

ART & DESIGN

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CRITIC'S PICK

She Turned Her Audacious Lens on Herself, and Shaped the Future

A powerful voice for marginalized groups, Laura Aguilar frankly and poetically portrayed Latino and lesbian communities.



Laura Aguilar in one of her candid self-portraits, “Grounded #111” (2006) at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art. She was alone, her face often hidden, her prone body aligned with and echoing landscape contours and rock formations. Laura Aguilar/Laura Aguilar Trust; Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art



By **Holland Cotter**

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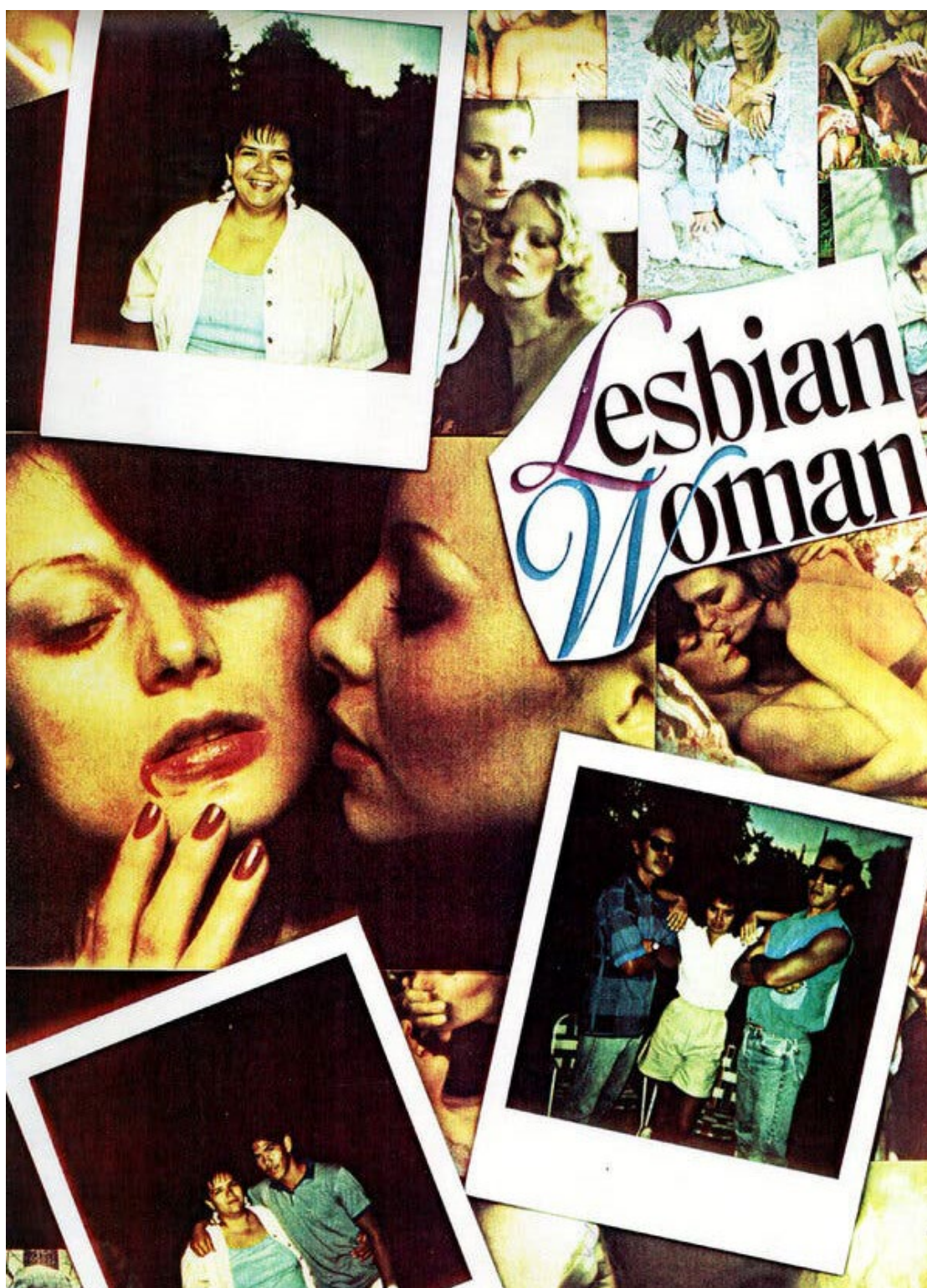
It feels good — a relief — to know that the photographer Laura Aguilar, who died in 2018, lived long enough to see her fine career survey, which opened a year earlier in her hometown Los Angeles, and has now, at last, landed in New York.

