

# american craft

MIX  
IT  
UP

The Playful  
Design of  
Tanya  
Aguñiga

Sins  
Under Glass


Pure Karen  
Karnes

Buttoned-Up  
Bustiers



April / May 2011  
\$5.99 US / \$7.99 CAN





Tanya Aguiñiga is ready to take on just about any medium, and her playful spirit comes through in all of them.



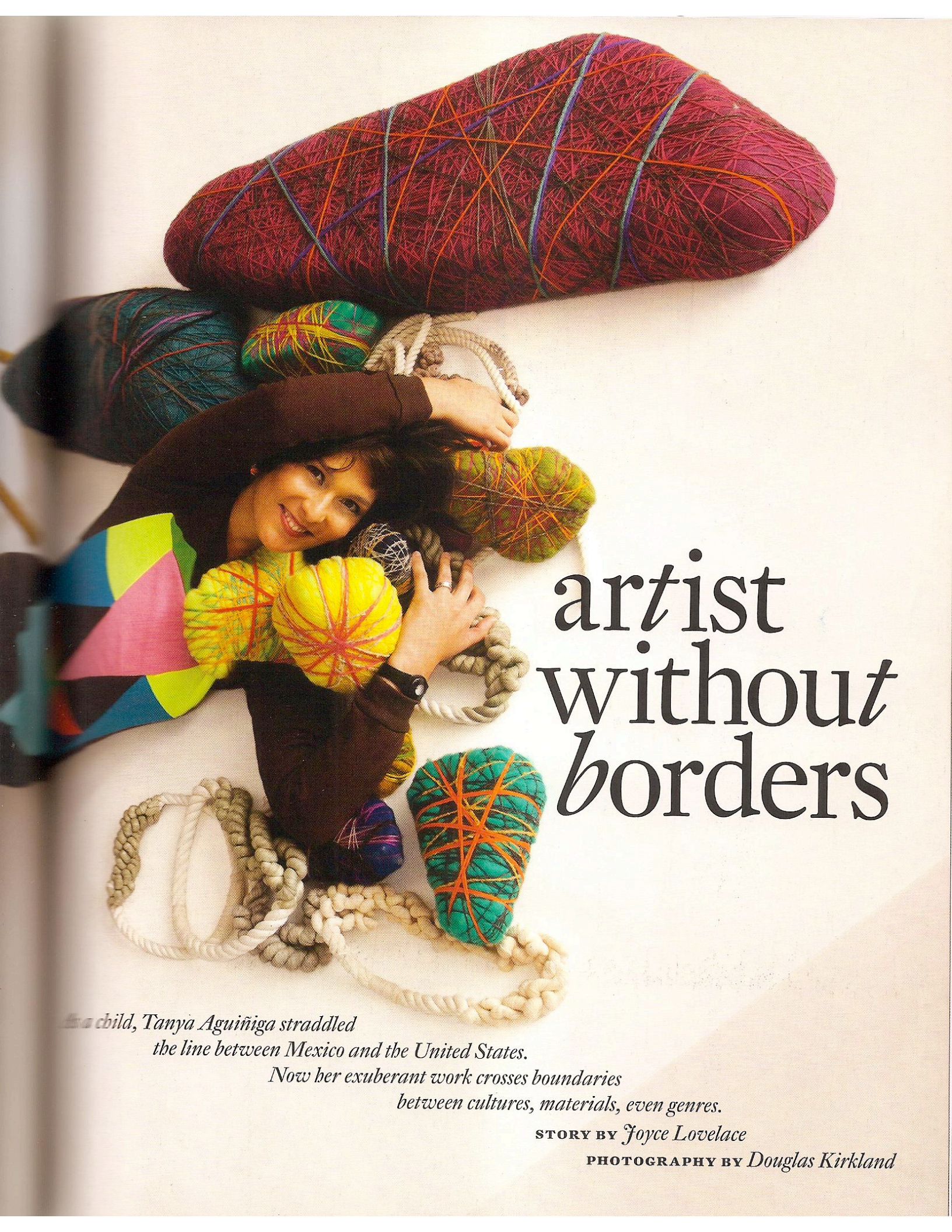
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AT 32, WITH A PROMISING CAREER ahead of her, the Los Angeles-based artist Tanya Aguiñiga is young to have already produced an iconic work. But a few years ago, fresh out of design school, she did just that.

