

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Remembering Photographer Laura Aguilar's Empathetic, Queer Art

Aguilar, the photographer who captured people's bodies with genuine empathy, died yesterday at the age of 59.

By Monica Uszerowicz, April 26, 2018



Laura Aguilar, "12 Lauras" (1993), 12 gelatin silver prints, 24 x 17 inches each (image courtesy the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, ©Laura Aguilar)

Laura Aguilar, the photographer [who documented her subjects with frank empathy and humanism](#) — among them families, other artists, the queer Latinx and Chicanx communities of her native Los Angeles and, most tenderly, herself — died yesterday, on April 25. She was 59 years old.

Her recent retrospective at the Vincent Price Art Museum (VPAM), [Show and Tell](#), was curated by Sybil Venegas — whom Aguilar met while taking photography classes at East Los Angeles College — in conjunction with [Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA](#). In light of Aguilar's passing, *Show and Tell* has become a kind of ode to the artist. Pilar Tompkins Rivas, director at VPAM, told Hyperallergic over email:

The impact of Laura Aguilar's work is profound. During her exhibition at the Vincent Price Art Museum, we witnessed people responding with a range of emotion — they were moved to tears, or inspired and joyful. So much of her work is about the struggle for self-acceptance. It is something that we can all relate to and Laura's images validate and acknowledge that journey. By virtue of being who she was, and by documenting herself and those around her, her personal bravery resonates through her images. We are honored to have worked with her and to have played a role in supporting her work and the tremendous legacy she leaves us.

Aguilar, who was from San Gabriel, California, often attributed her interest in photography to her late brother, who showed her how to develop film when she was a high school student in the late 1970s. Born to a first-

generation Mexican-American father and a mother of Mexican and Irish heritage, Aguilar, who had auditory dyslexia, found in photography both a mode of self-expression and a way to overcome her shyness. In a recent episode of [\*No Trespassing: A Survey of Environmental Art\*](#) for KCET, Aguilar explained she “documented artists to get to know them,” immersing herself in the Chicanx and Latinx East Los Angeles art and music community.



Laura Aguilar, “In Sandy’s Room” (1989), gelatin silver print, 42 x 52 inches (image courtesy the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, © Laura Aguilar)

Every series that emerged from that time is as much a reflection of Aguilar’s subjects and friends as it is of herself. In the *Latina Lesbians* series, in which queer women and lesbians provided their own captions, Aguilar wrote of

herself, "I'm not comfortable with the word Lesbian, but as each day goes by I'm more and more comfortable with the word LAURA." She also documented her struggle with suicidal ideation, the acceptance of her own body and mind — that trajectory between bouts of depression and self-love, a narrative that never knows any linearity. In the instance of Aguilar's work, that story took on a traceable, vulnerable form, a constant rebirth of new beginnings.

In a story for KCET, ["Connected to the Land: The Work of Laura Aguilar,"](#) Venegas discusses Aguilar's triptych, "Three Eagles Flying," an image in which the artist is both flanked and covered by the Mexican and American flags, tied by rope. "This is a deeply personal piece," writes Venegas, "drawing upon conflicting emotions Aguilar experienced as a child when she lacked the ability to verbally express reactions to her family dynamics, her relationship with her mother, the loss of her grandmother, her skin color, her body weight, her limited language abilities in English and lack of Spanish, and the challenges of navigating her racial and cultural identity, as Mexican, Mexican American and American."





