

Perspectives

Joe Aguirre: “Your Memory, Your Everything, and the In-Between”

Tim White

Subtle alternations between susceptibility and bravado suffuse Joe Aguirre’s body of work. Take the phrase “I Am Paper Skin,” which references an online archive of his principally nude images. While it could be “attributed to being (himself, heavily) tattooed, as well as the printed matter created from these photos,” it also conveys a certain permeability, a capacity to be all too readily impacted.

The title of one of Aguirre’s self-published zines, *Bitter and Then Some*, is a more prosaic reference. Taken from a work by the metalcore band Converge, the lyrics relay a

countervailing aspect that could serve as a vicariously written statement of artistic intent:

“Death to cowards, traitors, and empty words / To those adorned with the touch of rose petals / And the blessed gift of forgetfulness / For these are your years and days to outshine / Push on and soar higher / This is your memory, your everything, and the in-between.”

When ascribed to contemporary photography, “poetic” can be an overused adjective. It brings to mind gauzy images of starling murmurations, or lone figures in fields of leaden chiaroscuro. Aguirre’s works are indeed poetic, yet they are less akin to psalm-like strophes, having more in common with Bukowski’s jaded wit, or the inebriated verse of Dylan Thomas.

Although sober, Aguirre has a viewpoint that is similarly rueful of, and attentive to, our isolation, striving and vulnerabilities, balanced with elegiac empathy. Having grown up Mexican-American, and poor, his works identify strongly with the peripheral figures who cling to the margins of his increasingly gentrified San Francisco neighborhoods, as well as those he endeavors to meet in the lesser-explored fringes of Northern Europe. Of the



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trip that spawned another of his sequenced projects, *Ether*, Aguirre said, "Most people that make photos end up going to the brownest place possible, and making pictures of all the people that are exotic looking. I went to Scandinavia." (*From The LPV Show*, 6.16.2016, <http://lpvshow.com/3-22-joe-aguirre/>)

In sourcing a cryptic quote recently posted by Aguirre, I was led to a poem by Frank O'Hara. Of this ode conflating masterworks with the quotidian, Aguirre said, "Photography and poetry mean the world to me. It's how I feed my head and heart. (That poem) resonates with me. I truly believe I know what he was feeling. Being compelled to express such admiration for someone in such a way is how I want to make people feel with the photographs I make."

"...and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint / you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them"

Aguirre adds, "I can't even begin to explain how breathless I become over these words." Breathless credibly describes the impact of particular Aguirre images, like the veteran he met in a soiled garrison cap giving out (selling?) American flags, as an indiffer-

ent pedestrian passes him by. He is isolated on this urban-anywhere corner; Bank of America signage looming like a thought bubble, threadbare coat, grizzled beard and the thousand-yard stare of inarticulable trauma.

Aguirre's nudes convey the hedonic consolations such a figure might only vaguely recall, or has long past been deprived of. While stated blithely in photog podcast replete, "I'm a pervert, not a creep" (the LPV Show, cited above) is an apt and telling distinction. Perversity needs to be reclaimed from its pejorative (mis)usage, and understood to mean aspirationally, politically "contrary to the accepted or expected standard or practice."

As an artist Aguirre approaches prospective subjects frankly, avers his intentions clearly and strives to create a collaborative relationship (admittedly one that is heavily fraught and tenuously negotiated). I ask how he manages, without deterring arousal, to relate something more honest than the merely erotic or patently fetishistic. "A mixture of my fascination, photographic style and my blunt nature seems to work to my advantage when it comes to nudes. I hope the meaningful aspect of my portraits comes through because these moments are meaningful to me. I'm grateful for the time, for the connection, for the trust, grateful for the sub-



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These aspirations are evident whether he is depicting the louche denizens, men and women, of his home turf, elderly naturists in rural Finland, or himself in flagrante delicto. Among these varied styles, he has a preternatural eye for notes of grace: the feathers and flower in a woman's hair looking out from a high window, the slow realization that the elderly man on a bed is an amputee, the stars and stripes in the rear window of a burned-out truck, or a girl's benediction-like gesture bestowed on a boy at a street fair.

