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by Chon A. Noriega

# LAURA AGUILAR

## CLOTHED UNCLOTHED

### CHALLENGING NORMATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF THE BODY



Untouched Landscape © Laura Aguilar

**LAURA AGUILAR** is a photographer whose work spans over two decades and who also has made tentative, yet significant, forays into video.

Her photography deals mostly with portraiture, documenting social groups and identities that remain invisible in mainstream culture: Latina lesbians, black couples, obese people. This work shares certain similarities with the provocative portraits by Jock Sturges and Sally Mann, especially in terms of the high degree of collaboration involved. But Aguilar collaborates with subjects who are her peers so that her work is not about power differentials between photographer and subject as is often, if implicitly, the case with

Sturges, Mann, and the social documentary tradition itself.

In the 1990s, Aguilar received increasing critical attention, especially insofar as her works allow one to interrelate the gay/lesbian and Chicano communities. In particular, her nude self-portraiture challenged normative conceptions of the body, inserting her figure into various aesthetic frameworks: large-scale installation, photographic series with an almost sculptural attention to flesh as form, iconic and ironic self-portraiture, and

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landscape photography (in which her figure becomes isomorphic with rock outcroppings in the Southwestern desert). This work is bold, yet normalizing, iconoclastic, yet stunningly beautiful.

More than anything, Aguilar's work foregrounds issues of class, literacy, and the body; and, in some ways, these issues are more fundamental to her work than specific cultural identities, since she does not seek to define an essential or authentic core to her photographic subjects. Aguilar's work derives from or is motivated by her lifelong experiences as working class, dyslexic, obese, and lonely. For her, both ethnic and sexual self-identifications developed later in adulthood and are therefore expressed differently in her work. In this sense, Aguilar's work marks a shift in the expression of gender, racial, and sexual "minorities" away from the cultural politics that emerged during the civil rights era and then took shape in subsequent decades. But toward what? If she rejects cultural nationalism and identity politics, as well as the search for an authentic and fixed essence, she does not reject the underlying values of social equity and conviviality. In this way, she places an emphasis on social and physical presence through portraiture as a way to envision the interpersonal relation-

ships that make all communities, whether local or national, defined by political allegiance or corporeal belonging, inherently diverse, complex, and unstable.

In the mid 1990s, Aguilar turned to Hi-8 video, producing three *testimonios* in which she discusses her emotional state, dyslexia, and obesity in relationship to her art.<sup>1</sup> These works—*Depression* (10 minutes), *Knife* (5 minutes), and *The Body* (7 minutes)—reveal a sophisticated use of the medium, suggesting a possible new artistic direction that allows Aguilar to add a very revealing oral text to her striking self-portraiture, thereby circumventing her own dyslexia. What is most apparent about the videos, however, is that they are insistently autobiographical rather than testimonial per se. That is the videos reference an isolated "self" whose "home" is a dyslexic and obese body racked with severe pain and depression that cuts her off from "society." Her condition does not constitute a community for whom she speaks; rather, her assertion of self implies a community within which she can be seen despite her seemingly abject states: naked, obese, racially other, sexually other, and unable to communicate easily through writing. It is in this context, then, that she speaks of the "right" to exist and to find

happiness within a body at odds with the societal norms that determine participation within the public sphere. But while her rights echo those of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” Aguilar articulates these within her own body and outside the body politic. She does not claim special protected status as a “victim”; instead she insistently narrates her condition through the trope of a speaking self.

Her conception of the social remains focused on the act of being seen, unclothed. In *The Body*, Aguilar stands naked before the camera, but, unlike the other videos, she is quite animated, offering a rather coy smile. At the end of a shot, when she subtly signals for the camera to stop, we realize that her smile is not only to the camera and implied viewer but also to a person behind the viewfinder. It is here in the one-to-one exchange between the autobiographical self and the interlocutor that Aguilar re-constitutes “community”—not as something to be represented to an outside audience, but as a space within which to represent the self. As in her photographic series, community becomes strategic rather than essential, a necessary backdrop against which the self can disrobe. As Aguilar concludes in *The Body*, “through my art I have

been able to find some comfort and peace with my body.” What these videos suggest is that this process is both personal and political, not as an identity politics, nor even as a question of public policy, but as an “ethics of identity” in which art mediates between the speaking subject and other people.<sup>2</sup> This mediation is no simple matter that takes place within a one-to-one communication model, but rather it is an “unworking” by which “singular beings share their limits, share each other on their limits.”<sup>3</sup> Who these other people are and what Aguilar wants from them remains within the realm of Malinche’s secrets. But they can be seen.



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*Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* (Minnesota, 2000). Currently, he is an Adjunct Curator of Latino and Chicano Art at LACMA, where the landmark exhibition, “Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement,” is currently

underway (<http://www.lacma.org/art/ExhibPhantom.aspx>).

## notes

1. I discuss the concept of the *testimonio* in Chicano video art in “Talking Heads, Body Politic: The Plural Self of Chicano Video,” *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 207–228.
2. The phrase comes from Nancy K. Miller, “Facts, Pacts, Acts,” *Profession* 92 (1992): 13.
3. Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Inoperative Community,” in *Participation*, ed. Claire Bishop (MIT Press, 2006), 69. Nancy is often invoked as proof that “community” is a chimera, a position that opens the door to an implied Cartesian ontology (communities do not exist, but thought does); but his position is actually more nuanced, moving back and forth between the impossible necessity of both community and subjectivity: “We must never stop writing, or letting the singular outline of our being-in-common expose itself” (68).

## links

- [http://www.enfoco.org/index.php/photographers/photographer/aguilar\\_laura/](http://www.enfoco.org/index.php/photographers/photographer/aguilar_laura/)  
<http://www.amrousseau.com/articles/photometro10.html>  
<http://www.laweekly.com/news/features/the-natural/3259/>