IT'S THE WORD WE USE WHEN NO OTHER WILL DO: 

*Wow!*

And it's written all over these 50 GENIUS INVENTIONS, exquisite works of art, delightful discoveries, stirring bits of wisdom, really cool technologies, and miraculous molten chocolate cakes.

Illustration by VAULT 49
Nothing but Net

Janet Echelman’s colossal, shape-shifting public sculptures awe and inspire.

In 1997, painter Janet Echelman moved to India on a Fulbright Fellowship—her her paintings, which ship separately, never arrived. One day while walking on the beach, she noticed the massive nets being used by local fishermen; unlike her abstract paintings, “they were able to change and move, and were soft but also incredibly strong,” she recalls. She decided to experiment—and, working with the fishermen, produced her first woven sculpture, a jellyfish-like self-portrait she called Trade Winds. Now her enormous, billowing creations hang in cities around the globe, from an airport terminal in San Francisco to a plaza in Porto, Portugal. She chooses her materials—netting, nets—for fluidity, which contrasts sharply with the urban environments where her pieces live. “In big cities we’re surrounded by concrete, chaos, by glass and steel,” she says. Her sculptures serve “a greater need for softness,” providing a shared experience of awe in a hard-edged world. - ZOE DONALDSON