

For 30 Years, East L.A. Photographer Laura Aguilar Has Been Doing Something Daring

BY EVA RECINOS

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2016 AT 10:34 A.M.



Courtesy Laura Aguilar

A A

When it comes to the history of contemporary photography, the female body often is portrayed as it's been captured by a male perspective. Maybe it seems like a trite statement at this point, but despite all the theoretical talk about the male gaze and the hierarchy of art-making (with female artists constantly in the minority), there's still power in discovering female artists who are creating their own narrative and showing us the world through their eyes.



"Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell" highlights the work of a Los Angeles native representing a sort of photography in which the brown, female body is depicted with more agency.

advertisement

For the 2017 iteration of the citywide, cross-institutional art exhibit Pacific Standard Time, the Getty Foundation [set aside \\$8.5 million](#) for 43 exhibitions centering around Latino and Latin American art. "Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles/Latin America" ("LA/LA" for short) will feature an enormous range in subject matter and style.

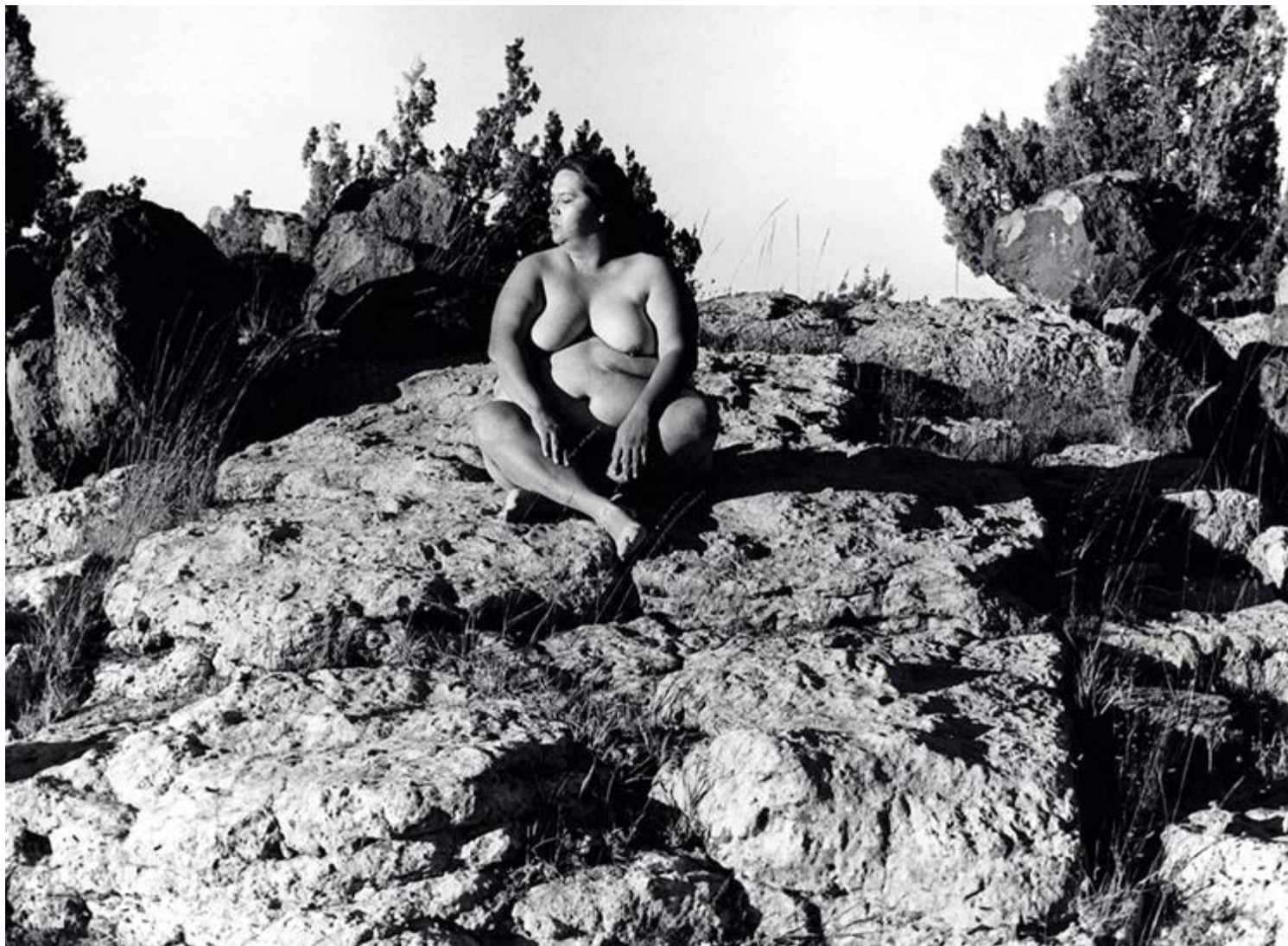
Opening next September, "Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell" at the [Vincent Price Art Museum](#) marks the first retrospective of the artist's work. Curator Sybil Venegas first got involved with the project while working on an essay for the show's catalog. Following some administrative changes within the museum, Venegas became curator of the show. The show will operate in two parts: historical works and ephemera on the second-floor gallery and video as well as large-scale works on the first-floor gallery. The show features more than three decades' worth of work from the artist.

