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THE UNCONVENTIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SELF-PORTRAITS OF
JOHN COPLANS, CARLA WILLIAMS, AND LAURA AGUILAR

by

ALICE DI CERTO

Under the Direction of Maria P. Gindhart

ABSTRACT

Laura Aguilar, John Coplans, and Carla Williams explore, through photographic self-portraiture, the representation of unconventional bodies. Even though the images produced by these artists are quite different in style, they all reflect an interest in a representation of the nude human body that challenges the traditional concepts of beauty so prevalent in a Western society obsessed with physical perfection. Even though the three artists produced their photographic self-portraits at roughly the same time, using the traditional gelatin silver process and responding to standards of classical beauty, their divergent life experiences, education, and social backgrounds have led them to question an almost universal vision of the perfect body from a broad spectrum of perspectives.

INDEX WORDS: Photography, Body, Self-portraiture, Nude, Aging, Chicano, Lesbian, African American.

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by

ALICE DI CERTO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2006

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Alice Di Certo
2006

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Introduction

John Coplans, Carla Williams, and Laura Aguilar explore the representation of unconventional bodies through photographic self-portraiture. Even though the images produced by these artists are quite different in style, they all reflect an interest in a representation of the human body that challenges the traditional concepts of beauty so prevalent in a Western society obsessed with physical perfection. The desire to analyze the oeuvre of these particular artists came from the similarity of their images, as well as their differences. The three artists produced their photographic self-portraits at roughly the same time, using the traditional gelatin silver process, and responding to standards of classical beauty. On the other hand, their divergent life experiences, educations, and social backgrounds have led these photographers to question an almost universal vision of the perfect body from a broad spectrum of perspectives.

The human body continues to be among the most celebrated, photographed, and studied subjects in art. Nevertheless, while concerns related to the body and its perception have changed over time and recently have become the focus of social and biological studies--because of the increasing cases of obesity, eating disorders, and plastic surgery linked to the representation of the “beautiful” body in art and media--not enough has been written in art criticism about nonnormative bodies.

The photographs of these three artists, whether in a formal and subtle way or in a

confrontational manner, offer to the viewers a clear social statement on the non-acceptance of differences in the United States. “The Other”--either old, or black, or female, or gay--is the subject of Coplans’s, Williams’s, and Aguilar’s self-portraits. Coplans dealt with masculinity and power, the myth of eternal youth, and references to canons of beauty in art and art history. In her photographs, Aguilar disconcerts viewers by juxtaposing classical landscape imagery with unconventional bodies--both hers and other women’s. Meanwhile Williams’s work, which in its reference to a long history of racism is more aggressive and directly political than that of Coplans and Aguilar, represents yet another way to approach the same issue of difference.

Much art has been created about stereotypes of beauty and the body, especially in the sixties and seventies by feminist artists and artists of color, but it was during an era of social changes in which art--much more than in the nineties and today--reflected the passions and the needs of people.¹ Performance artists especially addressed issues of independence, exploitation, and otherness with a remarkable directness and harshness

¹ Exemplary is the work of feminist artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Martha Rosler, and Ana Mendieta and the work of photographer Cindy Sherman. For more information on art movements of the sixties and seventies, in particular Feminism, I suggest: Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact (New York: Abrams, 1994); Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990); Kathy E. Ferguson, The Man Question: Vision of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993); Harmony Hammond, Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History (New York: Rizzoli, 2000); Amelia Jones, Body Art: Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998); Lucy Lippard, The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art (New York: New P, 1995); Laura Mulvey, Visual and Other Pleasures (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989); Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance (London: Routledge, 1997). About the work of the mentioned artists see: Carolee Schneemann, Imaging her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects (Cambridge: MIT P, 2002); Elisabeth Delin Hansen, Kirsten Dybbøl, Donald Goddard eds., Hannah Wilke: A Retrospective (Columbia: Missouri UP, 1989); Hannah Wilke, Intra Venus: Hannah Wilke (New York: R. Feldman Fine Arts, 1995); Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained, dir. Martha Rosler, VHS (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1988); Jane Blocker, Where is Ana Mendieta: Identity, Performativity, and Exile (Durham: Duke UP, 1999); Cindy Sherman, Cindy Sherman: Retrospective (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997); Michelle Meagher, “Would the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up? Encounters between Cindy Sherman and Feminist Theory,” Woman: A Cultural Review, 13.1 (2002): 18-36.

that often was controversial.² However, Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar--working in the eighties, nineties and today--have been dealing with the subtlety of otherness in a time when discrimination is often considered part of the past. Their work, which has not been explored substantially, opens the doors to a renewed discussion of the conventions of beauty and the body.

The bibliography on these artists is relatively limited. A large percentage of the information on John Coplans comes from his own writings, often appearing in catalogues of his work. Many of the articles about him just briefly describe his oeuvre, and little of great substance has been published in academic journals.³ Carla Williams's better-known series How To Read Character (1990-1991) is basically the only one discussed by a number of renowned scholars, mostly specialists in African American art, while the successive series of her self-portraits, described and reproduced by Williams on her web site, have been almost entirely ignored by critics and academics.⁴ Among the three, the

² Interesting readings about performance art related to the body, especially in the sixties and seventies, are the following: Sally Banes, Greenwich Village 1963: Avant-Garde Performance and the Effervescent Body (Durham: Duke UP, 1993); Judith Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (New York: Routledge, 1997); Coco Fusco, Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas (New York: Routledge, 2000); Amelia Jones, Body Art: Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998); Rebecca Schneider, The Explicit Body in Performance (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Lea Vergine, Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language (Milan, It.: Skira, 2000).

³ The following are some of the articles about John Coplans: Robert Belind, "John Coplans," Art Journal 53.1 (1994): 33-34; Vince Aletti, "Body Language," The Village Voice 26 Mar. 1991: 80; Eric Gibson, "John Coplans," Art News 95.4 (1996): 130-131; Vicki Goldberg, "The Effects of Aging, Viewed Unblinkingly," New York Times 2 Jan. 2000: 43; Eleanor Heartney, "John Coplans at Andrea Rosen," Art in America 89 (2001): 111-112; Ben Lifson, "John Coplans," Artforum International 34.8 (1996): 98-99; Peter Plagens, "John Coplans, 1920-2003," Art in America 91 (2003): 43; Curt Schieber, "John Coplans. A Body of Work," Dialogue 23.2 (2000): 37-39; Peter Schjeldahl, "The old guy," The Village Voice 25 Nov. 1997: 107.

⁴ For some of the major sources that discuss Williams's series How To Read Character see: Lisa Gail Collins, "Historical Retrievals: Confronting Visual Evidence and the Documentation of Truth" Chicago Art Journal 8.1 (1998): 5-17; and Lisa Gail Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002); Cheryl L. Finley, "Blackalicious" OneWorld Apr.-May 2003: 102-103; Charles Guice, "Reflections in Black," B/W Magazine December 2003: 54-65; Lisa Henry, "Why the Black Female Body: An Interview with Carla Williams" Fotophile 46 (2004): 6-9; Janell Hobson, "The 'Batty' Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body," Hypatia 18.4 (2003): 87-105; Deborah Willis, "Women's Stories/ Women's Photobiographies," Reframings. New American

most has been written about Laura Aguilar's work; for instance, her series are mentioned in several catalogues of shows in which she was included.⁵ In general it is fair to say that the work of these three artists, even though critically acclaimed--in some cases more, in others less--and often reported on by the media, has not been sufficiently discussed and examined in academic settings, especially in its over-all scope.⁶ My goal is to analyze the artistic production of Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar and bring to light the aspects that link the three photographers' work: issues of otherness, an alternative representation of the body in Western societies, and an intertwined interest in the representation of the human figure through age, race, size, and gender.

After a careful formal analysis of the works, I investigated issues concerning race and identity politics, objectification, and the body as a commodity--about which there is a great deal of secondary source material.⁷ It seemed necessary to utilize a postmodern perspective in analyzing the work of contemporary artists whose images are deliberately--as in the case of the theoretically informed Coplans and Williams--or more

Feminist Photographies, ed. Diane Neumaier (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995): 84-86; and "Portrait de la Photographie noire aux États-Unis," Anthologie de la Photographie Africaine et de l'Océan Indien (Paris: Revue Noire, 1998): 378-389.

⁵ The most complete and conclusive sources are about Aguilar's 1996 series Nature Self-Portrait. This was discussed and described in the catalogue for her 1998 solo exhibit in Barcelona at the Fundació "La Caixa", in several articles by scholar Amelia Jones, and in a 1999 MA thesis titled The Disruption of Normative Identity Constructs: The Nonnormative Bodies of Alison Saar and Laura Aguilar, by scholar Natasha Poor, who received her Master in Art History at the University of California Riverside (Amelia Jones was on her committee).

⁶ As mentioned above, some of the work of Laura Aguilar has been the subject of several academic studies, but those have rarely been inclusive of her whole artistic production or they have been focused only on specific aspects of her artistic career.

⁷ On identity politics see, for instance: John Anner, ed., Beyond Identity Politics: Emerging Social Justice Movements in Communities of Color (Boston: South End P, 1996); Coco Fusco, English Is Broken Here: Notes on Cultural Fusion in the Americas (New York: The New P, 1995); Michael Kenny, Politics of Identity: Liberal Political Theory and the Dilemmas of Difference (Cambridge, Eng.: Polity P, 2004); Satya P. Mohanty, Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, Paula M. L. Moya, eds., Identity Politics Reconsidered: Future of Minority (New York: Macmillan, 2006); Craig A. Rimmerman, From Identity to Politics: The Lesbian and Gay Movements in the United States: Queer Politics, Queer Theories (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002); Vera Whisman, Queer By Choice: Lesbians, Gay Men, and The Politics of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1996). About the body as commodity please see the suggested readings on page 2, note 1.

indirectly--as in the case of Aguilar--involved with these issues. Each artist is discussed in an individual chapter, which, in addition to the analysis of the work, covers biographical information. I believe that offering to the readers records about the artists' lives, beliefs, and perspectives is important as it helps to acquire a more accurate and well rounded understanding and appreciation of their oeuvre.

In the first chapter I discuss the work of John Coplans, a white male art critic, curator, art teacher, and artist who died in 2003 at the age of eighty-three. In his sixties, he took photography as his new career, and his naked body was essentially the sole subject of his images. Through the photographic representation of his decaying self, Coplans was offering a vision of an "imperfect" human body, a subject only marginally explored in photography and other media. His photographs, all shot in a studio against a white backdrop with the help of an assistant, are controlled and unemotional, even though often sardonic. While the photographic dissection of his body seems almost a scientific survey--mostly because of its comprehensiveness and the equal weight given to every single body part--his commentary on the perception of beauty in Western society is easy to detect. Coplans rejected the imposition of perfect, slender, and young bodies, presenting to the viewer, as an alternative, a usually neglected version of the male body: old, hairy, and wrinkly. Through his self-portraits, Coplans reveals the white male as someone who is not necessarily powerful and strong, but as someone who is also human and vulnerable.

The second chapter is dedicated to the work of African American photographer Carla Williams, whose nude body has also been, through the years, the almost exclusive subject of her photographs. Beginning with delicate and intimate images of her young

figure, Williams soon realized that the display of her body created a response in viewers because of its blackness rather than its nudity. Since then, she has at once challenged the standards of beauty forced onto women regardless of their race and the general public's perception of the black female body. In some cases she has confronted the viewers through references to history, in others through the representation of her body changing over the course of time from a more classical "beauty" to a more contemporary and realistic version of it. In both cases, however, she alludes to the way the black female body has been perceived and objectified in history as well as in the present.

Finally in the last chapter I deal with the work of Laura Aguilar, who was born in the United States but gives a clear idea of her strong connection with her community, Mexican heritage, and self-definition as Chicana. In her self-portraiture, on which she started to work around the late 1990s, she exposes her large nude body, thus challenging the Western concept of beauty identified with a classical ideal of physical perfection. Her beautiful images, shot in an often deserted landscape, make reference to the long tradition of landscape photography while subtly bringing to light social, sexual, and racial issues. An exploration of Aguilar's images leads to an analysis of an alternative representation of the female body that rejects traditional canons of beauty and alludes to race and an alternative sexuality.

In their images, the three photographers deal with the representation of otherness in terms of body shape, culture, history, and skin color. Their personal interests and backgrounds determine the different directions they take in their work although they all utilize a common contemporary subject matter: the representation of the body in the West and its relation to a changing, or unchanging, concept of beauty. A comparative analysis

of their works is relevant in the larger field of art history in that it offers a small but quite complete survey of ways in which the body can be considered nonnormative. A white man, a black woman, and a Latina woman represented their bodies, dealing to varying degrees with factors such as gender, skin color, age, weight, and nonnormative sexuality. Furthermore, the fact that Coplans, Aguilar, and Williams convey through self-portraiture the need for a more flexible and realistic vision of the human body eliminates, or at least diminishes, the possible accusation of exploitation and creates the ground for self-empowerment. Also, it is valuable to analyze the work of these three artists who use (and used) photography--a medium that only relatively recently has gained a major weight within academic course material and art historical studies and consequently the privilege of being addressed in art criticism--to discuss issues of unconventional beauty. I find it particularly relevant that Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar used traditional wet photography, which today is often supplanted by digital still and video images. I believe their choice to be quite courageous and revolutionary in a developing art world characterized by works that fit the public's need for big, colorful and out of the ordinary still images or, even better, for time-based video works that also engage the auditory sense and reflect our modern society's fast-paced rhythms. While photography as a medium has in the past helped to establish and reinforce stereotypes and conventions, especially about the body, Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar have used it to question them.

Chapter 1

John Coplans: the Aging Body

John Coplans, who had been successively an art teacher, painter, art critic, and curator, became notorious in the art world in his sixties, when he started a career as a photographer. Even though Coplans claimed that “[he] never expected anything [from photography] but to find something that would take up time,”⁸ it is mainly because of his photographs that he is now remembered and celebrated. And the reason for his success was, in large part, his choice of his naked body as the almost exclusive subject of his images. Throughout his career, he produced unflattering self-portraiture of an aging man.

Interviewed by Robert Berlind in 1994, ten years after he started his new career, Coplans described how, with his photographs, he was exploring a subject matter neglected by a culture that believes that “old is ugly.”⁹ As a contrast to his own images, he once mentioned photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s subjects as being always “essentially interesting, good-looking, and extremely physical.”¹⁰ It seems to me that it was his irritation with a society obsessed with physical perfection that gave life to his works. With the representation of his decaying body, Coplans challenged the concept of beauty in art and advertising in an America comfortable only with

⁸ Coplans quoted in Aletti 80.

⁹ Coplans quoted in Belind 33; and John Coplans, *A Body* (New York: Powerhouse, 2002) 175.

¹⁰ Coplans quoted in Belind 33. He also mentioned in the same interview how Mapplethorpe’s photographs were always and only “about classical notions of beauty” (Belind 33). Coplans’s relation with the classical tradition will be further discussed later in the chapter.

pin-ups and *Baywatch* bodies. This chapter will demonstrate that Coplans was rejecting a classical notion of beauty and instead offering a new vision of the human body: imperfect, irregular, in constant evolution and dissolution, but still fascinating and remarkable.

Coplans was born in London in 1920 and spent his childhood between the United Kingdom and South Africa.¹¹ This continuous traveling from place to place would have a strong impact on his life. In fact, for the year 1936 he wrote in his chronology, “Confused by constantly changing countries, schools, and languages, [I] decide I have had enough education. I leave home at age sixteen, and I get a job as an office boy.”¹² School was definitely not his favorite institution as Amanda Hopkinson suggested in her article on the artist, “He lived up to Mark Twain’s observation about not letting schooling interfere with his education.”¹³ In fact Coplans’s culture was mostly a product of the art books by which he was surrounded at home and of his Sunday visits to galleries and museums with his family. In 1937 Coplans decided to join the Royal Air Force as a pilot and later participated in World War II by volunteering in the Army. After spending eight years as a soldier between East Africa, India, and Burma, he went back to London. He recalled that he asked himself, “What on earth will I do after eight years in the Army? The only thing I am good at is barking orders.” He finally applied for a government grant to become an artist, “[the only] job for which there are no real qualifications.”¹⁴ Influenced by his father, a multitalented self-taught artist-scientist-inventor, Coplans tried to survive by

¹¹ The biographical information reported in the next paragraphs is drawn from Coplans’s chronology included in Coplans, *A Body* 150-167.

