

ART 309

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6 May 2022

### Interwoven: The Bond Between Feminism and Textiles

The art of tapestry making has served as an adaptable spring-board for second and third wave Feminism. Starting with Judy Chicago reclaiming craft arts in second wave feminism as a way of celebrating women, and leading to artists such as Erin M. Riley and Qualeasha Woods to continue the tradition in third wave (and potentially fourth wave) Feminism where they allow for more complex views of women's roles in society. Tapestry and textile arts have proven successful as modes of representation of feminist issues because of its time consuming process, historic connotation, and its role as a craft art. Following this theme: the art exhibition *Interwoven*, will include Judy Chicago, Erin M. Riley and Qualeasha Woods to prove the importance and success of textiles as a feminist art form.

The process and time it takes to create these textiles allows for further contemplation of the issues at hand and allows viewers to understand the importance of what is being depicted. Textiles have been tied to history and storytelling, which allows for a space where Feminist stories can be told and recontextualized. Tapestries and textiles' role as craft have empowered women to become producers and kept their art contemporary in a capitalist society.

This historical background of textiles was not always so tied to feminism, and had more to do with the decorative arts, as well as religious affiliated tapestries. In the biblical sense, tapestries were used to tell stories, illustrating characters and their epic narratives in the bible. (1) This use of tapestries as a form of storytelling was taken up by artists such as Faith Ringgold.

Faith Ringgold created a series called *Story Quilts* that allowed for a space where feminist and

minorities' stories could be told, and situated in the historically significant tapestry context. In an interview with Ken Tan, a journalist with Hyperallergic, Faith Ringgold stated, "It is a Story Quilt series that looks back to the people who came before us and tells their stories which might otherwise be forgotten. I'm very inspired by my ancestors and have revisited this subject matter throughout my career... My motivations have remained consistent — I have always wanted my work to reflect me and my experience." (2) Faith Ringgold, and the context of storytelling through tapestries has allowed for artists such as Judy Chicago, Erin M. Riley, and Qualeasha Woods to follow in her footsteps and utilize the textile arts for the Feminist Movements.

This historical context of tapestries allows for work such as Judy Chicago's *Creation of the World* in her *Birth Power Project* series in 1981. (3) This work reclaims history as reliant on the female body and its ability to give birth and keep the world growing. In an article titled, *Feminist Icon Judy Chicago on Resisting the Cycle of Erasure* Author Marisa Crawford states, (4) "Chicago's role as a second-wave feminist foremother, whose ideas laid the bedrock for future generations of art and activism." Even with artists such as Qualeasha Woods and Erin M. Riley, whose work is uncomfortably contemporary and saturated with modern day issues such as Planned Parenthood and the feminine experience in social media, there is still the historical background of tapestry storytelling that propels their work into cultural significance.

Tapestry and textile making is a craft art form. Craft has been looked down upon by fine art practices for most of history. This imbalance has attracted many groups to use craft arts that also feel looked down upon or a discrimination against them. The 2nd wave feminist movement was pioneered by Judy Chicago, who reclaimed the craft arts for women in her large collaborative works such as *Womanhouse* in 1972 and *The Dinner Party* in 1979. (5) This caused the idea that all things decorative and associated with the home, to now be forever associated with femininity

(embroidery, sewing, weaving, etc.).

Craft has always functioned within contemporary ideas. Julia Bryan-Wilson wrote the article titled, *Eleven Propositions in Response to the Question: "What Is Contemporary about Craft?"*. In this article, Bryan-Wilson explains why craft has survived and become just as "contemporary" as any other art form. Bryan-Wilson states, "Craft is edgy, craft is radical, even revolutionary, and craft has the potential to remake regimes of distribution." (6) Craft has always stayed at the forefront of activist movements, and because of its ability to be made and sold more quickly, it has allowed women to become their own producers and be independent in a capitalist society.

The process of creating tapestries and textile arts is always time consuming. The act of creating it, as well as the act of viewing this work, slows down the human experience. This allows one to reflect inwardly as they work to understand the significance of the art, or the building of it. Glenn Adamson, in an interview with Spencer Bailey sums up this experience quite well when he says that craft has an 'immediate temporality of rhythm" and this rhythm rises up within oneself as they look at the work. Adamson says that when one is looking upon the tapestry, you can almost hear the "clack, clack of the loom." (7) This experience is not only tactile and rhythmic, but also lends itself to a quiet contemplation of what is being depicted.

