

# I Become a Weaving with the Weavings: Gean Moreno Interviews Eric-Paul Riege

**GEAN MORENO:** “Hóló—it xistz” is the title of your exhibition at ICA Miami. Who is Hóló?

**ERIC-PAUL RIEGE:** Hóló is my son. The exhibition was conceived as he was conceived. Making is giving birth—an immaculate conception of sorts. My hands are the conduit of my family, my ancestors, the Holy People. When I work with materials, I let them play and converse with each other. I work with fibers: wools, yarns, hair, furs, hides, sinew, and other things. These materials were born from something living. The biology of my hair can be woven with sheep’s wool and sheep’s wool woven with horse hair and horse hair with some of my cat’s lint. They weave into one another like DNA strands to give birth to Hóló, to DiBÉ (another figure in my work), or to the creature I become during my performances.



Eric-Paul Riege with  
Hóló, 2019

Hóló was born in January 2019 from a performance at SITE Santa Fe, in an installation titled *diyín+*, *hooghan and weaving dance* (fig.3) for Na’ashjé’úí Asdzáá, Retha, Effie, Angela that was on display between August 2018 and January 2019 as part of *Casa tomada*, the SITElines.2018 biennial, in which Candice Hopkins, José Luis Blondet, Ruba Katrib, and Naomi Beckwith invited me to participate. Those months were his incubation period in the womb of the installation and in the womb of my mind. I don’t remember when he was fertilized. He’s about four months old now, though, and I wanted to create a show honoring him, to thank him for what we’ve gifted each other. My first time to Miami was in January, a few days after he was born, and it was my first time ever seeing the beach and the ocean. I added shells to him to represent that experience so I could introduce him to Miami. I’m hoping these shells are given back to the ocean when the show comes to a close.

**GM:** I'm interested in this idea of a male body with a womb.

**EPR:** Yeah. [Laughs.] The idea of sanctuary and of being protected and being so loved by something, a space whose only purpose is to keep you warm, help you survive, and allow you to emerge into existence. That's a womb. It's a home for coming to be. I was troubled that I couldn't provide sanctuary through my cis male body in this way. But the work allowed me to do that. The work is like a home that comes from my foremothers and allows me to be a mother and a father and a brother and a sister. During the last performance at SITE Santa Fe, Hóló finished his incubation phase. And so I'm feeling a little sad now. I don't know. Maybe it's like he's going off to school or something, because he's going to be separated from me for six months while he is at ICA Miami. It was even hard when I couldn't take him on the plane. Unfortunately, he traveled in a semitruck instead. It was our first separation. And now, with the show at ICA, we face a second one. The opening day of the show will be our moment to love each other and hang out for a while and then say goodbye.

**GM:** Let's backtrack and offer some context for the show by looking at some of your previous work.

**EPR:** I'm from Gallup, New Mexico. Born and raised. When I was doing my thesis project in 2017, I wanted to do a project honoring my family and honoring the history of our lives as weavers coming from this place and this land. It began with my mom's mom's mom, my great-grandma Angela Ashley. Angela Ashley was a weaver in Tó Dílídí, or Burnt Water, Arizona. The 2017 project *DiBÉ Hózhó Yit'ó* was me channeling her practice through my practice, which I later realized are one and the same. It was also about me putting the Diné worldview of Hózhó into my everyday life, a worldview that is about goodness and balance and harmony and love for yourself and for everybody and everything around you—for the ground you stand on, for the air you breathe, for the ceiling above you, for the sky above you, for the fibers of your clothes. I embedded that view in my life and I felt completely changed and more fulfilled.

My work is the journey set off by this spiritual relationship started then between myself, my gods, my mother, my father, my grandma, the audience, the work itself. This is all in part due to

Angela Ashley. She lived to be 105, I think. There are conflicting obituaries and documents that I've collected with varying birth years for her. She was born in the late 1800s. She could've been 115—that's what some people say—when she passed. I had a relationship with her. She passed in 2006 when I was twelve years old. She loved hands. I love to feel people's hands. Through their hands was how she recognized people later in life. You would go up to her and she would look at your hands and she knew if you were a hard worker or a person who worked in an office. She would say, "If you have soft hands, you're a lazy person who works at a computer." She also said people with soft hands were smart. That's what she said to my mom about my dad when she met him. [Laughs.]

She made weavings that were passed down to me. I'm grateful to have a couple of them in my studio along with weavings and blankets and rugs from other weavers from both my mother's and father's families. To me Angela is like this beacon in my life. I feel her energy and spirit in my hands.

*DiBÉ Hózhó Yit'ó*, 2017



**GM:** After the project honoring your great-grandmother, you produced the one that was presented at SITE Santa Fe, *diyin+*, *hooghan and weaving dance* (fig.3) for Na'ashjé'í Asdzáá, Retha, Effie, Angela.