¹² Coplans, *A Body* 153.

¹³ Amanda Hopkinson, “John Coplans,” *Guardian.co.uk*, 5 Sept. 2003
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/obituary/>>.

¹⁴ Coplans, *A Body* 158.

painting and teaching arts in deprived post-war London. However, discouraged by the European art scene and by his own paintings, which he considered ordinary, and also inspired by the “New American Painting” exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1959, he decided to move to the United States. He went to San Francisco in 1960, but he soon abandoned his career as an artist and art teacher for art criticism. In 1962 he started Artforum with John Irwin and his friend Philip Leider. Their idea was to create a magazine about the arts, the purpose of which was “to deal with art that is important, but that has received no critical coverage.”¹⁵ In the meantime, Coplans wrote several books--including ones on Donald Judd, Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and the photographer Weegee--and curated the first museum shows of works by Richard Serra, Judy Chicago and Roy Lichtenstein. As he became more and more involved as an art critic, he began to feel uncomfortable in the position of both new art’s promoter and “new” artist, so he decided to quit painting. Coplans had started at Artforum as an unpaid columnist, later becoming the editor. In 1977 he got fired when he refused to buy the magazine. In 1980, he became director of the Akron Art Institute (now Akron Art Museum) in Ohio, where, in addition to curating various exhibitions, he started a new art magazine: Dialogue. During the uneventful evenings in this provincial town in Ohio, Coplans started to take photographs and once again he decided to abandon his career. He wrote his last article (on Philip Guston) and in January 1981 moved back to New York City to be a photographer.

Once in New York, Coplans started to photograph art world friends in his studio. Although these pictures were exhibited in the 1983 Whitney Biennial, he realized that he was not satisfied with them, mainly because of a certain lack of control. This was

¹⁵ Coplans, A Body 162.

probably due to the fact that he was not used to dealing with a subject that had a mind of its own. He had never had this problem with painting (especially considering that he concentrated on abstract art) or when he first approached photography with the few nude self-portraits taken in Akron. He realized at this time that what he had to do was to go back to the exploration of his own body. This would allow him to have total control of the image as mind, eye, and subject, to communicate his point of view about the aging body to a society obsessed with beauty and youth, and to use photography as a sort of psychotherapy. In an interview in 1994 he declared: “When I was a painter, I was a tiny piece of sand in the vast desert of painting in which one was always in everyone else’s shadow. In photography I was somehow able to stake a claim for myself fairly quickly.”¹⁶ Working with his body, Coplans realized that he finally had achieved with photography what he had not accomplished with painting.

It is essential, in my view, to analyze Coplans’s photographs from both a formal point of view and a purely human perspective. In other words, in his images, the accent is placed simultaneously on their very structured formal quality and on the emotional response they cause in the viewer. My first reaction was to the abstraction of the forms, and only after examining the photographs more closely and for a longer time was I visually struck by the vision of the artist’s decaying body. Even looking dispassionately at the pictures, with the critical eye of an art historian or a photography collector, the viewer is sooner or later affected by the pure and simple fact of looking at an old body in its decline. We are human, and we are aware of the consequences of aging, but Coplans makes us extra aware: we look at his body and think of how we will look in a few (or many) years, or of how the men in our lives will look. As art critic and editor Eric Gibson

¹⁶ Coplans quoted in Belind 32.

suggested, it is “in that vulnerability and unidealized humanity [that Coplans] makes us see ourselves”¹⁷ and face our fears about aging.

It is important to notice that Coplans always excluded his head and face from his compositions. The absence of the most unique part of his body--by which he would be recognized as a specific individual--makes the images less about a distinct person and more about a sort of icon or symbol. Specifically, Coplans uses his body as a universal representation of age. This way, he gives the viewers an impersonal account of his self, avoiding any intimacy and precluding the emotional response that an individual, as opposed to a “body,” would cause. It is very important to understand the implication of Coplans’s choice of selectively avoiding to show his face. His body is in fact here to be read as a symbol, instead of being identified as part of an individual. While one frees us to think in general about aging, the other demands that we confront John Coplans as a person, the body of which is in decay.

Throughout his oeuvre Coplans represented his body in various ways. In some cases he created a sort of creative catalogue of its parts, mostly hands and feet, more or less abstracted by the size of the prints and the close-up framing. In other instances, he depicted his entire figure, mostly divided in multiple parallel panels each representing a fraction of his body.¹⁸ In some cases he concentrated on the analysis of all the possible body movements and the look of the flesh and skin (for instance in Three Quarter Back, Hands Clapsed and Interlocking Fingers [1986 and 2000, Figs. 1.11-6]), in others he seemed particularly interested in the geometry and the symmetry of the composition (as in Body Language I-V or Legs and Hands, Thumbs together [1985, Figs. 1.15-17]), and

¹⁷ Gibson 130.

¹⁸ As mentioned in the previous paragraph, his head is actually excluded from the composition.

then again he seemed to quote ancient Greek statues in a more direct way (a good example is Frieze #2 [1994, Fig. 1.9]). Always, however, he appeared to want to emphasize the age of his body in contrast with the smooth forms of young and athletic individuals, depicted both in most of the classical artistic tradition of art and in fashion and advertising.

When focusing on his body parts, essentially his extremities, Coplans offers to the viewer both a playful and “humanized” depiction of his hands and fingers and a grotesque representation of his crusty feet. In both cases he continues to put the accent--either subtly as in the first case or more openly as in the latter--on issues of age and physical decay. The strength of these images lies in the likely assumption that the viewers would not be as visually assaulted by them as they would by the outspoken and confrontational full nudity of an old wrinkly man. By not undergoing the “stress” of looking at a naked, male, aging body--an undeniably rare subject of contemporary art¹⁹--the audience has the opportunity to discover and analyze the signs of physical decay without being overwhelmed and shocked by a whole unconventional body.

Of all body parts, hands and feet are those that are most commonly exposed, yet it would take a certain intimacy with someone to recognize their extremities. It is this dynamic of familiarity juxtaposed with anonymity that makes Coplans’s approach an ideal way to articulate a figurative discourse about the aging body. The viewer can look at these photographs without embarrassment, by relating them to elderly family members and friends or by viewing the images as an exemplificative visual reminder of the passage of time. Under the pretext of offering simple visual diaries of body parts, Coplans strikes

¹⁹ The depiction of the male body in the arts has often been characterized by athleticism and strength, and only since the sixties has this tendency slowly started to change, especially in performance art. However it would be safe to say that the representation of aged or physically unattractive men is still quite limited.

crossways at an audience, which, rejecting a more straightforward and bold kind of photographs, could otherwise be unreachable.

The representations of hands, for obvious technical, physical, and anatomical reasons, are more dynamic than those of the feet. Here Coplans plays further with the forms, so that the hands become abstract and less recognizable or seem to represent a body on their own. Fingers, Walking (1999), for instance, clearly reminds us of two legs in the act of walking (as also indicated in the title) (Fig. 1.1). The anthropomorphic transformation of the artist's hand makes a direct reference to the whole body. The suggested movement and the slight torsion are, in fact, reminiscent of similar images of Coplans's entire body, as, for example, in the two bottom panels of the left figure of Frieze No. 1 (1994). In Double Hand Front (1998), on the other hand, the subject of the photograph is instantly recognizable and the harshly highlighted wrinkles and the broken fingernails suggest aging (Figs. 1.2-1.3).

Other images of hands are not as straightforwardly distinguishable as hands. The series of Interlocking Fingers (1999- 2000) for instance suggest tentacles, sea plants or creatures, branches, or even a vaginal cavity (Figs. 1.4-5-6). Here it is unclear if Coplans wants to suggest new forms and body parts--which could reference but certainly not be mistaken for actual legs or arms--or if he is simply interested in the display of shapes and texture that indirectly reference age. The framing of the fingers and hands series also contributes to the abstraction of the image. Even though it is clear enough, after a close analysis of the picture, that the subjects are merely hands--instead of wrestling bodies as one may think at first glance--the cropping of the full hand initially fools the eye.²⁰

²⁰ I refer to cropping in the framing and not in the printing process. As confirmed by Mr. Bradford Robotham, Coplans's assistant and studio manager for about eight years who photographed and oversaw

Especially in Interlocking Fingers, No. 23 (2000), the close up and the way the hand is shown only partially succeed in making the composition mysterious and unusual (Fig. 1.6). The scale of the prints, which greatly magnify the size of the actual fingers, also contribute to the abstract feeling of the images. Certainly a hand, no matter how oddly presented and how textural it looks, would not have the same impact if printed and displayed at life size. Those titanic hands suggest the idea of power and reclaim the audience's attention. Coplans urges us to analyze details of every day life that normally tend to be overlooked or ignored.

Putting aside metaphors or anthropomorphic attributes, the feet series leaves little to the imagination. The sick looking crust on Feet Crossed (1985), the dead skin in Dark Sole (1989), and the broken and filthy toenails visible in all the images are quite disturbing (Figs. 1.7-8). Feet are not commonly a subject of art or even fashion photography--though they may be the subject of fetishism and eroticism--and we commonly tend to associate them with bad smell and contact with the ground. Here Coplans certainly does not promote their beautification. The viewer is nevertheless morbidly attracted to these images, especially the sharp details of the crusts and the odd shape of irregular toenails. Just as in the hands series, the large size of the feet photographs contributes to an inevitable magnetism and repulsion. They are overwhelming and, although hideous, keep drawing the viewer back to them. In this series, once again, Coplans emphasizes the process of aging and its "unacceptability" in our society. The audience is impacted at the same time by the familiarity of these images--even if only for the dry skin we experience on our own body--and the

the production of his work between 1997 and 2003, the majority of Coplans images are printed full frame. Bradford Robotham, E-mail interview, 12 Jan. 2006.

repugnance of forms, shapes, and textures that do not correspond to the imposed canon of beauty and perfection.

Even though the hands and feet series represent a significant part of Coplans's oeuvre, the largest percentage of his self-portraits includes images in which his whole body is depicted.²¹ At times, these are presented in panels, often displayed in diptychs or polyptychs; in other words, each full-figure of Coplans's body is divided horizontally in three separate sections and two or more of these panels are grouped together.²² Here the artist shows himself in different positions, photographing his body from the side, back, and front. While in some of the panels one gets the feeling of a body in ordinary postures, as if the subject (who just happened to be nude) was in the middle of an everyday action, in others Coplans shows his body as if mocking the structured images of anatomical studies,²³ or, yet again, he poses like a Hellenistic or Renaissance statue. While playing with different body positions, however, the artist always gives a very unflattering representation of his figure.

Frieze, No. 2 (1994), for instance, is a polyptych where the photographer's body is depicted in four separate photographs, standing sideways and facing the viewer--showing the saggy chest, the large stomach, and the fuzzy genitalia--as well as from the back. His body, in its different representations, is also divided into three horizontal panels creating a grid-like effect (Fig. 1.9). In the second figure from the left in particular we cannot fail to notice, despite the subject's hairy back and the relaxed tissues, a strong

²¹ It would be more precise to say that his body is usually photographed from chest to shins, considering that his head is always excluded from the composition.

²² The lines of the body in the three sections are at times perfectly aligned, while in some cases they are slightly off centered. This kind of display was used for instance at the Tate Gallery in London in 1995, for a show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York City in 2001, and at the occasion of Coplans's memorial, again at the Andrea Rosen Gallery in 2004.

²³ The journalist Eleanor Heartney suggested that Coplans's "dispassionate presentation of these successive positions brings to mind Muybridge's motion studies" (Heartney 111).

similarity with the pose of a classical statue.²⁴ This is obviously ironic, considering that the owner of the body is seventy-four and has a big round belly; however, there is a strong dignity in the images and in their investigation of the forms. Also the title of the works, *Frieze*, suggests a relationship with the ancient Greek world and its art. I agree with Gibson when he writes that Coplans “shares with the Greeks a vision of the human figure as an articulate structure, a well engineered assemblage of moving parts.”²⁵ In fact, his photographs do present his body as a coherent construction, but a seventy-five year old construction, which is not very beautiful, classically speaking. Therefore Coplans’s declaration that “the classical tradition of art that we have inherited from the Greeks is a load of bullshit”²⁶ should be interpreted, in my opinion, as a rejection of a notion of beauty and perfection, which, accepted and over-used by Western society had created homogenization and standardization in the visual arts and in the way of thinking about the human body. In other words, Coplans used classical models as a springboard to comment on our society’s approach to everyday individuals versus ideal--almost mythical--beauties.

The use of flat and uniform lighting and of a neutral background reinforces the abstraction of the images and their symbolic force. There are no strong shadows that express passionate emotions, nor a familiar and identifiable background: the figures are depicted so as to be rationally analyzed, dissected, and understood as the emblem of the aging body. A more dramatic and intense use of lights and shadows would create a

²⁴ I am referring in particular to the figure’s weight shift, the classical *contrapposto* stance--which then emphasize the wrinkles of Coplans’s backside--as seen for instance in the Kritios Boy (ca. 480 BCE.), the Warrior from the Sea of Riace (ca. 460-450 BCE.), and Polykleitos’s Doryphoros--defined as a *Canon* of beauty because of the mathematical formula on which it was based on--or later in Donatello’s *David* (late 1420’s-late 1450’s).

²⁵ Gibson 130.

²⁶ Belind 33.

theatrical atmosphere and suggest a narrative, changing the viewer's perception of Coplans's body; in fact, he would more likely be seen as an individual rather than an unidentified body.

This polyptych is a sort of summa of Coplans's approach to the human figure and his own body: it includes images of the subject in casual and classical poses, as well as in postures that seem to be the result of a formal exploration aimed at finding the body's oddest shapes possible flattened by a two-dimensional medium. Another element that insinuates the artist's rejection of ideal beauty is the imperfect match of the three sections in which the figures are divided. The curves of the body do not seamlessly flow from one panel to the next just as most people do not fit the physical ideals imposed by society.

Other images represent Coplans's body in a different arrangement from the previously used formula of separated panels (Figs. 1.10-11).²⁷ For the artist to photograph his body was a sort of energizing exercise. He declared in an interview that the aging body is "a neglected subject matter."²⁸ He remarked that he felt alive even if older, and, referring to a society that does not acknowledge the vitality of elderly people, he declared that he would be a dead man if he would accept this cultural situation.²⁹ In Side View Bent, with Large Upper Arm (1985), for instance, the artist's body, softly lit from above his shoulder, is depicted in a meditative pose, with his hands clasped behind his back (Fig. 1.10). There is a contrast between the well-balanced composition--the body forming a gentle diagonal accentuated by the diffused shadow--and the harshness of the aging body showing all the signs of decay, including the gray pubic and chest hair, the bumpy torso and stomach. In Three Quarter Back, Hands Clasped (1986), on the other

²⁷ As described in the last paragraph of page 12.

²⁸ Belind 33.

²⁹ Belind 33.

hand, Coplans ironically poses like a body builder (Fig. 1.11). These photographs are witness to the energy and the strength of the body in general, without restrictions of age or body type. In particular with this image, the artist seems to make reference to commercial and fashion photography's narcissistic subjects, showing how "others" can be represented in the same way as the subjects of ads and magazines.

In a number of his self-portraits--and in some more than in others--Coplans seems to wander photographically looking for unusual, semi-abstracted images. In Back with Arms Above (1984), for instance--concentrating more on the image's formal composition than on the content--the artist plays with the shape of the back by creating a rectangular form surmounted by two round antenna-like fists (Fig. 1.12). While it is instinctively clear that the image depicts a back, the more the viewer observes it, the more unusual its rectangular shape looks. Coplans plays with the viewer's conventional idea of the body, offering a humorous and unusual representation of it. Torso, Front (1984), on the other hand, appears to be less dehumanized, is more recognizable, and the abstraction is tamed by the representation of a familiar body part in a common pose (Fig. 1.13). It is its framing--mostly the absence of the limbs and the close cropping on the sides--that isolates the torso making it look like a fuzzy face complete with nipple-eyes and eyebrows, a navel-nose and a bearded groin area-mouth. Once again, these images, in addition to being unusual, are not traditionally flattering or pleasing. The male upper body is commonly represented nude in advertisements and art photography and symbolizes masculinity and strength. When presented sexy and "spot on," as, for instance, in fitness magazines or in Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs, it corresponds to the ideal beauty imposed by our society. On the other hand, when shown as in Coplans's

photographs it is viewed as improper, an insult to the eye. Back Torso from Below (1985) follows the same pattern (Fig. 1.14). In fact the unusual vantage point is unflattering--the big stomach is wider than his shoulders--and it recalls other body shapes or objects, like a penis or a fleshy boulder.