It's a movingly, sometimes discomfotingly intimate show. To know Aguilar's art is, to an unusual degree, to know her, and to care about her, and to care about what she cared about: under-the-radar, under-threat social communities and hard-won personal survival.

Titled “Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell,” the retrospective was part of [“Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA,”](#) the Getty Foundation-sponsored extravaganza in 2017 of more than 70 concurrent exhibitions in and around Los Angeles that together demonstrated the influence of Latin America and Latino art on the city. A few of the bigger, splashier entries traveled, without delay, from Los Angeles to New York, one to the Met, another to the Brooklyn Museum. It would have made sense for the Aguilar show to head East too, to the Whitney maybe, or the New Museum. But it's only getting here now, four years late, half its initial size and hosted by a small, punchy, queer-positive outlier institution, [the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in Soho](#).

Actually, it's a natural berth for Aguilar, who was a born outlier to the mainstream art world, and knew it. (She once photographed herself as a scruffy panhandler standing outside a gallery holding a hand-scrawled sign reading “Artist Will Work for Axxess.”) By the establishment standards of a few decades ago, she was of the wrong social class and ethnicity, the wrong gender and sexual persuasion, and the wrong physical shape and size —

“fat” was her own descriptor. Plus, she had psychological disabilities —dyslexia, depression — that set her apart from easy integration into any kind of mainstream at all.



“Xerox Collage #2” (1983), color photocopy. Laura Aguilar/Laura Aguilar Trust; UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Talent, courage, brains and curiosity carried her. She was able to turn potential liabilities into creative assets, in part by making herself — a large-bodied, disabled, working-class Latina lesbian — a primary subject of her art. Today, when queerness in its many layered meanings, including its embodiment in the gender-neutral term Latinx, is acknowledged and valorized, she stands as a figure who was shaping a future that is our present.

She was born in 1959 in San Gabriel, in Los Angeles County. Her father, a welder, was Mexican American; her mother's background was native Californio and Irish. The assimilationist family wanted nothing to do with El Movimiento, the Chicano civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, and she herself, although brown-skinned, did not grow up speaking Spanish. In general, due to auditory dyslexia, undiagnosed until she was in her 20s, she had lifelong difficulties with communication, a handicap that led to an early sense of isolation.

She was introduced to photography by her older brother and was largely self-taught, though as a student at East Los Angeles College she found encouraging mentors. In college she also took consciousness-raising courses in Chicano studies. Sybil Venegas, the curator of the current retrospective, was one of her teachers and introduced her to the vivacious local Chicano art scene. Aguilar's developing sense of a Chicana identity is evident in the earliest works here.



Aguilar's "At Home with the Nortres" (1990) pictures a family watching television with calavera or Day of the Dead makeup. Laura Aguilar/Laura Aguilar Trust; UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

For a photographic series begun in 1984, she documented the fantastic costumes cooked up by young East Los Angeles artists to celebrate the annual Day of the Dead. A 1990 series called “How Mexican is Mexican,” consists of photo portraits of Chicanas, including herself, annotated with handwritten statements. Hers reads: “My mother told me whatever you do in life, all people will see is the color of your skin. I spent 20 years feeling ashamed, but that was then.”

