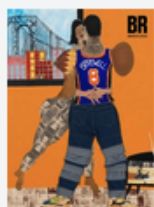


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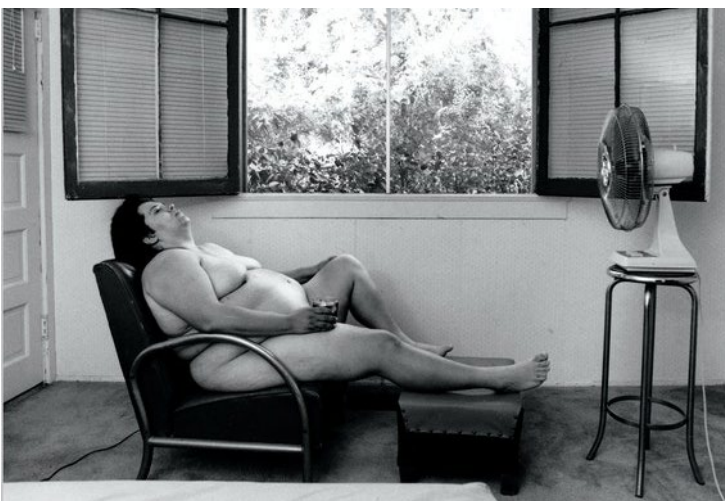
Visual arts programs and career development opportunities for learners of every age.

By Amanda Gluibizzi

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Laura Aguilar: *Show and Tell*

By [Rachel Remick](#)



Laura Aguilar, *In Sandy's Room*, 1989. Gelatin silver print, 42 x 52 inches. © Laura Aguilar / Courtesy the Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016 and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.

Within the boundaries of the frame, a naked female body reclines in repose on a chair with her feet resting on an ottoman in front of an open window. In one hand, she clutches a tumbler filled with an iced drink. Her body is oriented towards a nearby fan, as if she is waiting to catch a breeze that seems never to arrive. *In Sandy's Room* (1989–1990) is one of Laura Aguilar's (1959–2018) most well-known images—a self-portrait, a monumental nude, a rejection of the fetishization of women's bodies. It is one of Aguilar's largest single prints, more than three feet tall and four feet wide. Within her retrospective, *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, this immense work is reconfigured as one sentence within the much larger story that Aguilar's work tells about the complexity and embodied experience of identity.

Aguilar herself embodied and at times wrestled with many identities (artist, woman, woman of color, Chicano/a, queer, lesbian, Mexican, American etc.). Her self-portraits confronted, celebrated, and questioned the different ways she understood herself and the way others understood her. In a self-portrait from the "Latina Lesbians" series, *Laura* (1988), Aguilar photographs herself in a polo, shorts and a cowboy hat, smiling at the camera next to a cluttered bookshelf. Aguilar adds prints of *lotería* cards to form a border around the image. Underneath, she begins a hand-written inscription, "I'm not comfortable with the word Lesbian but as each day go's by I'm more and more comfortable with the word LAURA." The seemingly happy portrait is changed by Aguilar's

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diaristic confession about her discomfort with the label “Lesbian” and desire to simply be “LAURA,” rendering the portrait a more nuanced version of what a “Latina Lesbian” could be.

Aguilar often deployed testimony as a way complicating the viewer’s understanding of identity. The artist and her sitters were not only able to represent themselves but also their inner thoughts. In another series “How Mexican is Mexican,” Aguilar includes her sitters’ testimony and rates it mild, medium, or hot, mimicking salsa spiciness and correlating it with Mexican-ness. In *How Mexican is Mexican (Part 1C)*, the sitter writes in part, “I am a woman of color in the United States. / I am a product of the 2nd half of the 20th century. / I am a direct descendant of the Chicano movement of the 1960s.” This text, printed in the sitter’s handwriting, sits below her portrait—a spare yet profound image of her gazing directly at Aguilar’s camera. The epigraph allows the portrait to engage in conversation with the viewer; the sitter enunciates “I am” and dictates their own identity, thereby framing the image’s legibility. Though Aguilar was keenly aware of and reacted against stereotypes around the marginalization of queer and/or Chicana women, she centered her own and others’ agency and emotions within these frameworks.