An example of the importance of time in a tapestry is the work of Erin M. Riley with her work *The Pill* in 2013. *The Pill* is a woven tapestry that is 26 inches tall and 42 inches wide depicting an open box of birth control pills. (8) If this were a photo, it would be difficult to look at for more than thirty seconds. However, because this is a tapestry that took time to painstakingly weave on a loom, the viewer is forced to look at this birth control pill box with a renewed perception of importance.

The adaptability of textiles in various feminist waves, is an attribute to its success as a

medium for activists movements. In second wave feminism, the emphasis is on what makes women different than men, and why that is a good thing. In third wave feminism, there is the belief that perhaps there does not need to be any separation between man and woman at all, and the body itself is not altering ones' personal desires or beliefs. Finally, fourth wave feminism is not quite fully formed yet, as it is currently in place. However, fourth wave feminism definitely combines the thought that there may be experiences that are solely female, but that women's minds are just as capable and deserving as that of their male counterparts. From Judy Chicago in second wave feminism celebrating women's bodies, to Erin M. Riley in third wave feminism, showing the realities of what women go through, to Qualeasha Woods in potentially fourth wave feminism where she is showing female fetishization in the digital age. All of these women are utilizing craft for their own perspective on the feminist movement. In the book, *The Subversive Stitch*, written by Roszika Parker, Parker says, "To know the history of embroidery" she wrote, "is to know the history of women." (9) All three of them use textiles as a springboard for their ideas, and this is what makes their work more poignant and infused with significance.

These specific artists were chosen to be in the *Interwoven* gallery exhibition in Hazel B. Abbott theater due to their use of textiles, and their distinctly feminist concepts. The connection between the materiality and the concept is historically intertwined. Both textiles themselves, and the Feminist movements have grown and developed alongside one another, and are now seen as almost inseparable. Judy Chicago may have reclaimed craft arts for women, but artists Erin M. Riley and Qualeasha Woods have certainly picked up the torch since then and have made tapestries and the textile arts radically contemporary in the face of new issues in the modern Feminist movements.

Judy Chicago, *Birth Tear*, 1982, embroidery on silk, 20.5 x 27.5 in., embroidery by Jane Gaddie

Thompson (Fig. A):

A part of the *Birth Power Project: Birth Tear* is a more graphic depiction of a woman giving birth, than had ever been seen before in the 20th century. Judy Chicago was the creative director and designer of the *Birth Power Project*, however the actual embroidery was mostly done by various collaborations of female artists. The goal of this large collaborative series was to celebrate the unique ability of women to give birth, and how that ability is essential to humanity and the world. Situated directly within second wave feminism, Chicago is separating the biologically male and female experiences, while rejoicing in those differences as a way of searching for equality for women. The red on red embroidery of this work brings forth ideas of materiality and the visceral and somewhat graphic depiction of what it really means for a human body to have a baby. Visually, one can feel the agony of the woman illustrated due to the intense facial expression and repeating lines surrounding her. The vaginal tear is lengthened along her entire torso to explicitly describe the pain in which she is going through.

Judy Chicago, *Birth Power*, 1984, Embroidery over drawing on silk, 20.25 x 20.25 in, Embroidery by Sandie Abel (Fig. B):

*Birth Power* is an abstracted visualization of a woman about to give birth. Here we see the emphasized idea of physical power in the woman's body as she prepares for this endeavor. The viewer gets the sense of the woman concentrating and breathing in a sort of calm before the storm moment. The colors chosen in this work focus on this idea of everything boiling down to this one "pregnant" moment. The blacks and the yellows create a high amount of contrast of the woman and her body. The simple outline is successful in showing the viewer the muscles and curves of the body that is about to participate in a difficult and ancient act that is giving birth. With Chicago's creative direction, this work has a subtle power to draw the viewer's attention to the mental and physical ability of this woman to wrench a living being from her body. The

needlework in this work is not hidden by any illusions: rather the viewer is asked to pay attention to the lines coming down from the body and interpret the importance of their material substance with their symbolism of water breaking or a miracle happening, and a baby about to be born.

