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Judithe Hernández and Patssi Valdez: One Path Two Journeys

Curated by: Thomas Canavan

Exhibition schedule: Millard Sheets Art Center at Fairplex, Pomona, California, September 1, 2017–January 28, 2018

Exhibition catalogue: Cristina Isabel Castellano González, Ramón García, Scarlet Cheng, Judithe Hernández, and Patssi Valdez, *Judithe Hernández and Patssi Valdez: One Path Two Journeys*, exh. cat. (Pomona: Millard Sheets Art Center at Fairplex, 2017). 85 pp.; 139 color illus. Paper \$19.95 (ISBN 9780692927328 0692927328)

Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell

Curated by: Sybil Venegas

Exhibition schedule: Vincent Price Art Museum, East Los Angeles College, September 16, 2017–February 10, 2018; Patricia and Philip Frost Art Museum, Florida International University, March 3, 2018–June 3, 2018

Exhibition catalogue: Rebecca Epstein, ed. with contributions by Sybil Venegas, Mei Valenzuela, Christopher A. Velasco, Deborah Cullen, Amelia Jones, James Estrella, Tracy M. Zuniga, Stefanie Snider, and Macarena Gómez-Barris, *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Vincent Price Art Museum, East Los Angeles College, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, in association with the University of Washington Press, and assistance from the Getty Foundation, 2017). 240 pp.; 171 color illus., cloth \$39.95 (ISBN 9780895511683)

Reviewed by: Charlene Villaseñor Black, Professor, Department of Art History and César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies, University of California, Los Angeles

You have to try really hard to exclude Chicana women from the history of Chicana/o art. Women artists have been present at every step of the way, from the earliest years of the Chicano Movement, as witnessed by muralists Judith F. Baca, Judithe Hernández, and Las Mujeres Muralistas, or key printmakers such as Yolanda López or Ester Hernández. Women were involved in important collectives, including Los Four, the Royal Chicano Air Force, and Asco.¹ Yet women artists are underrepresented in museum exhibitions and catalogues. In the case of the historic *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation* exhibition that originated

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in 1990 at UCLA, women artists were sequestered into their own separate but unequal section, Feminist Visions, called the “Women’s Closet” by critic Alicia Gaspar de Alba.² For these reasons, the 2017/18 shows reviewed here from the Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA project are particularly noteworthy—the joint exhibition of Judithe Hernández and Patssi Valdez at the Millard Sheets Art Gallery in Pomona and the important career retrospective of Laura Aguilar at the Vincent Price Art Museum in East Los Angeles. Only one other of the eighty-plus Pacific Standard Time exhibitions focused solely on a Chicana artist: *The Great Wall of Los Angeles: Judith F. Baca’s Experimentations in Collaboration and Concrete*, curated by Mario Ontiveros at California State University, Northridge Art Galleries.

Artists Hernández and Valdez were born only three years apart, in 1948 and 1951 respectively. Although their artistic productions are quite visually distinct, they have much in common: both are from East LA; both were active participants in the Chicano Movement; and both were members of influential artist collectives (Los Four and Asco). They are the most important women artists to emerge from East LA during El Movimiento (the Chicano civil rights movement), and their parallel paths explain the exhibition subtitle, *One Path Two Journeys*. While the road each traveled was similar, their artwork and personal experiences exhibit vivid contrasts, as demonstrated by this display of sixty-one of their works, from the 1980s to the present. The layout of the exhibition by curator Thomas Canavan highlighted their divergent careers. He arranged their work in three rooms (4,400 square feet), each split in half, with Hernández’s work on one side and Valdez’s on the other.

A comprehensive range of Hernández’s art since the 1980s was on display, from experimental early work to work that consciously references Mexican culture and her signature depictions of women, especially powerful nudes. Employing pastel and other media on paper, Hernández’s works are lush and beautiful, her drawing technique breathtaking, the colors and shading sumptuous. Several of the most moving representations are homages to the often nameless victims of the Juárez murders, or more properly, feminicides (*feminicidios*), the killing of hundreds of women and girls along the Juárez-El Paso border, many of whom were raped or tortured, their mutilated bodies left in the desert. Two of Hernández’s largest, most impactful works in this show reference feminicide.



