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The Damage You Can Do As A Mother Is Laid Bare In Erin Riley's Tapestries

Brienne Walsh Contributor

This spring, my daughter began picking scratches and bug bites on her face until they became open wounds. It is not uncommon to look over at her, and discover that her face is smeared with blood. She's four now, my daughter, and like so many other kids, she had a rough year. In 2020, my husband lost his job and our family's healthcare; we moved from New York to Savannah; we tried to handle the stress, but we failed. My husband and I fought frequently, and openly.

In Savannah, I think we have a fresh start. Then I look over at my daughter, and her face is covered in open wounds, and she says pre-emptively, "I'm sorry, Mommy."

In "The Consensual Reality of Healing Fantasies," an exhibition of tapestries by the fiber artist Erin M. Riley current open at PPOW Gallery in New York through June 12, the scars of childhood trauma are laid bare. The tapestries, which are woven from bulk yarn Riley purchased from shuttered textile mills, are rich with symbolism that will read as familiar to any woman who has grown up in the United States, where female bodies are only sometimes human.

The exhibition, Riley told me, began with *An Accident* (2020), an 80 x 100-inch tapestry that depicts a single hand with bloodied knuckles and a bruise blooming across the back and wrist. The damage to it so clearly self-inflicted, the result of punching a wall or another person — an accident only in the re-telling. It was the beginning of the pandemic, and Riley was thinking a lot about the rise of domestic violence during lockdown, as women were stuck at home with their abusers. "The ability to leave your house as a coping mechanism as a way to survive wasn't even possible," Riley says.

Riley wasn't trapped with an abuser, but she was alone, making artwork and trying to connect with sexual partners virtually. The time felt productive. She began to reckon with some of her childhood memories. For example, the violent things that had happened in the house where she grew up with her mother, her sister and a stepfather, who was less a father figure than he was another child, or a roommate. There was the time when her mother and stepfather argued and threw Chinese food out of the window of the car. Riley turned that memory into *Skylark* (2020), a 68 x 100-inch tapestry that shows tire marks on a cracked road littered with the detritus of a different time — a cassette player, a used condom, a handful of photographs of two young girls.

In order to survive her childhood, Riley says, she had to agree to her mother's version of events. She was



Erin M. Riley, *An Accident*, 2020, wool, cotton, 82 x 100 ins. IMAGE © JSP ART PHOTOGRAPHY



Erin M. Riley, *Skylark*, 2020, wool, cotton, 68 x 100 ins. IMAGE © JSP ART PHOTOGRAPHY

frequently told, “you’re mis-remembering,” or “that didn’t happen,” phrases familiar to anyone who grew up in an abusive household. The consensual reality of healing fantasies is both the reality she agreed to as a child in order to keep the peace in her home; but also, the healing fantasies so many people engaged in during the pandemic, whether it was that a short walk around the block could heal burnout, or that in-person relationships could be replaced by Zoom calls and webcam sex.

Affair, The (2020), a 72 x 100-inch tapestry, depicts a browser featuring a webcam video of Riley’s nude body paused at the third second. The video is one of many tabs open on the browser — the others are for a suicide hotline, a link to Riley’s student loan accounts, a New York Times article about a woman killed in a domestic violence dispute, a History.com article about Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” anti-drug campaign in the 1980s, and a site where the television show *The Affair* is streaming. To the left, a message pops up. “Wyd?” it reads, the acronym for what are you doing? The piece captures perfectly the fragmentary online worlds we all live in, where sexuality is flattened and placed on an equal plane with information, violence and entertainment. Getting off online, the piece reveals, means ignoring the fact that the person offering you their body might simultaneously be researching ways to flee that body, which despite being a literal matter of life and death, isn’t engaging enough to fully hold their attention.

Engaging in sex online, Riley says, can be cruel. “You have to leave a lot of serious conversations and baggage behind,” she says. As a result, she notes, “people sort of forget to be nice.”

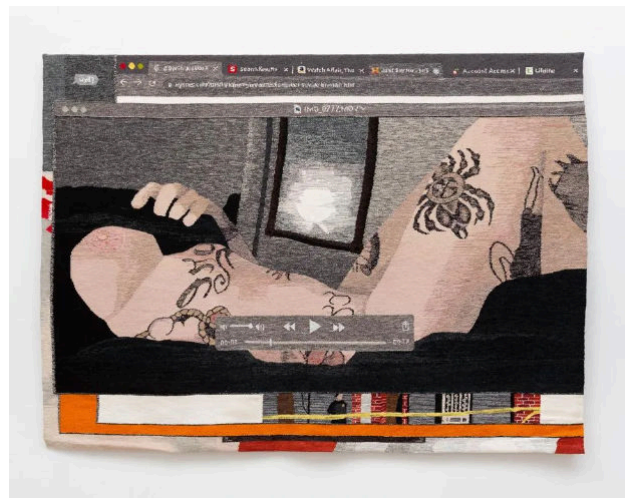
In tapestries throughout the exhibition, Riley’s body recurs in sexualized poses — her ass in the air, her back arched, her legs splayed open while she masturbates on a webcam. Interspersed are tapestries that re-create the covers of pamphlets and signs on domestic violence from the 1970s; tapestries of composition notebooks bearing Erin’s name and phrases like, “beauty lives here”; a tapestry of the temporary white morgue established outside of a hospital during the pandemic; and a tapestry of a dresser covered in books, cigarettes, bottled drinks and the paraphernalia used to inject heroin, which Riley says is an image from the news. The message is clear — sex and violence are connected, and lead to bad things for women, which we all know, and haven’t figured out how to change, especially not in the 21st century

In making the work, Riley realized that she has more issues with her mother, who raised her, than she does with her father, who was entirely absent. “I never missed this man,” she says. “There is something, in my opinion, super inherently sexist in assuming that an absent father is more impactful than a present mother.”

Anxiety (2020) is a 72.5 x 100-inch tapestry that shows Riley’s nude chest, emblazoned with a tattoo that reads “Treasure,” and covered with open wounds. The wounds are the result of Riley picking her skin — the press release for the exhibition notes that she suffers from dermatillomania, a condition where a person chronically picks his or her skin. The condition is linked to obsessive compulsive disorder but can also be a coping mechanism to deal with stress.

In the work, I see my daughter. At four years old, already picking at her skin. I love her so much, but have I fucked her up already?

It’s too easy to see a future for my girl in which she is yet another body forced to leave the person behind to survive in a consensual reality. A future woven large in Riley’s exhibition.



Erin M. Riley, *Affair, The*, 2020, wool, cotton, 72 x 100 ins.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PPOW GALLERY



Erin M. Riley, *Anxiety*, 2020, wool, cotton, 72 1/2 x 100 ins. IMAGE © JSP ART PHOTOGRAPHY