Judy Chicago, *Birth Tear/Tear*, 1984, macrame over drawing on fabric, 46 x 55.5 in., needlework by Pat Rudy-Baese (Fig. C):

*Birth Tear/ Tear* tapestry highlights the emotional and physical exhaustion after having birth. The tearing of the body here is the focus, as well as the specific emotions of the women. What is intriguing about this work is the fact that this woman does not seem to be happy after giving birth, but rather in more pain and sadness. This is a specific difference in what has previously been made historically that Judy Chicago is making a point on. In many depictions of birth the woman is always glowing with happiness after her baby has been born and she has finally fulfilled her ultimate purpose. (Thinking of depictions of the Virgin Mary giving birth to Christ) In past works the woman hardly looks affected at all after giving birth, and rather looks relieved and most importantly, beautiful. In this work however, the woman seems as if she has just finished fighting a battle. This is a reaction that is closer to the reality of what it means to have just had a baby. The darkness surrounding the woman, and the emphasis on the red “tear” reinforces this idea of pain and physical and emotional weariness.

Judy Chicago, *Creation of the World: Embroidery 1/9*, 1981, Embroidery on fabric, 15 x 22.5 in, Stenciling by Eileen Gerstein, Needlework by Pamella Nesbit (Fig. D):

*Creation of the World* is a more religiously symbolic take on the physical act of giving birth. Judy Chicago attempts to celebrate the female body, however she only goes so far within second wave feminism. Chicago may have pioneered this wave, but second wave feminism ideals allow Chicago to celebrate what is specifically feminine in a woman’s experience. However, it does not allow for the idea that men and women are of the same nature. Women are still seen as

separate in every aspect of themselves because of their anatomy. In this work, Chicago has elevated the experience of giving birth to biblical importance once again. This is the historical background of textiles at work where a narrative is beginning to rise and the viewer feels as if they are witnessing the embroidery of another bible story. This ideology and elevating of the female body is what prevents Chicago from venturing into third wave feminism where men and women are seen as humans first, with the same thoughts and desires.

Erin M. Riley, *Crimson Landslide 6*, cotton and wool, 48x 35 in. 2018 (Fig. E):

The work of Erin M. Riley takes a feminist way of thinking and situates in in the mundane reality of women's every day experiences. In third wave feminism, the ideology is that women and men are really not all that different, and there should not be so many separations between them. The biology of women may be different than mens', but the thoughts and desires are relatively similar. In this work, *Crimson Landslide 6*, Riley is commenting on the stigma that everything having to do with menstruation should be hidden from the public eye. Riley is purposefully showing underwear with period blood on it to confront the viewer with that which is usually hidden behind closed doors, and rarely even spoken about above hushed whispers. Riley is making the argument that this way of thinking is ridiculous, and menstruation should be seen as the same as having a sneeze or going to the bathroom. There is nothing controversial about periods, so there should not be a taboo connotation to it. Overall, the stark red on this work is counteracted by the mundane environment it is placed in, and the viewer can see the lack of emphasis on the underwear itself. Women's lives and their bodies should not be censored anymore than that of a man's.

Erin M. Riley. *Planned Parenthood*, cotton and wool, 15x 24". 2018 (Fig.F):

Directly across from Judy Chicago's *Creation of the World* in 1981: Erin M. Riley's *Planned*

*Parenthood* comes off as much more pragmatic and blunt. The imagery of sublime, religious birth, with that of a very normal looking abortion scene does bring about thoughts of the dichotomy of womens' lives. Always told they have something precious to offer to the world and they need to protect it, while at the same time being shamed for wearing immodest clothing or giving birth at too young of an age. *Planned Parenthood* illuminates the experience of the modern woman in the 21st century. Due to the woven material, the lack of face on the female doctor, and the fact that the view is from the woman getting the appointment; one feels as if they are remembering what happened yesterday. The low lighting and static-like linear shading gives the mood a nervous but resigned emotion. The experiences of women in the 21st century are far from what Chicago illustrates in *Creation of the World*. However, they still deserve a voice, and they still deserve to be heard out of respect for what life is like for women now.

Erin M. Riley, *The Pill*, cotton and wool, 26x 42 in. 2013 (Fig. G):

The time consuming nature of textile work is the reason why most textiles are decorative or historically significant. We are used to seeing grand designs on textiles and tapestries. This time consuming process is what causes viewers to look at this birth control pill box with a renewed sense of importance. The reality of this work is that it is only a birth control pill box. However, with the idea that someone spent hours creating this and weaving each strand on a loom, one begins to search for the meaning behind this work. What is significant about birth control? Why is it important enough for someone to blow up the scale and illustrate its detailed lights and shadows? The birth control pills are so specific to gender and age groups that it is difficult not to imagine the women who take these pills. This tapestry is dedicated to the ordinary women who take a pill once a day for the betterment of themselves. Riley is elevating the idea of birth control pills, so as to allow viewers in on the knowledge that birth control is common, normal, and



uninteresting due to its overuse. However, Riley is also emphasizing its power to control people's lives.

