

# Laura Aguilar, she flew...



*Three Eagles Flying* (1990) was part of the Esperanza's 1996 exhibit *Engendros*, a photo exhibit about gender & sexuality

by Penny Boyer

Laura Aguilar



Two names--first and last--fit chant-like in the mouth. One sounds like the inside of the other. The latter starts the first. La-Ra-Ah-Ghee-La-Ra-Ah-Ghee-La-Ra-Ah-Ghee-La-Ra.

An incantation. Conjuring the primordial. Coming up from stones. Desolation. Isolation. Bodies fallen but floating, heavy though heavenly. Muted *arroyos*. *Seco*. Sepia tones turned, tuned black and white. Mumbblings rumbling rumbled earth.

She found her bird inside the flag, then wore it. That's how she flew.

Laura Aguilar came to San Antonio several times. First to Esperanza. I knew her name from artist rosters I remember from working in Washington, DC at the National Endowment for the Arts on the first funding cycle for an Inter-Arts category called Artist Projects: New Forms. If only Jesse Helms knew then to look there for 'trouble,' he might have found it in Laura Aguilar: a Xicana queer taking pix of other California queers of color when she wasn't defining and outrageously glorifying the act of 'selfie' long before cell phones. Her self-portraits are magnificent, majestic landscapes that in San Antonio extended into group shots in wildernesses where the subjects come in and out of focus like mirages meant to confuse. Those works were for Artpace, her residency there, where she was called difficult by staff, but her show stunned..

Whenever she came here, she bathed in my tub. She loved my tub. It's claw-footed and longer than average and she'd soak for a long time, a pleasure she considered rare. When she worked at Esperanza she stayed at my house as part of an artist-run project I ran with Michael Martinez called VāN (as in vein or ARTery, vain as in vanity, or vane as in which way the cultural winds are blowing or *ven*

as in Spanish for 'they come' or 'they see' or even an artist-driven van). Even when she came to town and didn't stay at my house—like when she was in residence at Artpace—she'd visit my tub. She quizzed me repeatedly on the fact that I didn't know her and that I'd take her, a stranger, in and befriend her and provide for her—something I didn't think twice about at the time (meaning, I guess, I think a little more about that these days than I did which is sorta sad).

She said from the start that I reminded her of her friend Sandy. Sandy from one of her most iconic photos, *In Sandy's Room* (1989). In the image, Laura reclines naked in a midcentury chair beneath windows flung wide open, left leg bent upward, both feet on an ottoman, one hand holding a cup, the other on the bent leg; an electrical fan raised on three-legged stand or stool a foot from her feet is aimed right at her. This image irked right-wingers like local writer Roddy Stinson whose attacks of the photo and Laura were among the incidents that led to the Esperanza's historic de-funding in 1997.

Ironically, Sandy (Laura's friend) moved to San Antonio in the 2000s and we met and were remote friends—she lived on the far north side of town and I live just south of downtown—but she moved back to California though far from Long Beach where Laura lived. She didn't get to see Laura again during those last days when they ended dialysis and put her in hospice. A trip was planned, but not in time. Sandy was who let me know Laura died.

When Laura was at Artpace, I loaned her a book I treasured and after I handed it to her I wondered if I'd get it back. It's a German book of photographs of women wearing very little, some none, in calisthenic poses. It dates from during World War II and it's stamped indicating its having passed a censorship standard by the United States as a book about health and fitness. It's intriguing and I knew it would appeal to Laura's interest in the female

# Laura Aguilar



Laura blowing bubbles during a panel discussion at the Esperanza's exhibit, "motions" & "center" in 2003

form and corporeality. She also borrowed during her Artpace residency a summer straw hat, vintage with flowers, something of a little girl's hat, wide-brimmed and happy-making. While Artpace made sure I got the book back, I never saw the hat again. When I saw Laura's Facebook page during her dying days, there are pictures of her (selfies?) in big white-framed sunglasses that give her an endearing insect-like look. I think the hat held that same sort of fun for her. It lightened her. It lit her up. A photographer needs light.

I remember on one of her visits to San Antonio driving her to every edge of town visiting cemeteries—she was seeking angels to shoot. She found her favorites on the Southside, though we scoured Eastside and Westside ones as well. Angels. Aguilar.

Once my partner and I visited her home on the outskirts of L.A. She lived in the home she grew up in with her parents and her brother who she loved deeply—but they were all gone. Only she



Sandy's Room (1989) was part of Esperanza's 1996 exhibit, *Engendros*, a photo exhibit

was left. Alone in a place meant for many. She took us to a Polynesian restaurant for lunch—somewhere with umbrellas and mermaids in tall narrow frozen drinks. That's why we went—for those drinks.

Those were what she wanted to share with us.

She had long wanted to photograph my partner, but my partner wouldn't have it. Laura did a series of photos of us in various stages of undress—it was her attempt to make my partner comfortable with the idea of being photographed. Well, my partner turned around and insisted Laura never use those images for exhibition—she even made Laura sign something to that effect. One day we joined a group going to a State Park for some shots in a river; my partner hung back from the group, not wanting to be peer-pressured into the pictures. Laura asked me to pose, so I did. Lying naked in the rush of water was wonderful. When my partner caught up and saw what was happening she chided me and told Laura she couldn't use those images either. Laura said, "Your wife is a caveman." I was not happy.

But when we visited Laura, she showed me the contentious shot. It was gorgeous. I laid eyes on it only once but it has stuck with

*Nature Self-Portrait*, 1996



# 1959-2018



t about gender & sexuality

me hard. I should have offered a sum for it then and there. I don't know why I didn't. Maybe because my partner was there. Several years later I asked Sandy what she thought I could do to get that image. She said Laura could use money. I contacted her and was prepared to make an offer, but Laura said her eyes had gotten so bad she would not be able to find it. No, the way she said it was far more dire, clearly the condition had persisted for some time.

I had heard in recent years she'd been active with a women's empowerment group, that she had lost a lot of weight and that she was producing new work. But this new stage where she had lost her eyesight and could not photograph was a whole new world for her. Then I heard she was active with an Episcopalian support group, I think it was, and she had a new identity that had nothing to do with her photographer past it seemed.



*Motion #56 (1999) was part of the 2003 Esperanza exhibit, "motions" & "center"-new bodies of work for Laura Aguilar*

Then suddenly I was hearing about a wave of high profile exhibitions of her work. I celebrated one of those on Facebook only to have it turn into an obituary within a week.

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*Plush Pony #2*, 1992 was part of a series of portraits taken at the Plush Pony, a bar popular among working-class lesbians of color in eastside Los Angeles. Aguilar's photos rebelled against repressive stereotypes of beauty and body representation.

*THE ESPERANZA* expresses our condolences to Laura's familia and her friends in the arts and LGBTQ community. We were honored to have had her photos and presence at the Esperanza since the 90s. Esperanza staff and friends in San Antonio joyfully accepted her invitation to pose for her photos in the Texas hill country and assisted her as she took photos in San Antonio cemeteries in the East, West, and Southsides. Laura was a champion who put herself out there fighting for her own visibility and that of marginalized women who rarely find themselves the subjects of a camera lens. Her photos are an irrefutable historical legacy.

Laura Aguilar,  
*¡siempre presente!*

