



Art Reviews

# Laura Aguilar's Liberatory Gaze

Aguilar's portraits refrain from oversimplifying what it means to embrace one's culture while remaining at odds with tradition.



by Rachell Morillo

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Laura Aguilar, "Plush Pony #2" (1992), gelatin silver print, 11 x 14 inches (© Laura Aguilar; all all images courtesy the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, unless otherwise stated)

In Spanish the words for disrobing (desnudar) and unknotting (desanudar) are phonetically almost identical. Acts of nudity and untangling are similarly bound to each other in the photographic practice of the late Chicana photographer, Laura Aguilar, whose posthumous retrospective, *Show and Tell*, is now on view at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art.

<https://hyperallergic.com/635641/laura-aguilar-show-tell-review-leslie-lohman/>



*Laura Aguilar, "Armando" (1984), gelatin silver print, 14 x 11 inches (© Laura Aguilar; image courtesy the Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016 and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)*

Curated by Sybil Venegas, independent art historian, curator, and Professor Emerita of Chicana/o Studies at East Los Angeles College, the over 70 images from Aguilar's archive reveal the depths of the queer, disabled artist's decades-long commitment to clearly and truthfully picturing herself and her community.

Along the walls of Leslie-Lohman's main gallery, the photographs trace the chronology of Aguilar's artistic practice starting with xerox collages incorporating polaroids, and cyanotypes, both which speak to her love of process. These works, created in the early 80s hint at her sense of clear composition; her precision and ability to reframe dominant standards as the backdrop, not the focus, of narratives from her communities.

With the Latina Lesbian series, Aguilar goes a step further in establishing a new visual language for

exploring stories of identity: intimate, black and white portraits accompanied by handwritten reflections. Presented on an adjacent wall, *How Mexican is Mexican* (1990), employs this same style, this time with the addition of a metric that both acts as a stand-in for societal standards and subverts them. Diagrams of thermometers line the bottom of each image pointing to the range of comfort folks have with their ethnic identity and how, for Aguilar especially, this shifted situationally and over time. Aguilar's tender gaze speaks alongside not over each subject's own voice, each portrait a bold act of self-determination. These explorations highlight the perspectives of a post-Civil Rights movement generation, a generation fighting for visibility, without oversimplifying what it means to embrace one's culture while remaining at odds with tradition.





Laura Aguilar, "In Sandy's Room" (1989), gelatin silver print, 42 x 52 inches (© Laura Aguilar; image courtesy the Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016 and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

In documenting her community, Aguilar never erases herself, shifting the ethics of photographer-subject dynamics. Included alongside portraits of others are frank self-portraits and reflections which grapple with her insecurities as a queer, fat, disabled, Chicana. This self-exploration is key to Aguilar's later practice, as exemplified by her well-known self-portraits and series like *Clothed/Unclothed* (1990-94) and *Motion* (1999). She refused to ask others to open up and explore themes she was not already grappling with herself.

Walking through the gallery, I am most struck by the moments when Aguilar's writing burst through. Clear and concise, her writing is a scalpel getting at the heart of the matter. In *Latina Lesbians* she writes, "I'm not comfortable with the word Lesbian but as each day go's [sic] by I'm more and more comfortable with the word LAURA. I know some people see me as very childlike and naive. Maybe so. I am. But I will be damned if I let this part of me die." In this simple paragraph, is a full manifesto: a declaration of Aguilar's intent to be real and raw and altogether herself despite any obstacles or fear she might face.



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.

Laura Aguilar, "Don't Tell Her Art Can't Hurt (Part A)" (1993), gelatin silver print, 57 x 40 inches (© Laura Aguilar)

Viewed in conversation with earlier works, Aguilar's nude exercises exemplify her audacity as well as her refusal to shy away from what is messy. Initial nude self-portraits, like "12 Lauras)" (1993), show a Laura that is self-conscious, her nudity and the stark white background suggest a full revelation yet her poses are guarded, even insecure. Yet, through a commitment to continuing to explore these aspects of herself through photography, Aguilar arrives at her grounded, brazen *Nature Self-Portrait* series in 1996.

Straightforward in their compositions these works lean on photographic tradition to critique normative beauty standards and insist on the value of making queer, fat bodies visible.

Although it would be naive to say that photography fully healed Aguilar's relationship to herself, placing her voluptuous figure in relationship to the California landscape she and her ancestors belonged to grounds her identity in relationship to place in a way that still resonates. What I see in these self-portraits is a refusal to control a body so often regulated by society, in favor of exploring its vastness. Here, Laura is LAURA, the truest version of herself and simultaneously a mythic figure.





Laura Aguilar, "Stillness #25" (1999), gelatin silver print, 9 x 12 inches (© Laura Aguilar)

*Show and Tell* offers a rare opportunity to see the expanse of Laura Aguilar's work in a way that contextualizes the powerful self-portraits for which she is most known. I left empowered by the sense of how a photographer's gaze can turn the ordinary existence of marginalized folks into a radical rejection of oppressive normativity; with an understanding that art is most liberatory when it visualizes the fraught, fragile relationships we have with ourselves, others, and place that shape the meat of who we are.

Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell continues through June 27 at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art (26 Wooster Street, Tribeca, Manhattan). The exhibition was curated by Sybil Venegas.