Erin M. Riley, *Bruises 2*, cotton and wool, 16x 24in. 2018 (Fig. H):

In the 21st century, the concept of the “selfie” is quite normal and done worldwide. However, sometimes selfies can capture something more important and almost truer than what was intended for social media. Something that brings the viewer back to reality In this work, *Bruises 2*, there is a faceless woman depicted with flower-like bruises on her neck. It is well known that Riley often weaves images that are sent to her anonymously from men or women that want their stories shared. This is why the need for faceless people comes into play as individuals do not want their identities shared. This anonymity allows for this work to encompass all women who have suffered from domestic abuse, and creates a space where many people can feel empathy towards the figure. Combining this digital practice with the historical practice of weaving and the ideas of domestic abuse creates a poignant narrative. This allows for women in the modern day to compare themselves to women of the past and see that they do still have more in common than may at first meet the eye.

Qualeasha Woods, *The [Black] Madonna-Whore Complex*, jacquard cotton weave, glass seed beads. 2021 (Fig. I):

This shockingly contemporary work, *The [Black] Madonna-Whore Complex* by Qualeasha Woods drags historical narrative and textile work into the digital era. With an emphasis on the experiences of black women: Woods is orienting new female struggles as they relate to social media and real life. The biblical narrative of the Virgin Mary combined with the computer desktop icons creates a visceral effect. One feels as if history is a loop that is to be repeated indefinitely no matter the year or technology created. In this work, Woods is focused on the

fetishization of black women in social media. Specifically how it seems as if they get all the hate and discrimination, when at the same time people are searching up “young, hot, ebony online.”

Wood’s work is in direct conversation with Erin M. Riley and even Judy Chicago because she is combining the reality of women with the connotation of religion and the mystical woman figure.

Qualeasha Woods, *Heart of Glass*, jacquard cotton weave, glass seed beads. 2021 (Fig. J):

The biblical connotations here influence the idea that the woman depicted is untouchable, and something to be worshiped. However, on her chest is a large mouse icon that would be used to click on her if this was a computer. This constant push and pull is what Woods is trying to get across. The fetishization of black women through social media manifests itself in search histories and individual comments or posts. In potentially fourth wave feminism, Woods is exploring the idea that men and women are the same, however the psychology of the genders does create differences in their actions. As the flow from second wave, to third wave, and now fourth wave feminism leads to more knowledge on the subject, the artwork is following suit in creating more and more sophisticated ideas. Judy Chicago may have pioneered the 2nd wave feminist movement, but artists such as Erin M. Riley and Qualeasha Woods will be the ones to pick up the reins and further feminist theory.

## Conclusion

The set up of the gallery will be mostly surrounding Erin M. Riley and Judy Chicago, as they both have four works in the show and they are more well known. As the viewer walks through, they will constantly see the symmetry between Riley and Chicago and the asymmetry between second and third wave feminism at the same time. For example, putting Chicago's *Creation of the World* in direct conversation with Riley's *Planned Parenthood* could show the dichotomy of what Chicago sees as special about women, and what Riley sees as the mundane experience of what it means to have a female body. However, as the viewer continues walking, they will begin to see Qualeasha Wood's work as well to show what is happening with feminist textiles right now and where it is going to go in the future. This will allow the viewer to contemplate the history of textiles and the history of women, and hopefully will convince them to root for them both.

The goal of this exhibition is to prove that textiles and tapestries are successful in representing various waves of Feminism because of its time consuming process, role as a craft art, and its narrative and storytelling qualities that have followed it throughout history. To prove this idea, the artists Judy Chicago, Erin M. Riley, and Qualeasha Woods will have multiple artworks in the show that are all textiles with feminist concepts. Their concepts may span from celebrating women's bodies, to the feminine experience in social media, but they all come from a place of fighting for equality for women. These works will be strategically placed in Hazel B. Abbott theater so they can facilitate conversation about the vast differences between them despite their many similarities in concept and material. The decision to use Hazel B. Abbott theater was due to its identity as being part of one of the only all women's colleges in America and its richness in history.