Fig. 1. Judithe Hernández, *La Santa Desconocida*, 2017. Pastel on paper, 30 x 88 in. Private collection

In *La Santa Desconocida* of 2017 (fig. 1), Hernández presents the victim’s lifeless body as a beautiful sacrifice, honoring her in death. Her still, purple body reclines in a moonlit desert landscape; her floral huipil references the indigenous cultures of southern Mexico, the area from which many of the Juárez victims come, leaving family behind to work at the

maquiladoras on the border. Despite her peaceful face, Hernández hints at past violence and the passage of time. The stiffly upraised right hand of the figure is stretched out as if in rigor mortis, or perhaps poised in defense; the shredded bottom of her skirt blows in the wind. Red ribbons, visible in several of Hernández's works on this theme, wind around her neck and body. On the left, a sinister reference to the source of the violence is seen—a red hand, an allusion to the horrific strangulation suffered by this young woman.

In another monumental work, Hernández puts feminicide into historical context. In *Juárez Quinceañera* of 2017, a young girl dressed in an elaborate dress for her fifteenth birthday, but with a Mayan mask for a face, is posed against a pink wall marred by bloody handprints. In an interview with Ramón García, Hernández linked the Juárez tragedy to the series of calamities in the Americas since the conquest. In this way, Hernández traces the misogyny motivating these murders back to the colonial era, to the imposition of European attitudes toward women. In other efforts, Hernández explicitly points to organized religion as the explanation for the shocking feminicides, as in *La Virgen de las Rosas Sangrientas* (2009), *The Judgment of Eve* (2010), and *The Beginning of Sin* (2010).

Many works by Hernández feature female figures wearing masks, and the mask seems a perfect metaphor for her art. We see masks subtly stitched onto faces, *luchadora* disguises, or the Mayan mask referenced above. In Hernández's work, there is always something hidden from view, a mystery that forces the viewer into an active dialogue, that forces us to question, to think, to unmask, in order to complete the reading of the work—and it is this viewer engagement that is at the heart of her feminist practice. Through her seductive concealment, in addition to persuasive manipulations of line, color, light, and shade, Hernández powerfully communicates with her viewers.



Fig. 2. Patssi Valdez, *Farewell*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 49 x 36 in., Collection of Dr. Lane Igoudin and Mr. Jonathan Clark

Patssi Valdez's paintings of magical interiors, usually devoid of figures, are well represented in the exhibition, in addition to her collages, photographs, and installation art. Possessing a kind of manic, surrealistic quality, her interiors are daring in color, line, and composition; their jagged lines and tilted perspective unsettle the viewer. Although their colors are bright, even cheerful, something is off in these scenes, the drapery folds are too restless, the objets d'art about to animate. These disorientations pull in the viewer.

In *Esperanza's Vitrine* of 2005, a china cupboard is filled with assorted Virgin Mary figures. Flanked by two chairs, a restless broom moves on its own, poised in front of the vitrine. Other scenes seem even more surreal, as in Valdez's *Farewell* (2006; fig. 2), in which a red table, red chairs, and wineglasses hover against the green background of parallel curving lines, creating an obsessive energy. A spilled glass of red wine in the foreground and a lone woman in the background point to solitude and loss. In *Tangerine Sunday* of 2004 (Colburn Family Collection), enigmatic

umbrellas dance into a comfortable room from an exterior garden; in *Stormy Skies* of 2015 (Collection of Castulo de la Rocha), floating umbrellas punctuate a sea of swirly waters.

