



CRAFT IN AMERICA

EDUCATION GUIDE

Tanya Aguiñiga: Crossing Borders



"It just makes sense for me to be able to play with whatever I want to play with and not really stay within a certain definition of what people call me."

- Tanya Aguiñiga

LESSON OVERVIEW

Students will explore the work of Tanya Aguiñiga, including her furniture design, installations, accessory crafting, and community art projects. Students will consider the ways Aguiñiga crosses borders in her life and in her art making. In studio practice, students will felt with recycled wool and use the wool to alter and soften a hard surface (a mini-installation), to create a cushion, or to craft an accessory. Students will also sketch ideas for a larger installation that considers the idea of borders.

Grade Level: 9-12

Estimated Time: Three 45-minute class periods of research, discussion, and planning, followed by five 45-minute studio periods (Consider that felt may take some time to dry.)

Craft In America Theme/Episode: *CROSSROADS*

Background Information

Tanya Aguiñiga grew up in both San Diego, CA and Tijuana, Mexico, a bi-cultural artist whose quest is to create a dialogue between two very different cultural experiences in her craft-based artistic expression.

Having learned her trade from vastly different sources - from a native backstrap weaver in Chiapas, Mexico to the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design - her fiber art and furniture designs challenge our assumptions by re-purposing and redesigning existing icons and experiences.

As a founding member of the artist cooperative Border Art Workshop, she helped to establish a community center at Maclovio Rojas, a community in an impoverished area of Tijuana, established during the US/Mexico trade wars in the 1980s. Aguiñiga also creates environmental installations, including her 2011 solo show, *Crossing the Line*, at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles.

Key Concepts

- Artists' life experiences may influence his or her artwork.
- An artist may practice more than one kind of art making.
- Art can be used to improve people's lives.

Critical Questions

- How might an artist's life experiences influence her or his artwork?
- Why might an artist want, or need, to make different kinds of art?
- In what ways might art improve people's lives?

Objectives

Students will:

- Identify characteristics of the work of Tanya Aguiñiga, including her furniture design, accessory crafting, installations, and community art projects.
- Explain the concept of borders in artworks.
- Create an installed object or accessory from the felted fabric after practicing felting wool with recycled fibers.
- Plan and sketch an idea for a large installation.

Vocabulary

Felting, site-specific installation, activist, minimalist, intern, the various meanings of the word "borders"

Interdisciplinary Connection

History/Social Studies: Tanya Aguiñiga's story is an opportunity for students to consider their own heritage, and what borders they straddle regarding ancestry and cultural customs. This lesson may also lead to studying Mexican and Mexican-American culture, art, history, and present day political issues. There are several excellent online resources to aid in this study.

- The PBS series website for *School: the Story of American Public Education* has a section on the contentious history of bilingual education in America:
www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL00795BC38B4368D4
- The PBS series website for *Precious Knowledge* looks at the recent ethnic studies controversy in Arizona: www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/precious-knowledge
- A website through Brown University explores the Chicano movement of the 1960s and 1970s: www.brown.edu/Research/Coachella
- The newest museum of Mexican American culture is LaPlaza de Cultura y Artes: www.lapca.org
- MexicanHistory.org features information, images, and short films about many facets of Mexican history and culture.
- The Mexican Museum features images of Mexican art collections: www.mexicanmuseum.org

Science: As an extension of this lesson and as a way for students to more fully understand their environment, students might explore the attributes of fibers. Students can conduct burn test to detect fiber content and add to consider the benefits of natural versus artificial fibers and fabrics for various uses. They should consider attributes required for temperature extremes, medical and hospital uses, and specialized clothing such as space suits, diving suits, sports gear, military and firefighting apparel.

National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard:

1. Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes
2. Using knowledge of structures and functions
4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
5. Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Resources and Materials for Teaching

Resources

- Craft in America DVD, *CROSSROADS*. Also viewable online at www.craftinamerica.org/episodes/crossroads
- Craft in America website, www.craftinamerica.org
- Digital images of Aguiñiga's work can be seen on the Craft in America website and on Tanya's website and also at The American Craft Council.
- Information and images of Aguiñiga's design for A Board Game to End Homelessness can be seen here.
- The Famous Mexican Artists website has images and information about contemporary and historic Mexican artists, artworks, and art happenings.

Worksheets

- *Making a Difference with Craft: Felt Objects*
- *Visible Borders: An Installation Plan*

Classroom Resources

- Gather library books for research and inspiration on the topics of Mexican and Mexican American art and culture, furniture design, jewelry making, felting, needlework, fibers and fabrics, community art, murals, and installation art.
- Begin a bulletin board area for teacher and students to add stories about Mexico-U.S. border relations and border crossing (in both directions) that are frequently in the news, as well as other aspects of border crossing. Leave space for students and teachers to add examples of border crossings such as borders of nations, genders, race, class, age, and locally geographic borders such as school districts.
- Maps for classroom display.

