Begun in 2000, the Renwick Invitational is a biennial juried showcase for midcareer and emerging craft artists who deserve wider recognition. The makers selected for *Disrupting Craft: Renwick Invitational 2018*—Tanya Aguiñiga, Sharif Bey, Dustin Farnsworth, and Stephanie Syjuco—challenge convention and infuse craft with a renewed sense of activism, emotional purpose, and inclusiveness.

Aguiñiga uses natural fibers to reveal raw personal narratives with universal feelings of vulnerability, often through performative and collaborative ways to connect communities. From utilitarian pots to abstract wall pieces, Bey explores complex cultural histories, while discovering ways his artistic process can interweave his identities as artist, educator, and father. Inspired by the narratives unfolding around him, Farnsworth manipulates wood into haunting storylines with intricate portraits of today’s youth, shining a spotlight on those inheriting societal and economic decay. Syjuco challenges perceptions of “types” in America with social practice projects and the tropes of craft, uncovering the complicated and contradictory ways we understand identity and nationhood.

These four artists show how craft can reach beyond the art world, revealing broader narratives about skilled making and the handmade. While responding to current pressing issues, they also revisit their own identities and communities. The work featured here offers moments of contemplation on the rapidly transforming world around us, and disrupts the status quo to alter our perspectives, bring us together, and lead us to a more empathetic, compassionate future.
Sharif Bey
Defying neat categorization, Sharif Bey’s work ranges from functional pots and beaded necklace forms to sculptures pierced with nails and ceramic shards. Throughout his work, Bey investigates cultural identity, symbols of status and community, and notions of power and ritual. As a dual associate professor at Syracuse University in both the College of Arts and the School of Education, he maintains a studio space just steps from where he teaches, allowing him to combine practice with theory. This hybrid model allows Bey to continuously reinvent his artistic process, joining rhythms and routines within daily work and life. A way to sustain his own identity, he believes the legacy of his work is defined not only by its materiality but in the ritual of making, and all the rites associated with their conception.

Satellite Studio Materials
2018
packing blanket, clay, and tools
Collection of the artist
This arrangement represents one of Sharif Bey’s mobile studios (see the photograph at left). Upon becoming a father, Bey realized the need to combine family life with studio practice. He set up small satellite studios around his house, with shipping quilts acting as working surfaces. Using simple pinch and coil techniques, Bey quickly stockpiled hundreds of small pots, which became the base elements for his beaded pieces. Prompting a new scale and direction for his sculptural forms, these nimble studios also reflect Bey’s interest in hybrid models of working—blending home with studio, and teaching with artistic practice.

Assimilation? Destruction?
2000
terracotta
Juliet Art Museum, Charleston, WV
This installation piece was Bey’s MFA project at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Consisting of approximately one thousand pinch pots sculpted into human heads, the work evolves over time, as each installation results in more and more shattered fragments. Referencing the complex, tragic histories of migration from African nations, Bey questions the impact on the collective identities of these peoples and cultures. The notion of collective versus individual identity is also explored with Bey’s composite beaded necklace forms on view nearby.

Sax Bandit
2011
earthenware and mixed media
Collection of the artist
As with his functional vessels, Bey’s sculptural work often draws upon forms and ornamentation found within the cultures of West and Central Africa, as exemplified by Sax Bandit, and his pierced objects on view nearby. This pipe-vessel form, along with Deadly Bong (across the gallery), evolved from Bey’s 2004 Fulbright grant, which involved research into the history of pipe forms within world cultures.
Ceremonial Vessel I
2016
earthenware and china shards
Collection of the artist
Bey pierces his vessels and sculptures with shards and nails, evoking the history of nkisi power figures, ceremonial Central African objects embedded with metal elements to document milestone events within a community. The ceramic shards Bey uses are taken from older, discarded works or found objects, like surplus production plates from factories. Acting as his own personal method of documentation, he is “reclaiming [his] own visual history and re-charting the history of [his] hand, and the hands of others.”

