

# HYPERALLERGIC

## The Empathy and Solidarity of Laura Aguilar's Unbroken Gaze

The photographer portrays her subjects with a tenderness that makes them seem like friends, and with the attention of someone who really sees them.

By [Monica Uszerowicz](#), April 12, 2018

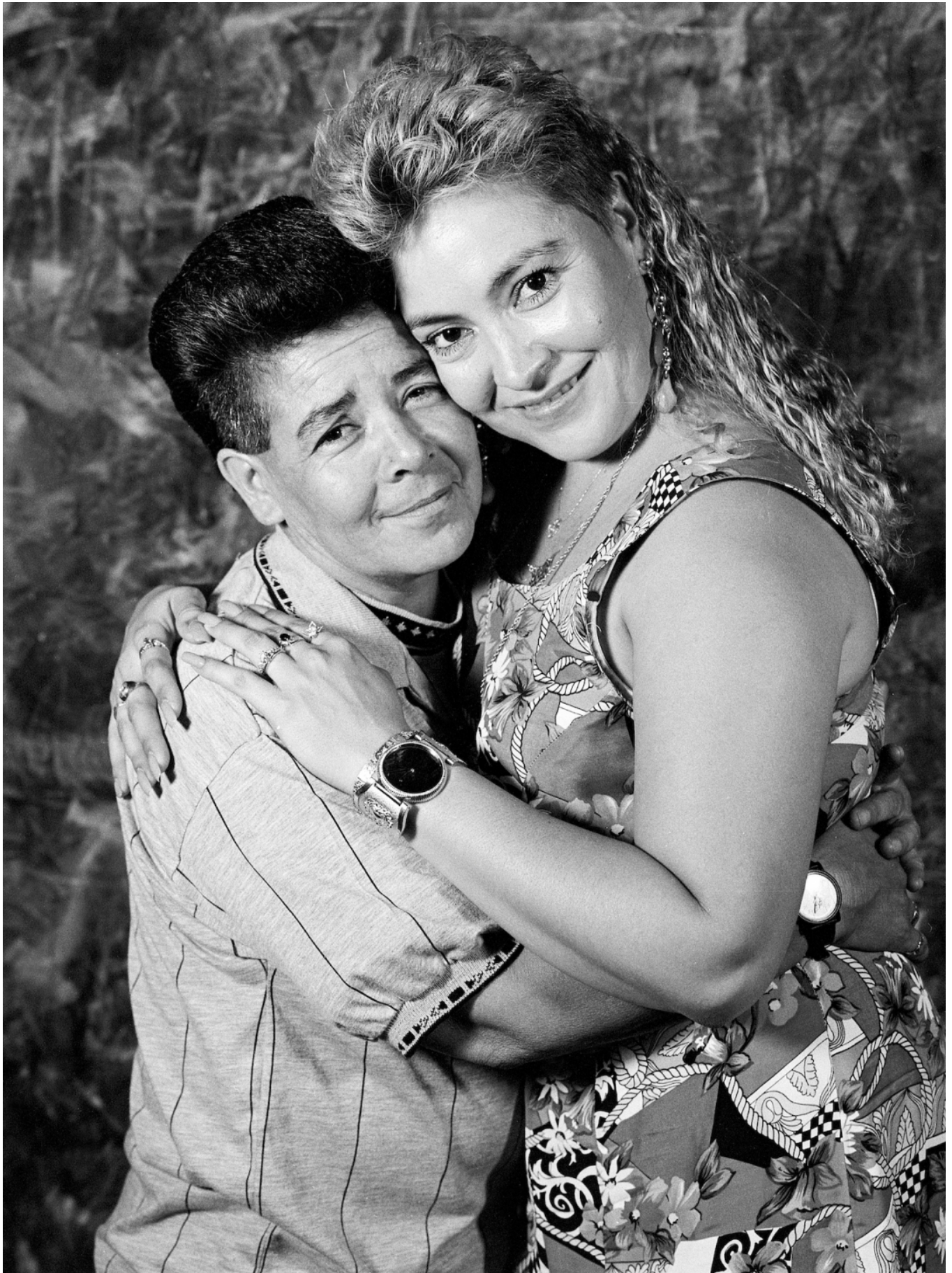


Laura Aguilar, "Nature Self-Portrait #14" (1996), gelatin silver print, 16 x 20" (photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

In Laura Aguilar's 1996 photograph "Nature Self-Portrait #14," the artist leans over a desert spring, her left hand nearly touching the water. The pause above the surface is deliberate, and the affectation looks painterly: a pensive, romantic near-touch. In other images from the series, taken while Aguilar grieved the death of a close friend and contended with the shame of being in her own body — large, brown, prone to bouts of deep depression — she becomes part of the landscape, the soft curves of her form reflecting the surrounding rocks. Here, she reflects herself. She's a femme Narcissus, lost in her own face, so entrenched in the surrounding landscape that drowning would be impossible.