Aguirre elides pat relegations to genres such as "street shooter," social documentarian, portraitist, landscape artist and figurative photographer. His works are often best seen in juxtaposition, with the lyrical narrative intentions he brings to carefully sequenced projects *B.A.T.S.*, *Ether* and more in the pipeline. Take the banality of his "sundress drying" counterposed with another shot of an incinerated pickup. (The works presented here are untitled. My references are merely descriptive, but one can't often resist a narrative impulse each compels.)

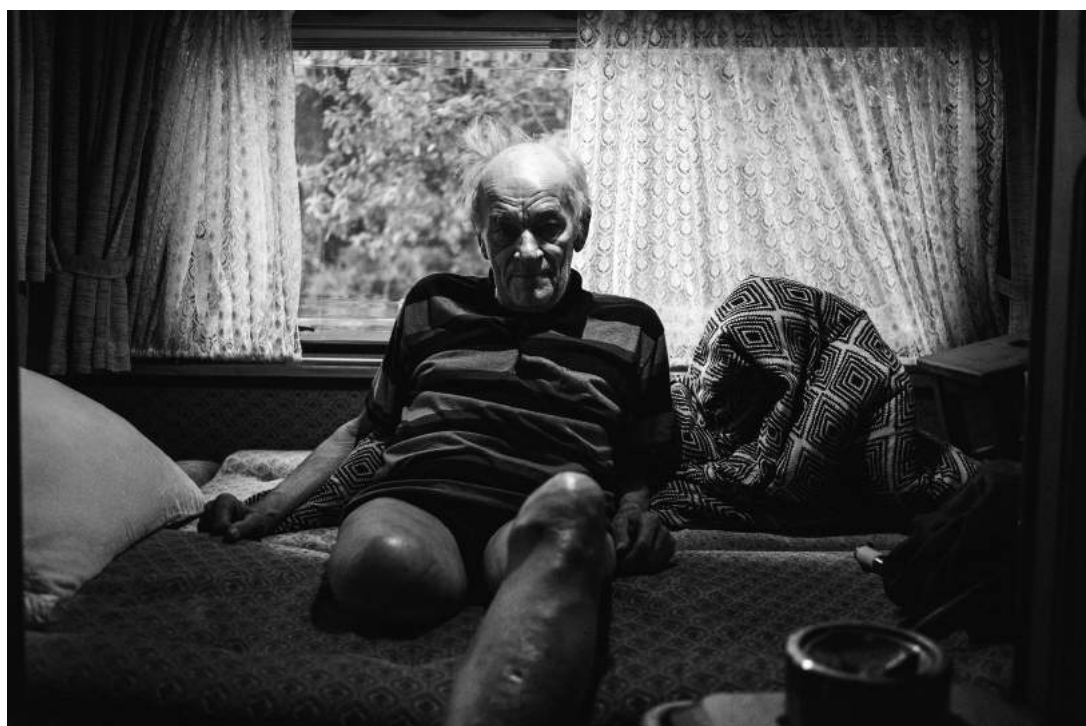
A viewer desires to know whether the artist is intimately involved with a subject so

proximal as his nude, bathing; or they might be reminded of an aunt or sister in the image of a forlorn woman on the Muni, ostracized somehow from her brood, travelling home to unfulfilled hopes and Tuna Helper. We can't help but inflect Aguirre's images with our own unique experiences of loss, isolation or intermittent ecstasies. Susan Sontag wrote in *Regarding the Pain of Others* that we become dulled to seeing it, transpose our awareness to persons we can no longer identify with. Aguirre makes plaintively clear that the objectified other is us, our neighbor, the dreadlocked figure in a "No One is Illegal" T-shirt, a fragment of self. That fascinated swain documenting labia is a lover we once were seen and shown to.

