

GOOD

Photographer Laura Aguilar Illuminates The Lives, And Bodies, Of Queer Women Of Color

by Eva Recinos, May 10, 2018

The photographs of Laura Aguilar's nude body in the landscape are stunning.

One photograph shows her slightly hunched in front of a large rock, and her body echoes its shape. There's a slight tinge of melancholy in the photo; even though the sun shines brightly on her body, like that solitary stone, Aguilar is alone in the landscape.

Aguilar's self-portrait is a photograph that has stayed with me: Here was a Latina woman showing us her entire self. Aguilar paired the softness of flesh with the hardness of rock. She was unafraid of laying open her vulnerability and also her strength. Aguilar documented queer communities of color, but she was also unafraid of turning her camera on herself.

Born in Los Angeles in 1959, she attended East Los Angeles College in the 1980s. While the community college is located in a majority Latinx and Asian community and is [comprised mostly of Latinx students](#) today, Aguilar had many factors working against her during her time there. She struggled to find her place and felt discouraged by professors. And as a queer woman

of color, the 1980s weren't the easiest time to create work about her identity.



Grounded #111, 2006. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

“I’m going to show you Brown-ness in this landscape, I’m going to show you queerness in this landscape.”

But it wasn’t until September 2017 that she started to gain widespread recognition for her work over the previous decades. As part of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA’s initiative to spotlight art from Los Angeles and Latin America at museums throughout Southern California, Aguilar’s work was featured in “Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.” at ONE Gallery in a historically gay neighborhood of West Hollywood. Her works culminated in a retrospective at the [Vincent Price Art Museum \(VPAM\)](#), the gallery space on the campus of East Los Angeles College, where Aguilar went to school so long ago. Sybil Venegas, the curator of the first retrospective of her work, “Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell” at the VPAM, had known Aguilar since the photographer was a student there in the 1980s.

Yet Aguilar’s homecoming was short-lived.

The exhibition ended Feb. 10, 2018, and Aguilar passed away April 25. She was 58.



The t-shirt said ART can't hurt you, she knew better. Her problem was she placed a value on it. She believed in it just a little too much she wanted to believe that it was hers to have, to hold, and to own.

Don't Tell Her Art Can't Hurt (Part A), 1993. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

An examination of self

Aguilar struggled to reach mainstream success. She didn't have, as Vincent Price Art Museum director Pilar Tompkins Rivas put it, the "structures within the art world to help her along."

When only a little more than 20% of major exhibitions ([between 2007 and 2013](#)) highlight the work of women exclusively, the odds are already stacked against women. For queer women of color, the obstacles are even greater. Aguilar also had dyslexia as well as physical and mental illness.

"Laura maintained, truly, this examination of not only self but her own community within her work."

While most artists who make a living in the mainstream art world get their MFA and teach to have a stable income, Aguilar couldn't do a lot of those things, says Los Angeles Times staff writer Carolina Miranda, who spent three days working on an oral history of Aguilar for the University of California Los Angeles' Chicano Research Center.

She describes Aguilar as "an incredibly focused artist" who took jobs for access to dark rooms and closely studied the work of artists she admired.

"The career that she had, to me, is all the more admirable because you do have this woman that is dealing with communications issues, she's dealing with depression, and she's dealing with the fact that her work is not necessarily like the art world's flavor of the moment," Miranda said.

Prolific photographer [Catherine Opie](#) — an award-winning artist who became world-renowned for her groundbreaking portraiture of the LGBTQ community — recalls being in a showcase of lesbian artists with Aguilar, the 1990 exhibition “All But the Obvious” [curated by Pam Gregg](#). Even though the two artists lost touch, Opie maintained an admiration for Aguilar’s work.

“I moved my work around with other subject matters,” Opie said. “Laura maintained, truly, this examination of not only self but her own community within her work.”



Three Eagles Flying, 1990. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Embracing her truth

Long before the recent conversations around body positivity, Aguilar presented her body in an undeniably honest way.

As an arts journalist and someone who works in social media, I've seen firsthand the negative online comments in response Aguilar's work and her body. As her revealing self-portraits surface on social media, I've seen the body-shaming, the name-calling. There are comments about her body being "disgusting" and about her needing to get "healthy." These responses are evidence that nothing has changed since Aguilar started taking photos. There are still people who are uncomfortable with seeing female bodies outside of the mainstream, ideal body type. There are still people shocked to see photographs of a Latina woman embracing her full truth.

