

# Features



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**Amy Devers** MFA 01 FD

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**Tanya Aguiñiga** MFA 05 FD



“There’s just something about 3D—the fact that I can touch it and it’s tangible.”

**Jessica Brown** MID 09

“My kids are my review team. They just respond instantly to stuff, and it’s amazing.”

**Buck Lewis** 81 IL





# DOING IT DIFFERENTLY IN A DIY WORLD

■ by **Francie Latour**

Earlier this spring Tanya Aguiñiga created an inviting installation of crisscrossed yarns, felted furniture and floating woven pieces for *Crossing the Line*, her solo show at LA's Craft and Folk Art Museum.

*Meet three designers who share a deep love of materials, a fondness for power tools and the drive to help others discover the joys of working with their hands.*

**HOW CAN YOU TELL WHEN A PHENOMENON HAS BECOME COMPLETELY ENTRENCHED WITHIN POPULAR CULTURE?** When it's got a catchy three-letter acronym that everybody either instantly recognizes or senses they should. Like DIY.

DIY is the American middle-class hobby that grew into a philosophical movement that exploded into a national obsession that spawned a billion-dollar media and retail empire. It's an anti-consumerist subculture and it's a giant cable network (actually several, including DIY, HGTV and a lucrative chunk of PBS). It's a way to plan your wedding and it's the message behind every ad for Lowe's and Home Depot. More than anything, it's a highly hyped notion of returning to something the average American vaguely senses has been lost—without knowing exactly what that something is.

For three young alumni—one from suburban Michigan, one from rural Kentucky and one from the Mexican border town of Tijuana—DIY was never really any of those things. It wasn't a trend or something they even identified with a label. For **Amy Devers** MFA 01 FD, **Jessica Brown** 09 MID and **Tanya Aguiñiga** MFA 05 FD, doing it yourself has always been something they craved. From the time they were young, finding a new way to use an old thing was a way of life and a physical impulse—almost an extension of their own hands.

They may not have chosen the same materials or had the same motivations: As a teen, Brown once took apart a dresser to make shelving for a stereo out of necessity; at the same age, Devers was doing her hair in wild architectural styles for sheer fun. Aguiñiga made money to buy candy by packaging handmade jewelry in Saran Wrap and selling it door-to-door.

Today, their channels of expression are equally varied—making how-to videos, creating floor-to-ceiling installations and bringing imaginative curb appeal to homes. But from a



shared passion for making and building, these three alums are carving out dynamic careers, blurring the boundary between DIY and craft and elevating the most mundane materials—from obsolete 8-track tapes to impersonal folding chairs to nondescript bathroom tiles—to new heights.

“All three of these women demonstrate a high level of informed intellect in their manner of making,” says Professor **Rosanne Somerson** ’76 ID, longtime head of Furniture Design at RISD and now interim provost. “There is a clear sensitivity to materials and process linked to their concept, but they each produce work that simultaneously extends their personal voice and our conceptual understanding.”

#### THE URGE TO TINKER

As distinct as their paths have been, Devers, Aguiñiga and Brown all describe the same gravitational pull towards three-dimensional making. “I started envisioning furniture before I had any idea it was something you could study in school or had any kind of understanding of the physics or mechanics of it,” says Devers, a Los Angeles-based furniture designer/maker who has skyrocketed to DIY fame as a co-host for shows like *Trading Spaces*, *Blog Cabin* and the A&E hit *This Yard*. This year, Devers launched “Hands On,” a home-improvement advice column for *ReadyMade* magazine.

Recalling her college days and early 20s, Devers says she had a powerful urge to tinker. She was studying the business side of fashion at the Fashion Institute of Technology. But one night, while watching her friends struggle to design a packaging product that would open in a particular way, she became obsessed. “I just couldn’t let it go,” she says. “I got my own cardboard and sat in my dorm room alone playing with it until I figured out how to make it work.”

Later, while sharing a tiny apartment with friends in California, she figured out how to make milk-bottle lamps with rudimentary wiring. But her mind was racing far ahead of her hand skills. “I started this mental process of re-engineering all the furniture in our place in my head so that it would be more useful to us,” she says. “I’d think, ‘If this futon was just hollow somehow, then we could still sleep on it but we’d have all this storage underneath.’”