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

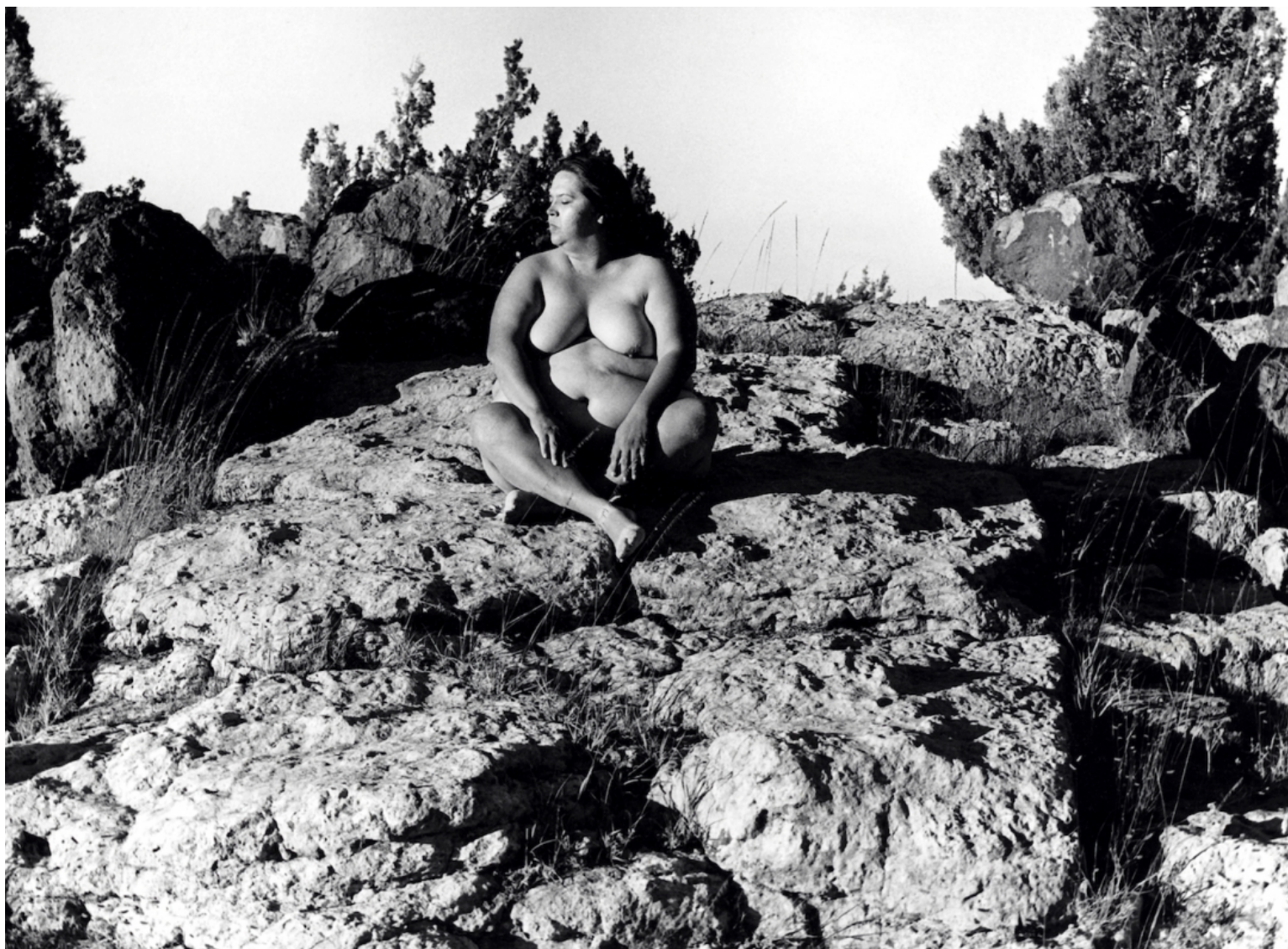
That her work has been politicized says more about the nature of the status quo than it does about Aguilar — the communities and bodies she documented have been considered atypical, and her actions therefore highly political, according only to myopic, colonial standards. She was simply revering her friends and her life — intuitively and personally exploring routes to, as Venegas explains, "negotiate and navigate her ethnic and sexual identity, her challenges with depression and auditory dyslexia and the acceptance of her large body." Jordana Pomeroy, the director at

the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum in Miami, [where \*Show and Tell\* is on view through June 3](#), refers to the exhibition as “one of the most powerful in the museum’s history...Aguilar’s legacy to the art world lies in her passion for expressing the human condition.”

*Show and Tell* traces the development of Aguilar’s career from her earliest work to the *Grounded* (2006–2007) and *Nature Self-Portrait* series (1996) — landscape photographs depicting Aguilar as a thematic element of the scene, her body part of the desert, its rocky terrain and smooth valleys. Her landscapes have the mesmerizing effect of at once exalting and normalizing what she refers to, in an accompanying video entitled “Untouched Landscape” (2007), “the untouched landscape” of her body. The physicality of her figure is as natural as the space around her, and as lovely. “I can see my own beauty and feel my own presence,” she goes on in the video. “I came to the realization that my art is important...Other people get as much from it as I do.”

Aguilar’s matriarchal lineage can be traced far and deep into the San Gabriel Valley, into the desert and mountains she went on to, in her own way, collaborate with. In the aforementioned KCET episode, Aguilar says, with the wind blowing through her hair, “My mom grew up here...my grandmother grew up here. This was my playground.” Venegas adds: “She came from a lineage of women who collected rocks...Her grandmother, Mary Salgado, was a big rock collector. Some of these rocks are out here — a lot of the rocks emulate the human form.”





Laura Aguilar, "Nature Self-Portrait #11" (1996), gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 inches (image courtesy the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, ©Laura Aguilar)

The stuff of her history is present in Aguilar's very bones; the story she wrote was wholly her own. In "Untouched Landscape," she speaks to her childlike playfulness, how she intends to guard it as closely as she protects her art. "The playfulness of being creative," she explains, "I just don't ever want to stop that part of me." It's Aguilar's sense of play that threads through the entirety of her practice, even at its most politicized: there is always, throughout, experimentation, hope, and the sense of renewal engendered by her spirit and genuine care for her subjects (herself

included). In the caption of her *Latina Lesbians* self-portrait, just after the sentence describing being comfortable with "LAURA," Aguilar added: "I know some people may see me as very childlike, naïve. Maybe so. I am. But I will be damned if I let this part of me die!"