Jar with Feather Texture
2016
wood-fired stoneware
Collection of Michael J. Scanlon
Bey’s functional pots are the backbone of his career, serving as the foundation for his work and teaching. He considers the vessel to be his “orientation,” and the hum of the pottery wheel to be something that grounds him. Despite their simple forms, Bey embeds these subtle, everyday works with rich layers of historical and cultural meaning. He draws upon sources as diverse as ancient American pottery, European modernist design, African ceramics, and Native American textiles.

3 White Birds
2017
earthenware and mixed media
Collection of the artist
Bey’s shift from functional pots to more conceptual beaded forms emerged from the idea that vessels could be considered “sculptures of pots.” According to Bey, “beads are pots, really—they have volume, form, and surface, but don’t contain in the same way.” As these neckpieces evolve in scale to become impractical as wearable objects, they become more explicit in their reference to historical adornment and ritual, and to contemporary notions of identity and status.

Nestle
2018
glass and mixed media
The Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art

Raptor Ruff
2018
glass and mixed media
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Purchase, gift of Walter Read Hovey, by exchange
Bey’s recent experiments with cast glass have led to new types of beaded forms, fresh avenues for collaboration, and a different pace of working. The curved, talon-like elements of Raptor Ruff coalesce to form a volume reminiscent of seventeenth-century lace ruffs—historical signifiers of class and wealth that align with Bey’s interests in adornment, status, and ritual. Nestle demonstrates the dramatic possibilities that glass offers for color luminosity, optical depth, and surface complexity.
Tanya Aguiñiga
Tanya Aguiñiga is a Los Angeles–based artist, designer, and compassionate activist. With a range of natural materials—from wool to beeswax to human hair—she crafts furniture, textiles, and sculptural works. Born in San Diego and raised in Tijuana, much of her work is shaped by her experience growing up within a binational, working-class family. Addressing cultural prejudice, gender disparities, and other urgent injustices, Aguiñiga advocates for social change through community-based projects, particularly within communities that neighbor the US-Mexico border. She strives to create dialogue, collaboration, and interconnectedness in everything she creates, whether she’s making a chair, organizing a community project, or designing a hotel lobby. Her work becomes an extension of her life, and in response to those who find it difficult to define her with any convenient classification, she simply responds, “I am whatever you need me to be.”

Quipu Fronterizo/Border Quipu
2016–18
recycled dress and bathing suit straps
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by AHAN: Studio Forum, 2018 Art Here and Now purchase
This work references quipu, knotted threads used by the Inca to record data. It forms part of Aguiñiga’s ongoing AMBOS (Art Made Between Opposite Sides) project, an initiative made up of collaborative art projects along the US-Mexico border. For Quipu Fronterizo/Border Quipu, volunteers invite commuters crossing the border to contribute knots to a giant quipu suspended from a billboard at the site, while documenting the emotional responses of hundreds of people making their daily crossings.

Hand-Felted Folding Chairs
2006–present
hand-felted metal folding chairs
Collection of the artist
While studying furniture design at the Rhode Island School of Design, Aguiñiga felt a longing for her home and her culture, so she began experimenting with felting wool. She used this low-tech and portable craft to soften the skins of the utilitarian and iconic designs she had been studying, deconstructing them into a realm of “fuzzy” cultural ambiguity. Inspired by the techniques and bold colors of Latin American textiles, she produces inventive soft furniture designs like Lanky and Monadnock on view nearby.

Tierra
2014
nylon, soil, leather, thread, and vinyl
Collection of the artist
Using a bulky warp and weft, Aguiñiga weaves together tubes containing soil taken from places that hold meaning for her, including her grandmother’s home, a hangout spot near her high school, and the beach where she had her first kiss. She considers soil to be our “true ground,” a marker of our collective histories. “In making an incredibly personal floor covering, I went on a journey to reconnect with places that haunt my dreams. The places my soul believes is home, and places that have shaped who I am now.”
**Untitled (Drifless)**
2013
raw and hand-dyed canvas, industrial felt, merino wool, cotton rope, sisal, wool yarn, linen, and Chiapas wool
Collection of the artist
Aguiñiga’s wall hangings form a personal and biographical body of work that draws from her experience of first-time motherhood. Reflecting on family histories, she uses materials that reference her binational childhood—like earthenware from Mexico and nautical rope from San Diego. Freed from the orthodoxies of warp and weft, they are loosely interleaved and knotted, with the soft, rich textures of undyed fibers, implying a sense of purity and new beginnings.