Eventually, when Devers got to RISD, her skills would catch up with her ideas. For her graduate thesis project, she designed and built an entire nightclub lounge interior using only bathroom materials; shower fixtures became lamps and vanity pieces became sitting areas.

“Everyone else was seeking out the most lavish materials—beautiful upholstery fabrics and exotic woods,” says Somerson, “and Amy brought in these really mundane materials from Home Depot, which she then repurposed with an incredible level of both craftsmanship and ingenuity.”

Like Devers, Aguiñiga was reaching for that same building know-how in her 20s, too, but for very different reasons. In the late ’90s, as part of the Border Art Workshop, a politically engaged arts collaborative in San Diego, she wanted to build spaces that would give migrant squatter communities access to resources and a powerful voice through art.

She built those spaces in the tradition of the border neighborhoods around her, cobbled together using nontraditional techniques and discarded materials destined for the

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trash heap. Once, she reclaimed an outdated marble rotunda from a local San Diego museum, sawed it into pieces, drove them down to Mexico and transformed them into church pews.

“Where I’m from, you don’t throw anything out. You always made due with what you had,” says Aguiñiga, a furniture designer and artist whose exuberant, handcrafted work has been shown everywhere from Mexico City to Milan. Her work has spanned the gamut from metal and plastic to wood and textiles; in *Crossing the Line*, her spring solo show at LA’s Craft and Folk Art Museum, she exhibited a room-size installation of crisscrossing yarns and floating woven pieces that enveloped visitors in a cocoon-like environment.

Through the Border Art Workshop, Aguiñiga developed the skills she would need to hone her vision in craft. “We built a soccer field. We built a cemetery. We built a sculpting school to teach people to carve gravestones themselves,” Aguiñiga says.

“I had never even used a power drill before, and here I was doing roofing and physically building stuff. That was when I started to think, ‘I want to make furniture. I like working with my hands to make something.’” And though it was a slow road, Aguiñiga began to win the approval of her struggling working-class relatives, who had been counting on her—the family star since kindergarten—to lift them out of poverty through medicine or law. “One of the times Pope John Paul II came to Mexico, we were on the roster of people for him to meet because of all the work we had done for migrant rights,” she says. “Even though my family wasn’t happy with me ‘wasting my brain’ on art, they finally said ‘Well, if the Pope thinks she’s okay, I guess she’s okay.’”

From the time Jessica Brown stole her cousin’s toy push saw, the satisfaction of creating and repurposing in 3D was visceral. Her longtime mentor and former high-school art teacher, Glenda Bittner, puts it this way: “She made men’s underwear out of duct tape. She made clothes for her pet rat. Every single solitary assignment I gave Jessica she attacked, like it was the greatest thing there ever was.”