Aguiñiga took metal folding chairs – the kind you find in church basements – and screwed their parts together so that they stayed open. She gave each chair a soft new “skin” of felt, each in an emphatic color – violet, gold, turquoise, tomato, steel-gray. Suddenly those drab, familiar forms were the opposite of their original selves: vibrant, playful, touchy-feely objects that would never again be folded up and hidden away.

People loved the felt chairs. They made a splash at the 2007 Design Miami expo, and soon she was making them to order (and still does). One customer wanted 21,





# artist without borders

*As a child, Tanya Aguiñiga straddled  
the line between Mexico and the United States.*

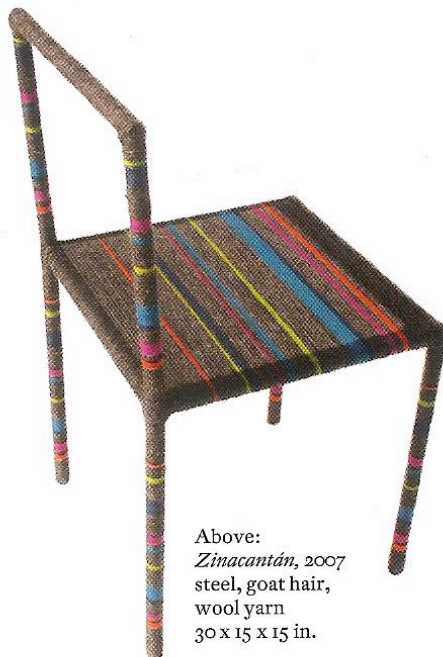
*Now her exuberant work crosses boundaries  
between cultures, materials, even genres.*

STORY BY *Joyce Lovelace*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY *Douglas Kirkland*



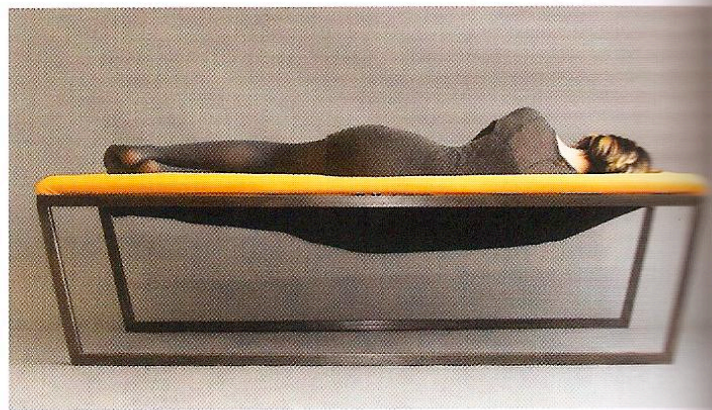
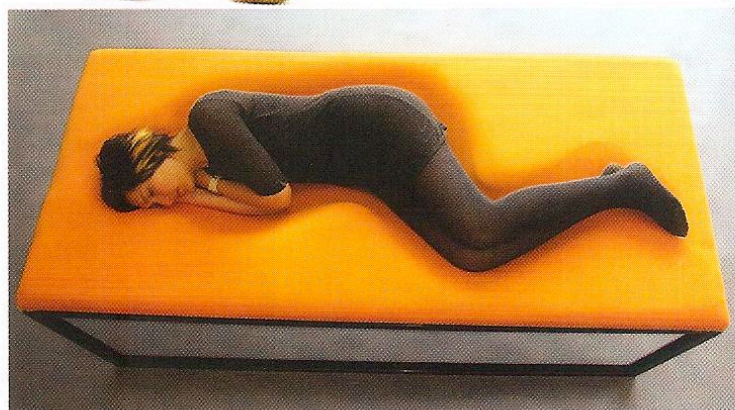
simple forms at



Above:  
*Zinacantán*, 2007  
steel, goat hair,  
wool yarn  
30 x 15 x 15 in.



