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How Photographer Laura Aguilar Uplifted Queer, Chicano Identities

The National Museum of Mexican Art is hosting a monumental survey of her work.

BY KERRY CARDOZA PUBLISHED 03/28/2019 AT 8:00 A.M.



Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #2*, 1996. PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

In the early '90s, the late Mexican American photographer Laura Aguilar wrote of her art: "I see this work is a part of me and it's very painful [sic] and I cry know I have this Right to beauty in my life and in my ART." This reflection, penned in a letter to the artist Joyce Tenneson, sums up Aguilar's complicated approach to image-making. While she believed in

the importance of documenting the multiplicity of human life, she often felt uncomfortable showing nude self-portraits and struggled to express herself.

All of this ambivalence, as well as the raw emotions of Aguilar's depression, are on display in [*Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*](#), the first retrospective of the artist's work currently on view at the National Museum of Mexican Art. Organized in 2017 by the Vincent Price Art Museum in collaboration with the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, the exhibition has become something of an homage to Aguilar's life; she died last April at the age of 58, having suffered from end-stage renal failure.

Cesareo Moreno, the NMMA's director of visual arts and chief curator, first saw Aguilar's work at this exhibition, and he immediately knew he wanted to bring the show to Chicago. "She was a very courageous photographer," he says. "And she really did understand that all people must struggle because she was so honest about her own."



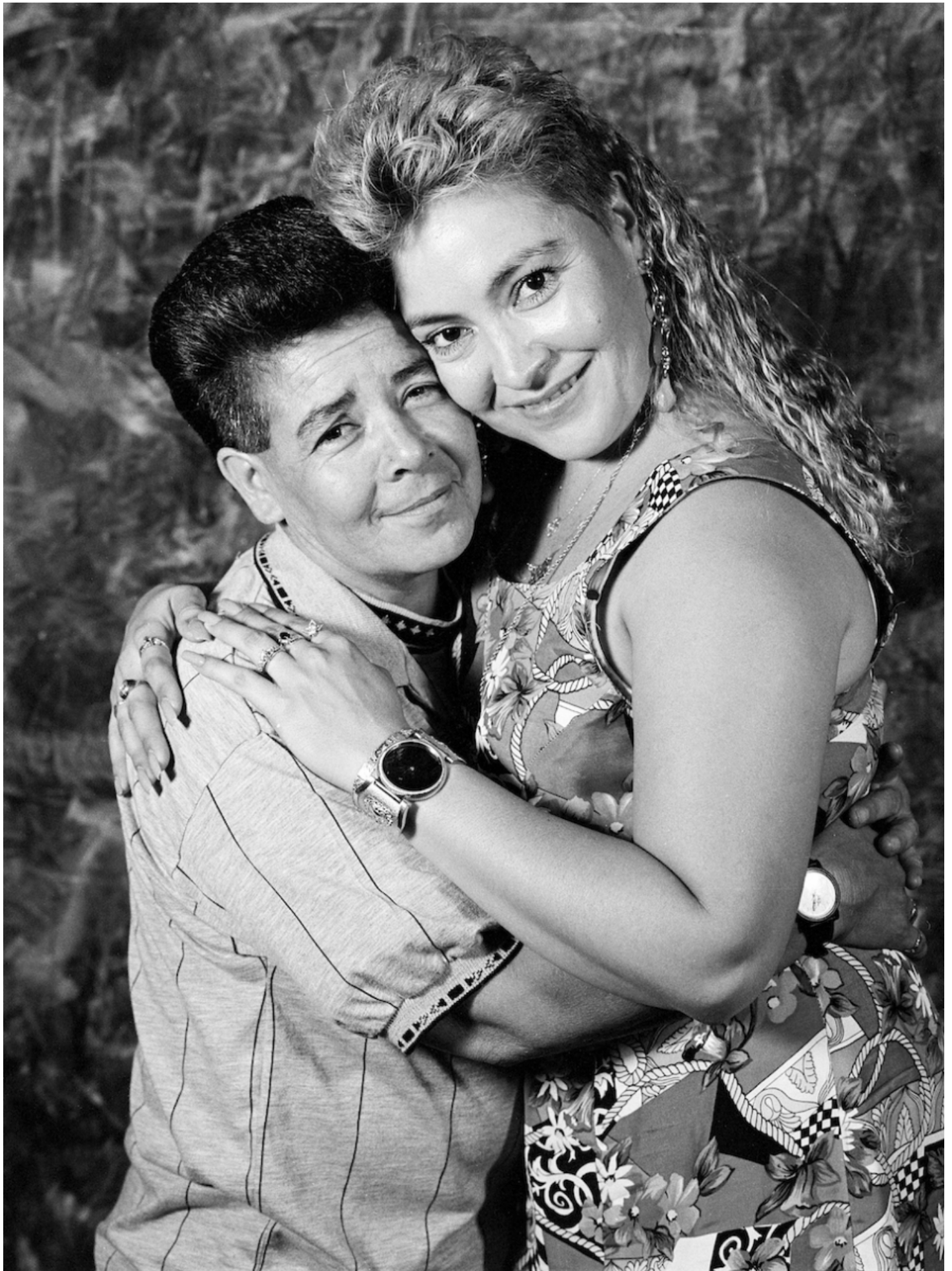
Laura Aguilar, *12 Lauras* PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER

Organized chronologically, the exhibition opens with work Aguilar shot in the early 1980s when she was a student at East Los Angeles College: black-and-white portraits of friends and artists around East Los Angeles, scenes capturing Day of the Dead celebrations, and self-portraits. In school, she learned about Mexican American history and was exposed to the region's art scene, where she eventually connected to local queer communities and, in

turn, met new subjects for her work. When it came to photography, she was mostly self-taught.

