

# Tanya Aguiñiga

ARTIST INTERVIEW

Interview with Anny Crane

Tanya Aguiñiga is an LA based contemporary textile artist and furniture designer with influences stemming from her childhood in Tijuana, Mexico. Aguiñiga's work uses sculpture and tactile experiences as a vehicle for community empowerment. Her LA based design studio also produces stunning contemporary furniture that evokes emotions through color, shape, and texture.

**Your recent collaboration with Mash Up Dance Company in New York with the dancing loom was incredible! Can you tell us about the inspiration and process behind this?**

Mash-Up and I worked on the collaboration for a year. We started with the idea that their performance would be based on geometry. From there, I came up with multiple concepts and models for props that could be interactive and help create choreography. Since I am constantly working on weavings, I grabbed a small frame loom to try some weirdo tests for backdrops. I wanted to play with the idea of creating a minimal graphic backdrop that could be changed when interacted with. It started as just a flat panel, but then when I doubled it up it created a beautiful moray effect, so I decided to keep exploring the idea. Mash-Up was originally drawn to the modular piece that I did for Kasthall, so modularity was important. Hence, the dancing loom was born!

I tend to be pretty spontaneous with my design process. Kind of like painting with texture in space. I start with materials and a color palette as the general feeling for a piece. From there, function comes into the design, and form comes last. I think this approach comes from growing up on the border and having a fluid relationship with identity.

**How did attending RISD and living in New England inform your creativity, which is so thoroughly influenced by LA and Tijuana?**

Living in New England brought a great sense of clarity to my work and life. It really helped me distill my border experience and helped me find my place and the place of my art beyond a regional identity. The stark cultural contrast also had a great impact on my design direction and led to using texture and color as a greater component in my furniture. I began incorporating textiles into my furniture designs as a way to pay homage to Mexican culture.

When I lived in San Diego, I was also really involved with the Border Art Workshop/ Taller de Arte Fronterizo BAW/TAF. All of my emotional work was made in collaboration with BAW/TAF, and I focused solely on line and function when making furniture. Moving to Rhode Island forced me to combine the emotional with the functional and my work began to have deeper context.

**Can you tell us more about your time with the artist cooperative Border Art Workshop, that you helped establish at Maclovio Rojas, and your goals for its influence in Tijuana?**

BAW/TAF had been around for 13 years when I joined. My first project with BAW/TAF was anti Operation Gatekeeper, helping work for migrant rights through art installations across the U.S. and Mexico. At the beginning of my involvement with BAW/TAF, they had formed a partnership with the community of Maclovio Rojas, an autonomous







community run by women and made out of trash from the US. The community had been facing brute forceful attempts at eviction by the Mexican government who wanted to take back the land squat that 8,000 people called home for over 15 years in order to exploit the newly commercial value of the land. BAW/TAF formed a partnership with the community to build a community center and start arts based programming that would bring attention to the violent governmental abuses that were occurring in the community. I helped build the community center (which had two artist in residence spaces, a computer center--even though we had no electricity, a darkroom, and a ceramics studio) and co-ran it for six years. As the liaison between BAW/TAF and the community of Maclovio Rojas, I was in charge of teaching arts literacy based classes for women and children, as well as finding and training volunteers to carry out all of our class offerings and building projects around the community. I headed the construction of a women and children's health center, a soccer field, and collaborated on the building of a cemetery and sculpture school over the years. I did this all while doing my undergraduate degree in furniture design at San Diego State University and working for the education department at the San Diego Museum of Art full time. It was an incredible time of my life. Full of emotional struggle, exhausted muscles and mind, camaraderie, inspiration and life changing experiences that cemented the being I am today.

Our goal in Maclovio Rojas was simply to bring national and international attention to the injustices against its inhabitants through arts based projects. The effect and intention of our work in the community