The series of six images entitled Body Language (1985) is a quite amusing example of what could be called “buttocks-wrinkles’ language.” A strong sense of irony is here accompanied by an interesting exploration of the formal qualities of gestures and folds of skin and flesh. There is, especially in the title, a clear reference both to the “body language” we use as a non-verbal medium of communication and the sign language used by deaf and mute people. The result is a comical sequence of gestures focused not only on the subject’s hands, but also on his wrinkly behind. Coplans has created a sort of indecipherable language by moving and staging his arms and hands in different ways. With this series Coplans may have wanted to ridicule theories about subconscious gestural communication, commenting on our contemporary uptight culture and our difficulty at interconnecting in a more spontaneous and straightforward way.

Another aspect to consider in Body Language, and in several other pieces, is the attention to the geometry of the composition, the relation between forms and shapes. The images present a strong symmetry and create an interesting play of negative and positive space. However, in many of the photographs these formal qualities seem to be deliberately used to counterbalance the boldness with which the body is represented. In Self Portrait (1990) for instance, the exact center of the image is occupied by the artist’s penis (Fig. 1.16). His navel and the area between his legs are on the same line that marks the middle of the photograph. The composition is very balanced and formally engaging,

but it is hard to get away from the accurate and unflattering account of the nudity, and in particular of the genitalia, of this mature gentleman. Similarly, in Legs and Hands, Thumbs Together (1985), the placement of the subject at the center of the frame, the symmetrical negative space at the sides, the two thumbs mimicking a phallic form, and the penis just above, make the composition very balanced, while, at the same time, reminding the viewer of the appearance of aging (Fig. 1.17). The equilibrium between negative and positive space and the symmetry between the right and the left side of the body takes away some of the boldness of the nudity and the literal depiction of the aging body.

In Crouched (1990), Coplans is bent down holding his head. With this position, he created a compact and linear focus of attention in the center of the frame (Fig. 1.18). The only element that disrupts the flowing line is the artist's baggy scrotum. This detail brings our attention back from the formal composition to the subject matter: a nude old man. The circular composition of the pose is reminiscent of some ancient Greek sculptures, like Myron's Diskobolos (450 BCE), the pose of which was almost literally copied by Robert Mapplethorpe in Thomas (1986, Fig. 1.19). Here once again we have a great contrast between the perfectly even lines and defined muscles in Mapplethorpe's image and in the Diskobolos and the hairy and sagging body of Coplans.

It is worth noting, especially in regard to these last pieces, that, in many of Coplans's self-portraits, his genitalia have a prominent position in the structure of the photograph and that, therefore, in the context of his aging body, they are the principal subject of possible ridicule. The depiction of sagging male genitalia in particular hits hard on the ego of the "dominant male" viewer who, through the representation of body

decay, is stripped of his “macho” dignity. In other words, Coplans makes a statement about the absurdity of male domination by showing the essence of masculinity--biologically and anatomically speaking--reduced to a flabby flask and gray hair.

The last typology of images I would like to address includes a series of more ambiguous self-portraits in which the artist’s body appears to have androgynous qualities. In Reclining Figures, #1 (1996) and Reclining Figures, #2 (1996), for instance, Coplans’s lounging body is visible from chest to shins, and in both cases the subject’s genitalia--physical attributes of masculinity--are not visible (Figs. 1.20-21). While in the first group, in which he is facing the viewer, they are hidden between his legs and covered by his hands, in the second group, Coplans is showing his back. The most interesting aspect is the ambiguity of the poses, which gives the male subject a feminine look. Even though the body is hairy and the breasts small, the stance recalls portraits of Venus, odalisques, and nymphs.³⁰

Another example, part of Coplans’s latest work, is Bodyparts, No. 2 (2001, Fig. 1.22). In this series the artist presents, once again, parts of his body placed in horizontal panels, and the result is a mix-up of elements leading to impossible anatomies. The two sets of limbs do not correspond, nor does the one part continue in the second panel. The content of Bodyparts, No. 2 suggests that Coplans formal play was intended to have a

³⁰ In particular the upper panel of Reclining Figures, #2, reminds me to Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s Grande Odalisque (1814, Louvre Museum, Paris) with her long back and sinuous figure. Reclining Figures, #1 on the other hand, brings to mind a photograph of painter and photographer Thomas Eakins, Thomas Eakins Nude, Semireclining on Couch, from Rear (ca. 1883, collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts). It is not implausible that Coplans, as a past art critic and curator, was aware of the existence of this image and produced Reclining Figures, #1 as an homage to the eclectic nineteenth-century American artist, who, like Coplans, was originally a painter but dedicated himself to photography in the exploration of the body and its relationship to Greek classic art. For more information on Thomas Eakins as a photographer see Susan Danyl and Cheryl Leibold, eds., Eakins and the Photograph: Works by Thomas Eakins and His Circle in the Collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Washington: Smithsonian, 1994).

deeper meaning. In this piece, the two specular images of kneeling thighs are almost identical except for the presence of the scrotum in the right one. Coplans often declared that he used photography to find himself ³¹ and that the reason for using his body as the only subject of his work came from the idea that “[his] body was everybody’s body. Like [his] genes were the genes of the whole human race, shared with them” and that he was “as much a woman as a man.”³² I find that this photograph is one that best represents his being both man and woman at the same time, a universal creature, a human being free from gender labeling.³³

To conclude, Coplans’s depiction of his old body without concern or embarrassment, as well as his ideas of universality, opened the way for a more profound approach to life. Even though he is not the only white male who, through art, has declared war on the standardization of beauty, he certainly has a place among those who deal with the representation and empowerment of the “other,” whether old, colored, or queer. Coplans’s “calm alternative to the artificial perfection that blares at us from every billboards,”³⁴ serves, like the work of Aguilar and Williams, as a means to open the audience’s eyes beyond the mere surface of things.

³¹ Aletti 80.

³² Schieber 38.

³³ As discussed at page 12, the absence of the subject’s head is an additional element contributing to a sense of universality in the representation of the human body.

³⁴ Goldberg 43.

Images



Fig. 1.1. John Coplans, Fingers, Walking, 1999, 26 x 34 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 113.



Fig. 1.2. John Coplans, Detail, Frieze No. 1 (left panel), 1994, 78 x 68 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 124.



Fig. 1.3 John Coplans, Double Hand Front, 1998, 42 x 52 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 8-9.



Fig. 1.4 John Coplans, Interlocking fingers, No. 14, 1999, 36 x 30 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 136.



Fig. 1.5 and 1.6. John Coplans, Interlocking fingers No. 22 and Interlocking fingers No. 23, 2000, 33 x 26 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 138 and 142.



Fig. 1.7. John Coplans, Feet Crossed, 1985, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 28-29.



Fig. 1.8. John Coplans, Dark Sole, 1989, 28 x 36 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 34-35.



Fig. 1.9. John Coplans, Frieze No. 2, four panels, 1994, 78 x 136 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 26-127.



Fig. 1.10. John Coplans, Side View Bent, with Large Upper Arm, 1985, 45 x 35 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 56.



Fig. 1.11. John Coplans, Three Quarter Back, Hands clasped, 1986, 46 x 29 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 54.



Fig. 1.12. John Coplans, Back with arms above, 1984, 42 x 32 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 38.

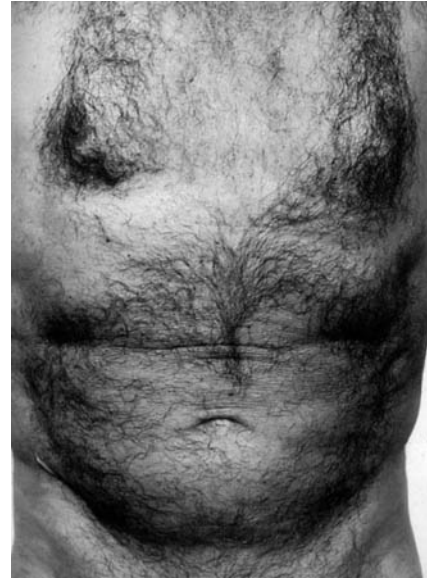


Fig. 1.13. John Coplans, Torso, Front, 1984, 48 x 34 inches, gelatin in silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 42.



Fig. 1.14. John Coplans, Back Torso from Below, 1985, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 47.

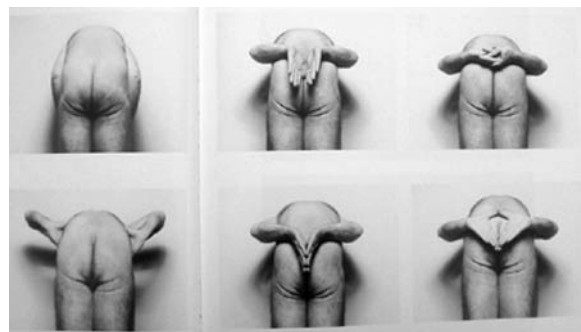


Fig. 1.15. John Coplans, Body language I-VI, 1985, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver Print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 58-59.



Fig. 1.16. John Coplans, Self-portrait, 1987, unknown dimensions, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Melody Davis, The Male Nude in Contemporary Photography (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991) 61.



Fig. 1.17. John Coplans, Legs and Hands, Thumbs together, 1985, 31x 25 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Davis 60.



Fig. 1.18. John Coplans, Crouched, 1990, 40 x 50 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 52.

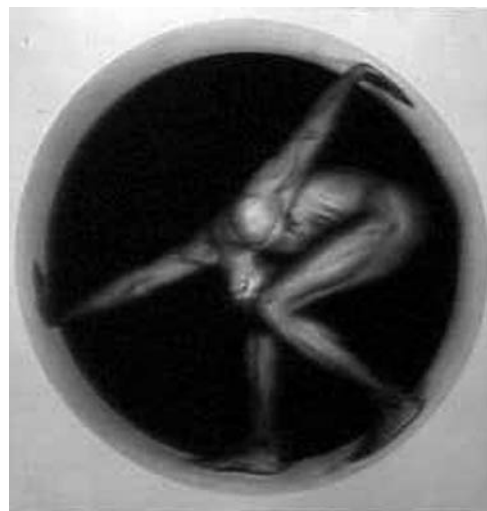


Fig. 1.19. Robert Mapplethorpe, Thomas, 1986, 20 x 24 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Richard Marshall, Robert Mapplethorpe (New York: Bulfinch, 1988) 171.



Fig. 1.20 and 1.21. John Coplans, Reclining Figures No.1 and Reclining Figures No.2, Two Panels each, 1996, 64 x 74 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 82-83 and 84-85.



Fig. 1.22. John Coplans, Bodyparts No.2, Two Panels, 2001, 35 x 50 inches, gelatin silver print, unknown collection. Coplans, A Body 144-145.

Chapter 2

Carla Williams: the Body Politic of “Otherness”

As John Coplans, the African American photographer Carla Williams has almost exclusively photographed her own nude body through the years. Inspired by Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, Emmet Gowin, and Harry Callahan, whose “historical” photographs she admired for their “beauty, simplicity, and familiarity,”³⁵ she began to create private and charming pictures of herself. Beginning with a search for delicacy and intimacy in still images, Williams soon discovered the impact on the viewer caused by the display of her body: a nude and black body. In this chapter I shall explore the way Williams at once challenged the standards of beauty forced onto women regardless of their race and the general public’s perception of the black female body.³⁶ In some cases Williams confronted the viewers through references to history--as in the series How To Read Character--while in others she challenged the public through the representation of her body mutating over time--changing from a more “classical” beauty to a less standardized version of it. Always though, she produced work in response to the arbitrary standards of beauty imposed by the West, for which the ideal body is thin, muscular, hairless, and white.

³⁵ In her artist’s statement Williams refers to the work of the above mentioned photographers in the context of “photo history” (Carla Williams, “Artist’s Statement,” [carlagirl.net](http://www.carlagirl.net/photos.html), Sept. 2002, 10 Apr. 2004 <<http://www.carlagirl.net/photos.html>>).

³⁶ Even though I will use the word race to clarify some of the artist’s arguments, I actually agree with the widespread notion of race as a social and political construction rather than a reality.

Carla Williams was born in 1965 in Los Angeles, California. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Art and Archaeology and Visual Arts at Princeton University in New Jersey in 1986. She continued her education at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and received her Master of Arts in 1988 and her MFA, with a concentration in photography, in 1996.³⁷

Williams started to produce self-portraits in 1984--although until 1986 the nudes were not prevalent³⁸--and she declared that at the time her work "was never conscious of race and gender issues."³⁹ In the images she produced from 1984 to 1986, all shot with a large format camera and all untitled, she seemed to be looking for a way to express her deeper feelings (see Figs. 2.1-2-3-4). Her happiness, serenity, anger, and sadness are expressed through the lens as a survey of her emotional states. One of her professors, the eminent photographer Emmet Gowin, described the work in enthusiastic terms:

The photographs of Carla Williams are, all 80 of them, self-portraits and at the same time something more. Many are so vivid that you catch yourself wondering if you are "supposed" to be seeing them. A few are disturbing and all are disarmingly direct and intimate. Gradually, however, one realizes that these are *not* essentially self-portraits nor is self love or narcissism involved here. Rather, these are images that belong to a search for an emotional state of mind.⁴⁰

The work that the artist produced at the beginning of her career shares commonalities with her successive series. One of the recurring elements would be the exploration of her

³⁷ Considering that available research material on the artist is quite limited, these--from Williams's web site--are the only bits of biographical information I was able to locate.

³⁸ She writes about her work at the time: "I was an undergraduate photography major at Princeton University learning how to photograph when I made these pictures. From the start I was a lousy technician. I didn't even know how to use a 35mm camera my first semester." (Carla Williams, "Self-Portraits before 1986," [carlagirl.net](http://www.carlagirl.net), Sept. 2002, Apr. 10 2004 < <http://www.carlagirl.net/photos.html>>.

³⁹ Williams "Artist's Statement."

⁴⁰ These comments on Williams's works were part of a recommendation letter Emmet Gowin wrote for her in 1986 (Williams "Self-Portraits before 1986").

own body as the object of the gaze and “of desire.”⁴¹ The later work, however, would be less intuitive and increasingly more conscious and measured.

Around 1989, as a graduate student at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, Williams presented some of her self-portraits in a group critique. The response she received on that occasion deeply changed her approach to her work. In her 1989 statement she declared: “at that moment I realized that my body could never be simply formal, or emotional, or personal. Most viewers would always see a black body regardless of my intent.”⁴² This realization led the artist to produce a more complex body of work, tightly connected with the history of photographic representation of the female body. The first effort in this new direction was concretized in the series How To Read Character of 1990-1991, in which Williams’s body was represented in segments and in systematic reference to historical images. About this photo installation Williams declares, “Taking its title from a nineteenth century phrenological handbook by [itinerant phrenologists Lorenzo Niles] Fowler, the series sought to represent images based on historical texts and stereotypes about women, specifically, though not exclusively black women” (Fig. 2.5).⁴³ The mentioned book was one of the many publications, popular in the 1800’s, dealing with physical differences between human beings.⁴⁴ In these texts, Caucasian Europeans were posited as better proportioned and consequentially smarter.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Willis, Anthologie de la Photographie Africaine et de l’Océan Indien 388.

⁴² Williams “Artist’s Statement.”

⁴³ Williams “Artist’s Statement.”

⁴⁴ The science of physiognomy was used to categorize human beings into body types with specific features that supposedly indicated such characteristics as intelligence, personality and even social class. This science rationalized prejudice, discrimination, and racism.

⁴⁵ The absurdity of such theories is so great, that it is arduous to believe they could be considered scientific and accurate. For reference to these publications see Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past. Of particular relevance is the second chapter: “Historic Retrievals. Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth” (11-36).

