

Jennifer West *Space Webs*

February 25 - April 13, 2024

As the Greek myth goes, Arachne was a young Lydian woman who had a preternatural gift for weaving. Her tapestries were so beautiful that nymphs from the surrounding forests and rivers started to flock to her workshop to behold them, convinced that Arachne's talent must have been bestowed by the gods. This angered the goddess Athena, who descended from Mount Olympus to challenge Arachne to a weaving contest. The young mortal agreed, and crafted a stunning tapestry that surpassed the skill and beauty of what the goddess created. Out of spite, Athena destroyed the girl's triumphant composition and turned her into a spider, condemned to weave her webs for all eternity.

This past September, while on one of her routine walks at the Arroyo Seco, Jennifer West noticed the sudden abundance of large spider webs, pitched all around the trail. The fall in southern California is widely known as "spider season," but the Los Angeles-based artist had never seen this many. Courtesy of Hurricane Hilary's rogue visit in mid-August, the region had received rare amounts of rain, and West was struck by how the orb weavers' webs captured the raindrops and morning dew, creating constellations of beading water. They were celestial, otherworldly; she returned to the Arroyo several times to photograph this phenomenon as the wet webs glinted in the morning sun.

These images and videos have made their way into *Space Webs*, an exhibition of new works by West and her first gallery presentation in LA since 2020. They also fortified the media and installation artist's growing fascination with outer space, after she learned that NASA sent spiders to the International Space Station to study their web-weaving in zero gravity, and that Russian scientists have developed spider-web-shaped spacecraft to clean up proliferating space debris.¹

In intricate tapestries of her own, West has sewn together strips of 16, 35, and 70mm motion-picture film imprinted with footage of spider webs, photographs of star clusters and nebulae, screengrabs of an online planetarium computer app, and scans of a century's worth of glass plate negatives, exposed by telescopes and digitized by Harvard College Observatory. (These plates were typically created and notated by women, a task that became gendered because of its semblance to embroidery work.) To obtain her organic images of faraway stars, the artist ascended to Mt. Wilson Observatory and rented its 60-inch telescope, pointing her camera into its matrix of mirrors and out towards the cosmos.

In homage to the spider, West painted over many of her film strips with silk dyes, in addition to staining them with coffee and soot. She then sewed them together into complex configurations; the telescoping, geometric patterns of these "quilts" contain countless, semitransparent images, aglow under the gallery light. In line with the artist's continued exploration of "media archaeology," her stitching and dying and drenching of camera film underscores its materiality, reminding us of expanded cinema's storied history as a tactile medium. In the same solar system as experimental filmmakers and artists such as Stan Brakhage, Bruce Conner, Margaret Honda, and Leslie Thornton, to name a few, West's luminous quilts also violate the assumed sanctity of cellulose with her characteristic punk irreverence.

In *Space Webs*, West also transposes her wide array of footage to newer forms of technology. *Space Webs Hologram Fan* displays a technicolored video of starstuff, transferred from 35mm, on a whirring holographic fan. In this context, the device smacks of a small spacecraft, emitting its immaterial, digital image like a signal. When photographed, its frame rate interferes, displaying only segments of the circular image. West took several of these fragments and printed their precise shapes onto aluminum, adding a new layer to the sediment of actions she has performed on her source material, freezing the many transfers between analogue and digital into a stationary object.

Elsewhere, West erects a nine-channel video installation with *Space Webs Screen Waterfall* (35mm film negative and print painted with silk fabric dyes, Los Angeles tap water and atmospheric soot), a cascade of digital monitors that spill from the wall across the gallery's floor. At this size, the intricate systems of the spider webs, star clusters, and astronomical notations become more legible, but no less hieroglyphic. Splashed in West's signature neon hues, *Space Webs Screen Waterfall* shows us the vastness of our universe and its infinite chaos. Webs made for catching flies and space debris alike mark a mortal desire for order, as do our meticulous methods for parsing the sky. West honors these efforts, but also finds the beauty in their inherent degradation. Glass plates crack, suns die out, film discolors and fades. Like Arachne, we can imagine our place among the gods, but we are mere tapestries of matter, given a brief chance to gaze skyward before we too turn to dust.

—Juliana Halpert

¹ The Air Force, too, has created a craft called "Arachne," as part of their "SSPIDR" project, a solar-power transmission system prototype.