Below left and right:  
*Embrace Lounge*, 2007  
steel, patina, rubber  
webbing, Knoll fabric  
2 x 7 x 3 ft.



in different colors. Before they left Aguiñiga's studio, she piled a bunch in a chaotic heap and took a photo. "I tend to think of the objects I make as 'he' or 'she,' with personalities. A lot of that comes from Spanish, how things have gender," Aguiñiga says, referring to her first language. "And I thought, this is the only time I've had this many chairs together. What if they were to get into a big bar fight?"

Fun is an essential ingredient in Aguiñiga's work, but there are deeper meanings at play. The felt chairs, it turns out, were an expression of her identity as a Mexican-American. If an institutional folding chair symbolized, for her, an America that at times seemed cold and impersonal ("a huge generalization," she acknowledges), then its warm and fuzzy alter ego channeled the tactile, familial exuberance of Latino culture.

Born in San Diego to Mexican parents, she was a U.S. citizen but grew up in Tijuana. From age 4 to 18, she was wakened every weekday at 4 a.m., in time to be driven across the border to the American side

and dropped off at her grandmother's house, arriving at school by 8. In the afternoon, she would cross back home to Mexico. The long treks and jarring cultural contrasts "influenced my work, my personality, every single aspect of what I do," Aguiñiga says today. In this and other ways, she gives new meaning to the term "crossover artist."

Though she thinks of herself primarily as a furniture maker, her output runs the gamut from rope jewelry to room-size installations. She works in metal, fiber, wood, clay, plastic – whatever suits her purpose – using methods that range from welding to weaving on a primitive back-strap loom. She's at home in the design and craft communities, embraced by both the museum and gallery establishment and the DIY-indie crowd. All of this makes her hard to label, but then labels don't interest her.

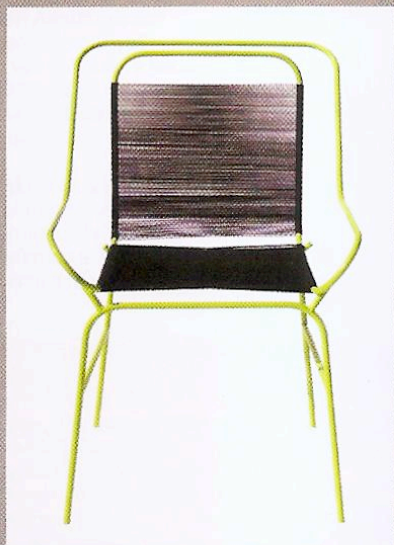
"I never wanted to put myself in any type of box," she says. "There's this thing that's stayed with me, of jumping back and forth between cultures. You don't even know what you are and where you belong."

Ultimately, however, her identity struggles have proven liberating. "It's nice, because you're able to float through a lot of different worlds."

Her talent and drive have earned Aguiñiga widespread respect. "Tanya is a true artisan with a passion for materiality and a deep understanding of not just good design but also outstanding craftsmanship," says Mariah Nielson, curator at the San Francisco Museum of Craft and Design. Rosanne Somerson, head of furniture design at Aguiñiga's alma mater, the Rhode Island School of Design, praises her "aesthetic virtuosity," noting, "she's not wed to any particular material, but expertly finds the right context for each idea." Gerard O'Brien, who shows her work alongside that of such California modern masters as Peter Voulkos and Sam Maloof at his Reform Gallery in Los Angeles, considers her "one of the most creative people I've ever been around – perpetually exploring, taking on projects. She's tireless."

