





THE NAKED

TRUTH

Her work created uproar in Colombia, but Society bursary winner Manuela Henao Restrepo isn't giving up, hears Lucy Anna Scott

Of all the advantages that being a recipient of the Joan Wakelin Bursary conveys, being plunged into the depths of media controversy was not one Manuela Henao Restrepo would have predicted on hearing she'd been chosen. But beauty in Colombia is – as she was soon to discover – a controversial subject. And the photo-essay the award enabled her to pursue centred on just that, as Restrepo set out to explore the social and cultural factors that have shaped the female form in the city of Medellín.

The results were arresting. Through her project *Beauties*, the 27-year-old introduces viewers to teens with a casual familiarity with liposuction, a diet pill seller so desperate to be 'as pretty as her friends' she allowed an unqualified doctor to inject biopolymers in her buttocks (a procedure she's now seeking to reverse), and handfuls of other women who've spent millions of pesos on plastic surgery. While this is not peculiar to Colombia, the

anthropological influences that have normalised plastic surgery for a generation of women in its second largest city are – and it was this that Restrepo documented as she strove to reflect a particular approach to, and interpretation of, female beauty.

'In Medellín, women have historically been seen as strong figures, mothers and hard workers,' explains Restrepo, who graduated in 2013 from the London College of Communication. 'But this changed during the 1980s and 90s. Drug lords would visit the US to do deals and return with images of beauty they'd seen in prostitutes there. This changed the role of women, from being mothers raising families to being bodies and beauties.'

'As that aesthetic went mainstream, women in Medellín grew up surrounded by those images. This not only affects the poor – the pressure is on all social backgrounds.'

The Colombia-born photographer became fascinated by the subject during a six-month stay in her native country, having been raised in Spain. It was then that the artist became

Skin deep: one of Manuela Henao Restrepo's *Beauties* subjects

Clockwise, from right: models at a Medellín textiles event; 'tummy tuck' scar; a sweet 15 cake; and a model and weight-loss pills seller, who began saving money for plastic surgery aged 18



aware of how mainstream cosmetic surgery had become, and how differently female culture was understood there.

'I wanted to get to know these women and understand how they felt about their bodies. What I discovered is that they feel great – they're proud,' she says. 'But what shocked me most was how the surgery isn't to gain greater love and affection from men; it is about competition with other women.'

Almost half a million surgical cosmetic procedures are performed annually in Colombia, according to The International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons. But as the country's economy booms, Medellín is undergoing its own makeover. Plunging homicide rates, a public campaign to reduce violence, and a development drive that has delivered swathes of new libraries, parks, schools and sustainable infrastructure, have all combined to qualify Medellín as a city of change on the international stage. For some, therefore, the old face that Restrepo's images portrayed proved awkward viewing.

'It was like rubbing salt in a wound,' she explains. 'The narcotics inference

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[in my work] was what created the most noise in the media. People want to move on and present Medellín as a place of innovation. The city is trying to ignore the influences that drug culture still has on society.'

The media's focus on the drug-related aspects of the photo essay has, she says, overshadowed other layers in the work: the interpretation of beauty, the past, aesthetics and femininity.

'The essay is not saying these women are involved in drugs, just that they have inherited the influences,' she says. 'I wanted to show the effects of that. When something so big happens in a society it affects all aspects of it, and one of them was the interpretation of female beauty. Trying to ignore it is trying to ignore a large part of a reality.'

Myopic it may have been, but the attention *Beauties* drew went far beyond anything Restrepo could have anticipated as she competed for the Joan Wakelin bursary in 2014, against a line-up of impressive candidates including 2012 Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize winner Jordi Ruiz Cirera.

'As soon as *The Guardian* [the Society's bursary partner] published my work I began to receive calls from the Colombian media saying they wanted to interview me. That was just the start, and it went crazy. Some publications took my images and wrote a negative story and sensationalist headline around them, using hurtful language. Readers were commenting on the story online too, saying all sorts of things,' Restrepo recalls. 'For a while I didn't want to see the pictures. But then I got prouder and prouder of them.'

British photographer Martin Parr HonFRPS was an important influence on Restrepo's undergraduate self. And especially formative was Paul Graham's *Beyond Caring* series – an essay that explored the crowded dole offices of Margaret Thatcher's Britain.



IN THE WAKE OF JOAN

Manuela Henao Restrepo was a recipient of the Joan Wakelin Bursary in 2014.

Administered by The Royal Photographic Society in partnership with *The Guardian*, each year the award offers a photographer £2,000 for the production of a photographic essay on an overseas social documentary issue. It includes the opportunity for winners to see their work published in *The Guardian*.

The bursary is a tribute to Fenton Medalist Joan Wakelin HonFRPS, who died in 2003 at the age of 75. The Lancashire-born photojournalist left behind an impressive body of work, in which she documented the women protesters of Greenham Common, New Zealand's Maori communities and Australia's Aboriginals. Her images of Vietnamese boat people in Hong Kong were included in the 1990 World Press Awards. In 1986 Wakelin established the Arena seminar group of photographers, a discussion forum still regularly attended and going strong.

It was this enthusiasm for encouraging others to take photographs that was among one of the key points of her *Guardian* obituary, published in October 2003. Another was the way the photographer gave a voice to disadvantaged or vulnerable people. Much of her work is now with the RPS Collection in the National Media Museum in Bradford.

To find out more about the Joan Wakelin Bursary, visit rps.org/learning/project-funding/joan-wakelin

This interest in social reportage has also taken her to the mountains of Colombia to document how capitalism is changing family life in the rural communities there. But the deep social debate Restrepo has invoked around the cosmetic aesthetic has galvanised her to develop *Beauties*, which represents her first long-term personal body of work.

With hindsight, she believes such a strong reaction to her photo-essay has led her to understand that comments both bad and good can allow an artist to see their work in a new way. She now plans to return to Columbia to profile even more women.

Restrepo is particularly interested in those who lived during the height of the narco-trafficking era, to see if time has brought perspective: 'I'd like to find out how their bodies were changed by that time, how they feel about that and what they think about the heritage of which they are part. Many of these subjects were difficult to access before.'

But Restrepo is also thankful for receiving the award at such an early point in her career, a time when she was blind to the double-edged sword

of publicity. 'I was super naïve, I didn't know the reaction it would create. Due to that, the work was very much from the heart and I had a lot of freedom to follow what I felt,' she says.

'It has made me more determined to pursue this subject. As well as the controversy, I had good feedback, and received emails from people in Colombia thanking me for my work and encouraging me to carry on. I was so grateful for that.'

Enabling girls to realise there are alternative ways of seeing beauty is a priority in Restrepo's reportage. 'I would like to believe that my work will tell them to listen to what you see around you and realise it is just a culturally formed interpretation of beauty; you don't need to take it in full,' she says.

But the girls of Medellín are not the only ones to feel the effects of the bursary. It has, Restrepo says, 'changed everything' for her: 'You're fresh out of university, you apply to many contests and no-one replies. You start to get desperate and then comes the light. The award was one big opportunity and I wanted to give it my all.'