Vega, Ingrid, *How I Made This: Erin M Riley's Painterly Tapestries, ARTnews*, 21 November 2021

ARTnews

How I Made This: Erin M. Riley's Painterly Tapestries

BY INGRID VEGA November 30, 2021 4:13pm

Though she works with yarn, figurative artist Erin M. Riley tends to use the word *painterly* to describe her process. Turning to tapestry wasn't a conceptual decision for her, but one made because she liked how she could use yarn to bring color into her art. Over Zoom from her Brooklyn studio, she says, "It's like my paint; it's how I learned to develop my images.

Erin M. Riley, *An Accident*, 2020, wool, cotton, 78 x 100".

Of course, a tapestry's qualities are different from those of a painting. Wool doesn't reflect light the same way paint does, and the dictates of a woven grid soften the imagery. But in painterly fashion, Riley hand-dyes the wool she uses in her work, creating hues not found in commercially dyed yarn.

Riley starts a piece by making a true-to-size sketch of the scene, which she then pins on the floor underneath her loom as a guide. She's been drawing from Covid-era realities for recent works like An Accident, in which she revisits her past as a child trapped in a violent household. The pandemic has also led her to make diaristic pieces about life in isolation. Self-portraits are a recurring theme for her. "Implicating myself," she says, "was a natural progression from using images of other folks."

After deciding on her image, Riley strings cotton ply lengthwise onto her loom to form a warp, the base on which the tapestry will be woven. Riley works on a floor loom rather than a traditional tapestry loom because it has harnesses to move the heddles—used to separate the warp threads—up and down, allowing faster weaving. It's how she learned to weave, she says, "so I have that muscle memory."

After the loom has been warped, Riley begins passing colored yarn (the weft) back and forth through the warp threads. The wool is wound onto bobbins so it doesn't tangle as she weaves. For bigger sections of solid color, she will place the bobbin onto a shuttle, a tool that makes the work easier. To make gradients, Riley works with three to eight shades of one color, overlapping them to create a seamless progression of values. She compares it to crosshatching in a drawing.

Erin M. Riley, Emergency, 2020, wool, cotton, 55 x 100".

The image determines the weaving method used. In *Baby Boo*, for instance, Riley—who has dermatillomania, an obsessive-compulsive disorder—portrays herself picking at her skin. The image is full of diagonals: the design of her tattoo, the strands of hair falling over her breast, her curled hands. To make them, she turns to the "eccentric weave" method of tapestry making, which allows her to work on shapes that wouldn't be possible to create otherwise. For these areas, instead of using the loom's built-in beater (which

packs each weft thread in across the whole tapestry), she uses a hand beater, which is similar in both size and shape to an Afro comb.

It is not often that Riley makes a mistake, but when she does, fixing it is as simple as taking apart the section and reweaving it to follow the outline of her drawing. When she's finished a piece, she continues weaving past the edges of the image to create a hem. Then she cuts the tapestry off the loom and binds the raw ends. A quick pass on the steamer, and it's ready to hang.

It can take Riley a month to finish a large piece of around 100 inches across, and a few weeks to finish a medium-size one. But the slow, deliberate work of weaving, she says, suits her quietly searing images. "I can face my vulnerability and be comfortable with sharing those parts of me."

Erin M. Riley, *Baby Boo,* 2021, wool, cotton, 38 x 48″.