**EPR:** Both of these installations are based around a hogan, or a home. *diyin+*, *hooghan and weaving dance* (fig.3) for Na'ashjé'í Asdzáá, Retha, Effie, Angela represented Angela's home. But also my home. But also a home. But also home as a feeling. An effigy of a home, I suppose. I would love for my work and I to be cremated together as an effigy when I die.

I use personification a lot in my work and writings because I'm a highly empathetic person. My memory is woven into so much around me that I've curated these auras and beliefs and wisdoms into what I've been blessed with. I see them as living, as a friend, or



a lover. You can see home in the glance of a stranger or the linger of a crush. *diyin+*, *hooghan and weaving dance* (fig.3) for Na'ashjé'íi Asdzáá, Retha, Effie, Angela was this altar of home.

There's this lineage of fiber in my family that is woven into my blood. My veins are like threads of their legacy. About six or so years ago, I had a beautiful moment together with my mom. While I was beating the weft next to her, she was transported back to her childhood, hearing again those sounds in the home where she lived with her grandmother.



*diyin+*, *hooghan and weaving dance* (fig.3) for Na'ashjé'íi Asdzáá, Retha, Effie, Angela, 2018

The installation at SITE was also Spiderwoman's home. Spiderwoman—Na'ashjé'íi Asdzáá—is a Holy Person who taught us Navajos how to weave through a gift she gave to Naayéé'neizghání (Slayer of Monsters) and Tóbájíshchíní (Born for Water), the Diné Hero Twins. Naayéé'neizghání and Tóbájíshchíní received weaving and then passed it on to their children and they to their children and they to their children and they to my great-grandmother and she to her daughter and she to her daughter and then to me and then to my son. The installation involves sharing these stories of weaving as gifted by my ancestors. Our cosmologies as Diné peoples permeate so much of our day-to-day lives that I think as I've gotten older I've become happier because I've become enlightened to this beauty. Na'ashjé'íi Asdzáá gifted Diné peoples the knowledge and beauty of weaving. I feel blessed by the Holy People every day, but especially when I'm making.

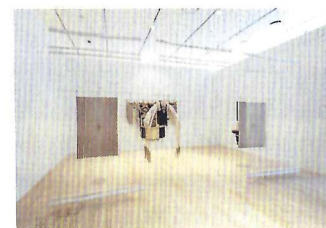
*diyin+*, *hooghan and weaving dance* (fig.3) for Na'ashjé'íi Asdzáá, Retha, Effie, Angela was Hóló's womb for . . . I don't think it was nine months. Seven months, I guess. Hóló may be a little premature, maybe that's why his head's still a lil' sensitive. [Laughs.] So Spiderwoman, and Angela, and Effie, my grandmother, and then Retha, who is my mother. I consider my mom an artist—I don't know if she would consider herself as such. She helps me a lot with my work, when I'm sewing three hundred soft sculpture balls, for instance. She'll sit with me and help me sew. If I'm doing a weaving,

she'll take the skein of yarn and roll it up into a ball for me. So it runs through her fingers and then it runs through my fingers. That's true collaboration. The work has all this familial history embedded in the weavings themselves. It is collaborative and part of the family tree.

**GM:** Can you explain what a hogan is?

**EPR:** A hogan is the traditional home structure for Diné peoples. There's the male hogan and the female hogan. The ones I presented are female hogans. When you enter an hogan, you go left and you move clockwise, which is also how you read a wedding basket. Always read clockwise. So, when I perform, I also perform clockwise as a way of recognizing this relationship. The installation at SITE Santa Fe was a hogan made of eight looms. The home is the womb and I want my work to be a womb for others to come into, to be a cocoon for them to feel safe in, to feel welcomed. I welcome everybody to come into the work, even during my performances. I mean, people do just by being there. Even though I have a hard time seeing while I perform, I absorb and cater to the energy of the audience. Even saying I have a hard time seeing is kind of a contradiction, because I can see with my ears and my sense of space.

**GM:** Some of the materials in the installation at SITE Santa Fe have reappeared in works produced afterward.



Installation view:  
"Eric-Paul Riege: Hóló—it xistz,"  
Institute of Contemporary Art,  
Miami, 2019

**EPR:** I reuse a lot of materials. I keep everything. When a show ends, I often deconstruct the works and use the materials later. This process of unmaking and remaking is so vital to my practice. I age and change and grow and so does the work. As I get a scar, my skin tissue heals itself. When my work is ripped or torn, it mends itself by coming into a new form or a new concept. I just hold the needle and thread and listen to what it wants to grow into. A lot of my

work includes things that were gifted to me. My aunt had a weaving in her house that was slightly damaged, and when she gave it to me I used it in one of my works. I see this as collaborative because now that memory is woven into the piece. This weaving is in one of the works in “Hóló—it xistz.”

