

# ARTFORUM

Passages

Laura Aguilar (1959–2018)

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Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #2*, 1996, gelatin silver print, 16 x 20". Courtesy: The artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

**I FIRST SAW A LAURA AGUILAR PHOTOGRAPH** about twenty-five years ago, I think in a local art magazine in Los Angeles. The fact that I cannot remember my first encounter has to do *not* with its lack of impact but, to the contrary, with the fact that from that moment onward, Aguilar's work became a mainstay in my thinking, teaching, and writing about issues surrounding embodiment in photographic representation, making it seem as if I'd always known these images, mostly portraits and self-portraits. I met Laura, and shortly thereafter, the photographs gained texture and depth. One on one, Laura was unsparing in her combination of directness and vulnerability, and these qualities now seem obvious in the generosity and affection of her camera eye, which offers both a tenderness and an incisive baring of her subject's energies.

Laura had the most trenchant way of condensing, in a single photograph, complex and sometimes conflicted ideas that others were hashing out at great length in academic art-world debates. This was certainly the case in the 1990s, when debates about fetishization and abjection swirled in feminist, queer, and antiracist theories in the visual arts. Aguilar, who once stated to me her disinterest in written theory (her dyslexia accompanied a fierce creative intelligence that didn't mesh with its demands), made pictures that achieved some of the same goals through visual means: The works activate questions about who is allowed into what spaces, which bodies are socially valued, and what kinds of people are encouraged or allowed to be artists. Among her "Artist: Will Work for Axxcess" self-portraits



from 1993, for example, is an image of the artist holding a cardboard sign with the titular text, standing in front of a building labeled GALLERY.



Laura Aguilar, *In Sandy's Room*, 1989–1990, gelatin silver print, 42 x 52". Courtesy: the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Aguilar's photograph *In Sandy's Room*, 1989–90, was a necessary inclusion in my 1996 exhibition "Sexual Politics," which presented feminist art and pivoted around debates in feminist art theory. This self-portrait depicts Aguilar reclining naked on a chair, feet up on an ottoman, in an attitude of what I'm tempted to call extreme, even aggressive, repose—a large-bodied queer Chicana odalisque, hair cut in butch fashion, head laid back, eyes closed, cold drink in hand (with ice visible), a window open onto a riot of

plant life, a fan pointed toward her. The picture exquisitely crystallizes the relentless objectification of the brown and the female body in Western representation and the way this freezing into fetish can flip into a sign of immense empowerment, perhaps because it is by/of a body so assertively uninterested in the viewer's gaze. The fact that we know Aguilar made this picture of herself helps in our appreciation of its function as self-empowering, but so does every detail in this meticulously composed image, from clearly self-confident naked flesh to external vegetation bursting its way into an otherwise plain room—the energy coiled in Aguilar's relaxed body explodes here.

I did not spend much time with Laura after I left Los Angeles for abroad in 2003, but one of her stunning 1996 “Nature Series” photographs—where she pictures herself (and in some cases other women) as both integrated into and corporeally separate from natural landscapes in California and Texas—has graced my living—room wall wherever I have lived, an uncanny photograph of a very large, boulder-shaped fleshy mass of body lying over a slab of rock, face not visible to view. We reconnected when I returned to Los Angeles in 2014, and in preparation for her retrospective at Vincent Price Art Museum, we had some chats. Her vitality (in spite of increasing health challenges), sense of humor, and ability to slice through the bureaucracy and posturing of the art world and its institutions were as fresh as ever. She could be acerbic but rarely at all off base in her sharp evaluations of what was going on around her.

She will be acutely missed as a friend. But the art world's loss is more epic: a creative vision that has no parallel in its ability to cut through talk with a kind of seeing that produces new relations in the world. A seeing that takes place in and through the body—and which Laura generously offered to us in the form of these extraordinary pictures that will live on in her absence.

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