

As spring turned to summer here in America, and the country's experience of covid-19 went from horrendous to something even worse, Ye'ela Wilschanski had a lot on her mind. A recent MFA graduate from Hunter College, she had been preparing for a residency at A.L.R. Gallery, New York City's leading feminist art centre, where she planned to stage one of her performances. Typically these feature handmade props - garments that transform themselves into whole rooms; ceramic body ornaments that prove to be sweet-sounding musical instruments - which she uses to explore her experiences of living in an orthodox community in Israel.

Like so many other plans in 2020, Wilschanski's were disrupted. She could not perform to a live audience, so retreated into craft as 'a gateway to a peaceful mindset'. She wove baskets from pine needles sourced from a park near her shared New York apartment. With each basket, she thought: 'I am creating a void for myself to rest in and for my creativity to hatch from.' Eventually that happened. Wilschanski devised her most poignant performance yet, staged for an audience of no one at A.L.R. The footage captured by the security camera is an indelible record of the moment: a woman entirely alone, with nothing to rely on but her own skills and artistry.

Wilschanski's story is one of thousands that have unfolded across the world in the past few months. In the US, a country thoroughly destabilised by crisis and acrimony, people severed from their usual support networks have had to dig deep within themselves. As in other nations under lockdown, studios and equipment were suddenly unavailable, galleries and museums were closed, exhibitions postponed or cancelled. Yet through it all, craft was an anchor in the storm.

Los Angeles-based fibre artist Tanya Aguiñiga was one of those whose practices were affected. Riding high following a run of solo exhibitions, she suddenly found herself unable to go to the studio. With various projects suddenly off the books, she was obliged to lay off her assistants and even sell some of her equipment. Since then, she has been working out of a small



Basketry photos courtesy the artist. (Right) Photo: David Gendler / Contrasto; photos by Chikobani / Los Angeles Times

YE'ELA WILSCHANSKI

Left: Wilschanski performing 'Fabric Floor: Blue Walls Brown Floor', part of Movement Research at the Judson Memorial Church in New York, 2019. *Below:* pine needle baskets woven by Wilschanski during lockdown



Installation photos by Ryan Gendler, courtesy Armory Center for the Arts

TANYA AGUIÑIGA

Previous page: the textile artist and her daughter in her makeshift studio - a carpenter in her front yard. *Left:* detail of an installation at Tanya Aguiñiga: *Borderlands Within*, 2020, an exhibition at Armory Center for the Arts, Pasadena, exploring immigration politics, transnational identity and community activism

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van parked in her front yard, finishing pieces for a planned show at her Chicago gallery, and making rope necklaces to put food on the table.

Even so, Aguiñiga feels like one of the lucky ones. She serves on the board of CERF+ (the Craft Emergency Relief Fund) and is a tireless advocate on behalf of migrant families, many of whom have been caught up in the punitive policies now unfolding at the Mexico-US border. She has increased her volunteer work helping asylum seekers to find housing. And Aguiñiga is also teaching art, activism and mask-making to inner-city youth, and building a pottery studio at an LGBTQ+ asylum shelter in Tijuana. All the while, she has been home-schooling her daughter, who gets to play in the yard

right next to Aguiñiga's impromptu studio - with handmade rope swings made by her mother.

It's impossible not to be impressed by such resilience, fortitude and flexibility, which seems a hallmark of craft makers around the world. Malcolm Mubutu Smith - who teaches at the Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture + Design at Indiana University - also lost his studio, while simultaneously dealing with what might be called the burden of representation. He is one of few people of colour to hold a tenured faculty position on his campus - and indeed, few Black ceramic professors nationwide. Between Zoom-based teaching sessions and seemingly endless committee work, he had to set up a home pottery. Then another major paroxysm came along