**Nopal**
2017
abaca pulp, clay, alpaca, flax, succulents, iron, horsehair, cochineal (live and dead), copper, gold, and human hair
Courtesy Volume Gallery, Chicago
*Nopal* is a common name in Mexican Spanish for prickly pear cactus pads. Here, Aguiñiga’s *nopal* are made from clay bodies embedded with copper, abaca pulp, insects, and even hair taken from the artist’s daughter and sisters. Digging into her family’s origins, Aguiñiga became fascinated with Mesoamerican history and the Mayan creation myth of *Popol Vuh*. This sacred text, describing the interconnectedness of earth, plant, animal, and human, provided a framework for *Nopal* and Aguiñiga’s explorations into her own complex cultural identity.

**Palapa**
2017
powder-coated steel and synthetic hair
Courtesy Volume Gallery, Chicago
Named for the open-sided thatched huts that pepper the beaches of Mexico, *Palapa* was conceived for an installation alongside *Nopal* (hanging nearby). These distinctive shelters are woven by Mexicans but used mostly by tourists. Aguiñiga’s mysterious, surreal interpretation of these everyday structures is symbolic of her own ambiguous identity, as someone who navigates the dual worlds of palapa maker and user, of and outside both cultures.

You are welcome to stand inside *Palapa*, either alone or in pairs, to experience the intimate space that encourages reflection.
**Stephanie Syjuco**

Born in the Philippines and currently based in Oakland, Stephanie Syjuco is an artist and assistant professor in sculpture at the University of California, Berkeley. Driven by socially engaged projects, she produces large-scale installations and communal workspaces that use elements of craft to challenge perceptions of “types” in contemporary America. Whether with color calibration charts or dazzle camouflage, she shows how the typologies we use to understand objects cannot be uncoupled from the way we categorize people, revealing contradictory fragments of American identity. Syjuco also explores the manifestation of the handmade within digital processes and virtual networks of dissemination, as seen with her counterfeit crocheted luxury fashion objects based on digital images, historical costumes rendered in “chromakey green” fabric, or hand-sewn tapestries that mimic transparency layers used in image editing tools. Through cultural and economic issues such as notions of citizenship and protest, the legacy of colonialism, the value of labor, and the ethics of standardized systems of production, Syjuco provokes us to interrogate the complicated relationships between objects and our own identities.

**Cargo Cults: Object Agents**

2013
mixed media sculpture and prints
Collection of the artist

The *Cargo Cults* project, comprised of object-based installations and photographs, borrows the “dazzle camouflage” graphic technique used during World War I. Rather than conceal a position, it was made to confuse the aim of the enemy. For her self-portraits (at right), Syjuco purchased mass-manufactured goods from retailers such as American Apparel and Urban Outfitters and restyled them to evoke historic ethnographic photographs and recognizable “ethnic” patterning and costume. Her use of camouflage disrupts our ability to classify the subject being depicted, challenging our views on exoticism and cultural identities. She leaves price tags visible and sports USB cable bracelets, details that hint at our consumer culture and digital lives.

**Neutral Calibration Studies (Ornament + Crime)**

2016
wooden platform, neutral gray seamless backdrop paper, digital adhesive prints on laser-cut wooden props, dye-sublimation digital prints on fabric, items purchased on eBay and craigslist, photographic prints, artificial and live plants, and neutral calibrated gray paint
Collection of the artist and Nion McEvoy