**GM:** Can you say something about the works *Naabeehó Bináhásdzo Bidah Naat’a’í* [Navajo Nation flag] // *neiiKAI* [we walk around. . .], *Dinétaḥ diyogí* and *dah ‘iist’ó* [loomz], *weaving dance* (fig.1), made in 2017 and 2018?

**EPR:** *Naabeehó Bináhásdzo Bidah Naat’a’í* [Navajo Nation flag] // *neiiKAI* [we walk around. . .], *Dinétaḥ diyogí* is the largest weaving I’ve done. It’s being shown at the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Arizona, right now. The work is a weaving mapping the ancestral homelands of the Diné peoples and my family. *Neiikai* is the plural first-person form of the verb *naashá*, which means “to walk around” and used to tell where one is at or where one is from. Our land is where we are from, where we walk around. *Neiikai* is also used here to represent where my own family is from and where we have migrated. Cultural, federal, economic, and domestic reasons dictated the migrations of my family (and many families) around Dinétaḥ in the past century.



*Naabeehó Bináhásdzo Bidah Naat’a’í* [Navajo Nation flag] // *neiiKAI* [we walk around. . .], *Dinétaḥ diyogí*, 2017

The weaving is a simplified version of the *Naabeehó Bináhásdzo Bidah Naat’a’í* [Navajo Nation flag]. The colors depict what Diné land is. *Dził Diyinii Dǫ́’go Sinil* [the four sacred mountains, *Sisnaajiní*, *Tsoodzil*, *Dibé Nitsaa*, and *Dook’o’ooshíid*, represented by white, blue, yellow, and black] is the space where the creator placed Diné peoples. The dark-brown rectangle depicts the original 1868 reservation allotment while the three copper-browns represent the current reservation borders and US state boundaries. The flag is designed as a Diné sand painting: a ceremony, ritual, practice, and art form for healing. I weave in my own rituals to surrender

and heal and pray for *Hozhó*. Some of the yarn used in *Naabeehó Bináhásdzo Bidah Naat’a’í* [Navajo Nation flag] // *neiiKAI* [we walk around. . .], *Dinétaḥ diyogí* comes from 1967, dyed and used in sand painting rugs. The background yarn is woven to depict strata—this is what our land looks like; this is the land where our Creator placed us.



Eric-Paul Riege with *regalia* for weaving dance [1], 2018–19

*dah ‘iist’ó* [loomz], *weaving dance* (fig.1) began a cycle of weaving performances and weaving dances that I do. It’s what I call all my performances. I become a weaving with the weavings. I represent the entire process, from the hauling of the lumber, the creation of the loom, the nailing of the loom down to the ground, the warping of the thread, the creation of sounds through the weaving comb, the tangles of warp and weft, the slow, labored process, the meditation of slowness, the thick viscosity of loudness. When my work dies, I’ll die; and when I die, it’ll die. I have such a strong connection to the threads in it that when I’m performing I’m talking to the work, I’m learning about the work, it’s telling me what it likes to do and what it doesn’t like to do. I get tangled within it. It wants to be intertwined between my toes. It wants to hold my hand. I want to hold its hand. We have this relationship with each other. Its markings are on my body, my markings are on its body. When I say that the work talks to my body—I’ll give an example. During a performance in May 2018 at the Sanitary Tortilla Factory in Albuquerque with one of my best friends, artist Kaitlin Bryson, who is from Reno but based in Albuquerque, I cut my hand on a steel metal drum an hour into the performance. There was blood all over the floor. I could see the fat within my hand, but my adrenaline was so high I was like, “Let’s keep going.” That moment became an amazing connection between art and my body. I had to be wrapped up in the emergency room later. [Laughs.]



**GM:** This sounds very much like ritual.

**EPR:** Yeah.

**GM:** But I remember one of the first times we spoke, you were very clear that it's not ceremony. What is the distinction?

**EPR:** My worldview and connection to the philosophy of my peoples and myself is embedded in my hands and in what I do and what I am. In my performances, I'm crafting a belief system for myself, crafting a god out of my own beliefs, and I'm worshipping the gods through the work. As I create, I'm creating the bible and the stories that go into that work, and the performances are my thinking of my gods, and of my gods giving me a son (back to that metaphor of the immaculate conception). And when I experienced for the first time the feeling of generating my own belief system in a performance ritual, it became an ephemeral but really substantial high, something I've never felt before. It became an addictive high—like all highs—and I have an addictive personality. Through every performance I'm trying, or praying, rather, to reach this state again. When you reach euphoria, which I have a handful of times, it tethers you to so much but leaves a lingering desire for more, I suppose. But then it's something I don't want to desecrate, which is why I have a hard time speaking about it. I've never been one to have a good grasp on written or spoken language, in terms of English. I speak like I talk. I talk like a homeboy in your hometown who bummed a cigarette at three in the morning while wandering the streets. I don't like the grandiose, esoteric pedagogy of academic art verbiage. I mean, I don't know . . . I'm trying to figure out how to talk about my work in a way that looks like the work. I don't think scholarly language is appropriate. I think my work is explained best through movement and symbols and poetry written in the air.