## Appendix

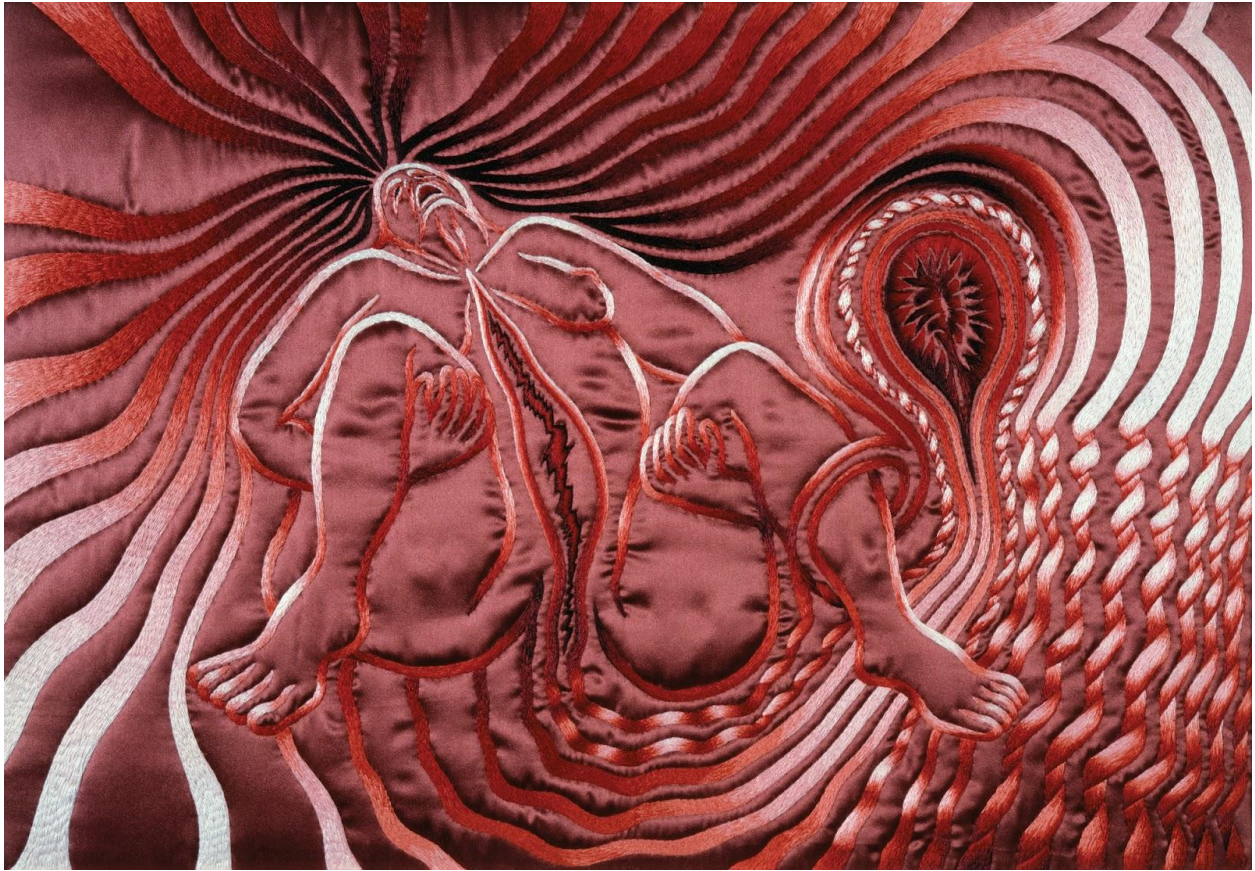


Figure A. Judy Chicago, *Birth Tear*, 1982, embroidery on silk, 20.5 x 27.5 in., embroidery by Jane Gaddie Thompson, private collection. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. (Chicago, 2022)



Figure B: Judy Chicago, *Birth Power*, 1984, Embroidery over drawing on silk, 20.25 x 20.25 in., Embroidery by Sandie Abel. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, NY. Collection of Through the Flower. (Chicago, 2022)



Figure C: Judy Chicago, *Birth Tear/Tear*, 1984, macrame over drawing on fabric, 46 x 55.5 in., needlework by Pat Rudy-Baese, private collection. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. (Chicago, 2022)



Figure D: Judy Chicago, *Creation of the World: Embroidery 1/9*, 1981, Embroidery on fabric, 15 x 22.5 in., Stenciling by Eileen Gerstein, Needlework by Pamella Nesbit. © Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo © Donald Woodman/ARS, NY. Collection of Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. (Chicago, 2022)



Figure E: Erin M. Riley, *Crimson Landslide 6*, cotton and wool, 48x 35in. 2018 (Portfolio, 2022)





Figure F: Erin M. Riley, *Planned Parenthood*, cotton and wool, 15x 24in. 2018. (Portfolio, 2022)



