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**About the author(s)**

is an independent curator, writer and art historian based in New York. She was the Assistant Curator of *Nivola: Sandscapes and Homemade* at Magazzino Italian Art, New York (2021; 2020); the co-curator of *A Fractured Sigh* at BravinLee Gallery, New York (2020); and the Assistant Curator of *Non-places and the Spaces in Between* at the Italian Cultural Institute, New York (2019). She was also a speaker at the 2020 CHASE Feminist Network Conference (Foundling Museum, London) and a moderator of *Reflections on Homemade: Artist Conversations*, hosted by Magazzino Italian Art (2020).

Cover image: **Fig. 8** *Nature Self-Portrait #2*, by Laura Aguilar. 1996. Gelatin silver print, 40.6 by 50.1 cm (© Laura Aguilar; courtesy Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation, Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; exh. Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York).

# Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell

by Chiara Mannarino • 16.04.2021

Despite Laura Aguilar's prolific body of work, *Show and Tell* marks the first comprehensive career retrospective of the Chicana artist.<sup>1</sup> Since its opening at the Vincent Price Art Museum, Los Angeles, in September 2017, the exhibition has travelled to three other institutions across the United States.<sup>2</sup> Its current presentation at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York, will hopefully capitalise on the momentum of recent institutional interest in Aguilar's practice.<sup>3</sup>

As the child of a Mexican American father and a mother of Mexican Californio and Irish American heritage, Aguilar lived between different cultures from the day she was born in San Gabriel in 1959. This reality, coupled with the fact that she had auditory dyslexia – a condition that affects a person's ability to process the basic sounds of language – led to an isolated childhood marked by difference. Aguilar credited her survival to her brother, who encouraged her interest in photography from a young age. Over time, this medium became the means through which Aguilar would express herself and give voice to a variety of groups, including feminist, queer, disabled and Chicano/a communities.

Entering the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, the viewer is greeted by a grid of twelve nude self-portraits, each of which intimately explores Aguilar's interior and exterior selves **FIG. 1**. In some she hides from the camera, partially obscuring her face and breasts, while in others she stares boldly into its lens, simultaneously confident, provocative and vulnerable. These strikingly honest self-representations introduce viewers to the qualities that define the entirety of Aguilar's oeuvre: a remarkable range of expression and what the art historian and feminist theorist Amelia Jones terms her 'radical vulnerability'. Jones defines this as the questioning of dominant structures of meaning and belief, specifically identifying this quality in Aguilar's work 'in relation to signifiers of race, class, and sexual identification [. . .] and in reference to herself as a subject challenged by a learning disability and mental health issues'.<sup>4</sup>

In the main exhibition space, Aguilar's work is divided into three thematic groupings. The first, 'Intersections', explores early examples of her photography, made during her time as a student at East Los Angeles College between 1981 and 1983, as well as images that speak to Aguilar's participation in the city's vibrant Chicano/a art scene of the 1980s. Several photographs, such as

*Armando* FIG. 2 and *At Home with the Nortes* FIG. 3 capture the distinct iconography and dress associated with the celebration of the Mexican holiday *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). They recall the work of the Mexican photographer Graciela Iturbide, whose documentation of *Día de los Muertos* festivities in her hometown of Mexico City similarly captures the spirit and atmosphere at the heart of Mexican culture. The curatorial decision to begin the exhibition with these images emphasizes how Aguilar's involvement in the Chicano/a community influenced the development of her practice and, especially, her interest in exploring Mexican American identity in her work.

The image on the adjacent wall – *Three Eagles Flying* FIG. 4 – is perhaps the most significant example of the artist's grappling with this concept. Composed of three gelatin silver prints, the triptych depicts Aguilar standing between the American and the Mexican flag. A visual embodiment of her cultural identity, the work explicitly positions her between two countries. Aguilar's breasts and arms are exposed while her head and hips are covered by another set of flags. A rope serves as a bridge between the two, tied tightly around her neck, wrists, and thighs. These visual details, especially the thick cord coiled like a serpent around Aguilar's body, recall the Aztec goddess Coatlicue, who is typically depicted as a figure with pendulous breasts, a skirt and belt of poisonous rattlesnakes, dismembered hands and no head. The title of Aguilar's work references the national symbol of the United States and Mexico, but it also alludes to Coatlicue's eagle-feathered headdress. Symbolising the antiquity of earth worship, the deity was often associated with governance and warfare and is considered one of the most formidable figures in Aztec art. As such, this evocation would suggest that Aguilar, too, is a political force to be reckoned with. A large-bodied, disabled, queer Chicana who struggled with depression her whole life, Aguilar – with her complex web of identities – threatened patriarchal and heteronormative structures.

