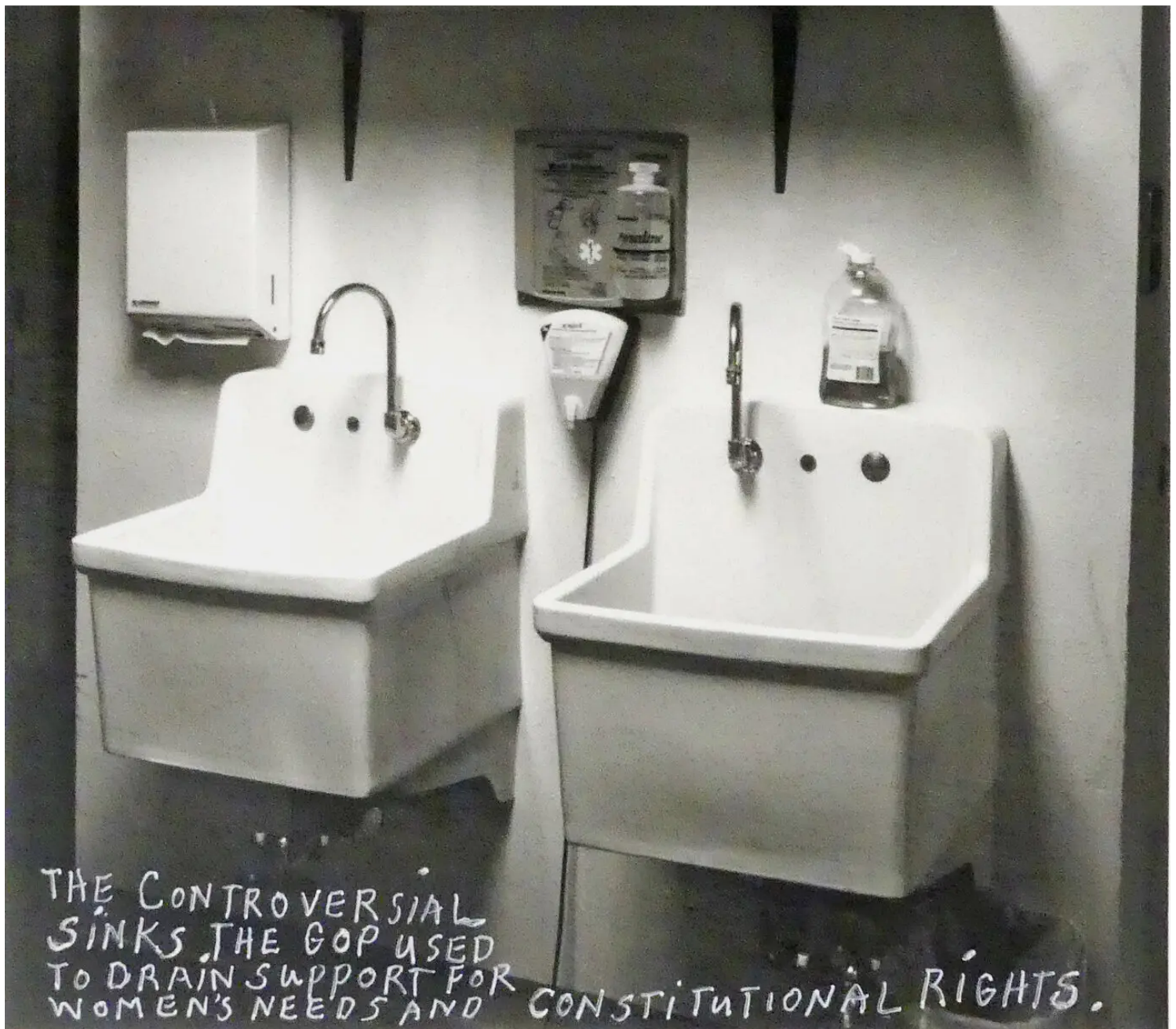
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Donna Ferrato: Holy NYT Critic's Pick

Even with blackened eyes, the women in Donna Ferrato's photographs look defiant, not defeated. A photojournalist and feminist activist who is best known for her documentation of domestic violence, Ferrato, 73, has also depicted women pursuing sexual pleasure, giving birth, raising children, enticing men and demonstrating in the streets. Her subject is women taking control of their bodies, and in her fiercely empathetic mission, sometimes she turns the camera on herself.

