

Photographer Laura Aguilar invited viewers to take a long, hard look at all her imperfections

A career retrospective at the National Museum of Mexican Art shows an artist dealing with the complexities of her identity.

By [Jonit Behar](#)



Laura Aguilar, *Three Eagles Flying*, 1990

Laura Aguilar And Ucla Chicano Studies Research Center

“Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell”

Through 8/18: Tue-Sun 10 AM-5 PM, National Museum of Mexican Art, 1852 W. 19th, 312-738-1503, nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org

In 1996, the self-taught photographer and film artist Laura Aguilar, then in her 30s, positioned her naked body in the rocky desert landscape of southern California and took a series of self-portraits. The black-and-white series *Nature Self-Portrait* (1996) juxtaposes the land and the artist's flesh: large, brown, queer, female. It asks viewers to focus their attention on the artist's body and see the often invisible and marginal reality of someone like Aguilar. Born to a Mexican Irish mother and Mexican American father, Aguilar struggled

throughout her life with the complexity of her ethnic and sexual identity, her obesity, her auditory dyslexia, and clinical depression.

Three decades of Aguilar's work are currently on display at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Pilsen, her first retrospective. This exhibition, titled "Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell," first opened in 2017 at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Los Angeles in collaboration with the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. Aguilar passed away in April 2018 from kidney failure shortly after the exhibition closed.

Sybil Venegas, who curated the exhibition and who mentored Aguilar when she was a student in the 1980s at East Los Angeles College, writes in the exhibition catalog that "Aguilar's work forces the viewer to confront images of Mexican American female identity, particularly images of the artist herself, that are often at odds with conventional yet stereotypical notions of women in general and Latina women in particular." Even though Aguilar is a Chicana artist, Venegas observes, she does not use the iconography of most Chicana artists.

The exhibition is organized chronologically and includes mostly portraits of Aguilar's friends and family, members of her Chicana/Latina and LGBTQ communities, people of color, the obese, and, most significantly, herself. Starting from her early projects, such as the photo-and-text-based confessional series *Latina Lesbians* (1986–90) and the multipart work *How Mexican Is Mexican* (1990), Aguilar invented a format that allowed herself and others to explore complex narratives of self-identity as well as creating an opportunity for self-acceptance and cultural and political resistance.

"Aguilar's work not only appeals to the Chicana community," says Cesáreo Moreno, chief curator of the National Museum of Mexican Art. "It speaks to anyone thinking about and dealing with complex identities." He adds that "her photography has a very special honesty. She's not trying but rather doing. She is honest so you cannot help but engage with it as a viewer."

In 1990, Aguilar made her first nude, *Three Eagles Flying*; it became her most celebrated work. In this photo triptych, the artist stands between the Mexican and American flags. She is seminude: the eagle of the Mexican flag covers her face, while the U.S. stars and stripes are wrapped around her lower body, and both flags are bound to her with a rope that loops around her neck and wrists. Aguilar represents here the challenges of navigating her racial and cultural identities as Mexican, Mexican American, and American. Aguilar's mother, for example, was light-skinned and, although a fluent Spanish speaker, was frequently mistaken for a white woman, while Aguilar, who was darker-skinned, was often chastised for not speaking Spanish—a common circumstance for many third-generation Mexican Americans. This piece set the stage for her future work.

Another nude work in the exhibition that caught my attention was *Nature Self-Portrait #4* (1996). The artist reclines on her right side in front of a pool of water. Her naked body faces the camera, revealing her large breasts, stomach, and thighs and is partially reflected in the water. Her eyes are closed, but even though her pose resembles that of someone resting, we know she isn't completely relaxed because of the tense position of her left leg, which seems to be supporting her body. The way the image is cropped makes Aguilar's body seem larger and closer to the viewer, almost an invitation for us to touch her and become part of the scene with her, to see her body first and only then ask, "Who is this woman, and what is she trying to tell us?"

"I photograph the people around me—women, people of color, gays and lesbians," Aguilar told the theater artist Luis Alfaro in 1992. "I wouldn't know what to do with the perfect body. Can we get comfortable with the imperfections?"

"At the end of the 20th century," Venegas explains, "people were not ready to see a naked large brown woman because it defies the idea of the body of a beautiful woman. . . . Aguilar was an artist ahead of her time. The public was not ready to embrace it at the time. Only now she is getting the recognition and understanding she deserves." This increase in attention and respect is due, in large part, to "Show and Tell."

The exhibition also includes two short videos where Aguilar casts a critical eye upon herself. *The Body* and *Talking About Depression*, both from 1995, are confessional, extremely intimate, and honest. Aguilar talks about her emotional state, her relationship with her mother, her role as an artist, and her suicidal thoughts.

It is not a minor undertaking that the Mexican Museum of Art decided to host this exhibition. Moreno, the chief curator, says that it's important for the museum to show Aguilar's work because it aligns with the museum's mission to reflect the Mexican community. "The community is very diverse, racially, sexually, philosophically, occupationally," he explains. But Moreno also told me that there was some criticism from the community for showing nudity in the museum, especially given that many of its visitors are children on school trips and with their families. "We received several calls, even before the exhibition opened, expressing disapproval," he says. "One person called telling me that what we were doing was sinful."

When I visited the museum on a Friday morning, there were indeed several groups of students walking through the Aguilar exhibition with their teachers. Some were giggling, embarrassed by the images. Others were examining the pictures with deep concentration. The teachers guided them through the show, asking them to look at the portraits with compassion.

Laura Aguilar's work embodies this perfectly.

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