This installation tackles key issues at the heart of Syjuco’s work, including cultural identity and our perceived notions of neutrality. Assembled on a stage like a classic still life, these objects and images are set against color calibration charts typically used by photographers to determine which colors are “neutral” or “correct”—a concept that has long been defined through a Caucasian lens. Many of the objects represented date from a period of early modernism when colonialism was unravelling, raising questions about cultural appropriation and the legacy of empire. These artifacts, such as the pixelated Central Asian rug pattern or the gray-painted Filipino butterfly chair, ask what it means to be “neutral,” “colorful,” or “colored” in contemporary America.
Chromakey Aftermath 2 (Flags, Sticks, and Barriers)
2017
archival pigment print
Collection of the artist and courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York
As with her interest in camouflage, Syjuco explores ways information and identities can be masked and obscured through chroma-key, a visual effects technique used to “drop out” a specific color range (commonly blue or green) and replace it with a transformed background (often used in weather newscasts and CGI filmmaking). Chromakey Aftermath 2 uses this concept to imagine objects left behind from a public protest selectively “dropped out” from a scene, as if the evidence of this civic disturbance was being erased from a news broadcast. Most recently, inspired by the tradition of sewing patterns, Syjuco has been using “chroma-key fabrics” to construct recognizable period costumes from significant moments of American history. She shows how objects and people can be rendered as cutouts or stand-ins symbolizing a type, and challenges a reevaluation of established historical narratives and “the ongoing invention of American identity.”

Total Transparency (Background Layer Bleed)
2017
hand-sewn quilting cotton
Collection of the artist and courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York
Like her Chromakey series (on view nearby), Syjuco is interested in how she can make digital editing tools physically tangible through handmade techniques. The checkerboard pattern of Total Transparency references the base layer, or “neutral” foundation, used in image design software. Instead of a “white” canvas, it represents pure transparency, and signifies the great potential of a work in progress. Although rooted in something digital, Syjuco’s piece is decidedly analog, demonstrating both conceptual absence and physical presence at the same time. Each cotton square is meticulously sewn together to form a quilted backdrop for her other installations and propositions.

Ungovernable (Hoist)
2017
sewn muslin and steel armatures
Collection of the artist and courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York
This work illuminates the rich craft history of protest banners, while considering the aesthetics of civic dissent in the digital age. The text, and therefore the meaning, of the banner is obscured by the intentional folding and unfolding of the fabric and the unravelling thread that deteriorates individual letters. Syjuco’s banner, propped up like stage scenery, highlights the distortion of images and information in the Internet era.
Dustin Farnsworth

Working primarily in wood, Dustin Farnsworth creates haunting storylines that inhabit his intricately detailed portraits of the disadvantaged and the marginalized. Profoundly influenced by the postindustrial decline of his hometown in Michigan, he aims to shed light on those inheriting societal and economic decay. As our persuasive narrator, he produces collective portraits of communities shaken by crisis and wary of the future, drawn largely from his artist residencies in Madison, Wisconsin, and Charlotte, North Carolina. His architectural structures blend memories of extant buildings with fragments of imagination, conjuring dream spaces that reflect emotional states of mind. Farnsworth’s work strives to give voice to those who have none, as he tackles issues such as social inequality, police brutality, and the tragic rise of school shootings. His most recent sculptural project incorporates audio interviews with young people from Charlotte, documenting their hopes and fears in a form of oral testimony.

The Bones Of
2012
poplar, bendable plywood, plywood, veneer, basswood, various fabrics, and various polychrome
Cameron Art Museum, Wilmington, NC: Claude Howell Endowment for the Purchase of North Carolina Art

I Am Man: Revenge
2011
basswood, poplar, pine, tree branches, mahogany, medium-density fiberboard, mild steel, aluminum, plywood, fabrics, stain, lacquer, kiln brick, rope, steel screen, high-density polyethylene, elastic, hardware, and various polycoating
Collection of Sandy Berlin
This kinetic sculpture is one of several marionette works that Farnsworth created early in his career. Influence for this work stems partly from his father, a carpenter, who had made him a pirate marionette for Christmas one year. As with The Bones Of miniature stage set (on view nearby), Farnsworth uses the metaphors of theatre and performance to create mental constructs for his characters, reflecting and amplifying emotional states of mind through surreal structures and imaginary dream spaces.