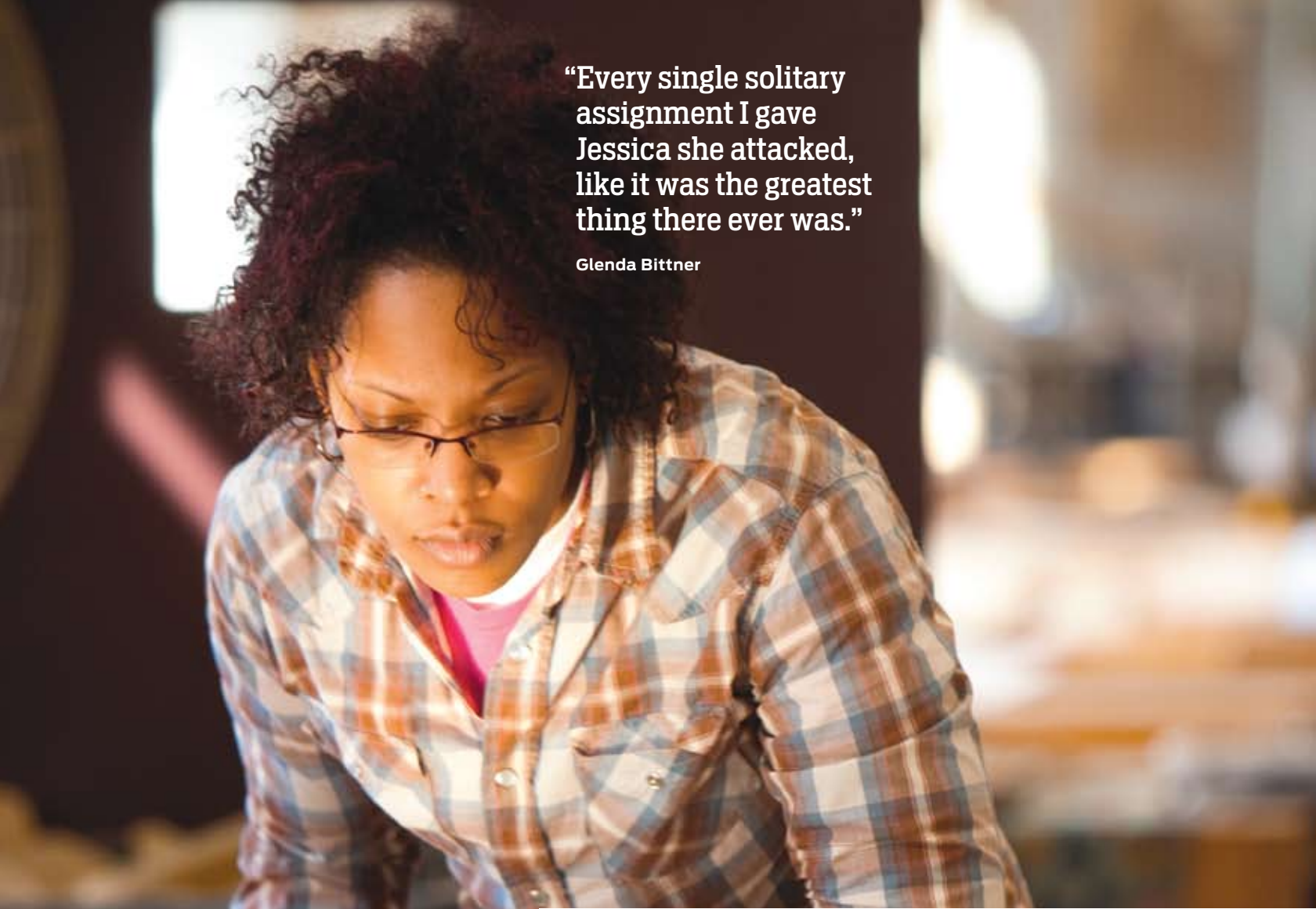
Long before Brown knew what sustainability meant, she and her family would do what most people did in their hometown of West Paducah, KY: They recycled, reused and handed down almost everything. Food scraps became cattle feed. Bathtubs became planters. T-shirts became rags.

But even in a community of savers, Brown stood out. Once,



Amy Devers on the set of the DIY Network show *Freeform Furniture* (above) and doing an on-camera workshop as a crowd of Koreans looks on in Seoul.





“Every single solitary assignment I gave Jessica she attacked, like it was the greatest thing there ever was.”

Glenda Bittner

after getting a stereo for Christmas, she took a saw, cut out the upper rails of her five-drawer bureau, covered a cardboard slab with some contact paper and then set it on the lower rails—all in a matter of minutes. “I took the stereo and speakers, positioned them into their new home and voilà,” says Brown, who now lives in Providence. “My parents were flabbergasted. One, that I had cut up a bureau they had had for years, and two, that I did it that fast.” Looking back, she says that her parents gave her a precious gift: the freedom to “destroy their house with purpose.”

Now Brown dreams of following in Devers’ DIY footsteps: With a TV persona that is a cross between Bob Villa, Bob Barker and ’80s MTV icon Downtown Julie Brown, she has launched four episodes of her YouTube show *Let’s Just Make That!*, showing viewers how to make kitchen islands or pot racks with the forgotten materials sitting in their basement. She is shopping the idea to several networks.

