

Remembering Laura Aguilar

by Gloria A. Ramírez, editor of La Voz

When Antonia Castañeda called to ask me if I had read the article on photographer Laura Aguilar that appeared in the New York Times on April 23, 2021, I was surprised to hear from Antonia because we had not been in direct contact since the COVID pandemic began. After she mailed me the article, *The Transformative Power of Vulnerability* by Holland Cotter, I read the full page article voraciously (yes, I know I could have found it on the internet, but I still love reading the actual newspaper). Being a huge fan of Laura's work, and having been honored to be one of her models in 1999 in the Texas hill country out by Inks Lake, I had the opportunity to observe her genius in action as she photographed mujeres in the nude connected to the Esperanza in natural settings that included cactus patches, riverbeds, rocks and boulders, and trees hanging with vines.

In reading the article, though, what eventually struck me, was that two of her most transformative and revealing works were exhibited early on at the Esperanza Center and would prove to be impactful for us all. Our connection with Laura began in the nineties and immediately we became "sisters in struggle." There were so many things that we connected on as women, as lesbians, as queer people of color, as people with disabilities and difference, and as working class and poor. Her very being as a fat brown queer women with disabilities grated against the mainstream and we were to find out that her insistence in accepting her self fully, and unapologetically, by projecting her image and essence out into the world in the form of magnificent photographs of her own

naked body—inspired and validated us at a level no one else had ever done before.

Laura, herself, felt the connection to San Antonio and the Esperanza and its mujeres to be special. What other cultural arts organization in the country was headed by brown queer women? When we invited Laura to exhibit and work at the Esperanza in the mid 90s she spoke of her feelings about San Antonio and the Esperanza writing:

"When I first came to San Antonio in September of 1996, I never thought I would want to come to Texas. My idea of Texas was from the movie Giant: I saw Texas as a racist place, and why would this California Chicana want to go there? But, when I arrived I was surprised by the Esperanza and the San Antonio community that I found. Everybody was extremely supportive; it wasn't the Texas I expected. Penny Boyer, a friend I met through the Esperanza, opened her home to me—a total stranger—and that was unique. As I spent time in San Antonio, I met artists from different organizations I found. This type of open, encouraging support characterized many of the people I met and the experiences I had. Artists from different organizations were on friendly terms and strongly supported each other's creativity. Despite this warm welcome, who knew my work was going to make so much noise in this city?"

In 1996, Esperanza cosponsored with VÂN, the exhibit, *Engendros*, a photo exhibit on gender and sexuality, the first of its kind in San Antonio. One of the pieces exhibited was Laura

Three Eagles Flying





Sandy's Room

Aguilar's iconic triptych, *"Three Eagles Flying"* composed of three panels that included the American and Mexican flags on each side of Laura who is tied up in the center panel with flags tied onto her naked body. Of this piece the New York Times article stated: *"From 1990 also comes what is probably Aguilar's best known work, the triptych titled, 'Three Eagles Flying.' In its central panel the artist stands, nude to the waist, her head hooded in a Mexican national flag, her lower body wrapped in the United States' Stars and Stripes. A thick rope snakes around her neck like a noose and ties her hands. She's held captive by political allegiances and their binding smothering power."* What this piece means to Queer Mexicanas like me, though, is the constant displacement of our existence in a land that does not see us much less accept us. What more can be said of this photo taken in 1990? It speaks of today and all of the "others" in the U.S. who are currently being cast out—"aliens" in our own land where the powers that be daily work to erase us.

The second iconic work that is generally referenced among the many photos Laura took in her short lifetime is *Sandy's Room* that also was exhibited at the Esperanza's *Engendros* exhibit in 1996. Of *Sandy's Room*, the New York Times article stated: *"Aguilar suffered a life of body-shaming and self-shaming, which she addressed and confronted through art. In one of her most widely reproduced self portraits, 'In Sandy's Room' from 1989, we see her nude and half-reclining in a chair, facing an electric fan. It's a great, witty and, by now, classic image: a new-style Venus—related maybe to the Willendorf Venus—relaxing, drink in hand, on a sultry Southern California day."*

Sandy's Room, though, stirred con-

trovery in San Antonio with columnist, Roddy Stinson, leading the charge making the photograph the subject of derision. He expressed disgust that "fat women" would dare make themselves the subject of art. This and other queer programs featuring queer women of color (like comedian Monica Palacios) and queer men, led to the defunding of the Esperanza on September 11, 1997 by the City of San Antonio—but the Esperanza regained its funding through the courts winning our case in 2001.

It's ironic that these two photographs that were taken in 1989 and 1990 by Laura Aguilar are still as relevant and powerful as when we first saw them at the Esperanza Center in 1996. Laura dared to embrace her whole being by photographing herself in these iconic ways and that inspired many of us to pose nude for her and thus, validate their lives, too.

From the Plush Pony series where working class lesbians posed for Laura to the Esperanza where mujeres agreed to pose in the nude amongst the natural surroundings of the Texas hill country resulting in the 2003 exhibit, *"motions" & "center"*, Laura Aguilar inspired us, all. Even after her death in April of 2018—her photographs are living representations of her presence in this world. In museums throughout the U.S. and the world, Laura's mark has been made and we shall forever be grateful for her work.

Laura Aguilar: Show and Tell the first comprehensive retrospective of her photographs over three decades organized by the Vincent Price Art Museum in Los Angeles that Laura got to see before dying continues at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in New York City through June 26, 2021.

Laura Aguilar, presente!



Motion