

Female Matadors

Photography by [Gina LeVay \(/people/gina-levay\)](/people/gina-levay)



<http://dj9frc12kqolk.cloudfront.net/sites/default/files/story-main-images/levay-header.jpg>

Raquel Sanchez. Toledo, Spain, 2007.

⌚ 4-MINUTE READ | ISSUE: [Spring 2014 \(/issues/90/2/spring-2014\)](/issues/90/2/spring-2014)

A teacher once told photographer Gina LeVay that you'll talk yourself out of anything if you think about it for more than five minutes. This advice has guided her career, leading her to search for adventure based on a simple premise: "Let me see what happens."

Whether she is going underground with sandhogs, the all-male crews who carve out the tunnels of New York City, or trailing female matadors in Spain and Mexico, LeVay seeks out extraordinary circumstances. "What attracted me to the bullfighters and also to the sandhogs is that they're real, gritty, just—people," she says. "So much in our culture focuses on celebrity, superficial issues and concerns. Get there fast, do this fast, and these people are the opposite of that."

In 2006, American LeVay began her odyssey into the Spanish-speaking world of *toreras*—female matadors. LeVay established a bond with the *toreras* over meals and conversation. These women lead dangerous lives, but LeVay soon learned they don't see it this way: "A lot of them have gotten gored, injured, and they just get up and want to do it again. They're fearless."

LeVay made three trips to Spain and one to Mexico over five years. She would arrive in advance of a *corrida*—a bullfight—to attend training sessions and travel with the women and their crews. Maripaz Vega, who has been bullfighting since the age of nine, was one of the first *toreras* who accepted LeVay into her circle. "I would just hang out with her and grab some beers after she killed two bulls," LeVay explains. "That's just her job—it's like going into an office. She doesn't think anything of it."

LeVay approached her project differently from the photojournalists—"tons of men, mostly"—who cover the *corridas*. She used a medium-format camera, which did not allow for the rapid shooting typical of sport photography. She wasn't angling for the familiar shots of capes and bulls. Rather, LeVay sought to capture the energy of the *toreras* in the ring, their raw intensity and confident, agile sensuality. The result is an atmospheric mix of bodies, human and animal; when you look at her photographs, you can almost smell the blood in the air.

Preparations for the *corridas* varied, as did the *toreras*' superstitions. Vega, for instance, would only allow her brother, who was also her manager, to help her into the elaborate *traje de luces*—the "suit of lights" bullfighters wear. Mexican Lupita Lopez, the only *torera* to take the *alternativa*—the rite of passage granting full-fledged professional matador status—"was very much about the media and the glamour of it all, of watching her lace up and put on her makeup." Lopez allowed LeVay to photograph her entire pre-*corrida* ritual, even her visit to a chapel for prayer.

But at Mexico City's Plaza México, the largest bullring in the world, with some 40,000 seats, LeVay was blocked by the owner from entering the inner ring, where Lopez and her crew congregated. LeVay believes it was because of her gender, not just for her safety. She said she was a photographer—"I need to do this, *it's my job*"—but she didn't gain entry until a member of Lopez's all-male crew vouched for her.

French *rejoneadora*—a bullfighter on horseback—Marie Sara experienced similar sexist treatment in 2006. According to LeVay, Sara was “great, just as good as the guy before her,” but the crowd booed and jeered, taunting “*mujer*,” meaning “woman.” A bullfight ticket usually includes three matadors, with two bulls each, and the women fight on the same ticket as the men, but are often treated differently.

Like the toreras, the blood sport of bullfighting is itself controversial. LeVay did not pass judgment on it, but provided her interpretation—from its ceremonial elements to its inherently violent conclusion.

Every project for LeVay is a matter of “exploring the self and challenging preconceived notions.” Getting unique access to the unfamiliar world of bullfighting fed what she calls her “creative beast” and has led to an ongoing project. “Seeing them in the bullring, where no one knows what’s going to happen—they’re warriors.”

—Allison Wright





Poster announcing Maripaz Vega's *corrida* in Hervas, Spain, 2007.

https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_o2_cmyk.jpg



During the season, bullfighters practice movements and tempo by having someone stand in for the bull. Here, Vega trains in Spain.

(https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_03_cmyk.jpg)



https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_19_cmyk.jpg



Marie Sara is a *rejoneadora* , or a bullfighter on horseback. Plaza de toros, Aranda del Duero, Burgos, Spain.

(https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_o4_cmyk.jpg)



(https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_05_cmyk.jpg)





Lupita Lopez prepares for a corrida. Mexico City, 2010.

https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_o6_cmyk.jpg





A member of Lopez's all-male crew preps her for the ring. Mexico City, 2010.

(https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_07_cmyk.jpg)



Lopez enters the Plaza México in Mexico City, 2010.

https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_o8_cmyk.jpg



https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_09_cmyk.jpg



https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_10_cmyk.jpg



https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_11_cmyk.jpg



(https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_12_cmyk.jpg)



Lopez exits the Plaza México by ambulance following the goring. She recovered from her injuries.

https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_13_cmyk.jpg



Vega after a corrida in Hervás, Spain, 2006.

(https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_14_cmyk.jpg)



Vega enters the ring.

https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_15_cmyk.jpg



Vega, Plaza de Toros in Loeches, Spain.

https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_16_cmyk.jpg





Vega, Plaza de Toros in Loeches, Spain.

(https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_17_cmyk.jpg)



https://www.vqronline.org/sites/default/files/story-images/levay_18_cmyk.jpg

[Gina LeVay \(/people/gina-levay\)](/people/gina-levay)

Gina LeVay holds an MFA in Photo, Video, and Related Media from the School of Visual Arts. Her work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in the US and Europe, including the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Museo d'art Contemporanea Roma, American Museum of Natural History, Hous Projects NYC, and Photo España. LeVay is an alumna and current staff member of The Eddie Adams Workshop. Her female matador portfolio has been issued in a fine art edition.

ISSUE: [Spring 2014](/issues/90/2/spring-2014) | [Volume 90](/issues/90/2/spring-2014) | [# 2 \(/issues/90/2/spring-2014\)](/issues/90/2/spring-2014)

PUBLISHED: April 2, 2014

UPDATED: April 2, 2014

TOPICS: [Mexico City \(/tags/mexico-city\)](/tags/mexico-city), [Spain \(/tags/spain\)](/tags/spain), [feminism \(/tags/feminism\)](/tags/feminism)