A selection of images drawn from a book published last year, "Holy," at Daniel Cooney Fine Art, was timed to coincide with the anticipated overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Ferrato annotates her photographs with handwritten captions, often inscribed on the prints. Without that supplementary information, you couldn't know that a picture of cots in a stark room commemorates a Parisian clinic where she underwent an abortion in 1978, or that a couple of sinks and a shelf bearing medical hygienic supplies stood in a San Antonio center that provided abortions until the Texas Legislature hobbled it (and most other facilities in the state) by imposing unreasonably stringent requirements, leading to a legal challenge and an earlier favorable Supreme Court decision in 2016, now reversed.





"Whole Women's Health Clinic, San Antonio, TX," 2019. Ferrato photographed surgical-quality sinks that a San Antonio women's clinic installed to meet the Texas Legislature's stringent requirements for facilities that perform abortions. Donna Ferrato, via Daniel Cooney Fine Art

Her pictures demand the trust of her subjects to pose for them and the courage to allow them to be published. One of her best-known is of "Rita," whose husband beat her in the presence of their sons. Ferrato was on assignment for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, covering domestic violence, and Rita's portrait, with two black eyes, ran in 1985 on the cover of the newspaper's magazine. Her face reappeared nine years later on the cover of *Time*. Rita pressed charges and divorced her husband. In the end, she triumphed, which explains the steadfast gaze and faint smile on her face. Her portrait is a study in perseverance, not victimhood.

Ferrato explores the pleasures of physical love as well as its occasional costs, bringing her Leica to swingers parties, not just to women's shelters. Some of these pictures are steamy, but more often they are playful. A dance leader wearing a fishnet dress at a clothing-optional resort juts her butt provocatively, so it dominates Ferrato's photograph. A smiling exotic dancer clothed in a bikini extends a feathered boa as she performs before an appreciative group of men. "She said she was a Strip-o-Gram girl," Ferrato writes. "After seeing her work, I say she was a savior the way she moved mankind."



"Neetsa, New York City, NY," 1980. Donna Ferrato, via Daniel Cooney Fine Art

These photographs reward scrutiny. In 1982, tracking the activities of a fast-living couple in an affluent New Jersey town, Ferrato was present when the husband, enraged that he couldn't find his stash of cocaine, slapped his wife in the face. In their mirrored bathroom, the violence is reflected and refracted, a middle-class American version of the fun-house finale of Orson Welles's "The Lady From Shanghai." And just as the character played by Welles in that movie keeps his distance and walks away from the married couple's fatal shootout, so Ferrato can be seen in the looking-glass in New Jersey, crouched low, impassively holding her camera. Like a war photographer, she is documenting, not intervening. (After the first strike, she says, she stopped him.)

In the manner of much photojournalism, which usually functions as illustration rather than as art, some of these pictures serve as embellishments to reported stories. A portrait of a mother in Mississippi, smiling tentatively as she holds her gaptoothed beaming daughter, is remarkable primarily because the woman's left arm emerges as a residual limb from her short-sleeved sweater. But that is not terribly interesting until you learn, from Ferrato's caption, that Minnie Evans was diagnosed with bone cancer while pregnant with this child and was advised by her doctor to have an abortion so she could be treated with chemotherapy. Rather than lose her daughter, she had her arm amputated. "Saw my arm off," the caption reports her saying. "I'm having this baby, and I'll need at least a stump to hold my girl."