Laura Aguilar, *12 Lauras*, 1993. 12 gelatin silver prints, 24 x 17 inches each. © Laura Aguilar / Courtesy the Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016 and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center.



Laura Aguilar, *Plush Pony #15*, 1992. Gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches. © Laura Aguilar / Gift of the Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016, jointly acquired by the Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

.Having seen Aguilar’s work previously exhibited in Los Angeles and San Antonio, viewing her retrospective now, on a snowy day in downtown Manhattan, I think about the magnitude of Aguilar’s impact, and how its significance very much speaks for itself. Her activism and insistence on subjectivity, seriality and complexity created a new archive of queer, Latinx women. Originally curated by Sybil Venegas, the exhibition’s emphasis on seriality also shows Aguilar’s deep investment in her communities in Los Angeles by including other series like “Plush Pony” or “Clothed/Unclothed.” “Plush Pony,” for example, documented the patrons of a working class, lesbian bar in the neighborhood of El Sereno, east of downtown Los Angeles. Elsewhere, in a small vitrine in the middle of the gallery, one can find the exhibition pamphlet for a group show of “Latin Photographers” at landmark Chicano print studio Self Help Graphics that included Aguilar. Nearby, Aguilar’s portrait of artist Harry Gamboa Jr., a member of the Chicano art collective ASCO, depicts him with his family wearing calavera face paint.

Aguilar's photographs not only created new archives and representations of herself and the communities she was a part of, but she also challenged their exclusion from so-called "fine art" institutions in Los Angeles. In *Will Work For #4* (1993), Aguilar holds a cardboard sign that says "Artist will work for Axxcess." and stands in front of a wall that reads "Gallery," locating her outside of the institution and challenging her exclusion. Aguilar even underlines the term "Artist," claiming a title which, through their exclusion, art institutions implicitly refused to bestow.

As her career progressed, Aguilar keenly focused on the body in space. *Grounded #111* (2006) shows the artist facing away from the camera, the shape of her seated figure and skin tone mimicking the large boulder behind her in the background. Other works in the series depict Aguilar and other models lying amongst rocks and desert scrub. In these images, Aguilar reifies the relation between body and landscape, emphasizing the fundamental objecthood of the body. *Grounded #111* draws a visual connection between the topographies of the body with those of the landscape, both open systems that give life and are vulnerable to change.

In *Show and Tell*, Aguilar's practice puts forth a model of understanding identity as it is experienced—physical, messy, complicated, joyful, communal, oppressive, and liberating. Aguilar's photographs provide a blueprint for a contingent, embodied understanding of identity, one that acknowledges both identity's hard edges and its muddled intersections. In this, there is no one definition for what a "Latina Lesbian" is, no one answer to the question "How Mexican is Mexican?" Instead, being is a process of becoming. In the final image in "How Mexican is Mexican" (1990), Aguilar captions her own photo "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."

Contributor

Rachel Remick

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Laura Aguilar, *Grounded #111*, 2006, Inkjet print, 14 1/2 x 15 inches. © Laura Aguilar / Gift of the Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016, jointly acquired by the Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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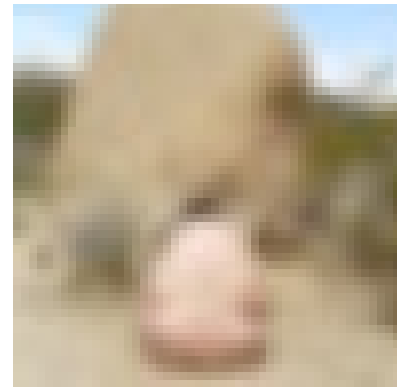
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body in space. *Grounded #111* (2006) shows the artist facing away from the camera, the shape of her seated figure and skin tone mimicking the large boulder behind her in the background. Other works in the series

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