Other works by Valdez specifically reference Mexican culture. Several allude to ancient Mexico, such as *The Aztec Goddess* (2017) and *The Hummingbird Queen* (2017). Both depict single glamorous female figures in outfits that call to mind the artist's own dazzling sense of style. In *Mexican Tchotchkes* of 2014 (Collection of Nely Galan), a variety of culturally coded objects—a sombrero, the sacred heart, a doll from Michoacán—are suspended against a dynamic turquoise background of swirling and parallel lines. Valdez's consideration of the birth of Mexico as a hybrid culture is reflected in *Pan Mexicano (A Merging of Two Cultures)* of 2017 (Collection of Castulo de la Rocha), a still life table laden with *pan dulce* (Mexican sweet bread) flanked by a Spanish girl on the left and an indigenous girl in yellow on the right, a self-referential allusion to Valdez's famous work of 1995, *The Little Girl in the Yellow Dress* (Cheech Marín Collection).

In the small catalogue accompanying the exhibition, poet and author Ramón García connects the two artists' work by describing them both as surrealistic.³ Both employ strategies to suggest the uncanny, although in stylistically distinct manners. Valdez's paintings seem more personal and introspective, as they manifest an agitated energy, allowing us a glance into her inner world. Hernández's are more tranquil, a result of her expert nudes and luxurious handling of pastel. Yet, their politics are more explicit. Although less openly political, Valdez's work suggests a radical notion: that Chicanas can make art that is personal, that is not overtly or obviously always about identity or politics. And that in and of itself is a radical political statement. Happily, this exhibition was one of the best attended of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA, due to its location on the LA County fairgrounds, with at least eighty-five thousand visitors viewing the exhibition.⁴

Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell was also well attended, with the highest attendance of any fall show to date at the Vincent Price Art Museum (VPAM).⁵ It recently traveled to The Frost Art Museum at Florida International University in Miami. This large career retrospective of 134 works by Aguilar from the 1980s to the 2000s, exhibited in more than 4,820 square feet on two floors, was the effort of guest curator Sybil Venegas, previously a professor at East LA College, where she taught Aguilar. She was also the artist's close personal friend. Venegas's profound understanding of Aguilar, both artistically and personally, comes through in the exhibition, which is beautifully and thoughtfully curated.

Aguilar's artworks were arranged both chronologically and thematically, giving viewers an expansive overview. The first room featured several powerful early series: *How Mexican Is Mexican*, *Will Work for Axxess*, and Aguilar's early portraits of East Los Angeles cultural producers, including images of them commemorating *Día de los Muertos*. Added architectural elements divided and punctuated the space to guide the viewer experience. Aguilar's best-known work, *Three Eagles Flying* of 1990, was featured on its own wall. The large image announced major themes that Aguilar contemplated throughout her career. We see Aguilar's half-nude, bound body positioned between the flags of the United States and Mexico. Another Mexican flag covers her head; a US flag is wrapped around her lower body; and a thick rope constricts her neck and wrists, wrapping around her torso and thighs. Bound by and within these two cultures, Aguilar is restrained and silenced—a powerful visualization of being in between cultures. The other key work in this gallery was Aguilar's first nude self-portrait, *In Sandy's Room* of 1989, in which we see the artist reclining in a vinyl chair, an iced drink on her thigh, as a fan blows cool air on her resting, unclothed

body. The first in a career-long meditation on the nude, Aguilar's initial photograph insists on the normalcy of her large body and her right to be seen and photographed. Other key series in this room include Aguilar's *Latina Lesbians* of 1986–1990 and the related *Plush Pony* series of 1992. The first features living portraits of prominent Latina lesbians, while the second portrays an East LA working-class lesbian bar. The final theme Aguilar addresses in this section is the difficulty of being an artist in an art world dominated by whiteness. The curator announces the major themes of Aguilar's early career: the complexities of Mexican cultural identity, the body, and being a Latina lesbian.



Fig. 3. Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #14*, 1996, gelatin silver print, 16 x 20 in. Photo ©Laura Aguilar, courtesy of the artist and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