Materials

- Sketch books and/or sketching paper, pencils and markers.
- Wool sweaters from a thrift store; one per student is enough for a cushion (from the body of the sweater) with extra sleeve fabric. If this is too costly, smaller projects may be more affordable. One sweater per four or six students is another option, and students can make mini-installations, cuffs, phone pockets, wallets and similar items.
- Stuffing: bagged polyester or natural fiber pillow stuffing. Recycled materials such as soft, lofty fabrics (lightweight sweaters, lightweight knits, synthetic and natural fleece) may be washed and used as a less costly stuffing alternative.
- Dishwashing soap
- Plastic dishwashing tubs, sinks
- Spray bottles for water
- Hot water
- Waterproofed surfaces for scrubbing wool; washboards if available
- Clothespins and clothes lines (or a dryer)
- Scissors
- Straight pins
- Safety pins
- Sewing thread and needles (Note: hand made felt can be too thick to easily sew on a sewing machine; hand sewing is usually preferable.)
- Embroidery thread and needle
- Yarn for tying and hanging objects



INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

*"I think it's a very frontier sensibility about making work."
- Tanya Aguiñiga*

This lesson includes viewing and discussing Tanya Aguiñiga's varied art making processes and practices and trying several of her practices in studio work. Studio work includes felting recycled wool fabric, creating mini-installations that soften or change the surrounding environment, creating felted accessories, and planning ideas for large scale installations, which may remain in sketch and model form or actually be installed.

Aguiñiga's position as a border-crosser in her international locations (the United States and Mexico) and in her art making practices provides opportunities to explore these and other examples of border crossings. Simultaneously studying US/Mexican border and cultural issues is an appropriate lesson enrichment, as well as inviting students to consider their own instances of facing and crossing boundaries and borders. Working in groups, if students choose, makes sense to provide a community aspect to this project, as Tanya Aguiñiga often works with others.

Before Viewing

*"... my work crosses in between functional and non-functional, fine art and craft, traditional and modern."
- Tanya Aguiñiga*

Introduce students to artist Tanya Aguiñiga and explain that they will view a video segment that follows the artist through some of her art making experiences. Ask students to look for the different kinds of art making that Aguiñiga practices. Enlist students to explain what is meant by the term, "border," and then encourage them to look for the kinds of borders that the artist crosses.

View the segment featuring Tanya Aguiñiga in the Craft in America *CROSSROADS* episode on the DVD or online at www.craftinamerica.org/shorts/tanya-aguiniga-segment.

After Viewing

Begin a discussion of Tanya Aguiñiga's work by asking for student reactions. Continue the discussion by asking the following:

- How does Aguiñiga describe her childhood? (She was outgoing and enjoyed the friendliness of her neighborhood community; she attended school in the U.S. so that her grandmother could babysit her.)
- What borders does Aguiñiga describe? (She talks about art borders such as "functional and non-functional, fine art and craft, traditional to modern" and she talks about literally crossing the Mexico-United States border.)
- What does Aguiñiga say about adapting when crossing back and forth between two countries? (Aguiñiga talks about adjusting to fit in to the side of the border she is on, "I was thinking a lot about just growing up on the border and having this kind of dual personality where sometimes I was one thing on one side of the border and then on the other side I'd have to become something else to fit in.")

- What are some examples of that process that Aguiñiga reflects in her artwork? (The cold, hard metal chairs modified with a soft felted coating; the braided cuffs that appeal to New Englanders.)
- What kinds of art does Aguiñiga make? (She designs furniture, makes fashion accessories, creates site-specific installations, and works on community art projects.)
- Ask students to consider Aguiñiga’s statement,

“...my exploration into color and texture comes from the Mexican side of me and the cleaner lines and more minimal aesthetic come from the U.S. side of me.”

Which artworks represent those aspects? (Her wall weaving installation features color and texture, her furniture designs vary from smooth, “minimalist” designs to textured and colorful fuzzy chairs.)

- What does her husband say about why Aguiñiga works with Maclovio Rojas? (Having become a successful artist, she feels compelled to give back to her community.)
- What is the purpose of each of Aguiñiga’s art practices? (She sells her furniture designs and her popular accessories, such as the knotted cuff bracelets: “I pay my bills by making jewelry and accessories.” Aguiñiga’s furniture designs and installations allow her to explore ideas that are important to her, including her crossborder heritage, for example her Low-rider stool, and the Crossing the Line installation at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles. Her community art expresses a commitment to social justice.)
- What benefits does Aguiñiga gain from working with others? (Aguiñiga, as she says, is outgoing and seems to enjoy companionship and a community spirit. Also, her family helps in the business, as do interns who gain experience working in an artist’s studio. While exhibiting in museums and creating artistic furniture can connect an artist with wealthier and more privileged communities, Aguiñiga’s other community projects keep her connected to people in less privileged areas.)
- Show students Aguiñiga’s design for a board game to end homelessness.

