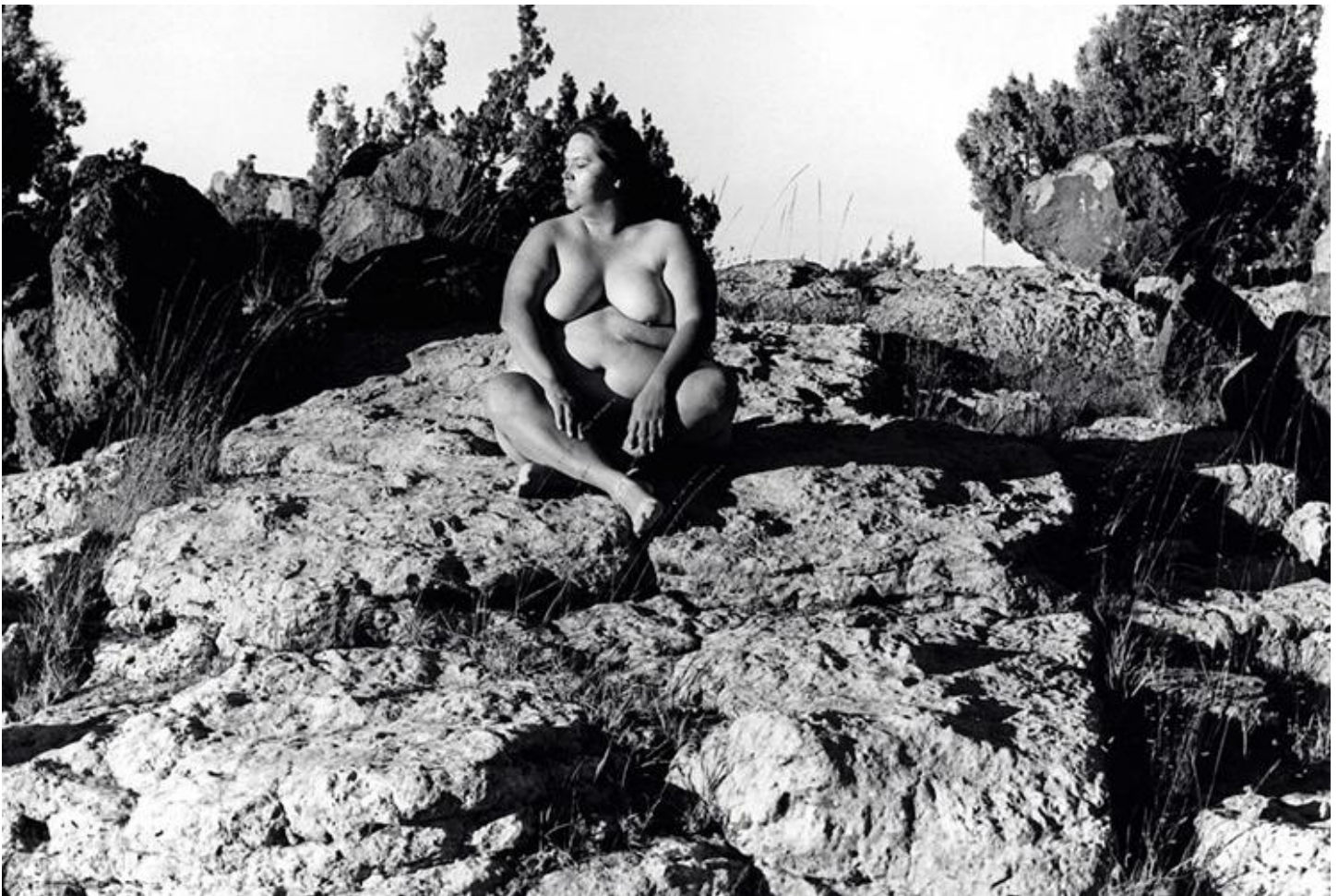


The Death of Photographer Laura Aguilar Is a Major Loss for L.A.

A woman of size and a woman of color, she refused to be invisible

April 26, 2018 by Gwynedd Stuart



A 1996 Self-Portrait from *Show and Tell*
Courtesy Laura Aguilar/Vincent Price Art Museum

In the fall of 2016, about a year prior to the opening of *Show and Tell*, a groundbreaking retrospective of her photography at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Monterey Park, Laura Aguilar was anxious about her

longevity. [In an interview](#) with Eva Recinos for *LA Weekly* (I was the publication's arts editor at the time), Aguilar said, "There's a good part of me that is afraid I may not be there. And I worked so damn hard to get there...to go back to a place [East Los Angeles College] that was not so easy to learn about photography or just being a woman that's trying to do something different and being told, 'But that's not what we do.'"

She was suffering from a number of health problems, including diabetes; meanwhile her art practice had long revolved around her physicality. The photos in *Show and Tell*, which was part of the Getty's massive Latina/o and Latin American art initiative *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, were self-portraits Aguilar took in the desert, her smooth, nude form becoming part of the arid landscape. She was a woman of size and a woman of color reclaiming her agency and directing the viewer's gaze toward a segment of society that's often invisible.

The *L.A. Times* [reported late yesterday](#) that Aguilar has passed away at 58 in a nursing home in Long Beach, where she was suffering from end-stage renal failure. Friend Sybil Venegas told the *Times*, "She died in peace having spent her last day with many loving visitors."

Venegas curated *Show and Tell*. [In 2016 she said](#), "Laura's work a lot of time represents people that are marginalized and people that are oppressed or people that are invisible...Poor, large women of color — they tend to be invisible in society. Nobody sees them. They're not represented in media, they are discriminated against because we have issues with color, we have issues with obesity. And so for a woman like herself to put herself front and

center in the conversation, that's pretty brave. That's pretty amazing because there's nobody out there that looks like her that's saying anything like that."

Aguilar's work also reflected the struggles she encountered simultaneously embracing her Mexican-American heritage and her identity as a lesbian. In one self-portrait, she stands topless between an American flag and a Mexican flag. Another American flag is wrapped around her waist like a sarong and a second Mexican flag is wrapped tightly around her head. A length of thick rope is wound around her neck and wrists. The visual antithesis of that portrait was recently on display in the LACMA exhibit *Home: So Different, So Appealing* (also part of *PST: LA/LA*). The 1989 self-portrait "In Sandy's Room" shows Aguilar reclining in a chair, a fan blasting air up and over her, beside a window thrown wide open. Despite the obvious heat, she looks like a woman thoroughly at home in her surroundings and in her body, even if that wasn't the case.

Besides her physical ailments, Aguilar suffered from auditory dyslexia, which made communicating difficult. Photography became an alternative means of speaking to the world—and hers was a voice that L.A. needed.