The exhibition continued on the third floor of VPAM, with Aguilar's more recent work. Her most famous nude self-portraits are here, the ones that feature her and her collaborators in landscape settings, such as *Nature Self-Portrait* (1996), *Motion* (1999), and *Grounded* (2006–7). The power of these images is based in their manipulation of conventions governing the depiction of the reclining nude female body in nature, a subject that dates back to the Venetian Renaissance, when it was formulated by artists Giorgione and Titian. The distinguished Renaissance art historian Rona Goffen argued that these images originally encoded explicit sexual content, because the outdoors was associated with lovemaking at the time, but awareness of this meaning has dimmed over the centuries.⁶ Goffen's reading of the reclining female nude in the landscape is central for understanding Aguilar's radical portrayals. While there has been some commentary on Aguilar's obesity, one critic describing it as an example of her "radical vulnerability,"⁷ insufficient attention has been paid to the erotic potential of her nude female subjects. While teaching about Aguilar's photographs in a seminar in Chicana/o Studies at UCLA in the spring of 2017, I was struck by graduate student Dafne Luna's powerful and discerning comment on *Nature Self-Portrait #4* (1996) by Aguilar. While I discussed the history of the reclining pose, students were quick to point out the monumentality of Aguilar's body, which resembled a

natural feature of the landscape. Luna redirected our conversation: “How powerful it is to see a body like hers eroticized,” she interjected, “particularly for people whom society tells they don’t deserve love because of their weight, sexual orientation, or skin color.” In other words, Aguilar brought to visibility the erotic life of people who are fat, queer, and brown.

The importance of the Laura Aguilar retrospective cannot be overstated. It takes on poignancy given the artist’s recent death in April 2018. The first full career survey of her work, and surprisingly only her second solo exhibition in a museum, the exhibition gives visibility to a major US Chicana photographer.⁸ Her images have often been dismissed as personal (a common critique of much feminist art), but this exhibition makes evident their radical nature. She expands the canon of the nude body (a major genre in Western art), chronicles the early Chicano movement in East LA, and addresses the difficulties of creating art as a person of color in North America. At the same time, the viewer is struck by the sheer quality and quantity of her art, and her precision as a photographer. Her sense of humor is another revelation.⁹ Even the title of the exhibition, *Show and Tell*, is sly and amusing, yet far-reaching in its implications for her work, work that draws attention to the politics of being a Chicana artist, a lesbian artist, a working-class artist, and a woman of size.

If I had to choose one photograph from the exhibition to represent the message of the show, it would be Aguilar’s *Nature Self-Portrait #14*, in which the artist reclines alongside a pool of water, gazing into her reflection, a contemporary Chicana Narcissus. She sees herself, in all her humanity and difference, and asks the viewer to see her, too. The time has come for more career retrospectives of artists such as Aguilar, as well as additional exhibitions that make visible the history of LGBTQ artists and cultural producers. This seems like the logical legacy of the third iteration of Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA.

Notes

¹ See Ella Maria Diaz, “Performing *La Mujer Nueva*,” chapter two in *Flying Under the Radar with the Royal Chicano Air Force: Mapping a Chicano/a Art History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 84–138.

² Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *Chicano Art Inside/Outside the Master’s House: Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 120.

³ Ramón García, “A Forest of Symbols: The Persistence of Surrealism,” in *Judithe Hernández and Patssi Valdez: One Path Two Journeys* (Pomona: Millard Sheets Art Center at Fairplex, 2017), 10–11.

⁴ See <https://www.dailybulletin.com/2017/10/27/audience-response-to-exhibit-at-fairplex-millard-sheets-art-center-reflects-publics-desire-for-fine-art-artist-says>.

⁵ There were 5,468 attendees according to Joseph Valencia of the Vincent Price Art Museum. Joseph Valencia to the author, March 21 and March 28, 2018.

⁶ See Rona Goffen, “Ladies and other Beautiful Women,” chapter two in *Titian’s Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 45–105.

⁷ See Amelia Jones, “Clothed/Unclotted: Laura Aguilar’s Radical Vulnerability,” in Rebecca Epstein, ed., *Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell* (Los Angeles: Vincent Price Art Museum, East Los Angeles College, UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press in association with the University of Washington Press: 2017), 39.

⁸ See Pilar Tompkins Rivas, “Foreword,” and Epstein, “Introduction,” in Epstein, *Laura Aguilar*, vii, 1.

⁹ See Chon A. Noriega, “Foreword,” on Aguilar’s “playfulness as an artist” in Epstein, *Laura Aguilar*, ix.