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Remembering Laura Aguilar, the Queer, Latina Photography Pioneer

In the sad wake of the photographer's passing, we look at how she carved a permanent mark on American history and helped out Latino artists along the way

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By Lexi Manatakis

[Show and Tell by Laura Aguilar \(30 Images\)](#)



"Nature Self-Portrait #14", 1996. Gelatin Silver Print, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

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"My photography has always provided me with an opportunity to open myself up and see the world around me. And most of all, photography makes me look within." For thousands of years, philosophers used words to explore their internal reality, but for queer Chicana photographer, Laura Aguilar, it was photography that allowed her to delve deep into her soul to create photos as equally pensive as Homer's *The Odyssey*.

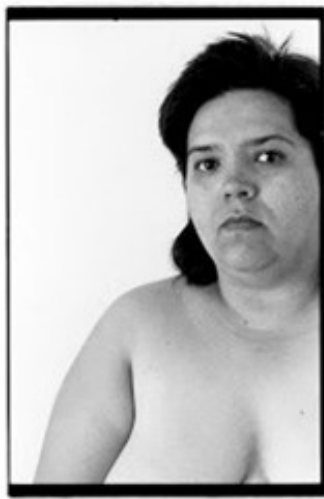
On 25 April, Aguilar died at age 58. As a pioneer of queer Chicana photography, her death comes at a great loss for both photographic and queer Chicana culture who, without Aguilar, would never have been so visually championed into wider queer and American history. Throughout her career, she exhibited in over 50 solo and group exhibitions, and her work has contributed to academia on writing queer Chicana experience permanently into culture. Whether she was shooting Latina lesbians in the 80s, diverse body types in mother nature, or life inside LA's only queer Chicana bar, Aguilar had a knack for rendering her subjects authentically, while consistently using her art as a form of therapy for coming to terms with her identity.

In memory of Laura Aguilar, we trace her incredible and influential legacy.

HER BROTHER LEAD HER TO PHOTOGRAPHY, WHICH SAVED HER LIFE

Laura Aguilar was born on October 26, 1959, in San Gabriel, California with auditory dyslexia: a hearing problem where the brain is unable to process sounds in the normal way. Because of the LA public school system, Aguilar

remained unaware of her learning difficulties for many years while finding it hard to read and speak. On top of this, her peers found her hard to understand because she couldn't pronounce certain words. Unsure of what was wrong with her, Aguilar retreated from the outside world in personal solitude as she became more and more insular. Entirely withdrawn from her youth, Aguilar credited her surviving the early stages of her life to her brother, who, after seeing her struggle to express herself through words, lead her to photography. He lent her his camera as a teenager and taught her how to develop film in the darkroom: a moment that would direct the rest of Aguilar's life. "The best thing in my life is my brother," Aguilar once stated. "He saved my life." Until her death, she remained a largely self-taught artist.



"12 Lauras", 1993. Twelve Gelatin Silver Prints, 24 x 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

SHE WAS OF MEXICAN-IRISH DESCENT, WHICH LARGELY INFLUENCED HER WORK

The photographer's mixed cultural heritage had a huge impact on her work. Aguilar's father, Paul Aguilar, was second generation Mexican-American, born in LA to parents who fled the Mexican Revolution, and her mother was half Mexican-American, half Irish. In 1999, the photographer shot "Three Eagles Flying": a self-portrait which literally placed her passive body, posed like a statue, in the middle of her dual heritage: symbolised in the form of an American flag to the left, and a Mexican flag to the right. The image was a bold metaphor for the eternal struggle of someone trying to fit into two cultural identities, as Aguilar literally suffocates herself with the Mexican flag bagged to her head, and uses rope to tightly bind an American flag to the lower half of her body. The image is said to address Aguilar's feelings of displacement: it is visual hyperbole relating to how visually disconnected she felt from her family growing up. Because she did not have her mother's features, people hardly ever connected her with her mum. "...I used to tell people I grew up on the edge of nothingness," she [once told](#) her close friend, writer Sybil Venegas. Going deeper than visuality, the work addresses Aguilar's childhood inability to verbally express her cultural identity (due to her dyslexia), as well as the loss of her grandmother, her skin colour, body weight, limited English speaking abilities, and her inability to speak Spanish. Intensely personal, the work speaks painfully to anyone who understands the battle of trying to satisfy the multi-faceted sides of themselves.



