



Figure 1. Laura Aguilar, *Grounded #114*, 2006, digital.
Courtesy of Laura Aguilar and the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center

HAS THE QUEER EVER BEEN HUMAN?

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*W*hat can be said about the photograph at left? At first glance, viewers will likely recognize the larger background object as a boulder: rough textured, sand colored, partly in shadow, surrounded by desert brush and blue sky. The smaller figure in the foreground presents more of a challenge. It both resembles and differs from the boulder; both share similar asymmetrically oval outlines, but the texture of the foregrounded figure is smoother, more like human skin. Upon noting the hair at the top and the cleft of the buttocks below, the viewer might begin to see this as a human body, seated on the ground, facing away from the camera. One cannot easily categorize the figure: sex, gender, race, age are obscured by its position. And many of the conjectures that one might make about this body as “simply” a body—for instance, that it is curled frontally inward and that it possesses arms and legs hidden by this pose—depend on assumptions about what a “proper body” looks like and what it can do.¹

The photograph, *Grounded #114* (2006), is the work of Laura Aguilar, a Chicana lesbian photographer from San Gabriel, California, whose lens tends to focus on nonnormative bodies and on members of marginalized groups.² Her specialization in portraiture, especially self-portraiture, locates her work, as Laura Pérez observes, on a “terrain of contestation for women of color,” as they must “peel away racialized and gendered associations . . . that their bodily appearance triggers in Eurocentric ways of seeing.”³

Since the mid-1990s, Aguilar’s work has given complex interpretation to Pérez’s “terrain of contestation” by incorporating land as part of that challenge.

In this work, Aguilar poses nude in “natural” settings, sometimes accompanied by other women, though more often alone, aligning her body with features of the landscape. Her outdoor photographs are often read by critics as gestures of defiance, flaunting, in a natural setting, the kind of body—fat, brown, queer—that is treated, in dominant culture, as at once a secret and a spectacle. In *Grounded #114*, from the artist’s first color series, Aguilar seems to mold her body into an echo of the boulder behind her—the pose concealing sex and gender, obscuring race, and making even her status as human difficult, at first, to discern. As in other feminist self-portraits, the female body refuses either to open itself to appropriation by the viewer or to position itself as the object of the male gaze.⁴ Ironically, though, Aguilar performs this refusal not by intensifying her apparent status as subject (through, say, a defiant facial expression or virtuosic posturing) but by turning away from the demand for recognition within the circle of humanity.⁵ By mimicking a boulder, Aguilar enters the very nonhuman fold where some would place her, effectively displacing the centrality of the human itself.

We take up Aguilar’s boulderish turn away from the demand for full humanity as a way to explore the overlap between queer studies and the rising critical interest, across the humanities and social sciences, in nonhuman objects. This turn toward the nonhuman insists, at minimum, that we view the boulder in the photograph not as “mere” backdrop or landscape but as equally important, equally in need of inquiry. In light of the social “invisibility” of Aguilar’s (human) subjects, this insistence might seem an outrage: why look away from the already overlooked or advantage the inanimate over the dehumanized? Yet *Grounded #114*’s self-portrait beckons us to follow this turn, to take seriously the possibilities of subjecting oneself to stone. There is something compelling about the symmetry of the two figures in this portrait, something that asks us to consider the suggestively queer connections between flesh and stone, between human and nonhuman. One might frame Aguilar’s boulder mimicry as protective camouflage, or a form of reverence, or even an in/organic identification; the same minerals occur in both bodies, after all. Yet when discussing this image, neither of us, from the perspectives of our own scholarship, could ignore the possibility that it stages a kind of mating dance.⁶ The connections and contrast between the two bodies—one flesh, one rock—come off as undeniably sexy; the pinkish-brown of Aguilar’s skin against the brownish-beige of the rock, the roughness of its surface against the smoothness of hers, caress the eye, catalyzing a tactile erotics. The folds of her flesh counterpoint the dents in the stone, both marking textured, touchable bodies. Her skin brings out a softness in the stone; the boulder lends her body an air of durability.

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