But to me, it was a revelation to see another Latina artist transforming a museum space into an exploration of cultural identity, mental health, the body, and sexuality. I often longed for the photographic portraits I saw on museum walls — larger than life and couched within curatorial language praising their importance — to portray people who looked more like my family, my friends, myself.

Latina women are often told: *calladita te ves mas bonita*, a joking phrase that roughly translates to "when you're nice and quiet, you look much prettier." That phrase might come with a grain of humor, but there's truth to it as well: Many Latina women and women of color are expected to tame their anger, their sadness, their sexuality.

Seeing a Latina woman embrace all of these truths so directly was thrilling.



In *Sandy's Room*, 1989. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

When I spoke to Aguilar in 2016 [for L.A. Weekly](#), a year before her VPAM exhibition was set to open, she expressed her fear that she might not make it to the opening: "There's a good part of me that is afraid I may not be there," Aguilar says. "And I worked so damn hard to get there."

Aguilar did make it to the opening, but her health quickly declined.

Tompkins Rivas said that Aguilar didn't attend many programs the museum held in conjunction with her exhibition.

But her effects reach far beyond the retrospective, and her photographs leave a lasting legacy of embracing one's identity fully and unapologetically.

Her practice continues to energize younger Latinx artists who have mourned her passing.

Rising Chicanx performance artist Rafa Esparza [posted on his Instagram](#):
“Thank you Laura Aguilar. hearts are heavy today ... all I can muster up rn.
RIP”

Photographer [Star Montana](#) remembers learning about Aguilar’s work through her mentor Mei Valenzuela. Although a few decades separate the two artists (Montana was born in 1987), Montana also explores themes of Mexican-American identity in her work. She had a solo show entitled “I Dream of Los Angeles” that displayed her portraits of people in both East and South L.A., Latinx and black communities that are seldom represented on gallery walls.

Montana often struggled to find information on other Latina photographers. “For so long, there wasn’t anybody — when you go back to the history of photography, [and look] for intersectional women who struggle with queerness and who struggle with depression and struggle with fatness and struggle with all these things — that we can look to the work and not feel ashamed of any of those things because she’s not hiding any of those things,” Montana said.

Aguilar “really lay at the intersection of all these things,” Miranda said of conversations about queerness, brown-ness, and photography.



Plush Pony #2, 1992. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Aguilar's photos feel all the more important and impactful today, where we are seeing attempts to infringe on the rights of LGBTQ communities and fear-mongering about Mexican and Latinx people.

"It was about visibility and about the strength within that visibility and being utterly not compromised in relationship to her own truth and the ideas around her work," Opie said.

And she never shied away from fully speaking her truth.



Stillness #26, 1999. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Montana recalls speaking on panels with Aguilar. She noticed that if Aguilar didn't agree with an interpretation of her work — filled with art world jargon as most critical statements are bound to be — she would simply say so. People in the room were sometimes uncomfortable at her bluntness, unsure what to make of an artist who refused to let her work be couched in too much theory.

"I hope that's not forgotten because that is a big part the work, how brutally honest she is," Montana said.

