

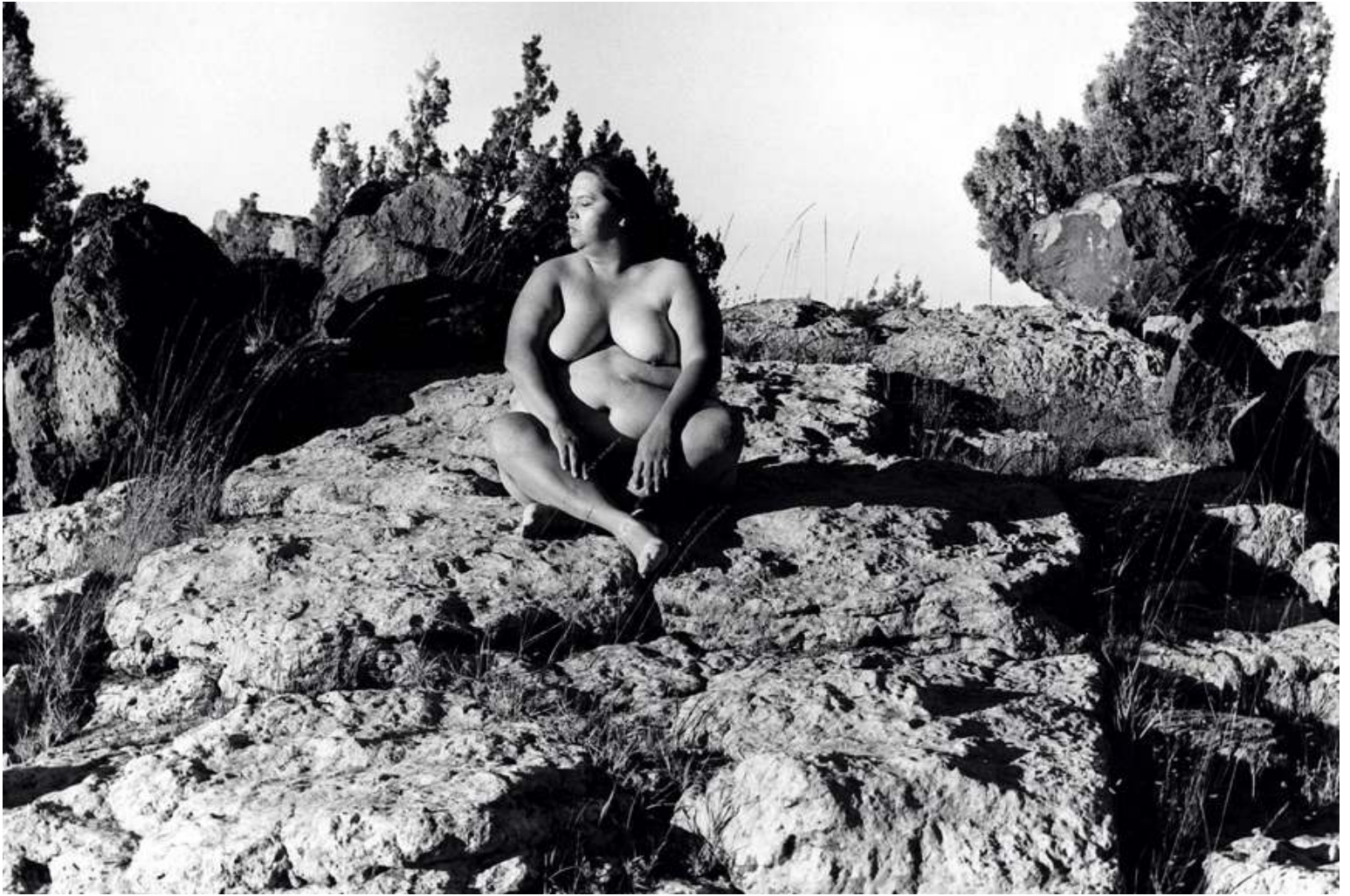
WIDEWALLS

Celebrating the Legacy of Photographer
Laura Aguilar

Art Exhibitions, Provoke! (NSFW)







May 3, 2018, by Balasz Takac

Balasz Takac is alias of Vladimir Bjelicic who is actively engaged in art criticism, curatorial and artistic practice.

Although the 1980s are perceived, at first glance, as the years of discotheques, sci-fi movies, lavish TV series and specific fashion style, the whole decade is followed by the intense political and social changes on the global scale.

In the American context, the Reagan government brought **a series of economic measures which have intensified the wealth of the already rich**, while the social circumstances remained the same or became even worse. In particular, the status of the *Others* e.g. Black, Latino and

specifically the LGBTQ community was unfavorable, despite the efforts made with the famous Stonewall riots back in 1969. The simultaneous process which had additionally enforced the marginalization and discrimination, was without a doubt [the AIDS epidemics](#). As the virus was discovered, the media started using it in order to establish the canons of morality which were in accordance with the traditional and religious beliefs of the majority of Americans. It is important to point out **the importance of the media presence of Anita Bryant**, a spokeswoman who has severely misused the AIDS crisis in order to discard the gay rights movement.

In this situation, a large number of the artists started exploring their gender, sexuality and intimacy in order to articulate the omnipresent homophobia, patriarchy, misogyny and the specificities of the community itself. **The art was perceived as a perfect tool for a struggle**, so it can be said that the artistic practices (such as the ones of [Robert Mapplethorpe](#), David Wojnarowicz or [Keith Haring](#)) which had started developing in that period, could be described as engaging ones.