The image is in the "Landscapes" section at her career retrospective. *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, currently on at Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum-Florida International University, was previously shown at the Vincent Price Art Museum and is curated by Sybil Venegas, an independent art historian and Curator and Professor Emerita of Chicana/o Studies at East Los Angeles College (ELAC), where Aguilar took photography classes in the 1970s.



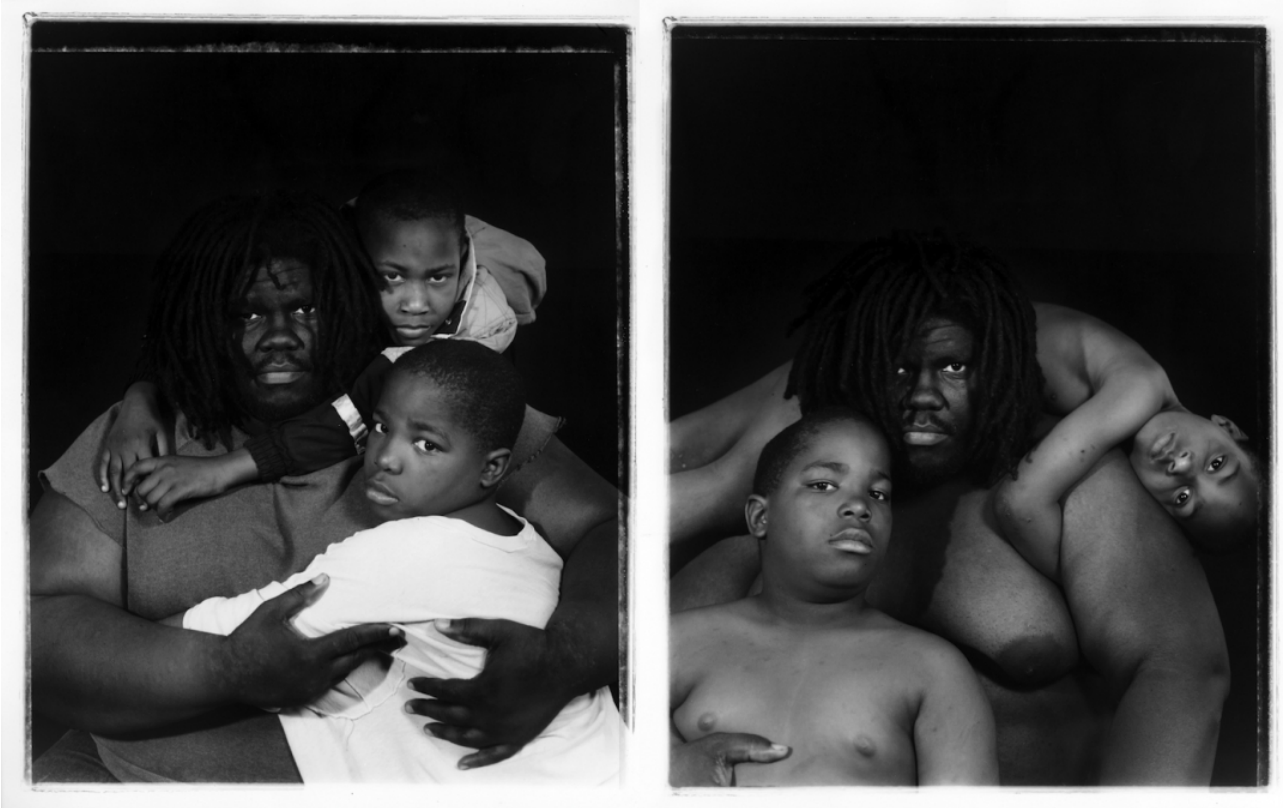


Laura Aguilar, "Plush Pony #15" (1992), gelatin silver print, 14 x 11" (photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

The show's two other sections, "Intersections" and "Belonging," mark other phases of Aguilar's career: the documentation of the Chicanx and Latinx communities in East Los Angeles in the 1980s, and the artists, families, and freedom fighters she portrayed tenderly, as if they were her friends. Nearly all of them were. Her own body is photographed in solidarity with her subjects, sometimes nude, or in repose, or with a gun in her mouth, enacting the suicidal ideation from which she's suffered. Reflection is a repeated component of Aguilar's oeuvre, even if water isn't.

