

# Laura Aguilar: Transformative Visual Acts in Chicanx and Latinx Portraiture



Center for Comparative Studies in Race & Ethnicity

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In an [artist statement](#) from 1988, Chicana photographer Laura Aguilar asserts, “I am a mostly self-taught photographer. 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 Aguilar, despite the lack of formal training,<sup>1</sup> photography was instrumental in visualizing identity. But most importantly, it was a way of turning inward and responding to personal feelings, including living with auditory dyslexia and depression.<sup>2</sup> Best known for her nude self-portraits in desert landscapes, she was active in documenting queer Chicanx and Latinx history in Los Angeles. To date, her most notable works discussed include [In Sandy’s Room](#) (1989) and [Three Eagles Flying](#) (1990) ([acquired by the Getty Museum in 2019](#)). Today, as Aguilar continues to gain recognition, her self-portraits are redefining photography.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1.** Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying*, 1990. © Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.

For Aguilar, the body is a contested site of struggle. In her 1990 triptych, *Three Eagles Flying* (Figure 1), she stands between a U.S. and Mexican flag. She is nude and bound by a rope. Her face is entirely blindfolded by a second Mexican flag, the eagle eating the serpent consumes her face, while a U.S. flag covers her lower half, leaving her arms, breasts and torso exposed. A thick rope coils around her neck, runs between her breasts and wraps around her waist, restricts her hands and tightly grips her thighs together. The image is distressing. Aguilar’s is positioned between conflicting cultures (American and Mexican) while also being restricted and silenced by national ideologies of the U.S. and Mexico. Deborah Cullen, American art curator, writes, “Indeed, Aguilar’s image is symbolically trapped between nations, identities, expectations, and assumptions.”<sup>4</sup> This sense of “in-betweenness,” or double consciousness, visualized by Aguilar painfully demonstrates the ongoing conflict of living as a foreigner in one’s own country. Or as Antonio Viego pointedly writes, “[Aguilar] is being held hostage in the image, seemingly awaiting execution.”<sup>5</sup>

In other photographs, such as the *Latina Lesbians* series (1986–1990), Aguilar presents visually rich and affirming portraits. Active in the LGBT community of Los Angeles,<sup>6</sup> Aguilar met women working in community organizing, education, health, and law. In an effort to debunk negative stereotypes (both within and outside the Chicanx and Latinx community), she began the *Latina Lesbians* series.<sup>7</sup> In *Carla Barboza* (1987), a gender non-confirming individual sits while directly smirking at the viewer. Wearing a suit and tie, Barboza's legs are confidently crossed while their right hand holds a cigarette aloft. Even more enticing is the handwritten text beneath the image, presumably handwritten by the sitter, declaring, "I used to worry about being different. Now I realize my differences are my strengths."<sup>8</sup> The image conveys Barboza's resilience while also giving insight into their process of self-proclaimed lesbiansim.



**Figure 2.** *Laura Aguilar, Plush Pony #7, 1992.* © Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.

This resilience resonates in other works like Aguilar's *Plush Pony* series from 1992. In these images, working-class lesbian women laugh and flirt with the camera. Taken like studio portraits, against a cloth backdrop, it documents queer life at the *Plush Pony* bar, previously located on the eastside of Los Angeles.<sup>9</sup> In *Plush Pony #7* (1992) (Figure 2), the subjects are glamorous and gleamingly defiant. At left a woman coquettishly reveals her shoulder while holding the thigh of a woman at right. With a flirtatious bend of the knee, and pouty lips, we are drawn into their joyous embrace. This jubilation reflects a playful intimacy (and queer kinship) among Chicana/Latina lesbians that would frequent the *Plush Pony*. Like the portraits of the *Latina Lesbians* series, the women included in *Plush Pony* also depict an empowering visual testimony to lives not often centered in the history of art.



**Figure 3.** *Laura Aguilar, Nature Self-Portrait #2, 1996.* © Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.

Aguilar did not only illustrate the social fabric of Los Angeles with profound closeness, she also created a visual language for herself. During the mid-1990s, after years of coping with feelings of depression for being a ‘large person,’ as she described herself, she turned to self-portraiture.<sup>10</sup> In these photographs, Aguilar, at times accompanied by other female bodies, is found in the rocky desert landscape of the American Southwest.<sup>11</sup> In images like *Nature Self-Portrait #2* (1996) (Figure 3), Aguilar is resting beside large boulders that emulate her curvaceous bodily form. Facing away from the camera, and folded inward, her body emulates the cracks and dents of the boulders while the shadows casted from her body intensify the affinity of the stones before her. In a sense, she has ‘grounded’ herself in a landscape that oscillates with the ‘largeness of her own body.’<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the black and white quality of the photograph blurs the distinction between her skin and the stones. Without the use of color,<sup>13</sup> it is difficult to determine where the rocky formation ends and where her flesh begins.





**Figure 4.** *Laura Aguilar, Center #94, 2000.* © Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.

This poetic embodiment can be perceived in other self-portraits such as *Nature Self-Portrait #5* (1996). In this image, Aguilar presents an astounding interconnection with nature. She stands firmly on a fallen tree with both her feet rooted on the thick trunk. With her hands high in the air, her fingers spread in delight. Flourishing with the weeds and trees in front of her, Aguilar is in sync with the landscape. However, there is one important distinction to be made in this image: Aguilar is not reaching out for the sun, *she is embracing it*. It is a celebration. This serene magnificence can also be noticed in *Center #94* (2000) (Figure 4). In this photograph, Aguilar is bathing under the sun. Turned away from the camera, she is reposed atop a boulder with her hair undone and flowing over the surface of the stone. She basks in sheer luminous splendor, exuding an immeasurable sense of calm. Without question, Aguilar's sunny delight is enthralling.



