

Crawford, Marisa, *With Astonishing Tapestries, Erin M. Riley Claims Space for Healing, Hyperallergic*, 8 June 2021

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With Astonishing Tapestries, Erin M. Riley Claims Space for Healing

Riley's work positions front and center everyday images of women's lived experiences, unapologetically centering traumas often swept out of sight.

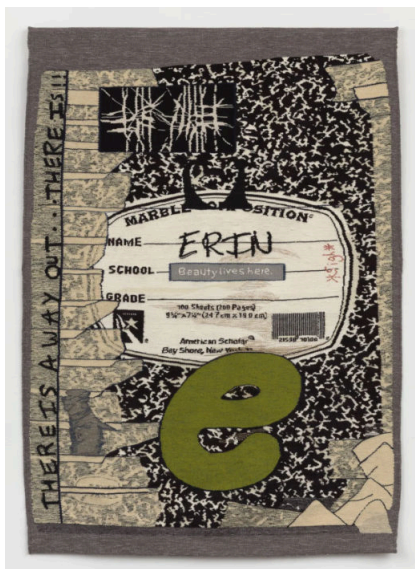
Marisa Crawford June 8, 2021

When I was fourteen I went into the bathroom with a powder blue Swiss Army knife and I pressed it against my arm. I was shocked by the bright red color of the specks of blood that began to appear against my pale skin. Self-harm brings everything into sharp focus, yet it also feels fuzzy, like your body is floating. I thought about these dichotomies — sharpness and softness, and their relationships to trauma, as I walked through *The Consensual Reality of Healing Fantasies*, fiber artist Erin M. Riley's solo show, now on view at PPOW Gallery. In Riley's grandly scaled, astonishingly detailed tapestries, the bright, shocking colors of violence and trauma break through muted grays and whites — the yellow caution tape surrounding freezer trucks outside a New York hospital during the pandemic; a bright yellow walkman in a pile of photographs, CDs, and dirty laundry; the red blood of a bruised hand — flashing like the vibrant

feathers underneath the dark wings of a bird you might learn about in a science textbook. Each strikingly realistic image disguises the handwoven process behind it. The artist sources wool from shuttered textile mills around the United States and washes, strips, and hand-dyes her yarn before weaving on a Macomber loom.



Erin M. Riley, "Depression" (2021), wool, cotton, 35 x 48 inches (all images courtesy PPOW Gallery)



Erin M. Riley, "Beauty Lives Here" (2020), wool, cotton, 64 x 48 inches

One of the tapestries, called "Beauty Lives Here" (2020), features a marble composition notebook with the name "ERIN" written on it, the words "THERE IS A WAY OUT... THERE IS!!" scrawled in all caps across its binding. In a May 26th panel discussion with artist Joe Houston and PPOW Director Trey Hollis, Riley talked about walking around high school with the notebook this piece is based on. "Nobody ever said, 'what do you need a way out of?'" the artist noted. These works call to mind how quickly our culture is prone to minimize the concerns of young women. Riley's works unapologetically claim space for subject matter that's often hidden from larger society — domestic violence, female sexuality, and self harm, along with everyday images of women's lived experiences — elevating them via a medium most associated with religious iconography and Middle Age nobility. Her work builds on the traditions of feminist artists like Ana Mendieta, Faith Ringgold, and Judy Chicago, who, as Vivien Green Fryd writes in *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970*, each used artwork to "speak the unspeakable and make public the crimes of rape, incest, and domestic violence."

In her tapestries, Riley puts experiences that are often dismissed as shallow expressions of attention-seeking young women front and center. "Anxiety" (2020), shows a photograph of scars from

dermatillomania, a form of self harm, usually kept hidden under clothing. Several works in the show depict a tattooed woman posing naked for a webcam, negotiating bodily pleasure in a way that's often considered narcissistic and maligned by our culture's hypocritical attitudes about sex. What is so wrong with craving or enjoying attention, these works ask. They present the challenges of navigating trauma as normal parts of life, as everyday as taking a sexy selfie or watching a TV show on your laptop. In "Affair, The" (2020) a computer screen shows a JPEG of a naked selfie; behind the photo are open browser tabs for a news story about domestic violence, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, and watching *The Affair* TV series on Amazon. This piece is in conversation with several other works rendering domestic violence pamphlets from the 1970s ("SOS," "WAVAW," "Celebrate", and "Community Problem," all 2020), which the artist noted are "emergency orange," communicating the need for help in code, much like a cryptic phrase scrawled on a notebook. Riley said she began creating these pamphlet images during the pandemic, due to an uptick in domestic violence. Through these works, Riley imagines how such messaging impacted her own mother's relationships with men.



Installation view, *Erin M. Riley: The Consensual Reality of Healing Fantasies*, PPOW Gallery, 2021

Riley's artwork presents different modes for coping with generational trauma and reclaiming our bodies as our own. From sexuality and creative expression to drug use and self harm, *The Consensual Reality* doesn't pass judgement on how best to heal. Rather, Riley places these various avenues in front of the viewer for us to bear witness, refusing to let these experiences be dismissed or ignored.

Erin M. Riley: The Consensual Reality of Healing Fantasies continues through June 12 at PPOW Gallery (392 Broadway, Tribeca, Manhattan).