This spring, Aguiñiga is busy all around L.A. At the Craft and Folk Art Museum,





Inset:  
*Alaska Chair*, 2007  
steel, seine twine  
32 x 22 x 22 in.



*Teotitlán 2*, 2007  
steel, lacquer,  
nylon twine  
24 x 22 x 16 in.



many **S**trands in her rich artistry





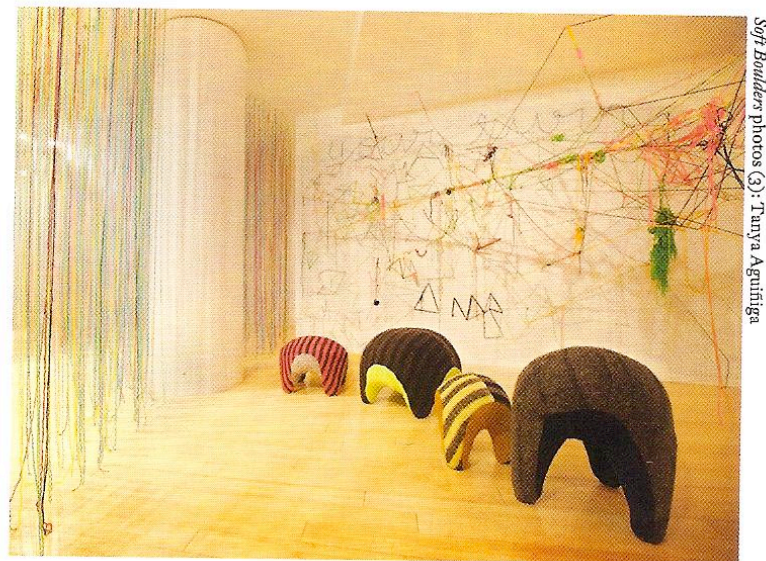


Left: Aguiñiga's *Soft Boulders* (2010), of carved upholstery foam and felted merino wool, have an almost animated presence.

Right: The *Soft Boulders* in context at Aguiñiga's "Crossing the Line" exhibition at CAFAM (through May 8).

Left: Aguiñiga in the thick of her installation at CAFAM.

Below: The many tools in the artist's studio suggest the wide range of materials she uses in her work.



*Soft Boulders* photos (3): Tanya Aguiñiga



she's woven an elaborate environment called, appropriately, "Crossing the Line" (through May 8). She did the decorations for the unveiling of LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, a new Mexican-American cultural center downtown. As a volunteer with the Watts House Project, she's helping renovate a home across from the Watts Towers. Then there's her job teaching "Methods and Materials" at Otis College of Art and Design.

As engaging as her work, Aguiñiga is a blend of urban sophisticate and bubbly Californian – even when discussing lofty art matters, she favors such phrases as "totally," "for reals," and "super." She maintains two studios in the hip L.A. neighborhood of Atwater Village – a loftlike space she rents in an artists' complex, and, nearby, a shed in

the backyard of the small stucco house she shares with her husband, musician and visual merchandiser Todd Beattie, her two college-student sisters, and her dogs, Rocky and Juliet.

She married Beattie at 18, and they lived first in San Diego, where she studied with the noted woodworker Wendy Maruyama at the state university. Making furniture appealed to Aguiñiga's ingrained sense of resourcefulness: "In Mexico, people don't have much. You don't throw anything away. You make do with what you have. You make things out of what you find." The border continued to figure prominently in her life. As part of the Border Art Workshop, she did outdoor projects and murals to highlight migrant rights issues. On weekends she drove down to the barrio of Maclovio Rojas near Tijuana to help run a community center, where she encountered poverty and despair – "really heavy emotional things."

