

Murphy, Yume, *Healing is a Relentless Dream*, ATM Magazine, 30 June 2021

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Healing is a Relentless Dream

Erin M. Riley's solo exhibition *The Consensual Reality of Healing Fantasies* is an open journal of the selves we become and unbecome

Yume Murphy



Erin M. Riley, "Webcam" (2020), wool, cotton, 69 x 100 inches, courtesy PPOW Gallery

CW: Mentions of trauma, self-harm, and sexual violence

Erin M. Riley's solo exhibition, *The Consensual Reality of Healing Fantasies*, unspools entangled healing trajectories, compulsively unraveling memories, lust, and salacious hauntings. The title of the now-closed exhibition reads like the name of a memoir, an introspective journey towards reluctant truths. To heal, you must first consent to the miracle of creation—surrendering to the generation of new cells, scabs, and scars in hopes of a momentary bloom. Here, healing is a relentless dream.

The Consensual Reality of Healing Fantasies debuts sixteen handmade tapestries woven by Riley throughout the pandemic at PPOW Gallery. The Brooklyn-based fiber artist, who has described herself as emotionally "walking around as a Febreze dumpster fire since 5th grade," reckons with her own, all-too-familiar relationship to trauma and its impact on her world, simultaneously concealing and disclosing wounds. Riley gestures to the generational trauma inherited from a single mother "who treated men as disposable while simultaneously allowing them to be the most disruptive element of the home": the work discusses childhood neglect and abuse, implied sexual and domestic violence. The result is a lurid meditation on healing that interweaves remembrances of Riley's own personal trauma, evidence of the coping mechanisms that she suggests have only "lead to more problems," and the erotic, often fragmented fantasies that inevitably arise from such healing journeys.

Riley's work calls to mind the writings of Gloria Anzaldúa. In her 2015 posthumous collection of essays *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality* (and in much of her critical work), the queer Chicana feminist discusses the ongoing process of healing from personal, communal, and national events. The Coyolxauhqui imperative, a theory developed by Anzaldúa and named after the Aztec goddess fabled for her dismemberment and subsequent re-creation as the moon, describes "the act of calling back those pieces of the self/soul that have been dispersed or lost" in the process of recovering from trauma. Through a re-integration of these parts of ourselves that have been wounded, Anzaldúa understands recuperation as the act of creating wholeness from chaos—a metaphor for creativity itself:

When fragmentations occur, you fall apart and feel as though you've been expelled from paradise. Coyolxauhqui is my symbol for the necessary process of dismemberment and fragmentation, of seeing that self or the situations you're embroiled in differently... Coyolxauhqui imperative is an ongoing process of making and unmaking. There is never any resolution, just the process of healing.

Healing is not a resolution as much as it is an ongoing space to imagine, to reconsider. Through a deep awareness of our wounds informed by both spiritual introspection and political activism—what Anzaldúa refers to as *conocimiento* throughout her writing—one is able to finally put the pieces back together, to better see their self and their relation to the world. This form of “spiritual activism,” in return, advances the liberatory potential of creative acts such as writing and art-making as they broaden the potential for empathetic encounters in spite of a world order that strives for binary thinking and borders between the self and others. Through the Coyolxauhqui imperative, we can understand healing, like any form of growth, to be deeply transformative. For Riley, as for Anzaldúa, healing is a transcendental aspiration.

Upon entering the gallery, I am first struck by the sheer scale of Riley's textile work. Woven on a Macomber loom, the tapestries' grand size emphasizes their grit. If you've ever had the pleasure of using a floor loom before, you're probably familiar with the way it requires all of you; limbs become ensnared in the warp as fingers thread yarn through weft, feet pressing against pedals progressing the textile. Weaving with looms of this nature gives way to instinctive movement, muscle memory so-to-speak, allowing the body to extend into an often meditative expression. Riley takes advantage of this quality. Washing, stripping, then dyeing wool sourced from shuttered textile mills across the U.S. by hand, she recovers discarded materials and inscribes them with new meaning on the loom—constructing stitch by stitch what is presented to us in full. Largely based on photographs and screenshots, the fiber meldings serve as scar-like memories themselves—both a careful reminder and metaphor for the layered and pain-staking process of healing. Riley's tapestries repair.

In the gallery's first viewing room, nine large-scale tapestries hang spaciouly across four walls. On the left, “Webcam” puts Riley's tattooed ass on full display, the tapestry suspended among several others based on screenshots of the artist's erotic webcam selfies. The playful pose of the nude body and its cheeky green and wine-colored tattoos, which have become emblematic of her work, contrast the more somber greys and bleak whites that foreground Riley in this self-portrait. Presumably in pursuit of some form of virtual pleasure, the artist directs an implied gaze back towards the camera (and potential lover), as seven of her other selfies peek out from behind the main selfie's Preview frame, open and selected in the screen's Finder window. The selfie, once flirtatious and sexy, becomes a more solemn reminder of the splintering of self undertaken when finding intimacy online, carrying with it the weight of isolation while contending with Riley's self-directed gaze. As I walk through the gallery, the body is only further fragmented.