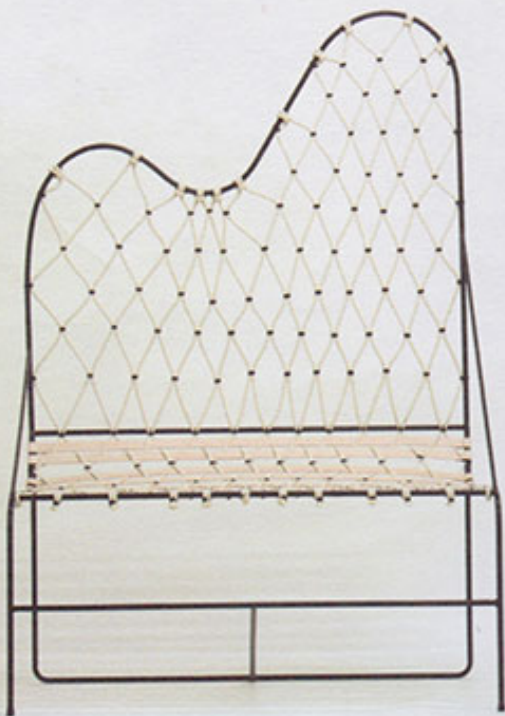
was also that it would help educate and empower the people of Maclovio Rojas (there were no government provided schools for a time, and when an elementary school was built, most families could not afford the \$25 a year it cost). In turn, it also had deep resonating effects on all of us that worked there. Since then, left in 2003, I have continued to harvest my love for community based work and art activism.

In my current work, I often attempt to bring attention to problems through pieces in hopes of making solutions a part of our conversation as a society. The issues that I deal with vary from the personal to larger issues of globalization and the needs of marginalized communities. Sometimes these solutions take form in the creation of physical objects, and other times they are community actions or ephemeral pieces that make audiences discuss larger cultural issues through craft.

**What is your process when creating such works as the installation piece for Ace Hotel in LA? Do you begin with an idea, or is it heavily influenced by the space?**

The work for the Ace Hotel was largely functional and site specific. It started with the need for an artwork with sound absorbing qualities whose form was shaped by the space. Commune Design and Alex Calderwood were very open to me playing with forms and materials that were already a part of my design vocabulary.

I pitched textures and processes that would be sound absorbing (wet-felted raw wool and woven industrial felt) and they decided on their







placement. Once I had the architectural elevations for the bar and the lobby, I tailored the designs to fit the spaces. For the lobby installation, the piece was super site specific and customized on site. We spent months sourcing fiber from farms and hand selecting shearing, which we processed in my backyard. We then felted panels with raised needle felted areas to create waves of texture and pattern. The lobby wall had many existing features that we had to jog and incorporate (like thermostats, fire extinguishers and lots of doors) so we made a paper pattern for the felt. The rest was all done on site. I really wanted the lobby to be cavernous and magical, with wool stalactites.

**While it seems you are incredibly inspired by geometry and structure, you are quite playful with your works. How does this juxtaposition evolve, such as your work in furniture (namely the felted chairs)?**

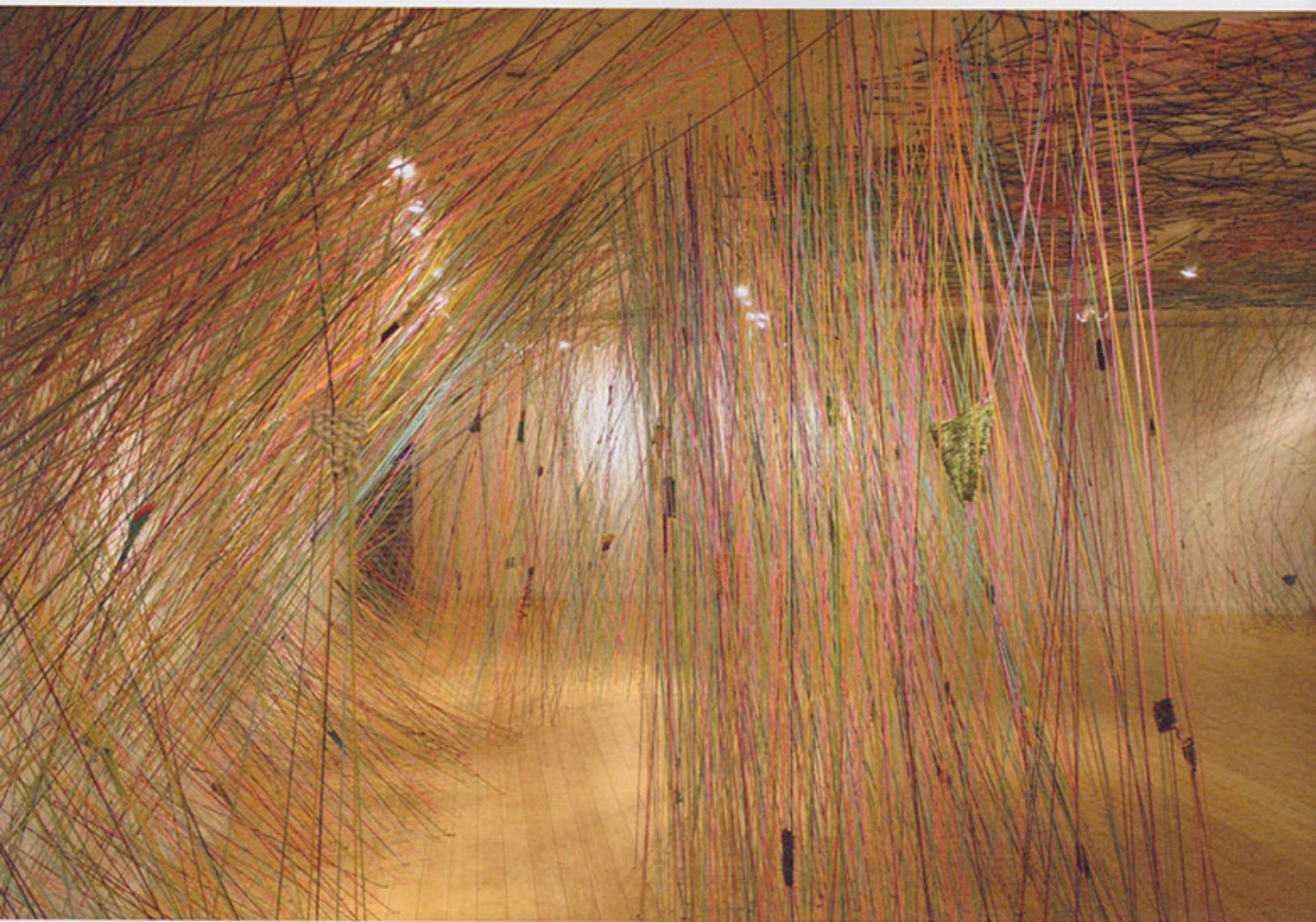
I guess I am really drawn to geometry and structure as a means to build up texture or support organic processes. My earlier furniture pieces were tighter. As I get older and more comfortable with my medium, I am loosening up and allowing myself to become more sculptural and less functional.