Succession
2014
basswood, poplar, steel, bendable plywood, human hair, and various polychrome
Collection of the artist
Farnsworth aspires to elevate his sculptural portraits, mainly of marginalized youth, to subjects worthy of contemplation, akin to religious figures. These characters are surmounted with “cruel crowns”—architectural structures that draw from fragments of memory and cinematic fantasy. With gnarled and crumbling surfaces, they represent abandoned buildings associated with industry and leisure and are symbolic of the decaying urban infrastructure and loss of social investment the next generations have been left to face.
**XLIII**

2016

poplar, reclaimed wood, chair, pencil, and various polychrome

Collection of Sandy Berlin

This work commemorates the number of young lives lost to police shootings in the United States during 2015 alone. Here, Farnsworth’s architectural “crown,” typically seen atop a sculptural portrait and originally intended for *The Reconstruction of Saints* (on view in the adjacent gallery), instead balances on a school chair. The absence of a portrait signifies loss, and the remaining crown represents the great potential that has been robbed from these young lives. Farnsworth borrowed architectural proportions from Frank Lloyd Wright’s Monona Terrace in Madison, Wisconsin, and structural details from various sports stadia. These elements combine to form a radial blur of architectural information, distorted out of recognition.

**styx/vodun**

2016

poplar, flowers, and various polychrome

Collection of the artist

Representing a funerary vessel, this work references the contrasting traditions of spirituality and death within Western European and West African cultures. It emerged from conversations Farnsworth had with a Ghanaian fantasy coffin-carver, whom he met at the University of Wisconsin-Madison during an artist residency. Echoing the maple seedpod outline of *The King Is Dead* (on view nearby), the same wood charring technique was used, which Farnsworth does to “edit away information.” It creates abstraction and ambiguity, resulting in what he describes as “charcoal drawings in space.”

**The Reconstruction of Saints**

2018

Aqua-Resin, polychrome, gold leaf, fiberglass, foam, and plywood

Collection of the artist

Farnsworth has recently been working on a larger scale, and this piece is one of his most ambitious projects to date. His new direction has been profoundly influenced by his artist residencies in Madison, Wisconsin, and Charlotte, North Carolina, where he arrived to witness the aftermath of police shootings of two African Americans, Tony Robinson and Keith Lamont Scott, respectively. *styx/vodun* and *XLIII* (on view in the adjacent gallery) emerged from these experiences. Originally, Farnsworth planned an architectural headdress for this portrait to reference Charlotte’s historic buildings. However, upon observing the widespread demolition of historic architecture within the city, he decided to omit it entirely, shearing off the bust at the crown’s intended line as a dramatic statement on gentrification and the loss of cultural inheritance. Building upon the theme of societal inheritance, Farnsworth plans to incorporate audio recordings of young people in Charlotte into the piece, recounting their world in their own words, providing “a low cadence of whispered hopes and fears.”

This project was supported by a Windgate Fellowship Award from the Center for Craft, with additional support from the McColl Center for Art & Innovation, Dave Bown Projects, 701 Center for Contemporary Art, and Clark Ellefson of Lewis and Clark.
WAKE II
2017
Aqua-Resin, Hydro-Stone, various polychrome, canvas, and vinyl acrylic paint
Collection of the artist

Dustin Farnsworth and Timothy Maddox
This collaborative work is both a memorial and a call to action—the title alludes to both the funerary context and the #staywoke hashtag associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Created as a response to the tragic amount of school shootings in the United States and the Boko Haram abductions of Nigerian schoolgirls in 2014, these skull-like masks represent children’s faces: “Keeping the flesh of the face was purposeful . . . to capture more of the soul than death.” Sign painter Timothy Maddox contributed the backdrop of slogans, which references the rich craft history of protest signs and banners throughout American history. First he painted miniature signs informed by recent public marches, photographed them swaying in the wind, and then projected them onto the canvas.

This project was supported by the Penland School of Craft; the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Windgate Residency; and the McColl Center for Art & Innovation