

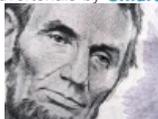
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Alberto Aguilar has a lot going on right now. A two-person exhibition of his momentary drawings, sculptural photographs, radical Shakespearean [video](#) and incidental sound art runs through mid-November at Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center, alongside the minimalist Rube Goldberg creations of artist Michelle Harris. Visitors to the MDW Fair two weekends ago could see an entire booth of Aguilar's invention, stocked with graphically painted totems, boards and shelves, plus 36 found household objects. And Saturday night he hosts a dinner party of strangers, to be held at an undisclosed location, starring a mole made from 50 ingredients.

Alberto Aguilar is also the parent of four children with his wife, Sonia. They are Madeleine, 13, Isabella, 9, Paolo, 8 and Joaquin, 7. At Roots & Culture, the four of them, dark-haired and doe-eyed, are captured, sitting like sculptures, in the modernist living room of a rented apartment on a recent [family trip](#) to Spain. Aguilar titled his photograph of the ensemble "Disney Channel (Madrid)," which explains their rapt, unidirectional gazes with unsentimental and global brevity.

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Madeleine fashions deft, [witty](#) light sabers, utility belts and daggers out of duct tape. The cardboard fort in their basement must be seen to be believed. The trampoline in the backyard stimulates endless euphoria.

This much I learned on a visit to Aguilar's studio, which is to say, his family home. The artist hasn't kept a formal studio since 2004, and instead makes his work in the midst of life, collaborating with everyone and everything that surrounds him. This includes his children, his students at Harold Washington College and his eldest daughter's Chicago Public School class, with whom he's made an end-of-the-year project every year since the fourth grade. Seventh grade yielded what must be one of the freest interpretations of "Othello" ever produced.

Familial details rarely find a place in art criticism. There are exceptions certainly — Sally Mann's photographs intimately witness the rural Southern lives of her three young children, while Melissa Ann Pinney's document the urban Midwestern life of her only daughter, Emma. But most of the time, an artist's kin are as absent in the gallery as the rest of his or her daily life, such as household chores, child care or commuting.

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It was not always so. In the 1970s, feminist artists argued that the personal was the political, and vanguardists like Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles conceived projects out of the daily labor of child-rearing and housecleaning, validating so-called women's work while also managing to continue making artwork of their own.

Somehow, Aguilar has landed sploosh in the noisy, messy, silly margins of so much serious, radical feminist work. It's as if, instead of figs, lard, anise, dates and onion — to name five random, consecutive ingredients in his mole, as elaborated in a drawing from shortest to longest — he ground together second wave art with the more exuberant and playful art-as-life, life-as-art codes of Fluxus.

The complex, tasty but not-too-spicy sauce that results suggests a very real, very middle-class [family life](#) performed with inspiration, flexibility and glee — a potent antidote in a culture where families serious about having kids be a part of their everyday life are still shunted off to the suburbs.

Consider a second photograph from the Madrid apartment, one that pictures a folding rack on which hang a dozen damp garments. Laundry, that most tiresome of chores, becomes a surrealistic word game when the metal laundry tree gets tangled with a real potted tree. Neatly framed between two doorways and centered in front of a gilt-edged mirror, the temporary sculpture stands proud and tall and winking hard.

Aguilar constructs these "domestic monuments," as he calls them — in his home and in others' — using whatever materials are at hand and leaving the background strictly as is, spilled toys, sprawled kids and all. In the past, elements have included a tower of stuffed animals, a pile of old clothes, a vintage dollhouse, a tabby cat, modernist end tables, rolls of duct tape and an exercise machine. When I visited his home, a modest example quietly appeared at the corner of the kitchen counter, a pencil hovering vertically in the air, its point stuck down in a wad of putty.

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Like the best of Aguilar's work, these monuments appear to have been muddled right out of the heady mash of [home life](#). By contrast, the series "Drawings in Passing," droll prose pieces and sketches, feels marginal, like the spare moments in which they were generated.

In another rented Spanish apartment, this one in Barcelona, Aguilar paired four mismatched chairs with five unrelated objects to create the oddest of formal portraits. Charged with sitting still and smiling for the camera, an upside-down drum, spiky houseplant and wooden chopping board attain an inconceivable level of gravity and personality. It's a kind of seriousness rarely found in adult creations, but integral to children's play, where anything can be anything else, and rules exist only so far as they can be reinvented. Why treat a white fan tower merely as a cooling device, when it can also be a pale, uptight dame with long legs crossed at an angle?

Why, indeed. I must remember to ask my toddler when she gets up from her nap.

"Alberto Aguilar and Michelle Harris" runs through Nov. 12 at Roots & Culture Contemporary Art Center, 1034 N. Milwaukee Ave., [rootsandculturecac.org](#).

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