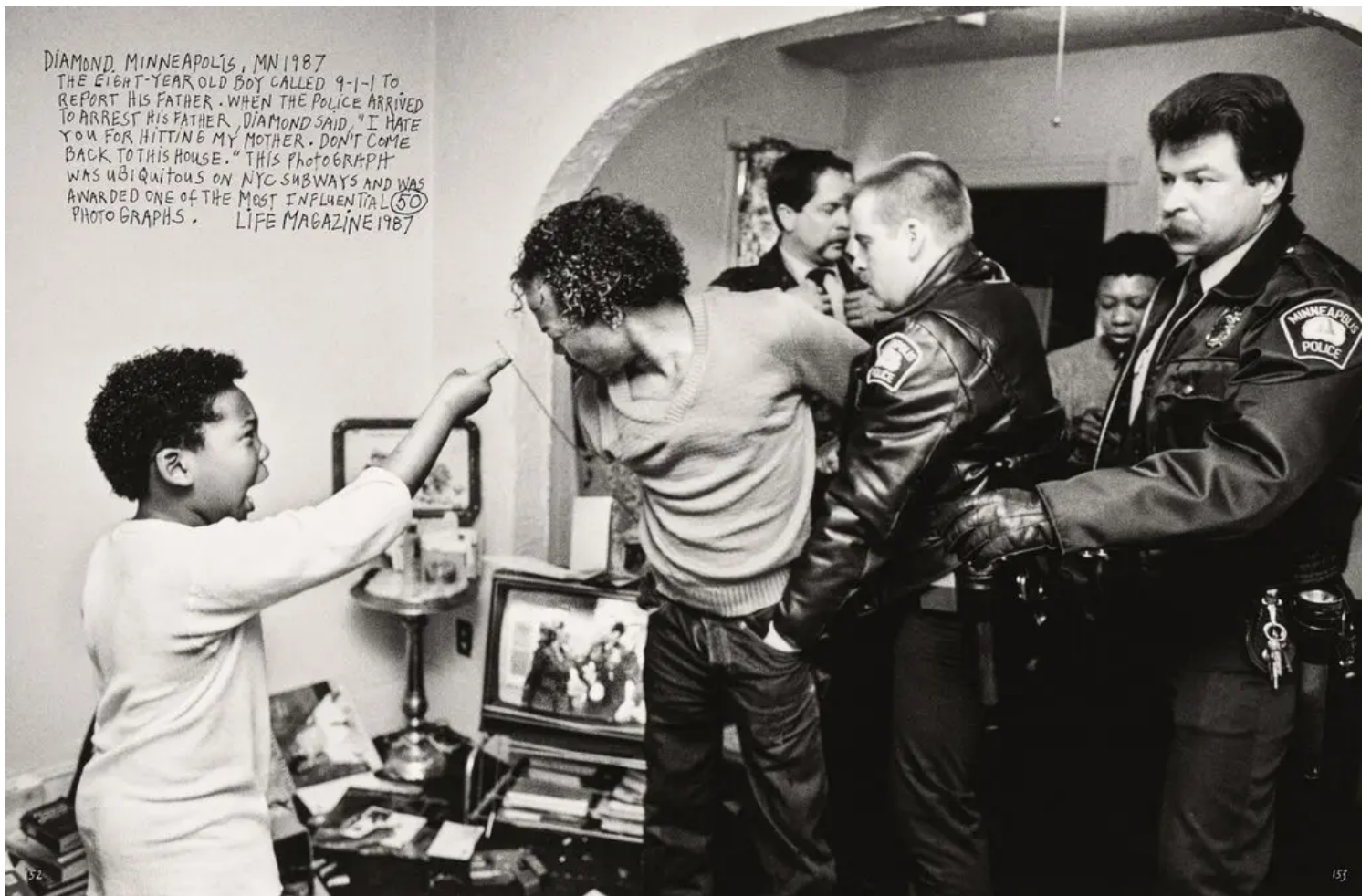


"Elisabeth's Night of Horror," 1982. Following this wealthy New Jersey couple, Ferrato, who is visible in the mirror, kept shooting one day as she watched the husband strike his wife. Donna Ferrato, via Daniel Cooney Fine Art

The best of Ferrato's photographs stand on their own without the assistance of ancillary commentary. Perhaps her most powerful picture, "Diamond, Minneapolis, MN," from 1987, records a harrowing scene. Uniformed police officers have entered a home, where a small television is playing and books are stacked on the floor. They were summoned by a 911 call from an 8-year-old boy reporting that his father is beating his mother. That back story is inscribed on the print. It's helpful but unnecessary.

The picture is dynamically composed, reminiscent of a Baroque painting, as tension-packed as Caravaggio's "The Taking of Christ." Three cops fill the right half of the frame, with the sole woman slightly out of focus in the back. In the center, a subdued man is being held, arms extended behind him, as one policeman thrusts a hand in his pocket. The boy at the left holds the stage. Rigid and furious, he is pointing his index finger at his father, and his mouth is open in a cry. Although his finger hangs in the air, it extends close to the man's face, which is abjectly averted. The only person looking at the boy, with intent consternation, is the policeman whose imposing form fills the right edge of the picture.

According to the caption, the boy is shouting, "I hate you for hitting my mother. Don't come back to this house." But you know that without hearing the words. The photograph impresses itself on your mind, and it lingers there like a bruise.



"Diamond, Minneapolis, MN," 1987. "I hate you for hitting my mother," the boy shouts at his father. "Don't come back to this house." Donna Ferrato, via Daniel Cooney Fine Art

Donna Ferrato: Holy

Through July 29 at Daniel Cooney Fine Art, 508-526 West 26th Street, Suite 9C, Manhattan. 212-255-8158; danielcooneyfineart.com.