

Laces of The Law

Laura MacLachlan, Laces of The Law





*Laces of the Law (paper and chicken wire sculpture)*

Walking along the halls of Middle Temple, I reflected upon rows of male judicial portraiture and asked myself where all the women were. As I crept around the corner of the final hallway, at last, a woman's portrait came into view. Having only been allowed to join the legal profession since 1919 after the passing of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, women have a lot of catching up to do when it comes to filling these halls with portraits with female figures.

I began researching other historical laws that prejudiced and restrained women. We have come a long way from the days when women were unable to open bank accounts, pursue education, or obtain work. Women were subjected to marital rape and domestic violence without much legal interference under the guise of respecting the privacy of marriage. Female divorcees also had few

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rights relating to the family home, which disincentivised them from escaping domestic violence. Historically, society perceived women as weak and incapable, thus some laws constrained women in a male-designed idea of what a woman's life should look like.

Such legal gender inequities were demonstrated in case law and legislation, but I wondered how I could capture this notion of the restraint and confinement of women in an art form. I came upon the idea of drawing a parallel between the law's construction of gender and the physical restriction of women's bodies through a corset. When I think of a corset, I think of oppression, restraint, and conformity to an ideal: an ideal designed by the male eye. Much like a corset, law was a tool to control women and fit them into a mould. The law laced women up into passive roles within society and stowed them away from public spaces. To capture this, I constructed legal documents into alternative forms. I took pages from various cases and legislations which sought to loosen these symbolic laces of the law that tightly confined women and shaped them into a corset. By doing this, I hope to encourage viewers to appreciate how laws have historically been tailored to fit a woman based on her gender, rather than her humanity.

If viewers look closely enough to appreciate the dates contained within the legal materials which comprise the art, they will realise that these jarring inequities are not merely historical relics. It is for that reason that I have left the laces tightened. I hope that my art may serve a dual purpose. First, an appreciation of how far legislation has developed to improve gender inequality. Second, to remind us of the strides we must take to address further concerns surrounding gender inequalities. I hope that viewers will question where else the laces of the law must be loosened, in order to allow women to embrace their true and individual forms and be free from legal biases.