The felt chairs came out of my thesis work in graduate school. I was working on ideas that were based on the half unseen in objects—it was all based on growing up on the border and living with dichotomy. The chairs were felted to turn a cold industrial iconic object into a warm and inviting permanent part of the home, while still alluding to its former self. The felt chairs started my love affair with wool.

**Your work, for the most part, is so contained and concise. How was the process behind your explosive 2011 Crossing the Line installation?**

My Crossing the Line installation at CAFAM was inspired by my time in Chiapas working with Maya women weavers as part of my Artists Helping Artisans initiative. I was really inspired by working on a backstrap loom. The idea of de-colonizing the process of weaving was mind blowing as well as using your body to regulate tension in fabric. It made me think of weaving as this entirely new experience and opened up possibilities as to what it could be. I thought about plein-air weaving and turning a room into a loom. How one can use the ceiling, floor and columns as a loom, and a loom just being two points of resistance that can exist in multiple points in space.





With this as the impetus, 27 of us turned the gallery into a giant loom. We wove spaces at which lines intersected. The majority of the volunteers that worked on the piece had never woven before, so it became a learning and sharing experience for us all. There was also an audience participation component as well as an educational component that showed audiences tools and processes used in Chiapas by the Mayan weavers I worked with.

**Where do you see your work evolving? Would you like to continue doing collaborative site-specific installation, such as your piece in the Ace Hotel, or would you like to continue exploring whimsical furniture design?**

Apart from commissions, I only make 2-4 new furniture designs each year. The studio is increasingly textile based. We felt tons of chairs year round and work on specific commissions with clients but I am increasingly drawn away from functional works. I really enjoy working on community-based projects, performance pieces and monumental



weavings. I am trying to work towards being able to do more of these projects. We will continue to work on hotel projects since they help subsidize the labor-of-love projects that do not usually yield financial compensation.

**What can we look forward to seeing from you?**

I am working on doing some more fiber based performance pieces as well as a new community based initiative on the border. I am hoping to open a project space at the actual U.S./Mexico border crossing that activates the border crossing as a positive space for spending constructive time. There will be crowd sourced installation pieces, art projects for families to work on while they wait to cross, interactive exhibits from artists on both sides of the border, as well as other free services to help create a more positive crossing experience for the hundreds of thousands of people that wait 2-3 hours to cross the border each day.

I am also in the process of making new work for Design Miami through Volumes Gallery and teaching a Fiber Sculpture class at Cal State Long Beach in the Textiles Department that I am pretty excited about. ■