Of a series of six large black and white gelatin silver prints, displayed in gilt frames, some depict Williams's head and others only parts of her body; all the images are untitled. The photographs, which have an average size of 5 x 4 feet, are paired with photocopy transfers of sections of the above-mentioned texts on phrenology and physiognomy--which could easily be described as scientifically racist books--and accompanied as well by so-called "scientific" illustrations.⁴⁶

Anthropological and scientific books dealing with diversity within humankind were numerous during the nineteenth century.⁴⁷ Williams chooses to accompany one of her pieces with images of Saartjie Baartman.⁴⁸ The story of this woman was one of the most renowned cases of "collaboration among mythmakers, scientists, and imagemakers" in creating a pseudo-scientific demonstration of the superiority of Caucasians over people of African descent.⁴⁹ This young African woman was literally exhibited, for her physical characteristics, in 1810 in London and Paris at parties and fairs,⁵⁰ and she was presented as the living manifestation of physical and intellectual inferiority by the writings of the well-known scientist Georges Cuvier, the sketches of Nicolas Huet le Jeune and Leon de Wailly (1815) and various anonymous caricatures (Figs. 2.6-7).⁵¹ Williams draws a

⁴⁶ The photocopy transfers measure 22 x 30 inches.

⁴⁷ One of these texts is in fact titled Types of Mankind, written by J.C. Nott and Geo. R. Gliddon and published by J.B. Lippincott and Co. in 1854.

⁴⁸ "Saartjie Baartman [...] was used and abused as a visual personification of myth: the myth of African difference and inferiority" (Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past 12). Baartman, a Khoi Khoi woman kidnapped in 1810 from South Africa to be exhibited as an example of a freakish Black Venus, was seen as unusual because of her particularly protruding buttocks and her prominent genitalia, the latter conserved in a jar for further "scientific" studies after her death and dissection. For more on the subject, also see Stephen Jay Gould, "The Hottentot Venus," Natural History 91.10 (1982): 20-27; and The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Times of Sara Baartman, dir. Zola Maseko, First Run Icarus Films, c.1998.

⁴⁹ Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past 11.

⁵⁰ Numerous publications reported these events through accounts and cartoons (See Fig. 2.7).

⁵¹ Another African American photographer, Renée Cox, inspired by this figure (who was also called *Hottentot Venus*) produced, in 1994, a photograph titled Hot En Tot. Similarly, another example analyzed by Lisa Gail Collins in her chapter "Confronting Visual Evidence and the Imaging of Truth" is used by

parallel with the representation of Baartman by displaying photographs of her own nude behind in profile, thus mimicking the pseudo-anthropological imagery (Fig. 2.8). The choice of this specific anatomical part is to be connected in particular with the supposed over-sexualization of the so-called Hottentot Venus due mostly to her large buttocks. Feminist scholar Michele Wallace writes in regard to this that the “representation of black women with large and fatty buttocks came to signify not only black women but all other categories of women, such as prostitutes, who were thought to be as sexually wanton as black women.”⁵² In other words, this body part has been used to identify the black female body as over-sexualized. The examples are numerous, Baartman and Josephine Baker being only the most renowned instances, and Williams, with her photograph, suggests that this attitude is still vivid today.⁵³

Another image in the series appears to refer directly to the sexualization of the black female nude. Here Williams is photographed in profile from head to thighs and her body is dotted with red push pins with handwritten letters on them (Fig. 2.9). The letters correspond to similar characters in the photocopy transfer, which define (both in the text and the drawing) various butcher’s cuts of a cow. The message is crystal clear: her body, nude, feminine and black, is like a piece of meat, an object ready for consumption.

One of the images that represents Williams’s head in profile shows her hair braided in small knobs (Fig. 2.10). Several push pins, numbered and lettered, are stabbed

another African American photographer, Carrie Mae Weems, in her 1995-96 series of thirty two monochrome C-Prints with sandblasted text on glass, titled From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried. Delia, an enslaved American-born young woman, daughter of plantation slaves born in Africa, was used as “proof” of white superiority by the research of Louis Agassiz (one of Cuvier’s pupils) and the photographs of J. T. Zealy (Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past 11-36).

⁵² Michele Wallace, “Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture,” Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures, ed. Russel Ferguson (Cambridge: MIT P, 1990) 45.

⁵³ Comments about the over-sexualization of Baker can be found in Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past 50-53.

into the photograph, approximately following brain sections described in the photocopy transfer of a diagram displayed below the photograph.⁵⁴ The reference to phrenology is here quite direct, because the dissected skull of the subject implies a judgmental reading of the character's capabilities and mental qualities. The text, which is very hard to read in the photocopy transfer--and even more so in the reproduction in books and on websites--seems to be about "definition." The images represent stylized heads--a larger one in right profile and three smaller in front, back, and left profile views--divided in sections in an attempt to "define" how the brain is organized and what every section contains. It clearly alludes to the notion of "intelligence," as these kinds of supposed empirical studies and graphing were used to "prove" blacks as intellectually inferior.

In a different piece, the photographer is represented facing the viewer (Fig. 2.11). Her expression is very confrontational, and the reference to the photocopy transfer, which reads "How to read the Character," suggests that the artist is challenging the spectator actually to attempt "to read [her] character." Williams looks sarcastically at the viewer, her chin up and proud eyes well fixed on the spectator, as if she were daring the public to guess her thoughts. She is no longer a passive spectator, but an active subject. The implicit statement is that it is not reasonable to believe that only by looking at the external feature of a person it is possible to determine their temperament and their personality. This is a very relevant issue, because it connects to the entire history of people of African descent. Even now, when racism and discrimination are often discussed as being part of the past, the bases of racism are connected to stereotypes: individuals are labeled exclusively according to their external appearance.

⁵⁴ In some cases the installation was set up so that the photocopy transfers were displayed beside the photographs rather than below them, as in the case of the installation in Fig. 2.5.

The combination of Williams's photographs with photocopy transfers results in a clear statement from the artist. In fact, using the "phrenological texts as labels for her self-portraits,"⁵⁵ Williams compares herself with the people described and pictured in these documents, openly emphasizing the analogy between the outspoken racist theories of the nineteenth century and the concealed racist perceptions of our time. Photography, even more than drawing, had been used to support anthropometric and anthropological theories, providing the readers of these texts with a more "objective" description of differences between races.⁵⁶ Williams's choice of old illustrations paired up with her photographic images makes even more apparent her suggestion that prejudices against people of color, in particular women, are still vivid.⁵⁷ In other words, Williams suggests to the viewer that the female black body is, at present, as objectified and despised as it was centuries ago: maybe not as openly, but in an equally wounding manner. Also, the artist is paying homage to the under-represented category of black female nudes.⁵⁸ She is finally bringing into a gallery, with proper lighting and golden frames, women of African descent, offering them the same reverence other subjects of art have always received. And she does so by using her own body as a symbol for an "other" body. About this work Collins writes:

By inserting her own body into history as both artist and model,
[Williams] offers viewers a rare image of an unclothed black woman who

⁵⁵ Willis, "Women's Stories/Women's Photobiographies" 84.

⁵⁶ "The term *anthropometry* was coined by the German physician Johann Elsholtz (1623-88) to describe a system of measurement he had devised to investigate the old Hippocratic proposition that there was an intrinsic relationship between body proportions and various diseases. [...] According to [a] new definition, *anthropometry* was seen to be primarily a system of measurement of the living human body to determine its respective proportion." Salah M. Hassan, ed., *Gendered Visions* (Trenton: Africa World P, 1997) 29.

⁵⁷ I realize the definition of "non-Caucasian" is quite vague, but, not referring only to African American or to people of African descent, it is probably the most appropriate.

⁵⁸ "The choice of representation [...] is intended to comment on the history of the formal portrait, especially the fact that certain subjects were not given this kind of aggrandizement and importance." (From Williams's statement in Willis, "Women's Stories/ Women's Photobiographies" 86).

is in her own studio and trying to define her own representation. Tellingly, she uses her body to inform and instruct.⁵⁹

Williams is in control of the camera, subject before object, and uses her position to raise awareness both of the general situation of African American women, underestimated and objectified, and of the lack, in the art world, of non-Caucasian artists and subjects of art pieces.⁶⁰

After this series, Williams's focus moved from the analysis of the self and the body centered on race and skin color, to an interest in the female body and the responses it creates when changing away from Western standards of beauty. In other words, in this later series of images, Williams's work was still about the body not fitting the current cultural standards of perfection imposed by the media, but in this case it was because of a lack, or insufficient level, of thinness and athleticism, very much like in Coplans's work. Williams's more recent work--photographs taken between 1992 and 1997—consists, in fact, of a series of nude self-portraits that could be defined as a sort of chronicle of her body's transformation: "through age, weight gain, and other changes on [her] appearance."⁶¹ Her images are deliberately posed, and, as suggested by Deborah Willis in her History of Black Photographers, "they draw inspiration from the photographic tableaux of nineteenth-century imagery and from cultural history."⁶² The reference is also to traditional portraiture, which so rarely has been used to depict black women. Here again, like in the series How To Read Character, Williams subtly polemicizes the absence

⁵⁹ Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past 27-28.

⁶⁰ Williams's writings, very often concentrating on the depiction of the female black body (often nude), are strongly connected with her photographic work. See "Hardcore: The Radical Self-Portraiture of the Black Female Bodybuilders," Picturing the Modern Amazon, eds. Joanna Frueh, Laurie Fierstein, and Judith Stein (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999) 104-116; and "The Erotic Image is Naked and Dark," Picturing Us, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: The New P, 1994) 128-134.

⁶¹ Williams "Artist's Statement."

⁶² Deborah Willis, Reflections in Black. A History of Black Photographers: 1940 to the Present (New York: Norton, 2000) 192.

of non-white subjects in the history of art, offering a classical and formal depiction of her nude body.

Venus (1994), for instance, represents Williams in a classical Marilyn Monroe-style pose. Her head is rolled back showing her sensuous neck, her eyes are closed, implicitly speaking of ecstasy or intense relaxation, and her long hair caresses her back (Fig. 2.12). Her body, full but defined, is very erotic. The subject, hidden by soft shadows and holding a curled up and intimate pose, avoids being objectified by self-consciously rejecting the viewer's gaze. Somebody could argue that it would be possible to read this image in the exact opposite way, wondering if Williams is here perpetuating, instead of undermining, stereotypes of nude beauties displayed for the consumption of a likely male audience. In many previous instances female artists have been misinterpreted when making use of their nude bodies and had clashing responses from critics and viewers. In some cases they created images using their nude bodies to reflect social stereotypes as imposed from without. In other cases, artists like Hannah Wilke attempted to locate personal pleasure and desire within those very stereotypes. Whether Williams identifies herself with Wilke's approach, or with that of the work of artists like Cindy Sherman or Martha Rosler--who insinuate through their images that there is always a certain impossibility to articulate female desire--or whether she simply exploits herself by narcissistically displaying her body could be a matter of long discussion.⁶³ However, because of the artist's previous work and her consistent effort throughout her career to

⁶³ Interesting in this context is the 1996 article by art critic and Assistant Professor of Cultural and Women's Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario Michelle Meagher "Would the Real Cindy Sherman Please Stand Up? Encounters between Cindy Sherman and Feminist Art Theory" (mentioned in the introduction of this thesis) questions the numerous reading of Sherman's work emphasizing its ambiguity and the constant doubt of whether she was perpetuating or undermining stereotypes in the representation of women.

visually promote women's ownership of their representation, and to condemn judgment of inferiority based on physical differences, I believe Williams is, in her self-portraits, actively a subject. In this image in particular, she demonstrates how the control of self-portraiture may transform a photograph. It is in fact her deliberate choice of photographing her nude self facing away from the spectator that makes her non-confrontational pose powerful instead of passive. The comments of critic Janell Hobson on this piece are quite insightful:

While the title of this portrait seems to evoke the "Hottentot Venus," we might recognize the older archetype of the Greco-Roman Venus, or perhaps the Black Venus, in which the "kallipygos" figure, known for her beautiful backside, also possesses the power to gaze from behind at her own buttocks and thus to reclaim her body as an erotic site of beauty and desirability. In *Venus*, Williams does not literally "look from behind"; instead she captures the image for her own gaze, and subsequently replicates this posture through the camera.⁶⁴

The way Williams poses reminds us of advertisements, of the typical depiction of beautiful women by the male-dominated world. But she is in control. She is the one who releases the shutter, develops the film, and makes the prints. In one of her articles she explains: "When I do disrobe I am the photographer as well as the subject, and I determine what is comfortable and what I want shown and what part of my body will communicate what part of my message."⁶⁵ Here Williams exhibits her body very consciously, communicating to the viewers a sense of privacy and self-contentment. The absence of clothing is a way for the subject to reveal herself fully, physically as well as psychologically. However it also makes references to vulnerability--avoided here by the power of the photographer taking pictures of herself--and recalls the position of African women, who during slavery were obliged to expose their bodies as models for

⁶⁴ Hobson 98.

⁶⁵ Williams, "The Erotic Image is Naked and Dark" 133.

“scientific” research. Once again, one could claim that the power of the photographer in charge of her own representation is not evident and that the woman in the image could have been coerced into posing for the voyeuristic pleasure of a male audience, as in the case of many nude female depictions in the history of art. Or it certainly could be possible that, despite the intention of the artist, her body on paper would be admired and objectified outside of the context she meant for it.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Williams’s writings, her art historical research, and the context of her work strongly suggest the very deliberate representation of her powerful self.

Nudity is also an important element that the artist uses to eliminate any temporal and social context. Against a bare background and without the reference of clothing, the body is the absolute center of focus and is to be judged in its most profound essence. There is however a noticeable difference between the way Williams and Coplans employed the white background. The latter, lighting the subject as to avoid any shadows, created a virtually sterile space. The body--with its creases, hair, and folds--and not the man, is the protagonist of the image. On the other hand, Williams, still using the same bare backdrop, modeled the light to create depth and drama. *Venus*, surrounded by dramatic shadows, is a person before being merely a body.

In my opinion the use of black and white film also contributes to making the photograph a depiction of a human being, where race and social background are unimportant. The tonal range of grays makes, in fact, the distinction of skin color challenging, especially in Williams’s case, her skin being not very dark or very light, as well as in the case of Laura Aguilar, whose work will be discussed in the next chapter.

⁶⁶ This last scenario is actually quite realistic, in fact in my interview with Williams she recalled she was contacted by a person who had visited her fine art web site and was asked if she would be interested in posing for lingerie advertisements. Carla Williams, personal interview, 19 Feb. 2005.

The absence of colors reduces the social and racial attributes of certain complexions and skin shades--especially when only one person is depicted--and gives an almost democratic veil to the scene, inducing the viewer to concentrate on content more than on the lavish and superficial aspects of the subjects represented.

It is obvious that issues of race are critical for the artist and that her desire to picture herself is closely tied with that of giving importance to neglected subjects--i.e. women of color. William's ultimate goal, in my opinion, is to depict a female black body as a human being, as important and worthy of notice. About her images Williams declares, "I hoped to convey a sense of transformation from individual to type through the relentlessness of the lens. Nonetheless, I think [my photographs] managed to be very personal and idiosyncratic, not "types" at all."⁶⁷ As for Coplans and Aguilar, Williams wants to depict her body both as her own and as a universal symbol of "atypical" beauty. Only so would the viewers be able to identify with Williams, a unique and specific woman, by recognizing themselves in the "Type" she represents. One may argue that "typing"--meaning "to represent beforehand as a type [or] to represent in term of typical characteristics: TYPIFY"⁶⁸--may have racial or racist implication. However, it is Williams's exploration of her figure, first through her individuality and then by typecasting it, which allowed her to offer to the viewers an original representation of the black female body.⁶⁹

The next images, produced between 1991 and 1997, are more ghostly and in some ways less accessible (Figs. 2.13-14). Williams here turns her back to the spectator, and

⁶⁷ Williams "Self-Portraits before 1986."

⁶⁸ "Typing," *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, 10th ed., 2002.