In 2003, the couple headed east to Providence so Aguiñiga could attend graduate school at RISD. Leaving home was difficult. She longed for her Mexican family, especially her aunts, who provided "warmth in my life. The first piece I made was about missing being hugged." That was *Embrace Lounge*, a daybed that envelops the body in a nurturing hold. Eventually her work addressed border issues overtly. For her thesis, *The Half Unseen*, she made minimalist steel half-chairs and tables that attached to a wall and only materialized in full when the light revealed their shadows. "It was about the ghost side of things, the side that's always there but you don't talk about it."

Post-RISD, Aguiñiga returned to California, and in 2006 she received one of the first United States Artists Fellowships,



# a scrapbook of **t**anya's world

a \$50,000 prize. Along with new tools and equipment, it bought her soul-satisfying sojourns to weaving villages in Oaxaca and Chiapas, Mexico, where she immersed herself in traditional culture and techniques.

"It was getting in touch with my roots, and what craft is about, you know? There's all the experimental and tech-y stuff that you're exposed to at school. But what I'm really attracted to is working with my hands, and connecting with others who work with their hands. Just being with real people who are working for a living." She has since launched Artists Helping Artisans, a program aimed at developing economic opportunities for craftspeople in marginalized communities in Mexico and beyond.

Aguiniga will soon be filmed for a segment of the PBS series *Craft in America*. The show's producer, Carol Sauvion, sees this young artist's activism as a compelling part of her story. "Personal experience has formed her into a humanitarian," Sauvion observes, "a conscientious contributor to the solutions we need for the problems the world is facing now."

While her social conscience has richly informed her creative work, it has also caused her to struggle with the notion of art for art's sake. "My family have all been working people," Aguiniga reflects. "The entire time I've been doing furniture, I've been fighting the urge to make sculptural pieces." Lately, she's feeling freer. "I'm a little more OK with not having to talk about border issues through my work. You know – like it doesn't have to all be about me. It can be about pure beauty. Or exploration of materials – bringing crafts to the attention of this public that's used to a different side of me."

+ [aguinigadesign.com](http://aguinigadesign.com)

Joyce Lovelace is American Craft's contributing editor.

Right: Boing-y Lowrider Stools of Baltic birch plywood, auto lacquer, upholstery springs and vinyl tubing look ready to leap into action.

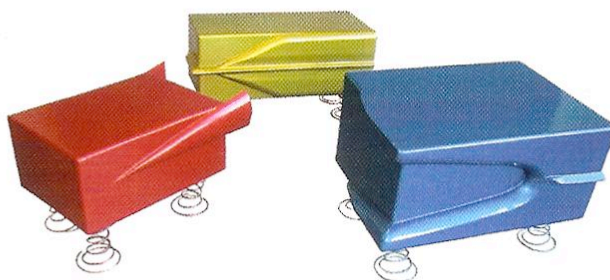


Photo: Douglas Kirkland

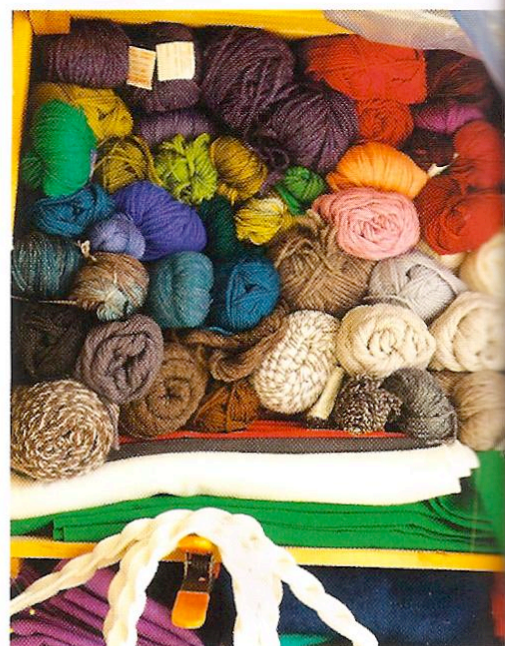
Aguiniga's Seating Trays of plywood, walnut veneer, cast silicone and felt do double duty and stack easily to stow.