Studio Production

(five 45-minute studio periods, dividing time among felting, creating with felt, and sketching/forming the installation models)

Tell students they will be studying artist Tanya Aguiñiga and her various art making processes and purposes. Let students know they will be learning to felt wool fabric, one of Aguiñiga’s methods, and then creating something with the felted fabric.

Students will create a mini-installation in which they intervene and improve their environment by introducing natural materials to soften a hard or cold surface within school. This could be creating a soft cushioned intervention for an uncomfortable cafeteria seat, placing felt around a table corner or leg where students bump and bruise themselves, or hanging a small colorful stuffed shape from a cold metal locker. Students can also craft useful or decorative accessories from the felted fabric.

Additionally, students will also consider large installations; including planning and sketching a large installation like Aguiñiga’s Crossing the Line. Depending upon time, interest, and feasibility, students may actually work from their plans to build the large installation. Encourage students to work in groups to share felted fabric that they create, to discuss areas in the room.

Making a Difference with Craft: Felt Objects

(one 45-minute class period)

This worksheet reinforces the fact that all of Tanya Aguiñiga’s art and craft practices make a positive difference in people’s environments. Discuss with students how her accessories and furnishings provide people with beautiful or amusing objects, how her community-based art helps people get housing or a skill that can provide income, and how her installations encourage thoughtful dialogues, empowering people to break through borders or to reconsider stereotypes about border crossing.

The worksheet helps students define an area in school that they could improve with a felt object, and in doing so, creating a mini-installation. Students can also design felted objects for enjoyment—a small fun item to brighten the school day.

Felting and Forming

(Five 45-minute studio periods, dividing time among felting, creating with felt, and sketching/forming the installation models, including reflection activity.)

Felting wool requires water (preferably warm to hot) and friction. The addition of some soap helps as well. Wool fibers will shrink and become denser, connecting to each other and yielding a soft, thick fabric that may be cut without the edges fraying. Ask students if they have ever unintentionally felted a wool garment by placing it in hot water or a hot dryer and pulling out a thickened, miniaturized sweater. Some woolens are treated to prevent shrinking; they may be labeled as such or labeled “superwash.”

Fibers vary, and part of the discovery process can be experimenting and comparing what happens to the different fabrics. Fabrics that do not felt may still be used to craft items. Have places ready for hanging/drying wet sweater fabric, warning that the room will probably smell like wet sheep (or a wet dog!). This process provides another opportunity to experience and compare fibers, in this case natural and synthetic fabrics.

Students may cut the sleeves from sweaters to be felted separately, or cut them after felting. Cushions can be made from the body, the front and back of the sweater, sewn together as a square and then stuffed. Sleeves may be shared to create smaller items such as mini installations, phone pockets, wallets, and decorated cuffs.



To felt:

Fill tub or sink 1/3 to 1/2 full with hot/warm water and add a squirt of dish detergent. Agitate to distribute detergent. Place sweater in water and agitate, kneading and rubbing sweater to felt the fibers. This takes time, and after several minutes in the water, students can wring most of the water from the sweater and move to a waterproofed surface to continue felting: rubbing, scrubbing and kneading fabric and spraying it to keep it wet while working.

Students may experiment with methods to see which manipulations work best for felting. This may take more than one class period: when students return, they may repeat the process until fabric begins to felt. When thickened, rinse felt to remove soap. In some instances, this process will yield no results, indicating that the particular fabric is not felt-able. Some students may want to drape and mold a portion of wet wool felted fabric over an object, such as a plastic bowl, to let it dry in a sculpted shape. Explain that this is how felt hats are crafted. Note that while fabric dries, students may work on their installation models and sketches.

When fabric is felted and dried, students can use it to create cushions and other items. To make a cushion, cut two matching squares of fabric. Sew around the edges, leaving a small opening for stuffing. Stuff lightly (especially for a seat cushion) and stitch the opening.

Mini installations to soften and alter surfaces can be pinned around the item, such as the corner of a table, carefully removed, stitched, and then reinstalled. In some cases, as in around a desk leg, the piece may be stitched in place. For decorative "installations" (such as a small stuffed shape) to hang on a locker or other site, attach a piece of yarn to the item. To make a cuff, simply cutting a band of fabric from the tube-like sleeve may work. Or, sew a deeper seam if needed to make the tube smaller. The cuff can be decorated with stitching, sewn buttons or beads, or with motifs cut from extra fabric and sewn to the surface.