⁶⁹ Williams chooses to represent her body in a very feminine, sexy pose, which could be seen as "typical" of a beautiful woman. It is through her fullness and blackness that she renders her unique and original beauty.

the painterly quality of the prints makes them dreamy and evanescent. In the first, we recognize the artist's buttocks and flowing hair on her shoulders (Fig. 2.13). The left arm is lifted, and the right side of her body is washed away by the bright light. We can still distinguish her sensuous and round forms, but once again we are denied her gaze, and we are obliged to guess her outline dissolving in the blurred and misty composition. The next piece is much darker, and the image, although muddy, is more clearly defined (Fig. 2.14). Williams is still sitting facing the wall opposite the camera, her arms are stretched along her body and her hair is up. It is unclear if it is actually shorter or braided around her head. Her body appears heavier, and her form less feminine.⁷⁰ The sole fact of revealing her plump arms and back, and not her hair, strips her of her sensuous femininity.

This is another relevant aspect of Williams's photographs: the analysis of how her appearance altered in time. Over the years her body changed from fitting the imposed standards of beauty--though she realized that her blackness made her "other" to the viewers' eyes--to moving away from it. With the representation of a voluptuous and aging body and short hair she confronted our society's ideals of beauty. One more time, and on another level, she contested the debatable values of the West. "Other" as black, or as a woman, or as an extra-large size, she presents her body in a very confrontational way.⁷¹

The next image actually represents only Williams's hands: she is holding her cut braids in the center of the frame, almost as an offering, seemingly in an act of humility.

⁷⁰ In particular her waist line is not as defined as would be "proper" according to the previously described Western standards of beauty.

⁷¹ Carla Williams "permet également à l'observateur d'explorer la notion "d'objet de desire" en photographiant son corps à différents stades de sa vie." (Loosely translated as "Carla Williams lets the observer explore the notion of 'object of desire' by photographing her body at different stages of her life"). This is how Deborah Willis describes the photographer's work in "Portrait de la Photographie noire aux États-Unis" 388.

The assumption that the tresses held by Williams are her own comes from the next picture, where she has short hair, and from the understanding of her work as an opus dedicated to the sole exploration of her own body (Fig. 2.15). However, in this picture, differently from many of her other images, the artist does not display the rest of her body. She seems interested in making a statement. The hair she holds represents, in my opinion, the only remaining symbol of her attachment to the Western world's judgment. It is useful, in observing this image, to keep in mind how the symbolism of hair is crucial in African and African American culture. For instance, critic Kobena Mercer, whose varied work on the politics of representation in African diasporic visual arts, suggests that "hair functions as a key 'ethnic signifier' because, compared with bodily shape or facial features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices."⁷² Complex hair styles carry specific meanings and have long been the subject of social and cultural studies as well as of art works.⁷³

With her photographs Williams responds with a decisive refusal of our society's requirements, according to which women, in order to be acceptable, need to look a certain way, to be a certain size, and to appear permanently young. She uses her own body to revolutionize these principles, offering a vision of herself changing over time. The images are, at once, timeless and articulated by the passage of time. The frozen

⁷² Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," *plm* 125 (2000): 69.

⁷³ For more on studies on the symbolism and importance of hair in African and African American culture see also, Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's, 2001); Paul Dash, "Black hair, culture, politics, and change," *International Journal* (2006); Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End P, 1992); Noliwe Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African-American Women* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1996); and Judith Wilson, "Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women's Art," *The International Review of African American Art* 11.3 (1994): 11-17. About Lorna Simpson, one of the best known artists who used hair as the main subject of a photographic series, see Thelma Golden, *Lorna Simpson* (London: Phaidon, 2002); and Deborah Willis, *Lorna Simpson* (San Francisco: Friends of Photography, 1992).

atmosphere and the absence of reference to location or socio-economical environment are counterbalanced by the evidence of passage of time on the subject's body.

In the last untitled on this series, the artist is looking directly into our eyes (Fig. 2.16). Her body is larger than in the previous photographs. Folds of flesh are visible around her waist and her hair is short and nappy. Williams's expression is angry: she seems to address the viewer with a confrontational "like it or leave it." The braids we saw in the previous image are gone; Williams is not here to titillate the viewers, but to confront them. She is in front of the camera to be true to herself, however her external appearance has changed. In the words of Deborah Willis:

She challenges the viewer to explore changing notions of beauty and desirability. As both object and director of the gaze, Williams examines the issues of responsibility and identity in the image-making process.⁷⁴

Williams addresses in her photographs the canons imposed by our society. First she touches on her experience of being an African American, as well as the active subject and object of her images, then she explores another aspect of herself: her femininity. In this case she shares concerns with women of all races, matters that deal with standards of beauty which are based on unfounded and illogical canons.⁷⁵

Beginning with a personal exploration of her body, continuing her research in relation to history, Williams concluded the circle of her work by going back to the self. Her later photographs demonstrate the artist's attempt to come to terms with her own

⁷⁴ Willis, Reflections in Black. A History of Black Photographers: 1940 to the Present 192.

⁷⁵ In this regard I find of interest an anecdote mentioned by Williams during the interview I conducted. "There was an exhibition of Carrie Mae Weems in New York, there was a bunch of art historians, all of them black women, and their attitude towards the picture was that Carrie's body was no longer young and attractive, so they just kind of dismiss it, they were embarrassed for her, her body was no longer tight – that's what I think they said – that it was just embarrassing for them to see her and they would not deal with the picture. I will never forget that, I thought how can that be that, particularly this group of women, this group of art historians, could be so dismissive of these images, that are not about surface and beauty." Williams, personal interview.

body and to educate the viewers about a more universal consideration of beauty in art and in the human figure. For several years she was no longer an active image maker but continued through writings her investigation about photography and women of color. The reasons that induced her to abandon an active role in picture-making were both an aversion to the prosaic commercially driven art world and the very practical lack of funding necessary to pursue a traditional artistic career. At present, Williams is in the process of producing two new separate photographic bodies of work, one about the women in her family, the other about the notion of a changing beauty, expressed once again through self-portraiture. The latter project consists of the juxtaposition of self-portraits taken in the early nineties with others made in the present day.⁷⁶ The recent photographs show the changes that have occurred in Williams's body-- she sees herself as older and heavier--and she explained that her intent is to "address this kind of censorship that is apparently taking place around certain kind of images."⁷⁷

In this regard, Williams talks about how, when still in graduate school, she was influenced by one of her teachers, photographer Anne Noggle, whose work consists mostly of portraits and self-portraits about aging. The artist comments on the fact that the stronger impact of Noggle's work and her teaching evolved over time as the attention to the aging body was something she better related to as she grew older. Williams's work, while still focused on the under-representation of people of color in photography, began to concentrate on issues of age and appearance as well.

⁷⁶ The images, digitalized and sharing the same frame, are similarly constructed. Williams's body is positioned as it was in the earlier images, and the lighting mimics the older work.

⁷⁷ Williams, personal interview. Because the most recent work is still in process, I did not have the chance to analyze it in person, nor do I consider it appropriate to include in the table of images the few digital reproductions of two series in progress. My description of the work is solely derived from the conversation I had with the artist.

Like Coplans and Aguilar, Williams challenged the imposed canon of beauty. As seen in the previous chapter, Coplans used art historical references to comment on the under-represented old and decaying body, while Williams, through historical phrenological texts and allusions to the absence of black bodies from photographic history, comments on non-white and not-slender bodies. Both utilized photographic self-portraiture to explore the representation of unconventional bodies and the cultural perception of what, in art and advertising, is not considered “standard” in terms of physical appearance.

Carla Williams’s work, in order to be fully understood, needs to be read on different levels, and this is where its complexity lies. The artist confronts the viewers, bringing back historical memories of racism as a way to fight it, and at the same time deals with the female body, objectified and constricted by meaningless standards of perfection.⁷⁸ She deals with concerns about race, gender, age, and size, at times focusing on one of these aspects, at others concentrating on all of them in the same work. Williams’s photographs make us reflect on the structures of society, while enchanting us with beautiful a-historical images.

⁷⁸ Often in the case of politically engaged art work, in particular about racism, there is the possibility that a certain way to approach the issues could be considered wrong. For instance Williams’s appealing to history to overcome racial discrimination could be seen as perpetuating the problem. However her work--warning the viewer on the possibility of falling back in the same pattern--makes it difficult to forget a painful past otherwise easily bound to repeat itself.

Images



Figs. 2.1 and 2.2. Carla Williams, Untitled, 1984-1986, 4 x 5 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Williams "Self-Portraits before 1986."



Figs. 2.3 and 2.4. Carla Williams, Untitled, 1984-1986, 4 x 5 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Williams "Self-Portraits before 1986."



Fig. 2.5. Carla Williams, Installation view of How to Read Character, 1990-1991. Willis, "Women's Stories/Women's Photobiographies" 178.

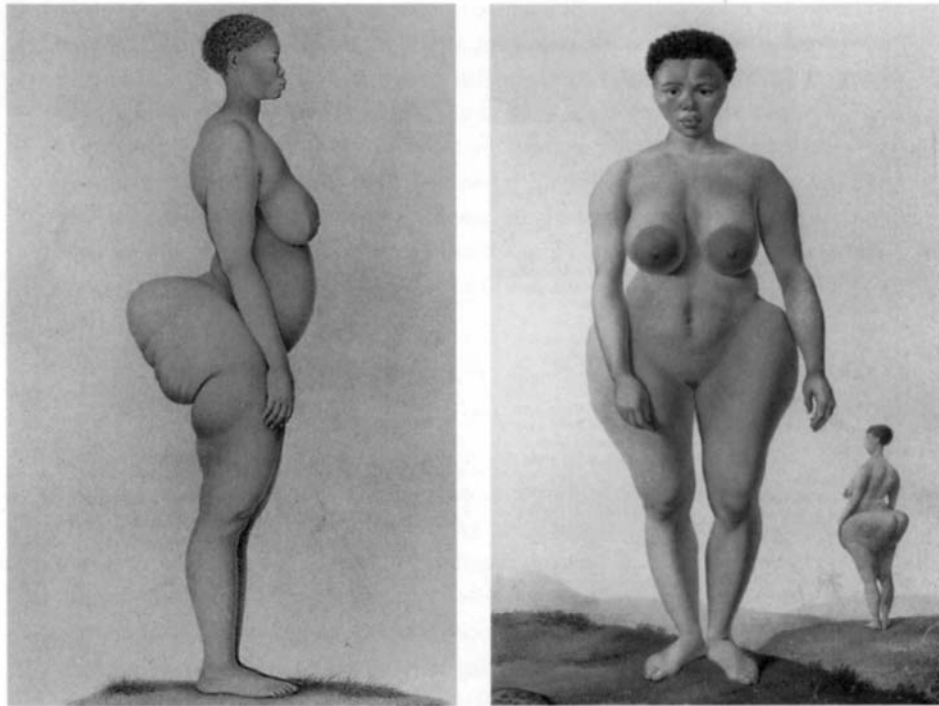


Fig. 2.6. Nicolas Huet le Jeune and Leon de Wailly, Saartjie Baartam, 1815, size unknown, Watercolor on vellum, Bibliotheque Central du Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris. Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past 15.

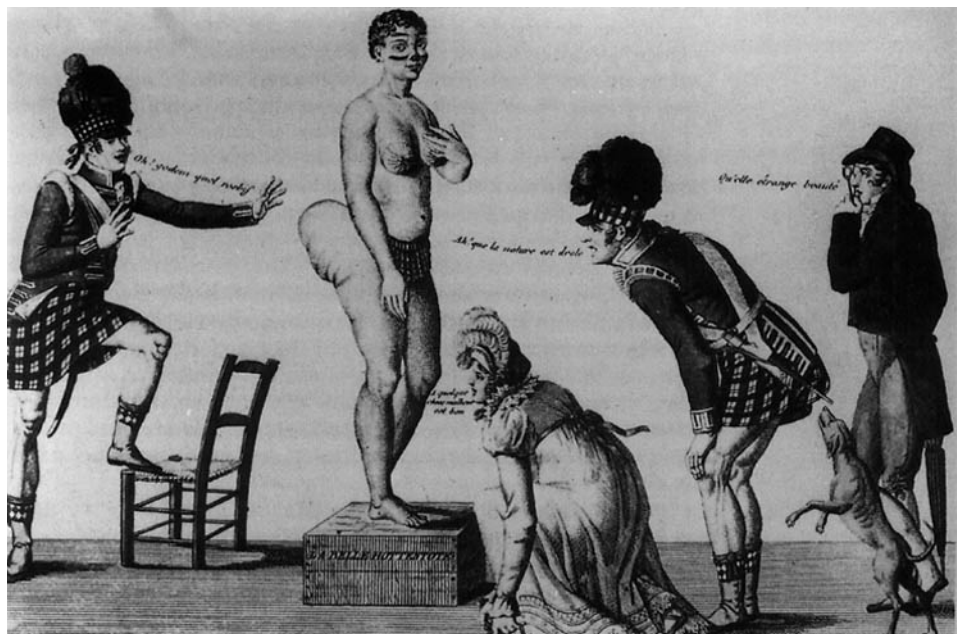
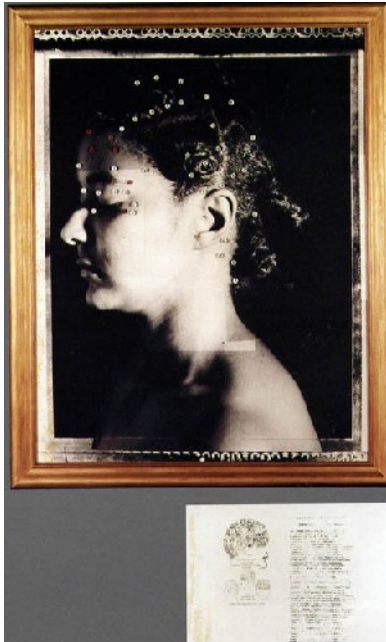


Fig. 2.7. Artist Unknown, La Belle Hottentote, Date, size, and collection unknown, Cartoon. Collins, The Art of History: African American Women Artist Engage the Past 14.



Figs. 2.8 and 2.9. Carla Williams, *Untitled from How to Read a Character*, 1990-91, photographs 5 x 4 feet, photocopy transfer 22 x 30 inches, gilt frames, gelatin silver prints, photocopy transfer, and push-pins, artist's collection. Willis, "Women's Stories/Women's Photobiographies" 179-180.



Figs. 2.10 and 2.11. Carla Williams, *Untitled from How to Read a Character*, 1990-91, photographs 5 x 4 feet, photocopy transfer 22 x 30 inches, gilt frames, gelatin silver prints, photocopy transfer, and push-pins, artist's collection. Willis, "Women's Stories/Women's Photobiographies" 181.



Fig. 2.12. Carla Williams, Venus, 1994, 16 x 20 inches, toned gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Jeffrey Hoone, "Carla Williams," Contact Sheet 94 (1998):13.



Fig. 2.13. Carla Williams, Untitled, 1991-1997, 16 x 20 inches, toned gelatin silver print. Williams, "Untitled Self-Portraits 1992-1997."



Figs. 2.14 and 2.15. Carla Williams, Untitled, 1991-1997, 16 x 20 inches, toned gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Williams "Untitled Self-Portraits 1992-1997."



Fig. 2.16. Carla Williams, Untitled, 1991-1997, 16 x 20 inches, toned gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Hoone 16.

Chapter 3

Laura Aguilar: An Unconventional and Political Body in Nature

The Chicano photographer Laura Aguilar, born in the United States but still strongly connected to her Mexican heritage, explores through her images the world of “others.” Like Coplans and Williams, she mostly uses her own unconventional body as the subject of poetic and beautiful black and white photographs. It is her self-portraiture, classical and formally stunning and at the same time politically challenging, in which I am particularly interested, and which I will investigate in this chapter. These images seem to be a synthesis of Aguilar’s sense of beauty, her need to disclose to viewers what is behind the restricted acceptance margins of Western societies, and her “coming to terms with [an oversized] body.”⁷⁹ It is important to clarify, however, that Aguilar’s representation--and beautification--of her large body is not an attempt to glorify obesity *per se*. In fact, she is well aware of the health issues concerning her weight.⁸⁰ Ultimately, with her photographs, she does not aestheticize the obese body, but she simply represents, through aesthetically engaging images, self-acceptance of her own body, a body considered unusual as a subject of the fine arts because it clashes with Western aesthetic sensibility.

