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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/59t9691h>

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**Publication Date**

2008-05-01

# the private and the public in the photography of laura aguilar

BY PATRICIA VALLADOLID

**W**ITHOUT WORDS Laura Aguilar's photographs have broken a big silence across marginalized communities. The images that she produces represent a community that has been invisible in the arts, not only queer, brown, and female, but also large. The ability to claim identity is empowerment, and although Aguilar does not seek to define Chicana lesbian art, she does challenge viewers to reconceptualize constructs of race, class, gender, and sexuality, particularly patriarchal constructs

of art that seek to romanticize or idealize the female form. Laura Aguilar's photographs of female nude forms in the natural landscape represent a vision of the female body that directly shocks the viewer's expectations and desires. It is through these aesthetic manipulations that Aguilar achieves self-acceptance of her own body, a body may not be considered "beautiful" or "fine art" because of how it opposes a Western aesthetic of "feminine beauty."

Born in 1959 in San Gabriel, California, Aguilar continues



In Sandy's Room, 1989, © Laura Aguilar

to live and work in the San Gabriel Valley. She attended the photography program at East Los Angeles Community College and continued her studies with “The Friends of Photography Workshop” and “Santa Fe Photographic Workshop.” Her work has been exhibited in the Aperto section of the Venice Biennale (1993), the Los Angeles City Hall Bridge Gallery, the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles Photography Center, Women’s Center Gallery at UCSB, Los Angeles’s Self Help Graphics, and the University of Illinois in Chicago. Aguilar considers herself a primarily self-taught photographer, and her work focuses on self- portraiture and portraits of her extended family and friends.

Aguilar’s photography moves beyond and out of the conception of portraiture into a place that is fascinating and creative, a place that creates strength not only for Laura but also for individuals

who know what it is to be the Other. As a Chicana feminist I too identify with Chicana lesbians and assume this identity as my own. Being exposed to Aguilar’s images has empowered me and reinforced my love for myself and my community, which has always been marginalized due to our race, class, gender, and sexuality. As a plus-size Chicana, I can relate to the struggle of acceptance for the non-hetero-normative female body. Mine is a brown curvy body, which is more than just *gordita*; it is human and real; I feel, I love, and I desire a voice and a place of my own, what Emma Pérez calls my own “*sitio y lengua*.”

By using her own body as an example of what it feels to be an outcast, Aguilar creates a *sitio y lengua* for the Chicana lesbian. Her vulnerable large body, I am sure, has been targeted by many as disgusting or not worthy of being classified as art. As a viewer of these representations of the vulnerable Chicana body, I feel as though Aguilar is pushing

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me through the barriers that socialize my own sense of self. Unlike supermodels who are currently seen in society as prototypes of feminine beauty, a fat woman is seen as an aberration, something ugly, or embarrassing. Aguilar's images subvert social expectations of female beauty and make the large Chicana lesbian body the center of discourse, thereby decentering the dominant perception of what is beautiful or acceptable in the female form.

One photo in particular shows Aguilar's comfort with her own body. *In Sandy's Room* (1989) is a self-portrait reclining in a chair in front of a fan and an open window. As soon as I looked at this photo, even on a small scale, I had to take a second look. I felt myself engaging in a personal conversation with this piece and was able to connect on the premise of public acceptance. As a plus-size Chicana, I wondered at the feelings and challenges

Aguilar must have experienced by taking this photo. Although I am comfortable in my body, society's constant rejection of anything other than size 2 constantly reminds me how I don't fit in. In Aguilar's portrait a sense of openness and comfort is conveyed by the way her body is relaxed and projects the idea of fearlessness and a sense of acceptance by occupying an open space, something that is even more obvious in her landscape photographs where Laura's naked form becomes part of the natural environment. Going back to her naked body reclining in front of the fan, I was almost able to see my own body open and ready to be seen.

I have gained a sense of self-acceptance by viewing Aguilar's work; her images allow me to feel the vulnerability of exposure, the daily struggle I engage in when I place my private body in the public space. Aguilar's photographs had the power to

move me as a viewer. I was able to connect and feel a part of a community that will understand me and not exclude me because of my size, the color of my skin, or the way that I speak. For the first time I was able to actually see the way Chicana lesbians challenge notions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. With all of the writings of Chicana lesbians that I've been reading so far this quarter in Professor Alicia Gaspar de Alba's course on "Chicana Lesbian Literature," I feel that Laura Aguilar's work is an extension of the theories and ideologies of writers like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and Emma Pérez, how they all explore the same concepts of home, desire, sexuality, identity, and consciousness. More than anything, Aguilar's work helps me to see how the personal is political.

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