Erin M. Riley, "Anxiety" (2020), wool, cotton, 72 1/2 x 100 inches, courtesy

In “Anxiety,” Riley poetically lays bare the reality of dermatillomania, a form of self-harm characterized by repeated picking at one's own skin. Only showing a fragment of her torso, Riley's body appears as a vignette against her almost-black clothing, drawing attention to the topography of cherry-hued scars that adorn her breasts. A tattoo of the word “Treasure” is inscribed across her ribs, affirming both the methods of her survival and her body itself. The two works oscillate between a desire for celebratory self-exploration and coping mechanisms that seek to destroy. A fantasy of a mythologized path towards complete recovery.

Across the room, Riley's woven nudes are mirrored by images reflecting upon the realities of traumatic rupture. “Skylark” paints a picture of the aftermath of a familial conflict. Tire marks leave behind a disc,

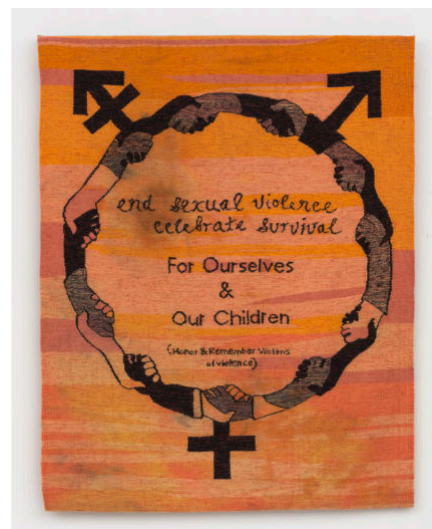
cassette, used condom, takeout food, and family photos strewn across cracked pavement. To the right, "Blue Tarp" implies the damaging result of such conflict, showing only the wreckage of an automobile laid atop blue tarp.

Flanking the entrance, a pair of tapestries depicting composition notebooks from Riley's youth serve as reminders of repressed and traumatic adolescence. In "Beauty Lives Here", tape bandages the length of meticulously woven marble notebooks along which "THERE IS A WAY OUT...THERE IS!!" is scrawled. A chartreuse sticker "E" for Erin and "*sigh*" scribbled in red ink animates the weary notebook's personified angst—a teenaged cry for help. In conversation with one another, these nine highly composed yet evasive tapestries look inwards towards the ease with which past traumas creep into our ritualized presents. Stickers adorning tucked-away childhood memories in notebooks emerge as tattoos brushing up against scars in Riley's adult life, bruised knuckles in "An Accident" a precursor for the self-harm Riley navigates later as she searches for self-identity. There is no life after trauma, only life with trauma.

As I approach the second viewing room, this tone shifts. Four emergency orange tapestries immortalizing vintage domestic violence pamphlets from the 1970s are met with another rendition of Riley's webcam nudes and a landscape of the outside of a hospital, offering a more societal commentary on the violence of misogyny. The ochreous tapestries—"SOS", "WAVAW", "Celebrate", and "Community Problem"—line two walls as they present a history of the support and resources available to victims of domestic violence, recalling Riley's mother's own abusive experiences with sex and poorly informed coping mechanisms. Unlike the other textile works in the show, these four are dyed and faded, seeming more aged yet enduringly profound in their italicized declarations of a continued crisis that has yet to be addressed.

"Affair, The" serves as a powerful grounding corollary. Unlike other self-portraits in the show, the tapestry centers a nude webcam video rather than a photo, paused at the 0:03 second mark as it frames the hills and valleys of Riley's reclined torso. The video window overlays an internet browser window with a range of tabs open: a New York Times story detailing a fatal instance of domestic violence, The History Channel's webpage on the "Just Say No" movement, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline's website, a Seamless food delivery page, and the Showtime drama series *The Affair*. Below the video window, yellow tape and a police officer emerge in what seems to be a photo of the crime scene covered by the New York Times article, framed by the same emergency orange present in the domestic violence pamphlets. There is also the inclusion of a casual "wyd" text, coded with lustful intents. The screen discloses as much as it conceals; omitting Riley's face, while a dissonant array of tabs allude to a self that has become fragmented by erotic desires, suicidal ideation, instances of violence, and banal escapism. In dialogue with the orange tapestries, Riley calls attention to how trauma stemming from rape culture, misogyny, and patriarchal violence pervades even the most quotidian activities. Healing fantasies become disrupted by the shifting realities of an isolating world.

In the Instagram caption of a May post picturing "Affair, The," Riley writes, "It's weird when you think you have to remind people that you're a human being, and then realize that the person who forgot was yourself." Through that reentry into the wound, Riley's work fluently realizes Anzaldúa's Coyolxauhqui imperative, finding a language to rebuild the self in spite of ruptures in both her childhood and more recent love life. The exhibition moves through the shame housed in the artist's early journals before arriving at a more unfamiliar, yet forgiving narrative—a deep awareness of our unrelenting desires to feel at once whole again; to reach a place traced by the amorphous contours of the selves we become and unbecome; where we come close to, if not arrive at, *conocimiento*.



Erin M. Riley, "Celebrate" (2020), wool, cotton, 58 x 48 inches, courtesy PPOW Gallery