Laura Aguilar was born in San Gabriel, California, in 1959 and currently lives and works in Rosemead, outside Los Angeles. Although mostly a self-taught

⁷⁹ Dan R. Goddard, “The Human Body as a Part of Nature,” San Antonio Express-News 12 Oct. 2003: 8J.

⁸⁰ Goddard 8J.

photographer, she did study at East Los Angeles Community College and continued with The Friends of Photography Workshop and Santa Fe Photographic Workshop. Her work has been widely exhibited both in the United States and in Europe (in England, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Denmark, and Germany). Among the most prominent venues have been the International Venice Biennale of 1993, the Smithsonian Institution's International Gallery in Washington, D.C., the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, the Los Angeles Photography Center, and the International Center of Photography in New York City.⁸¹ She has received numerous grants--probably the most prestigious from the Getty Foundation--and participated in a number of artists-in-residence programs.

Aguilar, a third generation Mexican-American, puts her life in her photographs, producing almost exclusively portraiture.⁸² When she does not depict herself, she represents her "extended family,"⁸³ friends and acquaintances who are mostly part of minorities--Latinos, people of color, and members of the gay community--basically people who share with her the experience of being "other." At the beginning of her career, Aguilar only portrayed these individuals, normally "under-represented in mainstream culture,"⁸⁴ and only later did she decide to represent her own personal experience of being "other": "self-identified lesbian, audio-dyslexic, Chicana, 'plus

⁸¹ The International Center of Photography exhibition, titled "Only Skin Deep: Changing Vision of The American Self," ran from December 12, 2003 to February 29, 2004. Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds., Only Skin Deep: Changing Vision of the American Self (New York: Abrams, 2003).

⁸² Mexican American on her father's side, Aguilar is also half Irish-American on her mother's side. Having grown up in southern California, she identifies herself more with her father's origins.

⁸³ Harmony Hammond 84-85.

⁸⁴ "Press Release: Laura Aguilar," Artpace.org, 15 May 1999, 2 February 2004 <<http://www.artpace.org/whatsnew/>>.

sized' woman.”⁸⁵ Aguilar declared in an interview, “I am a direct descendent of the Chicano movement of the 1960’s. Someone once said to me you are what you identify yourself to be. ... I chose to be, among other things, a Chicana.”⁸⁶ Aguilar can certainly be defined as a Chicana, and this is especially true in her earlier work, in which she deals with her community and her immediate surroundings, and through her images she makes a clear political statement about the ghettoization of minorities.⁸⁷ She has various points in common with her Chicano colleagues,⁸⁸ such as a strong engagement with sociopolitical issues, to a certain extent the reclamation of her cultural identity and the choice of themes related to alienation.⁸⁹ Visible in her work are the commitment to matters dealing with society, the relationship between members of different communities, and gender and race struggle. This is noticeable especially in her exploration of little investigated subject matters, such as overweight, gay, and “colored” people. Also the scale of her images, which occasionally are “mural-size,” may be seen as a reference to certain aspects of the Mexican artistic legacy, specifically to Muralism. In other words,

⁸⁵ A. M. Rousseau, “The Empress Has No Clothes,” [amrousseau.com](http://www.amrousseau.com), 8 February 2004 <<http://www.amrousseau.com/articles/photometro10.html>>.

⁸⁶ Laura Blaszkiewicz, “Laura Aguilar,” *Woman to Woman* (Century Cable Television, The Rock, CA): Kick Up Your Heels Productions, 1992, qtd. in Yarbro-Bejarano, “Laying It Bare: The Queer/Colored Body in Photography by Laura Aguilar,” *Living Chicana Theory*, ed. Carla Mari Trujillo (Berkeley: Third Woman P, 1998) 301.

⁸⁷ “When we speak of Chicano artists, we refer to the creative people of Mexican ancestry living in the United States who have sought to develop, often in collaboration with their communities, culturally relevant aesthetic alternatives to current mainstream definitions.” (Philip Brookman, “Looking for Alternatives: Notes of Chicano Art, 1960-90,” *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery, U of California, 1991) 181.

⁸⁸ Here I am not referring to specific Chicano artists, but to the general artistic “traits” recurrent in art works created by self-defined Chicanos.

⁸⁹ It is important to notice that while Aguilar’s reclamation of a lesbian identity and of her womanhood despite her weight are more easily detectable in her work, respectively in her early work and in the later series, her repossession of her Mexican-American cultural identity is mostly known from her declarations in interviews and from her artist’s statements.

many of the points of focus of Chicana artists suggested by scholar and artist Amalia Mesa-Bains⁹⁰ can be recognized in Aguilar's work.

In my opinion, however, there is an important difference between her work and that of other Chicana artists, and that is her self-definition as a lesbian. To be more precise, Aguilar defines herself as Chicana "among other things."⁹¹ Speaking about her Latina Lesbian series (1986-1990), she declared that "within the Lesbian and Gay community of Los Angeles, people of color are yet another hidden *subculture* (the italics are mine),"⁹² and, as added by artist and feminist critic Harmony Hammond, the Chicano and gay community are "not always receptive of each other."⁹³ Finally, the subject of estrangement in Aguilar's work is relative to her being both Mexican American and lesbian, in other words a minority in the minority.

Aguilar worked on her Latina Lesbian series between 1986 and 1990. Three examples of photographs from this series are a self-portrait of Aguilar, who considers herself as falling into this category, an untitled work, and Carla (Figs. 3.1-2-3). With this group of images, Aguilar demonstrates her interest in giving a voice to her community of "others." She is not concerned with the description of distinct characters for their specific individualities, but it is through various examples of persons that she depicts the strength and the empowerment of a definite group of people: "Latina Lesbians." The women she photographs, Carla for instance, face the camera with confidence and talk about themselves with pride. They are not afraid of exposing their otherness, and they do so through their body language and facial expressions. In addition to the images, Aguilar

⁹⁰ In her chapter "El Mundo femenino: Chicana Artists of the Movement – A Commentary On Development and Production," Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985 131-140.

⁹¹ See note 86.

⁹² Aguilar quoted by Harmony Hammond. Harmony Hammond 84.

⁹³ Harmony Hammond 84.

displays a portion of text handwritten by the sitters, thus making the communication with the audience multifaceted and layered.⁹⁴ Through her subjects Aguilar deals with issues related to Mexican heritage, with family values--even though somewhat altered by an alternative sexual orientation--with the “neighborhood” which Aguilar shares, and certainly with a social critique of a western, straight, white society.

In Aguilar’s series Clothed/Unclothed, which she started in 1990, many of the same considerations reappear, with an important variation: the nude. The photographs, taken in a studio setting with a dark background, are displayed as in diptychs. The subjects, often in the same position, are dressed in the left hand image and undressed in the one on the right. About this series, painter Margaret Lazzari writes:

Aguilar expands the range of what is considered normal, to include a broad variety of races, body types, and sexual orientations. Her photos extend the boundaries of ‘beautiful’ and thus reveal beauty in those who make mainstream straight white culture uncomfortable.⁹⁵

The subjects of these photographs are “unusual families,” people who are part of Aguilar’s life, individuals who, probably because of their acquaintance with the artist, seem unusually at ease in the presence of the camera. Each of the final diptychs is the result, in Aguilar’s mind, of the collaboration between herself and the subjects.⁹⁶ The socio-political strength of these images stands in their subversion of the traditional idea of family. In the images of this series, the subjects, always two or more, seem to emulate traditional family group photographs. In Cheri and Sue (1994) two women, one of whom is pregnant, pose for the camera showing an evident affection for each other (Fig. 3.4). In

⁹⁴ In this regard Aguilar writes in a statement: “I have dyslexia, so reading, writing, and understanding is very frustrating. Most of the women used handwriting, which is even more difficult to figure out. It has been and continues to be quite a challenge, but when I see the series of work, I get a great deal of satisfaction.” Laura Aguilar, “Artist statement,” [sla.purdue.edu](http://www.sla.purdue.edu), 2 Feb. 2004 <<http://www.sla.purdue.edu/WAAW/Corinne/Aguilar.htm>>.

⁹⁵ Lazzari quoted in Diana Emery Hulick, “Profile: Laura Aguilar,” Latin American Art 5.3 (1993): 54.

⁹⁶ Aguilar “Artist statement.”

Untitled # 2 (1994), a man and two women pose together (Fig. 3.5). It is unclear what relationship binds them, but it is quite obvious, from their stance and the simple fact that in one of the paired pictures they are posing together naked, that there is a strong closeness between them. The readings of this body of work can be numerous and diverse, however I shall concentrate on the aspects of this work that best relate to Aguilar's most recent images.⁹⁷ One of the most significant factors to consider is the representation of the nude body, which will be systematic in Aguilar's oeuvre from this series forward. Even though the viewers may be unable to resolve the ambiguity of the relationship among the subjects, they will sense the subjects' playful attitude and ease with each other and the photographer, as they appear revealing themselves fully, physically as well as psychologically. With her nude self-portraits, Aguilar discloses herself in a similar way, coming to terms with her body and connecting with the natural world.

One of Aguilar's first nude self-portraits, In Sandy's Room (1989-1990), was the artist's first conscious attempt to present herself openly to the viewer (Fig. 3.6). The artist is depicted resting on an armchair parallel to a very large window visible on her left side and a portable fan is in front of her. Writer and Spanish Professor Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano describes the image in relation to the new feeling of ease that Aguilar experienced after being long uncomfortable in showing her body. In particular, she writes about the relation of the image to verses by poet Nikki Giovanni:

The text captures many of the key aspects of Aguilar's esthetic project (looking at the self, question of identity, the (blurred) boundary between

⁹⁷ For more information regarding the Clothed/Unclothed series, see Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, Art, Women, California 1950-2000 (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002) 254-255; Harmony Hammond 84-85; Yarbrow-Bejarano 289-292.

the private and the public, the relationship between the subject and the viewer, the vulnerability of “opening up”).⁹⁸

The subject is relaxed and comfortable, which can be seen from her expression and the posture of her body, and she seems open to the viewer as the window is open to the public sphere. She does not have any clothes on, but her nakedness is not accidental. This is not a candid shot of a woman, who, caught by a sudden heat wave, is surprised by a hidden camera. Aguilar is holding the cable release with her left hand, and thus possesses the power to decide to show her body, herself, to the world. Her decision, after the first reproduction on sixteen-by-twenty-inch enlarging paper, to print the photograph to mural scale (three by five feet) three years later, seems to reflect the same concerns. She is well aware of the effect of showing her nudity⁹⁹ and of being oversize, but she wants to show that she is in control of her life, her body, and her feelings. She wants to demonstrate this powerfully. Her size, in our culture--and even more in California, cradle of Baywatch's blond Barbie dolls--has been something to hide rather than to display. Aguilar, however, does not give herself up completely; in fact her gaze is not directed towards the spectator.¹⁰⁰ In Sandy's Room is Aguilar's first step towards a daring display of her body, which symbolically represents what is unaccepted and unwanted in Western society.

⁹⁸ Here Yarbrow-Bejarano reports Aguilar's description of how she overcame her embarrassment of posing nude by repeating Nikki Giovanni's verses. Yarbrow-Bejarano 287-288.

⁹⁹ This is particularly valid in a society where nakedness is often associated with pornography, or at least with eroticism and dirtiness.

¹⁰⁰ The power of the gaze is a subject often discussed in art theory. The idea that staring at the viewer--or in the case of photographs, into the camera--could help the subject from being objectified has been developed especially in Feminist theory and criticism. For instance Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock, eds., Dealing with Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision (New York: Universe, 1992); Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson, eds., Dirty Looks : Women, Pornography, Power (London: BFI, 1993); Steven Z. Levine, "Manet's Olympia," Art Journal 52.4 (1993): 87-9; Mulvey 14-38.

Aguilar's newest series--Nature Self-Portrait, Stillness, Motion, and Center on which she started to work in the late 1990's--concentrate mostly on self-portraiture.¹⁰¹ Once more the artist exposes her nude body, thus challenging the Western concept of beauty shaped by the classical ideal of physical perfection. The new element in these more recent series is the contextual setting of the picture, which is not a sterile photographic studio, as in Clothed/Unclothed, or a domestic interior, as in the Latina Lesbian series and in In Sandy's Room, but nature. Also, the new work seems to be less directly political. This is partly because the artist ceases to represent her community--which is composed, as previously mentioned, of a quite diverse agglomerate of minorities--in order to represent only her own body.¹⁰² Another element that makes this work a less blatant comment on society and gender politics is the choice of abandoning the urban setting for what I consider a more "spiritual" environment. Being away from the city, and therefore physically apart from the social issues that characterize life in it, makes the work more detached and subtle. In these new series, Aguilar seems primarily concerned with formal elements and with a classical idea of beauty that she will revolutionize by offering a new vision, a revised aesthetic. By overthrowing a common notion of beauty, as she has done all along with her other works, the artist maintains, at least partly, her political agenda, although here she privileges the formal aspect of the composition. Also, positioning her body in nature, Aguilar, differently than Coplans, takes the attention off the minute details of the folds of her flesh and the chubbiness of

¹⁰¹ However, some of the most recent images, from the series Stillness and Motion, include other nude female models. More on the matter will be covered on page 79.

¹⁰² The exception is in the series where Aguilar photographs herself in the company of one or a few other women, also naked and, therefore, almost completely socially unidentifiable. The use of black and white prints contributes to an unclear racial classification of the subjects, making the distinction of skin color harder (in this case in particular, being that the subjects are not particularly pale or dark).

her forms. The spectator's eye is captured by her rendition of an arid natural setting, a theatrical backdrop for the representation of the human form. Coplans, on the other hand, eliminated any reference to time or location--hence eliminating any mood--forcing the viewer to analyze every inch of his unsympathetically presented body. While Coplans wanted to shock and violently shake the spectators' fear of the natural course of age and physical decay, Aguilar wants to share a vision of a body that can be, in spite of its differences, in harmony with the world.

The first series in which Aguilar positions her body directly in a landscape is Nature Self-Portrait (1996), a project on which she worked while at the Santa Fe Workshop. Her nude body, immersed in nature and blending into the scenery, ceases to be solely a human form. This is not to say that her forms are abstracted to the point where they are not recognizable. On the contrary, Aguilar's body, like the boulders and the arid plants, seems to be a necessary element of the landscape. The artist is not troubled when showing her sagging flesh, instead she seems more concerned with making the link between humans and nature more evident. Art critic Bill Smith, in an article, writes:

Aguilar is neither short nor thin. In fact, by fashion-magazine standards, her ample form would be considered obese, perhaps even grotesque. But is she beautiful? And to what extent does that matter? These are questions that Aguilar's work asks her viewers to confront. Through her photography, in which the artist herself is the primary model, she puts forth her own notions of the classic nude — its form, its purpose, its audience.¹⁰³

The artist is attempting to use the curves and valleys of her body to her advantage. Body and nature in her images are similar, they mirror each other. We admire the natural scenery--rivers, mountains, depressions--and find them beautiful, and Aguilar, in her own

¹⁰³ Bill Smith, "The Natural: Laura Aguilar, in the Flesh," [billsmithonline.com](http://www.billsmithonline.com), 4 Mar. 2004, <<http://www.billsmithonline.com/redbarn/>>.

way, emulates the long tradition of mostly male landscape photographers, such as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston.¹⁰⁴

From the birth of the medium, male photographers have been very interested in the subject of landscape, and they have been largely the primary executors of this art form. An interesting suggestion about male domination in landscape photography--which has been and still fundamentally is an all male "territory"--comes from critic Deborah Bright, who, in a popular essay first published in 1985, writes that, "The image of the lone, male photographer-hero, like his prototypes, the explorer and hunter, venturing forth into the wilds to capture the virgin beauty of Nature, is an enduring one."¹⁰⁵

Moreover in addition to excluding female artists from the production of landscape photographs, male artists soon started to use female bodies in nature as the object of their images.¹⁰⁶ Women were therefore not only excluded from the production, but also blended with nature in images of both the body *in* the landscape and the body *as* landscape. The objectification of the naked female body was accompanied by voyeurism and sexualization of the subjects. A good example of this kind of imagery is *Italy* (1993), by photographer Lucien Clergue, who, as suggested by curator and critic William A. Ewing, "has always felt the need to underline the traditional association of women's bodies with nature: his model's voluptuous curves mirror ripples in the sand, rock pods,

¹⁰⁴ A comprehensive discussion of landscape photography and its most famous practitioners exceeds the limits of this chapter and this thesis; for more on the subject I suggest the following: David P. Peeler, *The Illuminating Mind in American Photography: Stieglitz, Strand, Weston, Adams* (Rochester: U of Rochester P, 2001); Gilles Mora, ed., *Edward Weston: Forms of Passion* (New York: Abrams, 1995); Anne Hammond, *Ansel Adams : Divine Performance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2002); and John R. Stilgoe, *Landscape and Images* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Deborah Bright, "Of Mother Nature and Malboro Man: An Inquiry into the Cultural Meanings of Landscape Photography," *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography*, ed. Richard Bolton (Cambridge: MIT P, 1989) 344.