Figure G: Erin M. Riley. *The Pill*, cotton and wool, 26x 42in. 2013. (Portfolio, 2022)



Figure H: Erin M. Riley, *Bruises 2*, cotton and wool, 16x 24 in. 2018 (Portfolio, 2022)

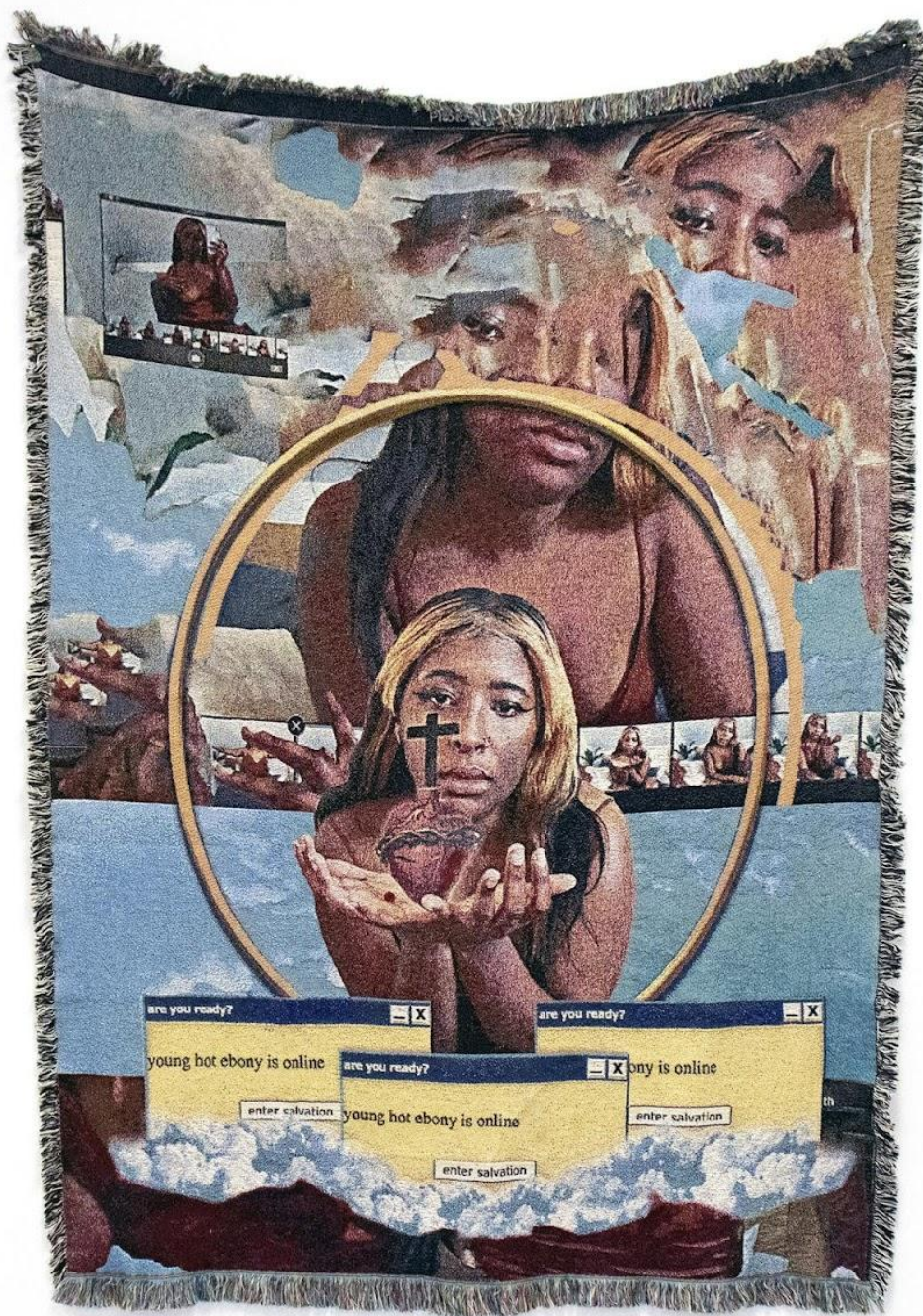


Figure I: Qualeasha Woods, *The [Black] Madonna-Whore Complex*, jacquard cotton weave, glass seed beads. 2021 (WMagazine, 2022)



Figure J: Qualeasha Woods, Heart of Glass, jacquard cotton weave, glass seed beads. 2021

(WMagazine, 2022)

## Endnotes

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