Nevertheless, there were not many women who dealt with the notions of both the [lesbian identity](#) and race, so it can be said that **one of the most prominent women artists from the 1980s** devoted to these subjects is photographer **Laura Aguilar**, who sadly passed away on April 25, 2018, at the age of 58.

Laura Aguilar has definitely preserved the famous feminist maxim that the personal is political, and besides the sexual identity matters, **she largely**

examined the politics of representation of corporeality and the racial issues, themes which are more than ever in focus of the global political landscape.



Laura Aguilar – Grounded #108, 2006. Inkjet print, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Laura Aguilar

The Photographic Rise of Laura Aguilar

Laura Aguilar was born in 1959 in a family of mixed race, and such a background severely affected her artistic practice. **The artist became interested in the media of photography from an early age**, so she

attended the photography classes at the Schurr High School in Montebello, California. Later on, Aguilar studied at East Los Angeles Community College for some time and participated in Santa Fe Photographic Workshop and The Friends of Photography Workshop.

Laura Aguilar managed **to establish a distinct photographic style by focusing mostly on portrayals**. Her body-centered oeuvre was devoted to the examinations of varying body types which differed from the general corporeality of cisgender white bodies. **The display of the obese, black and lesbian bodies** which were not visible and often socially endangered was not present in the mainstream art circles dominated by the market demands.

The photographs of Laura Aguilar were too subversive for the art world due to the uncommon and politically charged agenda, which can be ascribed even to the present moment. They were also very poetical and have reflected stronghold of the artist intense emotional and mental states which have progressed as the time passed by.



Laura Aguilar – Los Illegals, 1984. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Laura Aguilar

The Highlight Work of The Retrospective

Between September 2017 and February 2018, only a few months before Aguilar's death, The Vincent Price Art Museum held a retrospective of her works titled *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* at East Los Angeles College, comprised of over **one hundred thirty works which this outstanding artist made in the last thirty years**. The exhibition aimed to reevaluate the significance of her artistic practice and the overall contribution to the visibility of the community.

In order to capture the atmosphere of this vast exhibition, it is required to get acquainted with at least few of the examples of the works which were installed. Perhaps **the most comprehensive series** which reveals the formative points of her grand oeuvre is the one which depicts **Chicano an Latin lesbian community**. In order to emphasize the photographs, Aguilar even stated:

“What I am trying to do is to provide a better understanding of what it's like to be a Latina and a Lesbian. Within the Lesbian and Gay community of Los Angeles, people of color are yet another hidden subculture; we are present but remain unseen.”

By exposing herself as it is the case in with the work *Three Eagles Flying* made in 1990, she went even further in examining the complexities of hybrid cultural, national and social identity by confronting the national emblems of the United States and Mexico.

In 1996, Aguilar made a poetical and tender series titled *Nude Self-Portraits* (1996). By placing herself in a desert, the artist expressed all the frustration, loneliness and pain of being repressed; she channeled perfectly the purist for the concise self-image and self-awareness regardless of the social norms.



Laura Aguilar – Stillness #25, 1999, Gelatin silver print, 9 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Laura Aguilar

Laura Aguilar at The Vincent Price Art Museum

Practically, throughout all of her works, Laura Aguilar **dealt with the position of being both marginalized and depressed**. By portraying the community, she spoke of the complexities of her identity in an attempt to map **different approaches to the self-acceptance** and challenges of self-image construction in a society which was and still is repressive. She exhibited in the various institution, and as the time passed by her work became recognized.

Finally, **the photographs of Laura Aguilar are multifaceted and complex**. They are not only important documents of the past times and chronological homages to the lesbian community, but they are also powerful testimonies of ones feeling of **exclusion and isolation**.

On the other hand, what makes it in accordance with the contemporaneity is the fact that the American society deals with the same problems thirty years later, with the rise of the nationalism regardless of the democracy which is so accentuated by the leading political nomenclatures.

This important exhibition held at [The Vincent Price Art Museum](#) in Los Angeles was part of the *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA* which was an extensive one year project devoted to the exploration of the cities Latino community. The whole event was followed by the series of lectures, performances, and a catalog, so all the activities were aimed to once again properly evaluate and claim the importance of the socially engaged photographic practice of Laura Aguilar.

Editors' Tip: *Laura Aguilar: Show and*

Tell/ Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell surveys the career of Laura Aguilar, a Chicana photographer who is most widely known for black-and-white nude self-portraits that are frank and self-assertive, yet deeply sensitive and poetic. In photographs that are frequently political as well

as personal, Aguilar offers candid portrayals of herself, her friends and family, and her Chicano/Latino and LGBT communities. Ten essays trace the

www.widewalls.ch/photographer-laura-aguilar-obituary/

LAURA AGUILAR
SHOW AND TELL



development of Aguilar's work over three decades, exploring her photography in terms of its social, historical, and art historical contexts. This catalog accompanies *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, a retrospective at the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College.

Featured images: Laura Aguilar – *Nature Self-Portrait #10*, 1996. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Laura Aguilar; *Nature Self-Portrait #11*, 1996. Gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Laura Aguilar; *Stillness #26*, 1999. Gelatin silver print, 9 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. © Laura Aguilar.