“There’s something about 3D and the fact that I can touch it and it’s tangible,” Brown says. “With painting, I might be able to smell the paint, but I can’t physically go in there and move those shapes and colors around.”

#### PLANES OF IDENTITY

For Devers, Aguiñiga and Brown, the journey to becoming designers/makers was marked by their own evolving sense of

Jessica Brown MID 09 has been tinkering, experimenting and making things since she was a kid—when her parents essentially gave her free reign to “destroy their house with purpose.”

photo by Stephani Ewers



As one of the first women to be featured regularly on DIY shows, Devers typically tackled projects with men. Here she’s building a table with Diamond Rio on *DIY to the Rescue*.

identity and the lived experience of crossing cultural boundaries—boundaries of ethnicity, nationality, race and gender.

Fresh out of San Diego State with a degree in furniture design, Devers got her first job—as a machine shop foreman overseeing a 12-man team that built trade show booths. She quickly realized that before she could be their boss, she first had to prove she could be their equal.

“I noticed in my interview that they all came to work in blue Dickies and a white t-shirt,” Devers says. “So on my first day, I came in blue Dickies and a white t-shirt. When something was too heavy for me, I moved tables around and used leverage to manipulate materials. And I just worked. I worked as hard and as long as they did.”

But that gender challenge paled in comparison to what Devers would face in the surreal world of television. She broke into TV after hearing about a casting call from a friend of a friend. The criteria were simple: a female who was a skilled builder. No acting experience necessary. “I thought, ‘What the hell. I know how to build. I have rhinestone safety glasses,’” says Devers, who landed the part and launched her TV career on the DIY Network’s flagship show, *DIY to the Rescue*, in 2003.

On the one the one hand, Devers says, she was a sought-after commodity—a telegenic woman and highly skilled builder who knew how to get the content right. On the other hand, she was a novelty—a product audiences would have to buy in order for the show to succeed.

“There was a moment in home-improvement TV history where, if you were a woman, you were either the sexy carpenter who didn’t really know what she was doing, or you were the token female,” Devers says. “The network didn’t want either. They hired me because I was the real deal. But they had a deep suspicion that nobody would believe I was the real deal.”

These days nobody doubts Devers’ credentials, and she’s developed her own on-camera persona—“relaxed, a little bit of a smart-ass, and bossy in the all-for-the-greater-good kind of way.” But in that first crucial season, producers told her she had to play it safe: “No jokes, no goofiness, no personality. Just the facts. So I was being asked to be myself, but a very conservative version of myself.”

If Devers had to straddle invisible boundaries of perception, Aguiñiga straddled boundaries that were geographic and highly policed: Twice a day from the age of 5, she crossed the border from Mexico to attend school in San Diego, where she was born and where her father worked. For years, her Tijuana address was a secret she had to keep from her school and even her closest friends. But as an adult, her body of work—highly tactile, interactive pieces with unexpected combinations of material and form—stands as a powerful visual translation of that experience.

“Where we lived was a few blocks away from the border fence. So the drive to school was along this road right next to the border,” says Aguiñiga, who lives and works in LA and won a \$50,000 award in 2006 as an inaugural recipient of the prestigious United States Artists Fellowship. “That’s one of the things that made the border super present in my mind always, the difference between me just being able to drive over it and other people having to sacrifice their lives to cross it.”



As part of the project Artists Helping Artisans, Aguiñiga worked with artisans in Chiapas, Mexico, who weave fabric using backstrap looms.

bottom: photo by Belinda Valadez



**“I’ve always felt guilty about making work that wasn’t functional, because that’s something that people of leisure do.”**

Tanya Aguiñiga MFA 05 FD

With an instinctive love of materials and a childhood defined by a hyphenated identity, Aguiñiga began to embed her ideas about home, alienation, boundaries and belonging into her furniture designs. Her very first piece at RISD, *Embrace Lounge*—a daybed with a surface cut out in the shape of a human figure—spoke to an acute need she was feeling at the time: for physical, human contact.

Today, Aguiñiga’s sense of identity and place are still evolving. In 2007 she traveled with a younger sister to weaving villages in Chiapas, Mexico to study traditional techniques of backstrap weaving, where women use their own bodies as looms. But success has also meant redefining what it means to exist in two different worlds.