¹⁰⁶ Photographer Imogen Cunningham was among the few female artists, contemporary to Weston, to photograph nudes--however both male and female--in the landscape. For more on the artist see Manfred Heiting, ed., *Imogen Cunningham* (Cologne, Ger.: Taschen, 2001).

and waves.”¹⁰⁷ The nude curves of the normative bodies of the models, surely formally engaging, are very sensuous and meant to titillate the viewer (Fig. 3.7).

Aguilar follows and mocks this genre all at the same time. Her body in nature is far from the lush and erotic images by Weston--for instance one of the famous images of his series of Nude on Dunes (1939) representing a very dark-skinned African American woman¹⁰⁸--and Clergue, and does not correspond to the beauty ideals offered in advertisement, for instance in images like Nude in the Desert (1948) by commercial photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe (Figs. 3.8-9).¹⁰⁹ The difference is in the type of body displayed and the way the body is treated as object or subject. Also, Aguilar interacts with the tradition of landscape photography in her role of both author and subject of the photographs, playing with the supposedly “innate” affinity of women with nature. Being the author of natural imagery and at the same time *being* nature and political being, Aguilar makes us reconsider the established notion, reported by Bright in her article, that “men *choose* to interact with nature and bend it to their will, while women simply *are* nature and cannot define themselves in opposition to it.”¹¹⁰ In fact, the artist’s deep

¹⁰⁷ William A. Ewing, The Body: Photographs of the Human Forms (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1994) 217.

¹⁰⁸ Weston’s subject, a non-white and voluptuous woman, would not normally be considered a typical beauty in the West, however her lush sensuality is inarguable. Also, about Weston’s nudes, scholar Miles Orvell writes “Weston’s nudes were no less sensual than his peppers, but here the photographer had the advantage of being able to pose his more pliable subject in shapes that reinvented the human figure, making it unfamiliar in its beauty. Focusing intently on the intimate forms of plants, rocks, spiders’ webs, trees, and nudes, Weston, along with Strand, was revealing ‘thingness’ of natural things.” Miles Orvell, American Photography (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford UP, 2003) 100. It is interesting how many admirers of Weston’s work do admit his representation of women--human beings--as *things*.

¹⁰⁹ The subject of the female nude in nature in fine arts was soon followed by the display of the same subject in advertisements. Louise Dahl-Wolfe in Nude in the Desert quotes Edward Weston’s nudes in the desert, but makes the image--and the sophisticated white slender woman in it--the object of a commercial driven time, rather than simply the target of pure voyeurism. One could argue that being the photographer above mentioned a woman, she would have had the freedom to represent other kind of beauty types in her images. However, the world of Fashion and Advertisement is, to this day, very strict in imposing beauty standards to the photographers as well as to the public.

¹¹⁰ Bright 345.

connection with the natural landscape does not prevent her from actively seeking nature as subject and backdrop of her images.

In Nature Self-Portrait # 3 the viewer is faced with Aguilar's back (Fig. 3.10). Her buttocks in the foreground are abstracted by the harsh lighting, and the play of shadows and light between her legs and rear end is repeated in the earth depression in the background. She is facing away from the viewer, both figuratively and literally. As in In Sandy's Room, Aguilar denies her gaze to the viewer--as a way of fighting the long tradition of objectified female nudes subjected to the predominantly male gaze--by literally gazing into the earth, the ultimate symbol of powerful femininity.

In the next work in the series, Nature Self-Portrait # 4, Aguilar photographed herself reclining on the border of a small pond, and the positioning of her arms shows her caressing the earth (Fig. 3.11). This time she does not turn away from the spectators, but, her eyes shut, she is not engaged in a visual relationship with them either. The pose is romantic and erotic, almost classic. It reminds us of a fairytale scene or a magazine advertisement. But the subject is not a blonde, blue-eyed, slender supermodel; it is a heavy Mexican American woman. Her chubby, overflowing belly, touching the ground and reflected in the water, is the focal point of the composition. The scene is peaceful, but the lens reveals with austerity Aguilar's abundant forms. In other words, while the serenity of the scene--the calm and flat surface of the puddle and the figure resting on its side--would suggest an idyllic moment, the large body of the subject, makes this pastoral scene less than "perfect." In fact, with its over-abundance, it clashes with the established ideals of perfection of the West. This self-portrait, with the subject's reflection in the

water, is interesting also for the reference to the myth of Narcissus.¹¹¹ However, differing from Narcissus, Aguilar here doubles up her nonnormative figure, provoking her viewers and spoiling their expectations of a “classical” beauty. At the same time though, Nature Self-Portrait # 4 could be the representation of Aguilar’s deep self-acceptance: by exposing herself to a mirroring surface--she is displayed twice--the artist decides to recognize herself fully in it. In an interview, Aguilar declared:

Voluptuous is a kind way to put it, but really I’m fat. I am not saying I like being this way. I have always felt a lot of anger about my size. My work is a way of coming to terms with my body, with learning to be comfortable with who you are.¹¹²

Aguilar knows who she is, is aware of her appearance, and wants to live her life and make art without denying herself. She deals with her images in an unconventional manner, and as a result she has produced these powerful photographs.¹¹³

The artist’s body has also been compared to prehistoric Venus figurines.¹¹⁴ Her large body, her big round stomach, and her flabby breasts clearly remind us of ancient fertility statuettes, and her connection with the earth also makes her a contemporary version of an ancient nature goddess. But her figure, which in ancient times would have been considered beautiful and a symbol of fecundity, is rejected as grotesque and disproportionate in the contemporary Western world.

¹¹¹ About the myth of Narcissus and its relationship with Aguilar’s Nature Self-Portrait # 4 and her homosexuality, see Natasha Poor “The Disruption of Normative Identity Constructs: The Nonnormative Bodies of Alison Saar and Laura Aguilar,” M.A. Thesis, U of California Riverside, 1999, 103.

¹¹² Goddard 8J.

¹¹³ As previously mentioned, it is Aguilar’s ownership of the images and her large size that make her images of a “conventional” subject matter, such as women in nature, so unconventional.

¹¹⁴ For a comparison of Aguilar’s body with prehistoric Venus see José Duran Carmona who suggests that: “La artista en este ambiente nos recuerda [...] a una de aquellas Venus de fertilidad que nuestros antepasado preistoricos creaban.” José Duran Carmona, “Laura Aguilar,” [connect-arte.com](http://www.connect-arte.com), 15 Apr. 2004, <<http://www.connect-arte.com/archive/aguilar/aguilar.htm>>.

In Nature Self-Portrait # 7 and Nature Self-Portrait # 14, Aguilar is again facing away from the viewer (Figs. 3.12-13). She is immersed in the harsh landscape of New Mexico and appears between a group of boulders. Her body casts a shadow like the rocks. Here she is in nature, and she actually *is* nature. The coarse and hard rocky landscape and Aguilar's body resemble each other by appearing to have the same consistency, while at the same time being in contrast. Her skin is smooth and her flesh soft, while the rocks are textured and solid. Both scenes on the one hand convey meditative and spiritual moods, and on the other hand speak of solitude, isolation, and harshness.

In Nature Self-Portrait # 7, Aguilar seems to be waiting for something, maybe to merge with nature, or maybe she is looking forward to a time of acceptance and harmony, possibly outside the solitary desert (Fig. 3.12). But it could be a long wait, and in Nature Self-Portrait # 14 she lies on the ground in a fetal position, in better contact with the natural environment (Fig. 3.13). In addition to the symbolism of women *in* and *as* nature and the implied statement, it is important to notice Aguilar's attention to formal issues. The similarity between her body and the rocks was carefully calculated. It is evident in shape she obtained by deliberately posing in a certain way using the shapes of the cast shadows.¹¹⁵ Compositionally--as well as conceptually--it seems that the choice of the desert as a backdrop was best to create a visually interesting comparison between nature and the bare naked body.¹¹⁶ Critic Juan Antonio Alvarez Reyes mentions in the catalogue

¹¹⁵ Rather than carefully planning the scenes in advance, Aguilar's *modus operandi* is to photograph spontaneously choosing in the editing process the formally best images. Laura Aguilar, Telephone interview, 27 Nov. 2005.

¹¹⁶ Poor's ideas on the association between Aguilar's homosexual body and the desert are quite interesting. In her master thesis she writes: "I read the nature landscape as ironicizing women's affinity with nature based on their reproductive abilities (typically associated with heterosexual women). Aguilar juxtaposes her ideologically 'barren' reproductive body to the barren, dry, and desolated landscape." (Poor 100).

of Aguilar's show in Barcelona titled "El jo divers" (Catalan for "The Diverse Self"), that "She lives in a no-man's land, a solitary navigator steering her way through the plurality of her self."¹¹⁷ The figurative speech used by Alvarez Reyes is particularly appropriate in this case because of Aguilar's choice of a deserted landscape as the setting for her images. The location she chooses is an inhospitable "no-man's land." She alone can be there. She refuses to host male figures, nor she accepts the male gaze.

In 1999, during a two-month stay in San Antonio, in south-west Texas, Aguilar created the series Stillness. The images are similar to the previous scenes from Nature Self-Portraits, but for the most part these self-portraits include other nude female models in the composition. In these works, Aguilar is again looking for contact with nature, but she is no longer alone. She interacts with humans as well as with the landscape as if to suggest that we are all part of this planet and ought to deal with it, as we do with our human companions.

Stillness # 16, the only image of this series that I will analyze here in which Aguilar is depicted alone, represents the artist sitting in an empty tree trunk (Fig. 3.14). Her head is bent down, and her hair covers her face: once more Aguilar rejects the viewer's gaze. She does not offer herself to the viewer as object; she is subject and represents a moment that is just her own. Arms crossed, hands on her knees, the artist is isolated, perhaps thinking, sleeping, or even crying. Her vicinity to nature--her body almost imbedded in the tree or in what remains of it--brings to mind the work of an

¹¹⁷ Juan Antonio Alvarez Reyes, "The Diverse Self (a response to disquiet)," Laura Aguilar, exh. cat (Barcelona: Fundacio' La Caixa, 1998) 36.

illustrious Latin American colleague, Ana Mendieta, and in particular her 1977 pieces from the Tree of Life series (1977, Fig. 3.15).¹¹⁸

Mendieta, a Cuban who fled to the United States at an early age, produced series in which her body was strongly connected with the natural landscape. The earth for Mendieta was a sort of mother goddess, with whom she communed in her performances. Through her art she reestablished a bond with her cultural roots and with her motherland. Even though the differences between the two artists are great, the connection with natural elements links their works. Mendieta, torn away from her wealthy and comfortable home, from her family, and her culture, established a connection with the tradition of Santería and with anything that would bring her closer to a more natural and spiritual world and that would also differentiated her from the United States. Aguilar, on the other hand, was born in North America, does not speak Spanish, and considers California her home. She is certainly connected to her roots in a different way than Mendieta,¹¹⁹ but as the Cuban artist did, Aguilar has gone through a process of immersion in nature to find herself. In Stillness #16 Aguilar seems to absorb the energy of the tree while waiting to be revitalized by the primordial forces of the earth. Once again the artist also pays great attention to the formal quality of the image. Her dark hair flowing in front of her face mimics the tree trunk's lines and the shadows, and her legs prolong a diagonal line started by the broken trunk. Aguilar is part of the tree formally and conceptually.

118 A thorough discussion of Mendieta's work exceeds the limits of this chapter and this thesis; therefore I will here only briefly mention her work, in what I see as its relation with Aguilar's work. For more information on Mendieta, see Blocker's Where is Ana Mendieta: Identity, Performativity, and Exile and Olga M. Viso, ed., Ana Mendieta: Earth Body. Sculpture and Performance, 1972-1985 (Washington, D.C.: Hatje Cantz, 2004).

119 While Mendieta was forced out of her country and her culture, Aguilar was born in the United States and went through the process of discovering and, in her way, embracing the traditions of her ancestors as well as the new artistic tendencies of Mexican Americans and, especially, self-defined Chicanos.

In Stillness # 15 and Stillness # 26, Aguilar is accompanied by another woman, who is hard to identify: the images are black and white, and their faces are not visible (Figs. 3.16-17). The second figure, also nude, is significantly smaller and slimmer than Aguilar, and the visual effects created by this contrast are quite interesting. In the first image (Fig. 3.16), the two figures sit between large rocks in a similar position. They are leaning down, as if reflecting, resting, or hiding. The posture is very similar to that of Aguilar in Stillness # 16, but now she is not alone, and the protection of the tree is absent (Fig. 3.14).

The next image, Stillness # 26, represents a balancing act between the two subjects (Fig. 3.17). Aguilar, showing her body in its fullness, holds her partner on her back, almost lifting her from the ground. The contrast between the folded body of the artist (even more so because she is bent over) and the flat linear figure of the other model is visually striking as is the contrast between the skin color of the two: the slender model, almost blending with the color of the sand, is visibly lighter than Aguilar.

The second body brings to the composition a new complexity. The presence of another woman accompanying Aguilar has both conceptual and formal consequences. For instance, even though the photographs do not explicitly allude to sexuality, being aware of the artist's sexual preferences makes the presence of another woman significant: the patriarchal society dominant in the West is here completely excluded. These photographs do not address male spectators, or represent a male "companion," nor are they directed or taken by a male "heroic" explorer of a virginal Mother Nature and nude accessible female bodies.¹²⁰ Feminist art critic Laura Cottingham writes in this regard that Aguilar "further removes her iconography from an assumption of female sexual

¹²⁰ See page 63 and note 105.

performance for man. Naked, and with nature, Aguilar wants to be with women.”¹²¹

These scenes of interaction between two nude female bodies are not meant to titillate the viewer--as in fact did many images with similar subjects from the 1800's until now especially in fashion advertisement--they are instead meant as the representation of femininity and connection among women; Aguilar in fact, seems to suggest bonding and sharing of common experiences. For instance in Stillness # 15 the two subjects are in the same position, as if reacting to the same occurrence such as pain or fear. The thin and the large woman experience similar states of mind as reflected in their body language. In Stillness # 26 on the other hand, it is the formal contraposition between the two bodies that makes the image particularly significant. Aguilar's body has never been so striking in its massiveness as in this photograph, and this is in virtue of the contrast with a thin and more classical body. Also in Stillness # 15 the artist's body, close to that of the more slender woman, appears much heavier than in Stillness #16 where she poses alone in a very similar pose. Once again, the presence of other female bodies adds to the formal structure of the photographs while highlighting the ideas behind them.¹²²

The next series, Motion (1999), similar in many aspects to Stillness because of the use of the landscape, the nude, and the presence of multiple female subjects, seems--as suggested by the title--more dynamic.¹²³ In Motion # 59, there are three figures tangled together in the woods mimicking the twisted tree branches above them (Fig. 3.18). Again, their gaze is denied to the viewer, and the three women seem to enjoy a very personal,

¹²¹ Laura Cottingham, "Laura Aguilar," artpace.org, 29 Jan. 2004 <<http://www.artpace.org/artists/>>.

¹²² Other images of the series Stillness and Motion represent women of different skin color and body types. Some, as in the examples I have chosen to write about, are closer to the Western ideal of thinness, other are less so.

¹²³ Aguilar said in an interview that she was able to stand in more dynamic poses because of "movement classes" she took. Goddard 8J.

playful, and ritualistic ceremony. As suggested by critic Berta Sichel, “The [spectator’s] gaze does not correspond to desire, and bodies are neither objects of passion nor possession. The conventional visual pleasures of the naked body are disrupted, in silence.”¹²⁴ In other words, Aguilar breaks here with a long tradition of figurative arts that used the female body to arouse viewers and takes possession of her own body like the other women represented take possession of theirs.