In her "How Mexican Is Mexican" series (1990), a handwritten text by each woman subject flanks their image, describing their identities and proud, complex relationships to their history. Aguilar includes herself, with a statement of self-acceptance: "NO longer the questioning. Instead, room for forgiveness and the belief in possibilities. I am comfortable with who I have become. This I never thought would happen." Her "Clothed/Unclothed" series (1990-1994) showcases families of various races in all sorts of love — a father and his children, two women embracing each other. And there's Aguilar again, solo and stoic. Every photo is at once a tender visual hymn to its subject and to herself. Her camera becomes, over and over, an empathetic mirror.





Laura Aguilar, "Clothed/Unclothed #34" (1994), two gelatin silver prints, 20 x 16" each (photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)



Laura Aguilar, "In Sandy's Room" (1989), gelatin silver print, 42 x 52" (photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

Born in 1959 to a Mexican Irish mother and Mexican American father, Aguilar grew up with auditory dyslexia and suffered from mental, and now physical, health issues. Around the time she created the Latina Lesbians series, in the 1980s, she spoke of her practice in an early artist statement. "What I am trying to do," Aguilar wrote, "is to provide a better understanding of what it's like to be a Latina and a Lesbian." She added: "Within the Lesbian and Gay community of Los Angeles, people of color are yet another hidden subculture; we are present, but remain unseen."

Commissioned by a mental health conference, "Latina Lesbians" is similar in its approach to "How Mexican Is Mexican." The women are dignified and noble — not in the way that a white gaze sometimes guiltily bestows regality on indigenous or brown bodies, but rather by virtue of their powerful presence, and the gaze of someone who knows and truly sees them. Aguilar is there, too. "I'm not comfortable with the word Lesbian," she's written below her self-portrait, "but as each day goes by I'm more and more comfortable with the word LAURA."



Laura Aguilar, "Gilbert's Altar" (altar created for Gil Cuadros) (2001, photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)





Laura Aguilar, "Three Eagles Flying" (1990), three gelatin silver prints, 24 x 20" each (photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

It's a sentiment Aguilar repeats in "Untouched Landscape" (2007), a video taken while she shot the "Grounded" series (2006-2007/2016). As in her "Nature Self-Portrait" images, she fuses with the desert, this time in bright color. Her flesh is the same tone as every stone; the line of her backside continues on the surface of a boulder. Wistfully, she explains in an artist statement: "Every time the depression comes up, I can look at the artwork and say, 'you feel content there, you feel comfortable there.'"

"I'm trying to convince myself I'm not what I always thought of myself: 'I'm ugly, I'm fat, I'm not worth living,'" Aguilar continued. "I am these things, too: I am a kind person, a funny person, a compassionate person. In the photographs I'm beautiful. I'm kind to myself."

To be both marginalized and depressed — and to have the latter induced by the former — is also, in a way, to be continually reborn through the constant rediscovery of life's inexplicable value. With every series, Aguilar



embodies renewal and restorative strength. *Show and Tell's* placement in prominent institutions can't offer a balm to the longstanding invisibility of brown and queer people. (In "Untouched Landscapes," Aguilar notes that her work doesn't always sell, though she says so optimistically.) Instead, the show asserts the existence of its subjects, and the existence of Aguilar herself. When visitors stand before images of the photographer, some of them as large as five feet tall, they have to raise their gaze to see her.





Laura Aguilar, "Grounded #111" (2006), inkjet print, 14 1/2 x 15" (photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)





Laura Aguilar, "Los Illegals" (1984), gelatin silver print, 11 x 14" (photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell *continues at The Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum-Florida International University (10975 S.W. 17th Street, Miami) through June 3.*