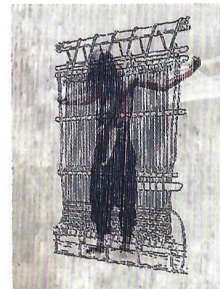
I do see my work as ceremonial, but based around my own cosmologies. It's ceremonial in a way that is both private and public. It's both by myself and with others. Ceremony for me is based in a belief system beyond my own. A gathering of participants to ignite a connectedness. I do see my performances as ceremonial in that there is an exchange of this connectedness, but I wouldn't want to make that an umbrella claim. I feel like I honestly can't call my work ceremonial, but others can. And I've always believed that others' interpretations of what I do are equally as true as mine.

I've joked before that I'm like the god, the angel, the priest, the cult leader, the believer, the nonbeliever of my own spirituality. It's a ceremony of praying to these moments in my life living together to birth thoughts of connection. Connection to the ink and paper these words will be printed on, to the hands that are holding this catalogue, the eyes understanding these symbols. I've met God before and He told me you had beautiful eyes.

The 2018 work *let the Holy ppl watch over U and Me* was an exchange with the audience, a gifting and taking. Wool that was gifted to me by a professor and also family member I then gave to others after blessing it with *tádidiin*, which is corn pollen. Life is a big gift. Life is this and that and there and here. This performance was me trying to offer a gift, to pass on an object that I had put these feelings into in order to share them with someone else.



*diyín+*, hooghan and weaving dance (fig. 3) for Na'ashjé'í Asdzáá, Retha, Effie, Angela, performance, 2018



Collage study 4 for "Hóló—it xístz" at ICA Miami, 2019

**GM:** Tell me more about how the weavings that you make and display become wearable elements in the performances.

**EPR:** I call them weaving dances because the work is a partner; it becomes the other dancer. Sometimes we step on each other's toes, sometimes we boppin' together really good and grinding on each other's asses. And it's like, when you step on each other's toes, it just leads into the next dance step anyway. So this is how our bodies are intertwined for multiple hours. The longer I perform the longer I can talk to the works and learn about them. You have to hang out for many hours and share many stories in order get to know each other, which is why my performances are so long. But I feel like my body knows more about my work than my mind does. If you want to know what these works mean, carry it for a while, for an hour or for a day. You'll probably tell me things they've told you that they've yet to open up about to me.

And I'm also calling on a higher power. When you call a higher power, sometimes they don't answer right away. The performances are me making that call and waiting, and then having a conversation with this power. Sometimes it is only a ten-minute conversation with them and sometimes it's a month-long conversation—but one has to reach out, leave one's hand out for however long it may take, waiting for someone to reach back.



Weaving dance,  
performance,  
2019

this life. I'm not sure if that makes me selfish or just a feeler. Maybe both? But art and my stories are made and told by my hands and therefore the hands of my ancestors and therefore the hands of the Holy People, all reaching out, welcoming you into our blessed space.

**GM:** And what's the body paint that you use?

**EPR:** Some of it is India ink, some of it is burned charcoal and ash, some of it is cheap makeup from Walgreens.

**GM:** The performances involve reductive forms of movement, a single gesture repeated for hours and hours.

**EPR:** That's how I learn about the work. Sometimes I'll do one thing for a while, then I will walk around, and maybe I'll bump into something, it'll make a certain sound and I'll be like, "Oh, it's speaking now. Let's see what you have to say." So I'll repeat that sound for a long period of time, just to listen to it, to learn about what it wants to say, or what it wants to do. I get tangled up in my work a lot, too, with the fringe and beads, and that's when I know it's embracing me. I fast before my performances. I like my body to be like an empty shell of skin, bone, and muscle, and I (try to) separate from any of my vices or anything I can give myself to. I can put my body through a lot. I'm a skinny dude, but my body can take on a lot. There's a limit where I should stop, but in my performances it's almost like that limit is removed and I become overwhelmed by my willpower, my energy, my adrenaline. And I try to feed that back into my daily life. But it's also kind of scary, the lengths I'll go. I've reached a max plenty of times and have had a couple of health scares because of it, but I submit to pain and love and energy so much that all of it exists together to allow me to absorb as much as I can in