The artist asserts that this work is less about political and social issues and more about the body in nature, nevertheless she here makes a clear statement about her relationship with other women, which excludes the male world.¹²⁵ Also, the juxtaposition of her obese body with those of women of more accepted body size emphasizes the distinction between what is considered “normal” and what is not. Even if Aguilar’s first work--Latina Lesbian series or Clothed/Unclothed--was more directly political, I nonetheless find her implicit commentary in these later series to be a social statement, rather than a mere celebration of the beauty of the local landscape.¹²⁶

The last series Aguilar worked on is titled Center and was produced between 2000 and 2001. In these works, the artist again represented herself alone and in a private dialogue with nature. After exploring formally and conceptually her body in relation to that of other women, Aguilar further delved into her own, as if the “group” images in Motion and Stillness were a way to discover more about herself.

¹²⁴ Berta Sichel, “Laura Aguilar: Why do we look at her?,” Laura Aguilar, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundacio’ La Caixa, 1998) 38.

¹²⁵ “ ‘I don’t see these images as being about what it is like to be a lesbian’ Aguilar said, ‘This is more about the body in nature....I don’t know why my work has been so controversial in San Antonio in the past.’” Goddard 8J.

¹²⁶ Goddard 8J.

In Center # 83 (2000), Aguilar appears in a fetal position lying on dry leaves. She seems to be sleeping, in peace, as if she has found her “center” (Fig. 3.19). Alone, without the need of external help she has found a balance with her inner self, her body, and nature. Differently than in the previous “natural” self-portraits, here Aguilar is back to being alone and literally embraces nature. Both in Center # 83 and Center # 72 (2000) the artist faces the earth and makes her own body part of it (Figs. 3.19-20). She no longer implicitly interacts with the viewer as in Nature Self-Portrait, nor does she need other people--as in Stillness and Motion--to find internal balance. She has finally reached her center by peacefully being with nature. Also the sequence of titles--Stillness, Motion, and Center--seems to indicate Aguilar’s necessary passages to improve her spirituality. In particular with her last series she seems to have assumed a more spiritual approach to life and issues of otherness. Her Chicana and lesbian identity does not need to be openly discussed through photographs because it is already an established part of herself at a deeper level.

To conclude, Aguilar’s work challenges our aesthetic beliefs, confronts our fears of not being accepted by society, and offers a renewed vision of the human body that should be accepted in all its various forms and shapes. I agree with artist and writer Anne Marie Rousseau, when she writes that Aguilar’s images contest our culture, in which “we have been denied visual access to bodies that do not fit the ‘norm’ of thinness and beauty.”¹²⁷ The sole fact that the artist faced her size--with which she is understandably not comfortable in terms of health concerns--with such grace and exquisiteness, makes her work even more relevant and remarkable. In her work Aguilar addresses issues of otherness by presenting her nonnormative body--non-white, non-straight, non-thin--in

¹²⁷ Rousseau, <<http://www.amrousseau.com/articles/photometro10.html>>.

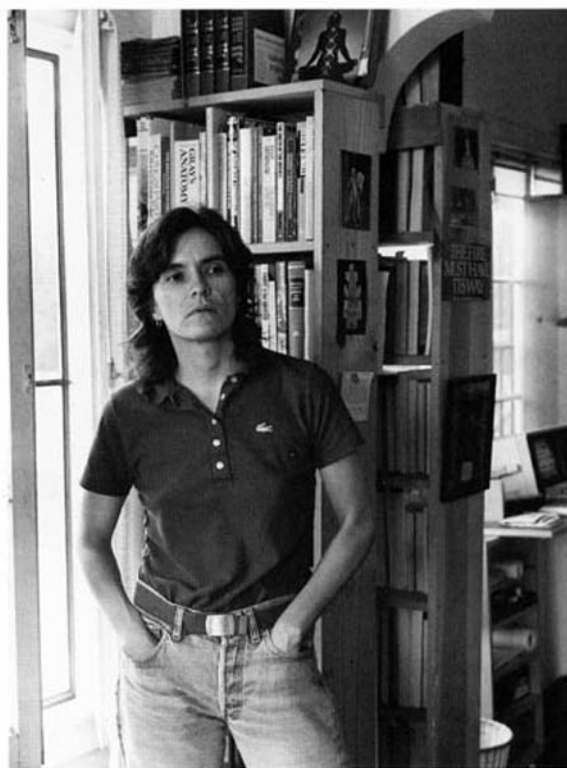
beautiful photographs. As for Coplans--more so than for Carla Williams--Aguilar's attention to formal concerns is as dominant in her work as her attention to social issues. Throughout her career, but especially in her later series, in which she was the sole or main subject, Aguilar has been composing her photographs carefully, stating her beliefs while, at the same time, constructing pictures that balance nature and bodies, skin colors, shapes and forms of the figures and the landscape. Like Williams and Coplans, she uses her own nude body to share with the viewers her way of exploring the acceptance of otherness, but also to discover and accept her own self.

Images



I'm not comfortable with the word
 Lesbian but as each day goes by I'm
 more and more comfortable with the
 word LAURA. I know some people
 see me as very child like, naive.
 Maybe so. I am. But I will be
 damned if I let this part
 of me die!

Fig. 3.1. Laura Aguilar, Laura, from the Latina Lesbian series, 1987-90, 11 x 14 inches, gelatin silver print with phototext, artist's collection. Carmona.



My latina side mixes my lesbian side with chispa
 & pasión. I am a lifelong lesbian and I think that
 women hold powerful promise for changing conditions
 on the planet. You think I look hostile? Maybe
 it has to do with a passion for and an impatience
 with a vision. Maybe it comes from comparing
 what could be with what is. ¿! Y qué?!

Fig. 3.2. Laura Aguilar, Untitled, from the Latina Lesbian series, 1987-90, 11 x 14 inches, gelatin silver print with phototext, private collection. Carmona.



*I used to worry about
being different.
Now I realize my differences
are my strengths.*

Carla

Fig. 3.3. Laura Aguilar, Carla, from the Latina Lesbian series, 1987-90, 11 x 14 inches, gelatin silver print with phototext, artist's collection. Yarbro-Bejarano 292.



Fig. 3.4. Laura Aguilar, Cheri and Sue, from the Clothed/Unclothed series, 1994, Diptych, each image 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Chaterine Lord, Pervert: The Art Gallery, University of California, Irvine (Irvine: The Gallery P, 1995) 3.

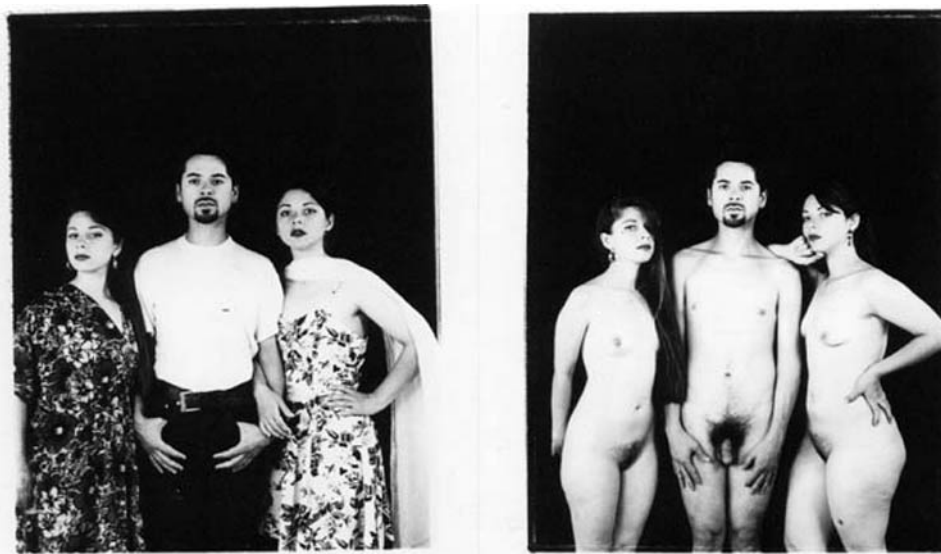


Fig. 3.5. Laura Aguilar, Untitled #12, from the Clothed/Unclothed series, 1994, Diptych, each image 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Fuller and Salvioni 254.



Fig. 3.6. Laura Aguilar, In Sandy's Room, 1989-1990, 16 x 20 inches (3 x 5 feet in a 1993 print), gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Harmony Hammond 84.



Fig. 3.7. Lucien Clergue, Italy, 1993, dimensions unknown, gelatin silver print, private collection. William A. Ewing, The Body: Photographs of the Human Forms (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1994) 237.



Fig. 3.8. Edward Weston, Nude on Dunes, 1939, 7 1/2 x 9 1/16 inches, gelatin silver print, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tuscon. Fusco and Wallis 361.



Fig. 3.9. Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Nude in the Desert, 1948, unknown dimensions, gelatin silver print, private collection. William A. Ewing, ed., The Century of the Body (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000) 47.

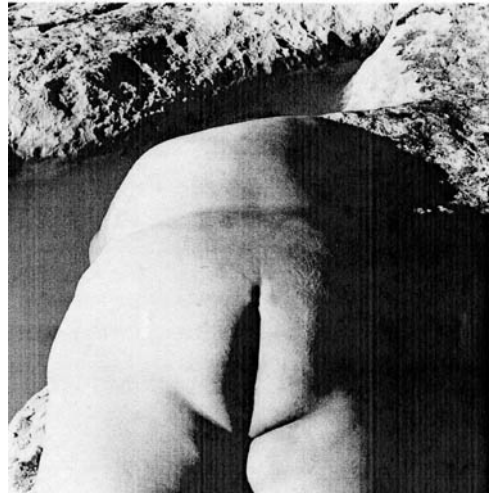


Fig. 3.10. Laura Aguilar, Nature Self-Portrait #3, 1996, 16 x 16 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Laura Aguilar, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundació "La Caixa," 1998) 23.



Fig. 3.11. Laura Aguilar, Nature Self-Portrait #4, 1996, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Laura Aguilar, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundació "La Caixa," 1998) 23.



Fig. 3.12. Laura Aguilar, Nature Self-Portrait #7, 1996, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Laura Aguilar, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundació "La Caixa," 1998) 26.



Fig. 3.13. Laura Aguilar, Nature Self-Portrait #14, 1996, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Laura Aguilar, exh. cat. (Barcelona: Fundació "La Caixa," 1998) 31.



Fig. 3.14. Laura Aguilar, Stillness #16, 1999, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. "Press Release: Laura Aguilar," [artpace.org](http://www.artpace.org), 15 May 1999, 2 Feb. 2004 < <http://www.artpace.org> >



Fig. 3.15. Ana Mendieta, Untitled from Tree of Life series, 1977, 20 x 13 ¼ inches, color photograph documenting performance in Iowa; Raquelín Mendieta Family Trust collection. Viso 54.



Fig. 3.16. Laura Aguilar, Stillness #15, 1999, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. "Press Release: Laura Aguilar," [artpace.org](http://www.artpace.org), 15 May 1999, 24 Apr. 2004, <<http://www.artpace.org>>.



Fig. 3.17. Laura Aguilar, Stillness #26, 1999, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. "Laura Aguilar," [vielmetter.com](http://www.vielmetter.com), 24 Apr. 2004, <<http://www.vielmetter.com/exhibitionaguilar.htm>>.



Fig. 3.18. Laura Aguilar, Motion #59, 1999, 9 x 12 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Luz Calvo, "Disparaged Body Exalted: The Photography of Laura Aguilar," New Bodies of Work from Laura Aguilar: Motion & Center (San Antonio: Esperanza Peace and Justice Center, 2003) 9.



Fig. 3.19. Laura Aguilar, Center #83, 2000, 9 x 12 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Calvo 9.



Fig. 3.20. Laura Aguilar, Center #72, 2000, 9 x 12 inches, gelatin silver print, artist's collection. Cola 2001: Laura Aguilar... [et al.] (Los Angeles: City of Los Angeles [Cultural Affairs Dept.] in association with the Skirball Cultural Center, 2001) 27.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored the representation of nonnormative bodies in the photographic self-portraiture of John Coplans, Carla Williams, and Laura Aguilar, three United States-based photographers whose work challenges Western ideals of beauty and physical perfection. Active from the eighties until now--with the exception of Coplans, who unfortunately passed away in August 2003--these artists continue to produce work maintaining a strong interest in the depiction of their unconventional bodies.

Each photographer deals with a body that, in addition to being far from the slender yet muscular ideal offered by fashion, advertising, and often fine arts, encourages the viewer to reflect about age, skin color, and gender issues. In different ways--either playfully or making reference to art history, recalling pastoral scenes or simply visually commenting on history through very clear political commentary--Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar represent their "otherness" through astounding gelatin silver prints.

An aging Caucasian man analyzing older men's position: from being, as a male, the personification of power, to becoming a castaway because of age and physical decay, an African American woman dealing with a long history of racism focused on supposed visual "differences," and a Chicano woman confronting her obesity and her "queer" sexual preferences together form a quite broad spectrum of perspectives about the representation of nonnormative bodies. Furthermore, the three photographers' interest in age, weight, and gender unifies their work, while complicating their self-representation of the body and revealing a very personal approach to the shared subject matter.

In the twenty-first century, concerns about the acceptance of differences, in body types as well as of minorities, may seem superfluous, as the philosophy of the “politically correct” is strongly advertised. However, as is demonstrated by racism, sexism, and homophobia today, difficulty in acceptance is not a fact of the past as much as we are led, or want, to believe and to address issues of “otherness” should not be considered unnecessary. Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar raise, through the depiction of their own nude bodies, questions about race and identity politics, the body as a commodity and objectification. Communicating with the audience by means of photographic self-portraits, they address larger socio-political and aesthetic concerns by looking inward and focusing their camera lenses on themselves.

Other contemporary photographers, as well as artists working in other media, have dealt with non-conventional bodies and--through the representation of the human figure--with issues of non-acceptance of what is different from the canons established by Western societies. However, even though many artists have touched on some of these elements, no one, that I am aware of, seems to have dealt with the depiction of unconventional bodies quite like Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar. Japanese photographer Manabu Yamanaka, for instance, bluntly explored the nude bodies of very old and wrinkly women in his black and white series Gyahtei (Great Age, 1995). However, although his work dealing with age straightforwardly represented is similar to that of Coplans, the images, which are not self-portraits, are more directly focused on the decay with seemingly less attention to formal elements, and, above all, they represent only a small part of Yamanaka's oeuvre.¹²⁸ Melanie Manchot, a German photographer based in

¹²⁸ The photographer had been a nurse for elderly people, gaining their trust and probably their love. However, one could argue his images are a form of exploitation, especially as he is a man photographing

London, and French artist Yves Trémorin both photographed, among other things, their nude aging mothers. In their careers they have produced black and white photographs, but also color images and video-based artwork, and have dealt with a variety of subject matters. Though the images of their aging mothers undoubtedly fall in the category of work about nonnormative beauties, this does not seem to be their main focus. U.S. photographer Jen Davis, on the other hand, produces brusquely direct self-portraits offering tableaux of her clothed overweight body in everyday situations. The body represented is similar to Aguilar's but the use of color images and the depiction of her body covered by clothes, offers a different approach to the analysis of nonnormative beauties.¹²⁹

Finally, although Coplans, Williams, and Aguilar are part of the larger tradition of nude photography--that today includes a number of artists preoccupied with a non-traditional representation of the human figure--their way to deal with unconventional bodies is unique. They use formally engaging compositions and graceful imagery to depict their nude selves as universal symbols of a "different" kind of beauty.

women. Coplans, with his self-portraits, eliminates such a possible assumption by photographing his own body.

¹²⁹ The choice of color or black and white film is certainly critical in that it determines the mood of the photograph and the way it will be interpreted. Color images, mirroring more closely reality, can be more direct and harsh, while black and white prints seem to offer a more iconic representation of the subject matter. Coplans's, Williams's, and Aguilar's photographs for instance, if shot and printed in color would lose their aura of monumentality and spirituality bluntly portraying physical flaws, hairs, and pores. In other words they would emphasize the physicality of the bodies represented rather than a more universal idea of unconventional bodies given by the poetic depiction of individuals.

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