"Three Eagles Flying", 1990. Three Gelatin Silver Prints, 24 x 20 inches each. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

SHE SHOT *LATINA LESBIANS* IN THE 80S

In 1987, Aguilar shot her *Latina Lesbian* series: a collection of black and white portraits of queer Chicana musicians, lawyers, and mothers. The series picks up on the style Jim Goldberg's 1979 *Rich and Poor* series, by including handwritten monologues under each subject. In this sense, Aguilar allows her subjects total control over the telling of their own identity, stripping power from the photographer, and placing it into the hands of the subject. Locking a direct gaze with the camera, all of Aguilar's Latina Lesbians appear proud, and liberated in their identities. The series also features a self-portrait, which Aguilar uses as a form of coming out. While she did not directly connect with the word lesbian, her inclusion in the series was an act of self-identification and realisation for the photographer. In the image, ["Laura" \(1988\)](#), Aguilar stands among personal possessions,

and the image is bordered by a set of cartoon tarot cards: a coming together of Laura's spiritual evolution. Under the image Aguilar's handwritten scrawl writes "I am not comfortable with the word lesbian, but everyday I am more and more comfortable with the word LAURA": a deeply personal reflection on the photographer's coming of age.



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. Gelatin Silver Print, 57 x 40 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

PLUSH PONY (1992) IS ONE OF HER MOST WELL KNOWN SERIES

Plush Pony is not only one of Aguilar's most well-known series, but the images are a documentation of the stories within what was once LA's only queer Chicana bar, Plush Pony – since closed. Situated in a squat, one-story building among auto body shops and warehouses, Plush Pony was a safe space for Mexican and Chicana women and it hosted a working class, butch/femme scene that Aguilar immediately decided to capture. The series documents a critical moment in LA's queer Chicana history, as it features portraits of a diverse array of Plush Pony's attendees, standing in front of patterned studio backdrops. "Aguilar set up a makeshift photo studio there and photographed its participants," curator Ondine Chavoya [told Dazed in 2017](#). "The series is so striking because of the texture and style that's captured in these images: the breathtakingly butch with the playful femme, the various gender queer postures and stylisations that we see in those images. They were taken in the early 90s at a time when there was still a Latina lesbian bar in LA. So, culturally, these images also capture the queer spaces that no longer exist particularly due to gentrification."



"Plush Pony #15", 1992. Gelatin Silver Print, 11 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

HER LATEST WORK WAS IN LAND ART

In the late 90s, early 2000s, Aguilar shifted her photography to land art in a deep exploration of her body, and the infinite connection between the female form and the landscape. Picking up much of Cuban artist [Ana Mendieta](#)'s artistic sentiments, "Stillness" (1999), "Motion" (1999), and "Center" (2001) fuse female bodies with different landscapes. With seamlessness, Aguilar's naked body becomes one with the land. In "Motion", the artist sits on the ground, bent over in the form of a rock as the folds of her skin mimic the edges of the undefined boulders that surround her. Executed in black and white, at first glance it seems impossible to differentiate which form is human and which is not. Critics said Aguilar's turn to land art was to extract her form – commonly rejected from society for not fitting within socially constructed ideals of beauty – from humanity, to take it back to the natural world as a space free of judgement. In these works, Aguilar also takes her form away from male-dominated sexualisation and perception and returns it to the purity of mother nature.



"Motion #56", 1999. Gelatin Silver Print, 20 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

HER WORK WILL FOREVER BE ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST VULNERABLE EXPLORATIONS OF QUEER CHICANA EXPERIENCE

Laura Aguilar will forever be commemorated for her commitment to visually writing queer Chicana experience into wider American culture. Not only does her work progress the experience of queer women, but marginalised queer women of colour. Through continuously exploring her own vulnerability, Aguilar created a platform for others to tell their stories.

"Laura was so revolutionary for her time because there just weren't any

images like this of Latina lesbians,” curator David Frantz told Dazed. “There was no one specifically producing work about Chicanas and Latinas from a queer perspective, and also from a female photographer. Laura (was) ahead of her time in that regard.”

You can see Laura Aguilar's work on show at Show and Tell at Frost Art Museum FIU until 27 May. You can find out more [here](#)



"Clothed/Un clothed #14", 1991. Two Gelatin Silver Prints, 20 x 16 inches each. Courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.