Even in these early, smaller images — most are around 8 by 10 inches — you can see Aguilar's clear gift for composition and detail. *At Home with the Nortes*(1990) centers on a family of four watching cartoons in their living room; the scene would be quotidian were it not for each individual's Dia de los Muertos face paint.

Sybil Venegas, the curator who worked with Aguilar to select work for this exhibition, says that these early portraits are crucial to Aguilar's oeuvre. "And she was real happy about that, too, because that was where she came from — that was sort of the ground of her experience."



Laura Aguilar, *Plus Pony #15* (1992) PHOTO: COURTESY OF UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER
chicomag.com/arts-culture/March-2019/Laura-Aguilar/

In the late '80s and early '90s, as Aguilar explored her own identity as a queer, Mexican American woman, her work became more explicitly political. In a series she titled *Plush Pony*, Aguilar captured patrons from a working class lesbian bar near downtown LA in frank, intimate portraits that unapologetically celebrate their identities.

How Mexican is Mexican is a series of three triptychs, each presenting a self-portrait alongside portraits of two other Chicana women. Beneath their photos, each woman wrote a short text about their own identities. One expressed: "It is my connection to la raza [the race] where I get to be proud, chicana. myself understanding did not come from 'chicano studies 101.' I grew up in it, thats how I lived." At the bottom of the frame, Aguilar printed a row of clip-art thermometer, labeled "mild," "medium," or "hot," to measure each subject's understanding of their Mexican American identity.

In 1990, Aguilar made her best known work, *Three Eagles Flying*, a triptych with two photographs of an American flag and a Mexican flag, separated by an image of herself. She's standing bare-breasted, with hands bound by rope. Another Mexican flag covers her head; an American one, her lower half. The birds in the work's title represent the countries' emblems as well as the Spanish word for eagle: águila. The term, a reference to the artist's surname, reflects her feelings of being caught between cultures, particularly as a brown woman who couldn't speak Spanish.

It was, as Venegas puts it, "the breakout piece for her. It's a conversation about the polemics about Mexican American identity and/or border identity, which is kind of the ground zero for most Mexican identities in this country." *Three Eagles Flying* is also a deeply personal work, standing as one of Aguilar's first nude self-portraits.

"Laura was so far ahead of the times," Venegas says. "It was very difficult for many people to visualize the large, brown, female body. It just was something that people did not do. So this in-your-face, powerful image ... it just basically blew her out of the community, and she became known to a much larger audience."



Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying* (1990) PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE UCLA CHICAGO STUDIES AND RESEARCH CENTER

Aguilar's honest self-exploration is partially why her work is so appealing, adds Moreno. "As she was exploring her own identity, or identities, I think she really hit on the universal."

Indeed, as Aguilar explored these personal complexities, she seemed to be intuitively aware about the notion of intersectionality, a phrase that wasn't coined until 1989 by the scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality describes how all aspects of a person's identity — race, religion, gender, and so on — are interconnected and thus impossible to consider separately. Aguilar's work is empathetic and intellectual, and it served as a way for her to clearly communicate her thoughts; she was diagnosed with auditory dyslexia when she was 26, which made reading, talking, and writing challenging.

Inspired by photographer Judy Dater's self-portraits in nature, Aguilar began a new set of works in the late '90s, of nude self-portraits taken outdoors. The first series, *Nature Self-Portraits*, were black and white images she took on a road trip through New Mexico in 1996. In these tender pictures, which sometimes include other women, the artist uses her body to mimic the arid desert landscape. Behind a fallen tree that has several barren branches thrust upwards, Aguilar stands tall, hands reaching for the sky. In a color photograph from a similar series, *Grounded* (2006), she sits with her back to the camera, mirroring the rounded shape of a large boulder in front of her. Through these deliberate poses, Aguilar implies that her body's presence is as natural and beautiful as the surrounding scene.

Many of Aguilar's photographs are emotionally raw, but the exhibition's most touching work is a candid video, titled *Untouched Landscape*. In it, the artist stands naked in the desert,

talking conversationally about her work and how she struggled with depression and self-esteem. At one point, she describes her changing perception of her body as she's photographed it over time, and how she's arrived at acceptance. "I look at the artwork, and I see I feel good there," she says. "I feel comfortable there."

Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell runs at the National Museum of Mexican Art through August 18.