



Artists win awards for highlighting life on the border and reclaiming African art

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Tanya Aguiñiga worked with indigenous communities in Chiapas and Oaxaca, Mexico and in Alaska, but always felt drawn back to the border.

After immigration became a major issue in the 2016 campaign, artist Tanya Aguiñiga started walking among the cars and pedestrians lined up at the U.S.-Mexico border and handing out postcards with the question "What are your thoughts when you cross this border?" in both English and Spanish.

Attached to the cards were two strands of fabric to be tied together. The result was *Border Quipu* – named after the Inca device for organizing information using knotted threads.



Above: The *Border Quipu* artwork on display above the AMBOS storefront in San Ysidro, Calif. in view of traffic crossing the border.

Below: Artist Tanya Aguiñiga asking people who cross the U.S.-Mexico border communities to participate in the making of her art project *Border Quipu*.



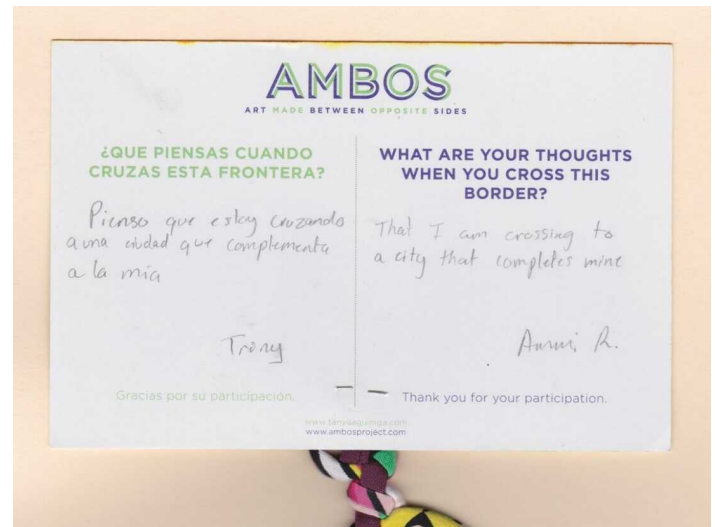
The artwork, a cascade of thousands of recycled bikini and dress straps of different colors and prints, was one of the works cited by the judges of this year's Heinz Award in selecting her for the \$250,000 cash prize.

New York-based Sanford Biggers was the other recipient of the award, named after the late U.S. Senator John Heinz, that recognizes excellence and achievement in areas including the arts, the economy and the environment.

Artists who've won the award in the past include 2008 winner Ann Hamilton, who is known for her large-scale multimedia installations, public projects, and performance collaborations, and artist and filmmaker Kevin Jerome Everson who was given the award in 2019. Aguiñiga was born in San Diego and raised in Tijuana, Mexico. As a child in the 1980s, she would cross the border to go to school. Later she attended community college, where she was introduced to art as a form of activism, and San Diego State University, but then did furniture design because it was something "my working-class family could relate to. "But slowly, I started kind of feeling like it wasn't enough to just make or to just design or to just think about stuff and to be doing something that was more for like a luxury market," she said.

She worked with indigenous communities in Chiapas and Oaxaca, Mexico and in Alaska, but felt drawn back to the border so she founded the AMBOS project. While the word means "both" in Spanish, the letters stand for "Art Made Between Opposite Sides." In creating *Border Quipu*, Aguiñiga said she wanted to do something with the AMBOS team on the mental states of those crossing the border at a time when then-candidate Donald Trump was promising to build a wall along the border. When Trump claimed that most Mexicans were rapists, criminals or drug dealers, Aguiñiga took it personally. "I was just so upset because we constantly have to carry so much of the weight of the U.S.'s need for labor, cleaning people's houses, child care."

Some of the postcards she got back contained the following thoughts written in Spanish: "Many risk their lives when crossing into the United States and it is very hard to live on the border. Many find their end in the desert." "Everything you can do over there you can also do here in Mexico with a lot of effort instead of being enslaved to work." "I cross with a passport and I feel like the happiest man in the world." "These border towns depend on each other a lot. There is a "knot" that unites both countries and that makes them stronger. "The artist said the quipu itself was initially displayed on a billboard above the AMBOS storefront in San Ysidro in view of traffic waiting to cross the border. She said it's meant to represent the U.S.-Mexico relationship and also what it does to the people who cross frequently. "From being what we are then suddenly when we cross into the United States and become this different thing. We hold our breath and we become this really different, kind of afraid person that is suddenly stigmatized."



People crossing the border were asked to write their thoughts and tie a knot to symbolize the relationship between the U.S. and Mexico.



Sanford Biggers looks up at his Oracle sculpture when it was on display at the Rockefeller Center last spring

Aguíñiga says she wants to use the power of art to transform the U.S.-Mexico Border from a place of trauma, to a creative space for collective healing and expression. "A lot of my work stems from a place of emotion and trying to heal trauma. Trying to do some of that messy work in public so that a lot of us can benefit from it, not just myself."

She called the Heinz award "a huge validation of the work I've been doing for the past 20 plus years."

In December, Aguíñiga plans to drive along the entire U.S.-Mexico Border to set up shrines made by people who are in AMBOS' "trauma-informed ceramics program" for LGBTQ+ asylum seekers. The goal is to create spaces for people to pray and pay homage to those who lost their lives to come to the U.S.



Artist Sanford Biggers' sits in front of his *Codex*, a textile work that includes paintings and sculptures done directly on or made from old quilts.

Biggers' works encompass painting, sculpture, textiles, and sound and employs a variety of media from antique quilts to marble.

Earlier this year, he received his largest commission to date, the third installation of his *Chimera* series, *Oracle*. The 25-foot tall sculpture, weighing more than 15,000 pounds, was on display at the Rockefeller Center in New York until June.

The seated body of the sculpture is inspired by the ancient Temple of Zeus, and the head is based off of masks and other sculptures from various African cultures, including Luba art and the Masai religion.

He says he's intrigued by recent findings that many of well-known marble sculptures from antiquity were actually painted in brilliant and even garish colors, and he compares that to the "early 20th-century 'black-washing' of African works," in which objects were "stripped of all material adornment and any ritual and cultural residue."

"The Chimera sculptures challenge the washing away of history in both cases and acknowledge the impact this revisionism has had on nationalistic propaganda, cultural understanding and the relationship between the West and the rest of the world," he said.

Biggers said he believes his award is a recognition of this deeper story.

"It's just a great honor to know that there are foundations like the Heinz that are out there to support ambitious work," he said.