Aguilar's interest in exploring the marginalised human figure, most notably herself, would continue to grow alongside her developing sexuality and political consciousness. The exhibition's next section, 'Belonging', displays collaborative series, such as *Plush Pony* FIG. 5, that indicate Aguilar's increased involvement in the Los Angeles gay and lesbian communities. Her photographs of the Plush Pony memorialise the only queer Chicana bar in Los Angeles, which has since closed due to gentrification, joining a long history of queer establishments that have faced a similar fate.<sup>5</sup> As of 2020, there are only fifteen nightlife spaces dedicated to gay and queer woman remaining across the United States.<sup>6</sup> Aguilar's photographic documentation of the joy, love, acceptance and community many found at the Plush Pony speaks to the importance of queer spaces and draws attention to the political issue of their disappearance FIG. 6. In this section, one of the most striking works is a large black-

and-white self-portrait of the artist – nude, leaning back in a chair with her feet stretched out on a footrest, revelling in a fan’s cool breeze **FIG. 7**. This image subverts gender roles perpetuated by the nuclear family model of the 1950s.<sup>7</sup> By placing her body at the centre of this photograph, Aguilar renounces the expectations associated with this patriarchal and heterosexual configuration of domestic life.

Aguilar continued to produce nude self-portraits throughout the 1990s, many of which are displayed in the exhibition’s final grouping, ‘Landscapes’. Before arriving at this concluding section, the viewer encounters three videos in which the artist candidly discusses her discomfort with her body, constant struggle with depression and suicidal thoughts. In *The Body 2* (1995), for example, Aguilar looks directly at her audience as she speaks, creating an intimate and conversational atmosphere. She explains that she began taking the self-portraits in an attempt to deal with her depression and shame about her body, and that her art encouraged and allowed for self-acceptance. At one point, she notes: ‘I shouldn’t be feeling this safe and comfortable’, demonstrating just how radically her art impacted her relationship to her body and its associated trauma.

These video works frame the significance of Aguilar’s subsequent *Nature Self-Portraits* (1996). Here, Aguilar’s naked body blends seamlessly into her surroundings – its curvature mirroring the landscape of the Southern California desert in which she resides – while its materiality remains present. In *Nature Self-Portrait #2* **FIG. 8**, for example, the outline of Aguilar’s curled pose aligns with the rugged rocks that frame her, but her skin and extended legs reveal the bodily form as foreign to this harmonious landscape.

Not only does this exhibition give long-overdue recognition to an artist whose work deserves more critical attention, it also comprehensively explores the wide variety of themes in Aguilar’s oeuvre, all of which are pertinent to our current moment. Since the beginning of the pandemic, increased isolation has caused a rise in mental illness, substance abuse and suicidal ideation; the global shift toward remote working has brought attention to issues of workplace accessibility and the need for online accommodation practices. Aguilar’s work remains relevant and radical, serving as a testament to her lasting legacy. It invites viewers to take a critical look at our contemporary state and to recognise issues that continue to persist while simultaneously encouraging us to dream of a more caring and accessible future for all.



Fig. 6 *Plush Pony #2*, by Laura Aguilar. 1992. Gelatin silver print, 27.9 by 35.6 cm. (© Laura Aguilar; courtesy Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation, Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; exh. Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York).



Fig. 7 *In Sandy's Room*, by Laura Aguilar. 1989. Gelatin silver print, 106.7 by 132.1 cm. (© Laura Aguilar; courtesy Laura Aguilar Trust of 2016, Los Angeles and UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, Los Angeles; exh. Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York).



**Fig. 8** *Nature Self-Portrait #2*, by Laura Aguilar. 1996. Gelatin silver print, 40.6 by 50.1 cm (© Laura Aguilar; courtesy Vincent Price Art Museum Foundation, Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; exh. Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York).

**Exhibitions details** Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell  
Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, New York  
6th February–27th June 2021

## Footnotes

- 1** The identifier Chicana (masculine form Chicano) is used by people of Mexican descent born in the United States. The term developed during the Chicano Movement of the 1960s and 1970s as a way to signify Mexican-American pride. It therefore exists within and invokes a specific political context.
- 2** Before it opened in New York, the exhibition travelled to the Patricia and Phillip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University (3rd March–3rd June 2018) and the National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago (22nd March–18th August 2019).  
Catalogue: *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*. Edited by Rebecca Epstein. 240 pp. incl. numerous col. + b. & w. ills. (UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, Los Angeles, 2017), \$37.55. ISBN 978-0-89551-168-3.
- 3** Following her death in April 2018 Aguilar began to receive institutional acknowledgement in the form of acquisitions. In 2019 the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, purchased thirty-five prints by Aguilar, followed by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, which in the same year acquired four of her photographs.

- 4** See A. Jones: 'Clothed/unclothed: Laura Aguilar's radical vulnerability', in Epstein, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.39–53.
- 5** For contemporary examples of such closures and their effect on the LGBTQ+ community, see A. Abraham: 'In the beginning, there were gay bars', in *Queer Intentions: A (Personal) Journey Through LGBTQ+ Culture*, London 2020, pp.82–111.
- 6** S. Marloff: 'The rise and fall of America's lesbian bars', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 21st January 2021, available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/rise-and-fall-american-lesbian-bars-180976801>, accessed 13th April 2021.
- 7** It was not until Betty Friedan challenged the flawless façade of the nuclear family and its strict division of familial roles by gender in her influential book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that the voice of the disgruntled housewife came to the fore, goaded by Friedan's radical question: 'Is this all?'



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