Across a wide gamut of styles, Aguirre defies pat categorization and confinement to any one classification. Rather than a scatter-shot approach that typifies some photographers, his cameras are extensions of his eye, seeing subjects not as characters but as individuals, deliberately interacted with. Living now for the past nine years in San Francisco after stepping outside the familiar confines of his upbringing in San Jose and "the nothing it was/the everything it was," there is a coming to terms, visually, with unfamiliar terrain apparent in Aguirre's work. "I do think that if







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I hadn't left, my camera wouldn't be my companion. It would be an afterthought in a box somewhere in a garage." Photography became a way to get acquainted, create dialogue and to retain the ephemeral.

Social media has evolved into an accelerated means of making such connections, even as it devolves into self-reinforcing feedback loops; what Aguirre sees as "a sphere of false sincerity between human beings (that) has given birth to an 'I'll like you if you like me, as long as you agree with me' type of culture."

Still, he is immersed in its various platforms, while valuing interactions that subvert the superficial, stating, "I tend to place a higher value on those who are honest with me, respect my input and give me some insight on what my eyes can't see in my own work, than those whose work I respect but don't feel a bond with personally. With so many photographers connected on social media, there seems to be an emphasis on groups or large social circles of acquaintances looking for only positive comments on each other's photos and photographic endeavors. I'm looking for the few who aren't looking for the 'yes' or the likes on Instagram only. I have room for the real ones."

Online discourse has allowed him to meet, virtually, numerous prospective patrons and consonant fellow artists—relationships that he frequently makes actual, creating opportunities for exhibitions in Paris, cross-country couch surfing and travel to remote global regions. (See Jonas Normann's film *Ether* at <https://vimeo.com/152493128>.)

Currently, Aguirre is planning trips to London, Berlin and Madrid, funded by print sales. Photographic practice is hardly a team sport, but Aguirre takes pains to pursue cooperative ventures, and to promote the works of others he believes in: "Certain social platforms have made it possible to be a part of great things. The two collectives I am in, Burn My Eye and Inverse, are international groups of photographers that 'meet' online to create, critique and plan together the things we show together in the physical world."

The well-travelled roads of say, Cal Arts graduates might not have led to such unanticipated associations: "I never finished high school, and to be honest I never really cared until I entered my thirties. I've worked in kitchens, tended bar for most of my twenties and for the past 9-10 years I have never let a camera sit at home."



For someone whose home is a countercultural cornucopia, and whose outward appearance might rattle the squares ("Make all the assumptions you want when you see me on the train, but I'm listening to the Carpenters thinking about what kind of pasta sauce I'm going to make with my cat."), Aguirre's subjects are seldom conspicuously outré. He is more often "drawn to someone who seems a bit tossed aside, or by themselves. Even in groups I'm drawn to the wallflower. I often wonder what people are waiting around for, who they are looking for, what magic they think will help them through a door." He cited a Dr. Suess poem "The Waiting Place" as a summary of his identification with our shared afflictions:

*"Waiting for a train to go or a bus to come
/ or a plane to go or the mail to come / or the
rain to go or the phone to ring / or the snow
to snow or waiting around for a Yes or No /
or waiting for their hair to grow."*

As a postscript, Aguirre said, "Subtle with my work, flamboyant with my life. Full stop."

Few photographers can move so fluently between images of children, coitus, fellow commuters or natural disasters as Aguirre. His balance of the chaotic and static, the

ordinary and extreme, and our public and private selves is adroit and expansive. Like the world's shortest story, apocryphally attributed to Hemingway: "For sale: baby shoes, never worn," unwritten volumes and worlds exist before and following his shutter's comprehension. Aguirre initiates, rewards and places faith in our own potential for developing and exchanging voluble, wordless stories.

Addendum

For more information and images, visit joeaguirrephotography.com.