Visible Borders: An Installation Plan

(one 45-minute class period)

Using the worksheet, allow students to work together to discuss concepts for a large installation. Offer students examples of other artists' installations. Remind students that this is just a plan, such as an architectural drawing or a schematic for a stage scene for the theater, and that, as in Tanya Aguiñiga's sketchbook, artists come up with many ideas but not every idea gets constructed or completed.

Encourage dialogue about Aguiñiga's statement:

"I was thinking about lines and what do lines mean. You know one of the first things that I thought about was, how the line is the border and the line is artificial boundaries. So the space is really laid out with all these artificial boundaries, because if you really wanted to get through it, you know it's just string, you could just, you know, go through stuff."

- Tanya Aguiñiga

Have students consider potential meanings of Aguiñiga's statement and of her installation. How would they explain the meanings to someone else? Encourage varied approaches to the broad theme of "borders."

CLOSING STRATEGIES

Reflection

Have students photograph their work, installed or in use, to be displayed. If photography is not an option, have students create sketches. Students should write an artist's statement for their felted work. In their reflection, students should indicate the success or limitation of their projects as they see them.

Have students create the display of objects, photos of objects installed or in use, and sketches/models for the larger installation concepts with accompanying artist statements for each. Suggest that students include information about Tanya Aguiñiga and her work in their display.

Assessment

By examining the worksheets and the student's artwork, and in discussions with the student throughout the project, it should be evident that the student can:

- Describe the art making practices of Tanya Aguiñiga.
- Illustrate examples of "borders" as a theme in artworks.
- Craft felt from wool fibers, and create a mini-installation or an accessory made from the felt.
- Understand the concept of a site-specific installation and sketch a plan for such an installation.

Extensions

Students may examine the work of the following artists on the Craft In America website, listed under Fiber: www.craftinamerica.org/artists-material

Each of the artists shares something in common with Tanya Aguiñiga.

- Artist Consuelo Jimenez Underwood also explores borders in her textile work: www.craftinamerica.org/artists/consuelo-jimenez-underwood
- Lisa Sorrell also has a family business, crafting custom made boots: www.craftinamerica.org/artists/lisa-sorrell
- Randall Darwall shares Tanya Aguiñiga's use of vibrant color, featuring it in his woven fabrics: www.craftinamerica.org/artists/randall-darwall

Authors

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Worksheet: Making a Difference with Craft: Felt Objects

*"Anywhere you place one of her pieces it suddenly feels at home."
- Gerard O'Brien, curator, about Tanya Aguiñiga's work*

Tanya Aguiñiga uses the easily portable craft of felting to "teach people a skill that could help them earn some income."

Consider the ways that Tanya Aguiñiga's craft and art making improves people's environments, and list them here:

Aguiñiga has a sense of humor and some of her creations are just for fun. Check out her "balloon outfits" at www.aguinigadesign.com/accessories/balloon_outfits.html. How would you describe these to someone who hasn't seen them?

Look around your school. Are there places that could use a soft surface or some fuzzy color to make them less cold? Think about the desk leg or corner that students are always bumping against, or a row of drab metal lockers lacking an accent of color and softness. Is there a mouse or hamster in the biology room that wants a little woolen hut? Are you sitting on a hard chair that needs a cushion? List some places and ideas for a felt intervention, a mini-installation:

Share ideas with your classmates. Choose one to sketch. Include a schematic - a drawn plan for how you will make the object and where it will be placed.

Worksheet: Visible Borders: An Installation Plan

"...One of the first things that I thought about was how the line is the border and the line is an artificial boundary. So the space is really laid out with all these artificial boundaries, because if you really wanted to get through it, you know it's just string, you could just, you know, go through stuff."

- Tanya Aguiñiga, about her installation *Crossing the Line*

A site-specific installation is an artwork created for a particular space, and it is usually temporary. Reflecting on Aguiñiga's statement, can you think of borders that are easily crossed, and borders that are not easily crossed? Consider different kinds of borders:

- Physical, for example, mountain ranges and walls
- Metaphorical, such as the "glass ceiling"
- Legal, including immigration rights and age-related rights.

List some borders and boundaries within school, between people and spaces. What are borders and boundaries that you encounter? Are they visible or invisible? How would you depict them?

As a group, choose a border or boundary to represent in an installation. Consider how you will resolve these issues:

- Location. Where will it be installed? Will the location have special meaning?
- Materials. What will you use to create the installation? Recall that Aguiñiga's installation used hundreds of colored yarns.
- Symbols. Will your location and/or materials be symbolic? How will you represent the idea of a border?
- Viewers. Do you want viewers to interact with the installation or just view it? What do you want viewers to experience or think about?
- Can you imagine your installation making a difference to someone, or to the school? What might that be?

Create a small model of the installation plan on a piece of cardboard or in a box that represents a room. You can use paper cutouts or other simple materials. Label the parts of the model. Title your installation, and create an artist's statement that explains the plan to others.