**Figure 5.** Laura Aguilar, *Self-Portrait*, 1983). © Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016.

Recently, I have been thinking about the profound nakedness that animates Aguilar's photographs and illuminates an emotional interiority. In *Self-Portrait* (1983) (Figure 5) Aguilar is found smiling at the camera while splashing in a kiddie pool. She is holding an inflatable seal next to her while her legs stick in the air exposing the flippers on her feet. Her hair and clothes are drenched. It's a playful scene. As an art historian I am astounded by how Aguilar can capture such a sense of playfulness in a single shot. This jubilation, this sense of fullness, is to be perceived in much of her photography work. From portraits of Chicana/Latina lesbians affirming their strength to flirtatious portraits of women at a local bar to her nude self-portraits in nature, Aguilar's photographs strive for an extreme degree of 'nakedness' that is intimate while simultaneously dignifying. It is what makes her photography aesthetically and philosophically astute.<sup>14</sup>

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## Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> According to Rebecca Epstein, Assistant Director of the Chicana/o Studies Research Center at UCLA, “Aguilar is a largely self-taught photographer and video artist; however, and fittingly, it was at East Los Angeles College (ELAC), where VPAM is located, that she met the photography instructors who became her mentors and set her on her path.” See *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* (2017), page 1. Sybil Venegas, independent curator and close friend of Aguilar, furthers this point, “Aguilar is essentially self-taught: despite the courses she took at ELAC, her higher education was highly intuitive.” See *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* (2017), page 13. It has also been noted that Judy Dater and Joyce Tenneson, well-known contemporary American photographers, influenced Aguilar’s photography. Aguilar also attended several workshops with Dater and Tenneson which led her to experiment with self-portraits with her own nude body.

<sup>2</sup> Aguilar used photography as a source of personal transformation. In a short documentary, titled *Laura Aguilar: Life, the Body, Her Perspective*, she discusses the desert self-portraits as visual sources that made her feel more whole, “Every time the depression comes up, I can look at the artwork and say, ‘you feel content here, 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 [...] I am these things, too: I am a kind person, a funny person, a compassionate person. In these photographs I’m beautiful. I’m kind to myself.” View *Laura Aguilar Life, the Body, Her Perspective* (2009) directed by Michael Stone.

<sup>3</sup> Most recently, Aguilar was featured in a captivating retrospective, titled “Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell,” at the Vincent Price Art Museum while also appearing in “Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.”

<sup>4</sup> Cullen further elaborates that while the triptych may be interpreted as a sexual scene of bondage, the iconography in Aguilar’s *Three Eagles Flying* also aligns with images produced by Latinx artists in the United States in the 1980s protesting the kidnapping, torture, and humiliation that surfaced from Central and Latin America. *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* (2017), pages 24–37.

<sup>5</sup> Antonio Viego, “The Place of Gay Male Chicano Literature in Queer Chicana/o Cultural Work.” *Discourse*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1999, pp. 111–131.

<sup>6</sup> Aguilar was also an artist in residence at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in the early 1990s.

<sup>7</sup> In a 1988 artist statement from Laura Aguilar explains, “My artistic goal is to create photographic images that compassionately render the human experience, revealed through the lives of individuals in the lesbian/gay and/or persons of color communities. My work is a collaboration between the sitters and myself, intended to be viewed by a cross-cultural audience. Hopefully the universal elements in the work can be recognized by other individuals’ communities and can initiate the viewer to new experiences about gays, lesbians and people of color.”

<sup>8</sup> As Sybil Venegas, who curated the “Show and Tell” retrospective, affirms, “Aguilar used both image and text to document the women of this unrecognized community with statements of their beauty, strength, and dignity.” Sybil Venegas, *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* (2017), 15.

<sup>9</sup> The Plush Pony bar was located in the Los Angeles neighborhood of El Sereno. It was best known as the “gay girl” bar in east Los Angeles and was popular among working class Chicana and Latina lesbians. The Plush Pony was gone by 2010.

<sup>10</sup> The series includes: *Nature Self-Portrait* (1996), *Motion* (1999), *Stillness* (1999), and *Center* (2000), which later led to *Grounded* (2006–2007).

<sup>11</sup> Many of Aguilar's self-portrait series were taken at the El Malpais National Monument and Gila National Desert in New Mexico. Other photographs were taken in the desert of Joshua Tree and the Mojave Desert in California.

<sup>12</sup> Aguilar asserts, "[...] In these images I feel beautiful [...] I feel very safe and comfortable. And you know, I have that sense of myself that I never had most of my life [...] And I am much aware that I am a large person, and that I am not necessarily beautiful in the way people think of beauty [in the Western world]. But I can see my own beauty; I can feel my own presence and my own beauty. More so in the images [...] I can see the peace and part of myself that I have in that moment. And there are a lot of moments at home, and just at home, that I just don't have that." View *Laura Aguilar Life, the Body, Her Perspective* (2009) directed by Michael Stone.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that in the 2000s, Aguilar turned to color photography. This is important given that the use of color brought an entirely new dimension to her self-portrait photographs.

<sup>14</sup> As Chicana/o Studies scholar Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano poignantly writes, Aguilar's photographs provide "a bridge between 'fine art' photography and the historical role of ... photography in the self-representation of [a place and] people of color." That is to say, the social portraits are both personal and political while also aesthetically astute. Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano, "Laying It Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar," in *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman, 1997), 283.