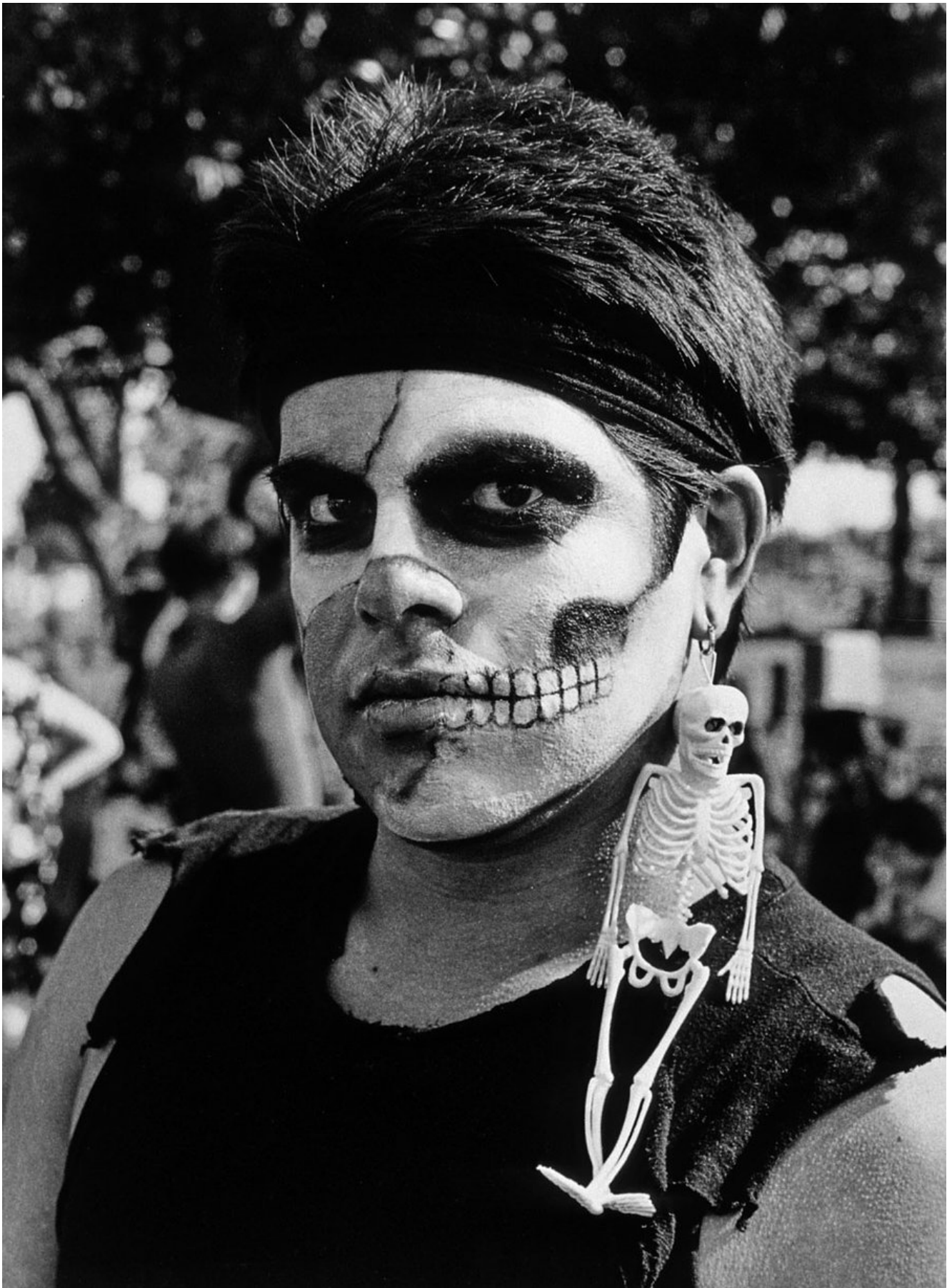
And that honestly comes through in her photography, paving the way for others to create their own self-reflective work. Tompkins Rivas recalls a photograph posted on Instagram during the very beginning of “Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell.” In it, a student stood against a video projection of Aguilar “in the nude in front of a big rock.” The young woman in the photograph had taken off her shirt and “had the body that mirrored Laura’s body.” After getting over her initial shock, Tompkins Rivas realized the importance of this image.

“I knew from that, as the show kind of ran its course, that young people that were coming in [and] were seeing images that acknowledged parts and aspects of their identity that they may not have ever seen in the context of a museum before,” Rivas said. “And that’s very powerful.”

Aguilar’s work also broke through some of the male-dominated histories of image-making.

As Miranda explains, there are multiple layers to her portraits in the landscape. When it comes to landscape photography, the names revered in art history are all male. And landscapes are often tied to Western concepts of masculinity, Miranda noted. Aguilar broke through all of that.

“She was saying ‘I’m going to show you this femininity in this landscape,’” Miranda said. “‘I’m going to show you brown-ness in this landscape, I’m going to show you queerness in this landscape.’”



Armando, 1984. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Becoming visible

Aguilar created a space that's so rare to find within visual culture.

And it resonates with me.

For so long, I yearned to fit in more with mainstream images of what constituted the ideal woman. As a young girl, I didn't know how to embrace my brown-ness. I loved Disney princesses, and so many of them didn't look like me. My favorite pop singers were white. The ads in billboards so often depicted thin, white women. I didn't have the chance to form ideas about what it meant to be brown and beautiful.

And when I realized that I loved art history, I resigned myself to the fact that I would probably be studying art that portrayed the bodies of white women for the majority of my career.

Aguilar's images are creating a new narrative. Her photography has given me permission to look at my own identity and brown-ness and to celebrate it in its own right — not as a comparison with anyone else.

Aguilar also gave me permission to embrace all the parts of my identity. I didn't grow up talking about mental health. I didn't grow up seeing strong, queer, brown women. So many facets of my personality fall outside of the norm, outside of the ideal Latina woman.

In the legacy she leaves behind, Aguilar showed me what it's like to unapologetically make yourself seen.



At Home with the Nortés, 1990. Photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Top and share photo by Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.