“It’s a long process to be okay with someone giving you \$50,000. I was never actually prepared for success. I was prepared for struggle,” she says. “I’ve always felt guilty about making work that wasn’t functional, because that’s something that people of leisure do. And now I guess I’m ‘people of leisure.’ I’m still exploring ideas centered around craft and tradition, but in different ways.”

On the surface, Jessica Brown might seem to share some common ground with Devers and Aguiñiga. As an African-American growing up in rural Kentucky, she knew what it felt like to be a minority in a predominantly white world. As a woman who builds, she knows what it’s like to be female in a predominantly male world.

But while Brown has addressed issues of race head-on in her past work, those are not necessarily the forces that have shaped her art. What accelerated Brown on her path was something else entirely, something that made high-school art class not just a fun place to create, but a critical outlet for her survival. In 1997, she was among a group of students who were fired on in a school shooting, injuring five and killing three.

She doesn’t talk much about the incident, and the bubbly optimism of her YouTube workshops betrays nothing of the pain she experienced. But in the shooting’s emotional aftermath, art literally saved her. “After the shooting, the art room became my escape, because I decided to not really deal with the... shooting,” she says.

The art annex became the place Brown went in the early-morning hours before school opened, letting herself in with alarm codes she had been given. It was the place teachers sent her as an alternative to detention when she got in trouble. And it was where Brown forged a deep bond with Bittner, her art teacher, who became her mentor and surrogate mother.



Aguiñiga created *Embrace Lounge* (top) at RISD, inspired by the need to be held. Later she rescued a set of metal folding chairs from a dumpster and covered them in felt skins, using eye-popping colors inspired by her native Latino culture.

bottom right: photo by Peter Goldberg 88 PH

“I have absolutely no doubt Jessica is going to be famous one day,” Bittner says. “I’ve never known anybody braver than she is and I’ve never seen her fail at anything. I’ve seen her detour, but I’ve never seen her fail.”

#### CRAFTING COMMUNITIES

Here’s a coincidence: When you talk to friends of Devers, Aguiñiga or Brown, they inevitably start telling a story that involves one of those women walking into a room. The point of the story is to explain that the room is no longer the same once they’ve entered it.

“I took Amy out to dinner last night. We went to a restaurant we’d never been to before, and there was a room in it I wanted to show her,” says Ron Fleming, an LA designer and friend. “There was a big party happening in that room, so I hesitated. But Amy just walked right in and grabbed the guy around the shoulders and said, ‘Hey, happy birthday!’ She’s totally fearless.”

These women don’t just want to break new ground, colleagues and friends say. They also passionately want to connect. With an equal mix of personal dedication and larger-than-life personality, they are using their craft to engage audiences and build communities. The infectious enthusiasm they generate around their work has allowed them to bridge divides between high art and domestic crafts, between the average homeowner and the intimidating renovation project, and even between generations of their own families.

“My granddad watched me on YouTube and he calls and says, ‘Jess, you don’t know how proud I am. I tried to teach your uncles how to make things, and I always wanted to pass on that legacy,’” says Brown, who first started *Let’s Just*



*Make That!* to help her mother in Tennessee tackle basic home projects when Brown was far away. “Hearing that and knowing that brings a whole new level of satisfaction.”

Rosanne Somerson recalls being in a room when Aguiñiga demonstrated her process of hand-felting folding chairs. She remembers the entire studio smelling like olive oil and soap, and watching her student lovingly cast the bright wool fibers onto the drab metal.

“If you’re in a room with Tanya, you’re happy. She is just naturally connected to people. And actually, I think that’s something all three of these women share,” says Somerson. “They all are incredibly hard workers. But they’re all also really funny, lively inventive people who draw people to them and, in doing that, draw them to new ideas.”



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Rosanne Somerson 76 ID



Jessica Brown loves transforming trash into something useful, as in the funky key holder she made from an old Neil Diamond 8-track tape. Above: One of the benches Amy Devers has shown viewers how to build on *Fix This Yard*.