Venegas has known Aguilar since the artist was a young photographer at East Los Angeles College. As one of Aguilar's mentors, Venegas has come to learn a lot about both Aguilar's personal life and her artistic journey.

"She's not typical in the sense that she has issues such as dyslexia — auditory dyslexia, which has impacted her entire life in terms of how she hears and how she understands. ... She did not have a typical high school and college experience," says Venegas. "In many ways, photography for Laura was a way of communicating when other forms of communication were very difficult."

Aguilar found inspiration in photographers such as Judy Dater and Joyce Tenneson. She began creating series such as the "Latina Lesbian" series, portraits with captions written by the women portrayed under each piece. Soon, her focus turned to her own body and she started going out into nature and capturing her own body within the landscape. This led to

her "Nature Self Portrait" series.



Courtesy Laura Aguilar

RELATED STORIES

[Star Montana's Photos Capture Loss, Pain and Family Secrets in East L.A.](#)

For Venegas, the photographer's decision to depict her own body proves especially significant. As a Mexican-American, Aguilar had to deal with her cultural identity while facing the challenges of coming out as a lesbian.

“Laura’s work a lot of time represents people that are marginalized and people that are oppressed or people that are invisible,” says Venegas. “Poor, large women of color — they tend to be invisible in society. Nobody sees them. They’re not represented in media, they are discriminated against because we have issues with color, we have issues with obesity. And so for a woman like herself to put herself front and center in the conversation, that’s pretty brave. That’s pretty amazing because there’s nobody out there that looks like her that’s saying anything like that.”

While Aguilar has exhibited her work internationally, staging the show in East L.A. is important, particularly because of Aguilar's connection to ELAC. She admits, though, that she had to find her strength amidst a lot of challenges during her time there.

"I feel good that it's going to be at East L.A. where I started and where I struggled," Aguilar says. "In the long run I got a lot out of East L.A., dealing with teachers who were sexist and all that — and learning to speak up for myself to men or to anyone who was trying to stop me from doing what I want to do."

But Aguilar can't help but feel distracted by one looming concern: her health.



Courtesy Laura Aguilar

“There’s a good part of me that is afraid I may not be there,” Aguilar says. “And I worked so damn hard to get there. And in this sense, to go back to a place that was not so easy to learn about photography or just being a woman that’s trying to do something different and being told, ‘But that’s not what we do.’”

advertisement

Aguilar recognizes that some things since her time in art classes have changed. But many of today's emerging

artists still face the same challenges. Just recently, Artsy [broke down the ArtReview's Power 100 list](#), a catalog of the most influential figures in the art world, 68 percent of whom were male and 70 percent of whom were white. The odds are still stacked against certain kinds of artists, but Aguilar's work is evidence that it's still possible to fight for visibility.

Venegas can't get past the "insurmountable odds" that Aguilar faced.

"She was able to transform herself through photography," Venegas says. "It's like the power of art, it's the power of the visual image, [the fact] that she's been able to create, to communicate what she's needed to communicate — that is a profound story."

Venegas also hopes that Aguilar's one story encourages others to create despite the challenges in their lives, specifically those stemming from discrimination. And she hopes that viewers will expand their opinions of others through seeing Aguilar's work.

"When you're driving down the street of East L.A., you see so many women that look like Laura," says Venegas. "And no one's going to pay attention to them. Because they're poor, because they're just walking with a bunch of kids ... people don't pay attention to those people. And so to have her and the work that she did, in particular her self-portraits — they're really beautiful. So it really challenges what is beauty. What is beautiful? What is a woman or a man, for that matter, what do we have to look like in order to be considered beautiful?"

Laura Aguilar: *Show and Tell will be on view from Sept. 16, 2017 (first part), and Dec. 9, 2017 (second part), through April 9, 2018.*

Contact:  [Eva Recinos](#) Follow:  [L.A. Weekly Arts & Culture](#)

 [L.A. Weekly Arts & Culture](#)

Read More:  

Get the Theater Newsletter

GO ▶

 [COMMENTS](#)

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

- [Confessions of a 30-Year-Old L.A. Mall Rat](#)
- [Miss Fortune: Finally, a Memoir That Isn't Self-Indulgent Trash](#)
- [A Retired Graffiti Artist Found an Interesting New Career in Gardena](#)
- [Best Places to Go Thrifting on L.A.'s Eastside](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS

- [ICT: Shipwrecked!](#)
Thu., Oct. 27, 8:00pm [TICKETS](#)
- [Los Angeles Ballet Present...](#)
Sat., Oct. 29, 7:30pm [TICKETS](#)
- [Test Primary Act](#)
Mon., Oct. 31, 8:00pm [TICKETS](#)
- ["Lend Me a Tenor"](#)
Wed., Oct. 26, 7:30pm [TICKETS](#)

POWERED BY 

POPULAR STORIES

- [How Charles Phoenix Became the Master of L.A. Nostalgia](#)
- [Wet Hot American Summer Cast Members Reunite for a...](#)
- [From Hollywood to Silicon Beach, L.A. Creatives are Plotting...](#)
- [Illustrator Jess Rotter Explains Why We Need to Embrace Boredom](#)

Sponsor Content

©2016 LA Weekly, LP. All rights reserved.