

In Memoriam: Maestra Laura Aguilar



Detail from Aguilar's self-portrait in Don't Tell Her Art Can't Hurt (Part A) 1993. (Laura Aguilar / UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center)

by Gabriela González

To breathe in the streets of Los Angeles is to discover a blood bond with the cultures that, while not as ancient as the land itself, were tied to it for far longer than recorded history. Being present in this place, in the here and

now and in the back when becomes an experience in truth-telling. I've fallen in love as a photographer myself with the essence of this heavy nexus. They say falling in love is like walking into a room blindfolded while waiting for a picture to arrive in your head.

Others swear the secret to love is in the journey and the yearning for life. After ten years of prolific shooting in analog and work that approximates photojournalism, I've noticed I feel tied to places that speak discreetly of their native art. My father bled through the heaviness of this city with his hands tied to the crop, working alongside the rise of the United Farm Workers union. So, it was natural for me to take that experience and generate my own metaphor.

Falling in love is then, I think, also like a grape which reacts differently to a range of external pressures and processes, transitioning itself. It's solid, yet, when pricked or crushed, stains profoundly, leaving a permanent mark on clothing and a less permanent, though still memorable, one on skin. For me, one of those allegorical tattoos was recently etched upon my soul by Laura Aguilar, a conceptual artist beyond her time, both in and out of her community.

A phenomenal photographer straight out of the East Side and a former student at East L.A. College (ELAC), she first spoke to me via her vast, powerful, and empowering body of work at a one-woman retrospective installed within ELAC's Vincent Price Art Museum (VPAM), a blockbuster

exhibition—her first-ever major museum solo show and part of the *Pacific Standard Time: Latin America/Los Angeles (PST: LA/LA)* juggernaut that took L.A. and the art world itself by storm for most of 2017 and well into this year in addition.

After a stirring introductory tour of her life's work during the exhibition opening, I was compelled to revisit the VPAM for a discussion of the brilliant photographs I'd encountered during the inaugural reception. The gallery talk featuring the artist on her work took place just a few short weeks after the show was unveiled. Needless to say, Aguilar became my instant hero.

I enter the VPAM—for only the second time in my life—just prior to her presentation. I look to the far right and spy a massive stack of exhibition catalogues, boldly bearing the words *Show and Tell*, the book's title. I run over, stop, and take a deep breath. "I'm here," I say quietly to myself. I rush over to the water fountain, skip it and take the next elevator. My journey has definitely begun. The retrospective fills two floors of the museum. On one, a significant portion of the walls are covered with her divine monochromatic, silver gelatin, nude portraits in mural form. As I stand before them, my heart leaps into my throat. I feel, somehow, that I've come home.

The show is everything I've dreamed, and I'm just getting to know her. The rooms contain selections from various portraiture series that range from diptych narratives to self-exploratory studies, some raw in their bold

depiction of her own nakedness and that of others in her circle of friends and colleagues. Others capture everyday, ever-changing moods. Mundane domestic settings become bittersweet as they are transformed by her lens into scenes that capture true essences.

Brilliantly conveying the struggle of artists from marginalized communities to gain access and the political injustice that still thwarts their efforts, her photos are sharply ironic. They also pay homage to the diversity within an already diverse community. I am proud to discover her work and see within it all-to-often invisible narratives reflecting the LGBTQ+ presence in our community. As an advocate for queer and LGBTQ rights and identity, she made her photos during a time when documentation of her specific community was virtually non-existent and therefore even more crucial.

Her work is punctuated by an ability to communicate emotions and feelings, both her own and those of her subjects, clearly, in a simple black and white print. Every piece transmits multiple levels of composition—levels she was obviously aware of, with ease. The rows of white frames adorning the lucid montage of images where she is shown holding herself or holding a gun symbolize, for me, that common thread of grief and sorrow that results when pieces of oneself get torn away, one's existence peeling away in layers as a result of marginalization.

One selection of photographs from an early period in her artistic development incorporates text by Aguilar, and I hang on to every word. I

literally feel the messages pouring out of the surface of the photos onto me as if it were inevitable, as if Laura were staring right into my core. Every one of her friends stare back at me as I gaze at them intently, their faces full of smiles and admiration for the artist behind the lens.

The show is absolutely stunning. And I feel an immediate urge to recommend embarking on and experiencing the magical stillness and bliss that is Aguilar's work. It will haunt you always and leave you a believer in constant self-discovery as a real necessity.

A room on the third floor features a video projection in which Aguilar speaks to the viewer almost directly amidst even more images depicting desert formations in viciously gorgeous comparison of her own ungainly and unruly but still vehemently beautiful body mass to the formations of rock and earth wrought by Mother Nature.

There aren't words, really, to honestly describe the beauty that melts out of these photos and the stories behind them. They seem born in her deep desire to connect with her home, the San Gabriel Valley and her ancestors, the spirits who guard the awesome terrain.

The capacity to communicate what rests at our deepest inner-spirit as sentient beings through art mediums and deliver a distinct narrative through a series of works is what makes us so amazingly human. I always like to hold on to the idea of there being a common thread that binds all of

humanity and makes us whole again. Through alternative print practices and photography, there is still an ever-growing melange of mixed media and conceptual art waiting to happen. It's all about the story and the vision behind it.

Laura Aguilar was a strong-willed woman who identified as a lesbian, gracefully pushing through with diligence, paving a personal trek through college without ever looking back. She enrolled in ELAC art classes in the '70s and made it her mission to put her heart on the line and into her work as an example for others to follow, fighting oppressive social norms that further restricted her freedom to simply be all the while.

After I exit the last gallery on the top floor of the museum and stop to take one last look before running down to meet her, I grab my own copy of the hard cover catalogue and get in line. I stand there, breaking into a cold sweat; my pen doesn't work, and my phone is dead. I do my best not to panic. It's my turn. I realize at that moment, right before putting my unopened book down, that I'm about to meet a soul sister, the one person on the planet that completely understands me and doesn't even know it.

"Hi there, what's your name?" Laura asks me with a smile and a handshake, I freeze. My brain is telling me to speak, my heart is telling me to embrace her, my body is telling me to cry from everything I'm feeling. "Hi, Ms. Laura Aguilar, I am your biggest fan. I feel like we are the same person." Laura giggles as she signs my book with a Sharpie and replies, "Oh yeah, how

so?" I nervously go on about my love for analog photography and how much I miss being in the darkroom for hours.

She smiles again, only this time, Laura touches my hand and whispers "They don't want us, and they never did. Don't ever quit. I worked hard so you can work harder and become the true legends that we are." I squeeze her hand and thank and thank her and thank her more than ten times for everything and anything I can think of. We speak of meeting again soon for her next talk and she reminds me to "Never look down, always look up."

It was the first and last time I would see her. And if I'd have known that, I would have hugged her then and never let go. Rest in Power, precious and honored Maestra Aguilar. I will always consider myself fortunate I had the opportunity to meet you in person. You are forever a queen for those of us down here in the City of Angels humbly aspiring to walk in your footsteps. You were a trailblazer for me and so many others. Your legacy illuminates us all.