Left: The glass top of the Moño Table (2002) rests on four loops of Italian bending poplar.



Below: Aguiniga's stash of yarn, felt, and other textiles in her studio.



Left: Aguiniga keeps these fanciful goats in her studio; they were made by women in Mexico with whom she worked.



Above: The Hole Table (2005), 40 inches in diameter to seat four, ensures no errant crockery goes sliding off the powder-coated steel surface.



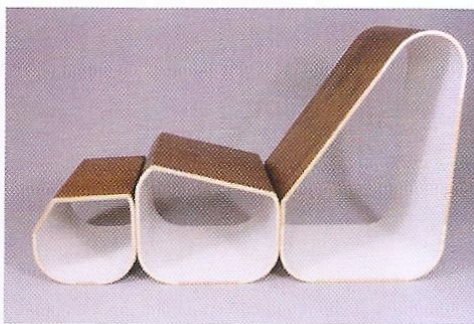
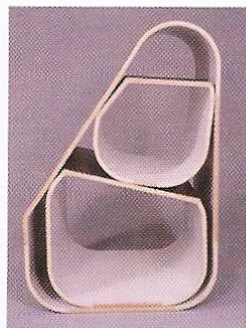


Above: *Panchito* (2003), of powder-coated steel, laser-cut and welded.

Right: Aguiñiga covered her studio wall with a black-board to work out designs and capture her seemingly endless supply of ideas.



Photo: Douglas Kirkland



The artist and her husband, Todd Beattie, demonstrate possible seating arrangements using the *Modular Lounge* (2000), made of poplar, mahogany, plywood, and Formica.

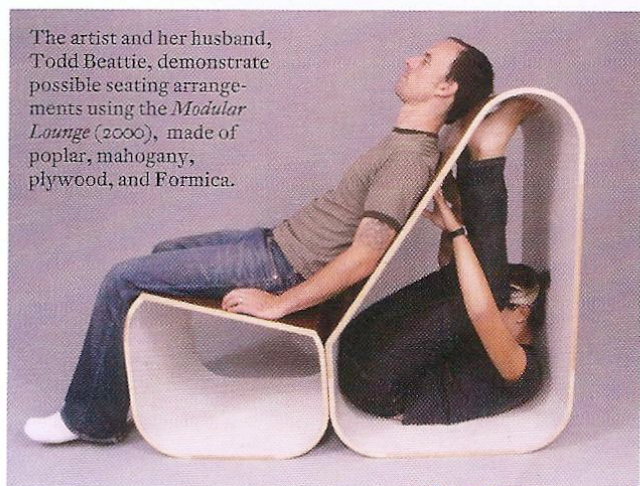


Photo: Douglas Kirkland



Above: The 5-foot-long *Birch Sled* (2007) combines birch logs with sleek steel.

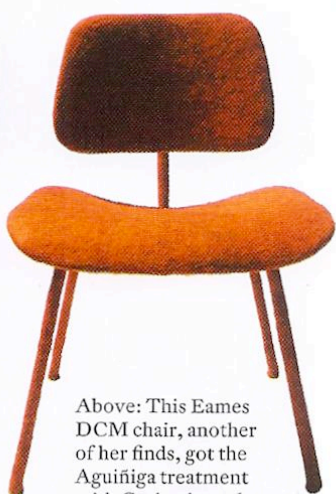


Left: What? She makes jewelry too? Aguiñiga's hand-dyed Rope Knot bracelets.

Right: The hand-woven *Non-Parcil Rug* (2004).



Right: The artist gave this Eames wire chair she found a partial covering of Gotland and merino wool in 2008.



Above: This Eames DCM chair, another of her finds, got the Aguiñiga treatment with Gotland wool.



Above: The artist hand-felted one of her signature pieces.

Left: *Teotitlán I* (2007) is made of steel, lacquer, and nylon twine.