Despite her words, she was uncomfortable with a one-track identity. From 1990 also comes what is probably Aguilar’s best-known work, the triptych titled [“Three Eagles Flying.”](#) In its central panel the artist stands, nude to the waist, her head hooded in a Mexican national flag, her lower body wrapped in the United States stars-and-stripes. A thick rope snakes around her neck like a noose and ties her hands. She’s held captive by political allegiances and their binding, smothering power.



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). Laura Aguilar/ Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation and The Los Angeles County Museum of Art



“Plush Pony #15” (1992). Laura Aguilar/Laura Aguilar Trust; Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In the 1980s, Aguilar came out as gay. In 1986, she began another portrait-and-text series, “Latina Lesbians,” which reads a bit like a cultural anthropology project. In 1992, she dove directly into the gay community with on-site portraits of the clientele of a local working-class lesbian bar called the Plush Pony. The good-humored rapport among her subjects, most of them Latina, comes through. But in a catalog essay, the scholar James Estrella, who had access to Aguilar’s letters and diaries, suggests that, for various reasons, she felt emotionally conflicted about her relation to the scene. Surely her struggle with depression was a factor.

Aguilar made powerful videos about this experience. In a short 1995 piece titled “Talking About Depression 2,” she does exactly that. She addresses the camera and speaks — gently but bluntly — about her chronic feeling of despair, of waking up in the morning furious with God for keeping her alive. In a second video — hard to watch — she teases the blade of a knife against her hand while musing on an urge toward self-destruction. And in a set of photographic self-portraits titled “Don’t Tell Her Art Can’t Hurt” she puts the barrel of a gun in her mouth.

Such displays of psychological exposure could easily feel self-aggrandizing. In Aguilar’s hands, they don’t. Emotional nakedness — what another catalog writer, [Amelia Jones](#), refers to as “radical vulnerability” — becomes, for her, a means of self-acceptance. And she translates it into literal, bodily nakedness in her late work, much of which is a form of self-portraiture.



“In Sandy’s Room” (1989) is a great, witty and, by now, classic image: a new-style Venus relaxing, drink in hand, on a sultry Southern California day off. Laura Aguilar/Laura Aguilar Trust; UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

Aguilar suffered a life of body-shaming and self-shaming, which she gradually addressed and confronted through art. In one of her earliest and most widely reproduced self-portraits, titled “In Sandy’s Room” from 1989, we see her nude and half-reclining in an easy chair, facing an electric fan. It’s a great, witty and, by now, classic image: a new-style Venus — related maybe to the Willendorf Venus — relaxing, drink in hand, on a sultry Southern California day off.

She once noted that the only time she was truly comfortable with her body was when she felt it touched by a breeze or warmed by the sun outdoors, in nature. And that’s where her late nude self-images are set, many in the deserts of New Mexico and Texas, terrain associated, as now seems clear, with immigration and border-crossings.

Sometimes Aguilar poses with other women, but in the best of these pictures, meaning the most moving ones, she’s alone, her face often hidden, her prone body aligned with and echoing landscape contours and rock formations. The latest of the solo series, “Grounded” from 2006, brought color into her work, which until then had been primarily black-and-white. Also, there’s an element of sensuality — light and shadow on flesh — that hadn’t been evident before. And there’s an air of harmony, even peace. This isn’t a portrait of self-effacement exactly, but where her presence in her art had always been essentially about being apart-from, here it’s about being part-of.

Aguilar, who scrambled over the years to stay financially solvent and lived alone in a small house passed down through her family, died of diabetes and renal failure at 58. By that point, although she had sold little, she had had many shows, culminating in this one, which was organized by the [Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College](#) in collaboration with the [U.C.L.A. Chicano Studies Research Center](#).

In 2017 in Los Angeles, her retrospective was a popular hit. As American cultural demographics change, she’s entering the history books. But she still stands outside the mainstream, and probably always will. When the art world forms its pantheons, it usually goes for glam of a standard, starry kind. Aguilar doesn’t give us that. She gives us honesty, imperfection, generosity, herself. So much better.

Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell

Through June 27. Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, 26 Wooster Street, Manhattan. 212-431-2609; leslielohman.org.