

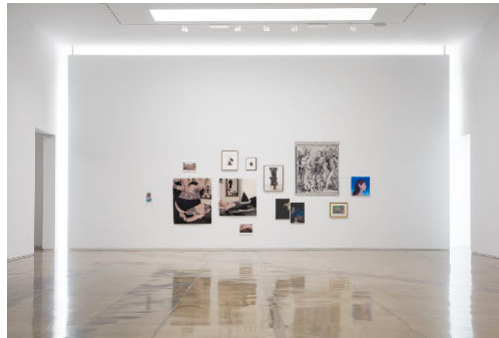
Armstrong, Annie, *The Many Shades of Myselfs*, Garage, 16 October 2020

# GARAGE

## The Many Shades of Myselfs

Textile artists Erin M. Riley and Sophia Narrett chat with GARAGE about friendship, productivity, and their work in a new group show at Kohn Gallery.

By Annie Armstrong



At Los Angeles's Kohn Gallery, a group show titled *Myselfs* comprises work by 25 different artists working in varying mediums. The show is emphatically diverse in this way, with work by painters like Loie Hollowell and Amoako Bofo on view with photography by Wolfgang Tillmans, alongside mixed media works by Chiffon Thomas and Jagdeep Raina. The show's curator, Joshua Friedman, wanted to explore how different mediums can communicate ideas about racial, gender, and national identities, and how these come to be constructed.

Among all of these pieces are works by two artists working with fabric, Erin M. Riley and Sophia Narrett. Riley, a textile artist whose subject matter ranges from Pornhub screenshots to mirror selfies has been friends, with Narrett, who creates pictorial, dream-like universes with fibers for years now. GARAGE caught up with them to learn more about their work and their friendship, based on their mutual understanding on the therapeutic aspects of their medium, the joy of solitude, and encyclopedic knowledge of *The Bachelor*.

*Hi! Erin, it's so good to see you. It's been a while.*

Erin M. Riley: I think the last time we saw each other was in Miami.

Sophia Narrett: I think us, too. Remember, we had that really great day together?

*What'd y'all do?*

SN: I don't know, it was just really nice. We went and got coffee and just had all of these intense heart-to-hearts. I was thinking about this today actually—we spend so much time alone working, and in very similar ways. So I feel like we very much get each other.

EMR: It's good to indulge. I'm so glad I went to Miami! I had never been to Miami, and it was such a nice time.

*It's so fun! People are really hard on Art Basel Miami Beach for being a drag, but I've always had a blast when I'm there. It's December and you get to go someplace warm and it puts everyone in a good mood. I like it.*

SN: Totally, I had a great time. Especially after this year, you think about an experience like that and just go, Wow. I'm never going to say no to a party again in my life!

*God, me neither. So when you guys have these hive mind conversations, what is it about your processes that you can connect over so well?*

EMR: It's less about process and maybe more about temperament, or focused energy and the ability to work for long periods of time on the same thing.

SN: I think our daily lives are very similar in a way, and because of our labor intensive processes—which isn't an aspect of my work that I think about a lot, necessarily—but it shifts the rhythm of our lives. That shared experience defines a lot of the way we look at the world. Also, we're in the same universe of how we're engaging with our personal experiences and thoughts and processing that through the work.

EMR: There's something brave about being girly. I think that Sophia's work always has that element. The fact that she's in the art world and openly talks about The Bachelorette as one of her inspirations. Like, I've watched every season, so obviously it's at least a little bit inspiring to me. It's revealing in a way that's so beyond the hoity-toity art world. Everybody's work is about everything, but a lot of people don't admit the pop culture references that are always going to inspire everybody. There's no denying that.

SN: I think we're both invested in an honesty in our work, and following that impulse wherever it will take us.

*So what are those personal, vulnerable experiences you both draw on, individually? What have you been thinking about lately?*

EMR: I've been thinking a lot about memory, childhood, and aloneness. Isolation but in a way of being present in a non-sexualized body. Being present in a body that can be sexualized, but isn't currently being sexualized. Also, what is a body that isn't being objectified? What is my identity, as I'm living in a body that isn't engaging with the world in that manner.

SN: I think right now, this experience of isolation is playing into the work. The first piece, I described, I started before the pandemic. But the most recent one is definitely about being isolated and having experiences through the work and through imagination and the internet. In isolation, how can you have experiences, and how can you feel connected through the Internet and narrative? How can you feel connected to the human spirit when you're alone? I love thinking about you [Erin] in your studio, and we're both isolated but we're both doing the same thing and tapped into this art spirit experience. Even before the pandemic, before the isolation experience, I've thought of art as a way to have communication with people below the surface. That's become even more intensified now. I like to think of my art as a message I'm sending off in a bottle, and hoping that someone gets it in some way.

In terms of the images, and the stories I'm choreographing, I've been thinking of love and eroticism as a way to transcend isolation.

*It seems like making art has always been a pretty singular experience for you both. How has isolation changed your work flow? I find that artists kind of respond one of two ways: this time is either emotionally and creatively draining, so it's really hard to work, or you get to have all of this focused time and emotions are heightened, and that's motivating. Where do you fall?*

EMR: In some ways, it feels like I'm back to the beginning. It feels unknown, there was nothing on the schedule and for a period of time it felt like the art world was over. There was a freedom in that. Like, I don't have to make anything good or really care, because nothing's going to be sold or shown anyways. That was very freeing. But then this September, everything kind of started up again at a rapid pace that was almost too much. I haven't thought much about reintegrating into the world. I love going to art shows, but it almost feels like a chore now. It feels like a break from the routine of life. I've been in New York the whole time, and it's felt like I've lived in the middle of nowhere but in the middle of the city.

SN: At first it wasn't really a change for me. Before this, I would have periods of time where I would just work for three weeks. So it's not uncommon for me to have times like that. But there's such a difference in being able to choose that and having it forced on you. I've definitely had this weird rhythm where after every two or three weeks, I have an emotional breakdown. Then I have a catharsis. And then I just keep going.

*It's funny, I was thinking about how I think a lot of people have picked up embroidering or working with textiles during the pandemic, myself included.*

EMR: Totally, so many people are picking up crafts. That's another thing, I have felt for so long that our type of life has been sort of ostracized. Like, "Oh, you're busy in the studio!" So I've developed all these skills that I've always felt guilty for having. Like, I can be okay alone for a week. I don't need to talk to people for like, a month. I almost feel guilty, because I'm fine! That part of my life is fine. I have those skills. The extroverts are not doing good, and I worry about them a lot.

*Right! Like, obviously I'm not doing this as an artist like you guys are, but while I have the loom in my hands I love the tedium that lets my mind go free, and knowing that there's a goal, but it's very far off and I'm slowly*

*working towards it.*

SN: Absolutely. I'm definitely like an OCD, neurotic person and I have a lot of anxiety. I've read that doing rhythmic hand motions and repetitive hand tasks actually can chemically relax you. I know for a fact that I'm addicted to this process. Also being able to listen to podcasts or go down weird Youtube holes while I'm building this thing. I feel like when I'm designing an image or a narrative, I'm engaged in a different way and I'm thinking intensely. But then once that's done, and it's the making, it's almost like it's out of my hands. It happens very subconsciously and I'm just going.

Compared to when I was a painter, there was always this baggage in my head of, "What is a good figure painting? How can I make this good?" The embroidery process has totally removed that kind of evaluation. You make it until it's done. I have a lot of excess mental energy that this process burns off.