BOMB

Unexpected Vernacular: Ellen Lesperance Interviewed by Jared Quinton

Painting feminist knitting patterns.

Ellen Lesperance, *Pink Triangle, New Wave*, 2020, gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper, 42 × 30 inches. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

For the past several years, Portland-based artist Ellen Lesperance has been producing impeccable gouache paintings of "protest sweaters"—specifically those made and worn by feminist activists of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp who demonstrated against the storage of US nuclear weapons in England in the 1980s and '90s. Rendered in the knitters' language of Symbolcraft, Lesperance's hauntingly beautiful paintings could actually be decoded by knitters to re-create the garments, whose images she sources from extensive research. We spoke about the complicated questions of access, activism, and labor raised by her work and its enduring focus on this particular episode in history.

—Jared Quinton

Jared Quinton
Let's jump right into the deep end. What do you consider to be the political stakes of your practice?

Ellen Lesperance
When I think about representing female bodies, which I do in my work, it has been my pursuit to get away from painting likenesses, that literal description of what a body looks like, and to find some opposing mechanism. It's been really tricky. I think it's easy to see that the female body in art history has been this site, even a repository, for the projections of—typically male—narratives, fantasies, aggressions, and cultural values. My long-term project of trying to make a representation that captures something else about a subject—something honorable and reclaimed—has landed me on looking for a different visual language. It has also brought me to look more closely at each subject's ideological drives, her politics, and the speech she utilizes in a public sphere to argue for herself.

Ellen Lesperance, *The Second Path of Feminye*, 2020, gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper, 42 × 30 inches. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

JQ
So it's something like a complicated politics of refusal? You're embracing abstraction as a way of protecting or concealing your subjects, but then also finding ways to communicate their specificity—in the case of your most recent work, a group of feminist, anti-nuclear protestors. This seems to be where your focus on aspects of public presentation comes in. The women themselves aren't necessarily your subjects, but rather it's their constructed self-images that get disseminated, preserved, etc. Can you talk a bit about how you first came to research these activists and why they've become such an enduring focus for you?

EL
I like the idea of a politics of refusal, but I also think it's an attempt to re-prioritize a viewing audience. Which viewers does an artwork "reach," who is spoken to, and maybe even who, on purpose, gets excluded? The paintings may look abstract to you and to many people, but to other people they put forward really clear pattern language and describe the body using a specific, though, I guess, unexpected vernacular: Symbolcraft, which is knitting-pattern language. In terms of representation, the descriptive potential of Symbolcraft is different, but, for me, it is certainly not less than the descriptive potential of more traditional painting. Both are partial.

I have been a knitter most of my life, and have been enamored with Symbolcraft as an alternate representational language since the 1990s; but I couldn't access how I could make a literal painting with it until I met an ex-camper from the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in 2005, and started researching it. The activists there used Creative Direct Action as a frequent tactic, deciding that creative making was a sort of remedy, or opposition, to violence and war-making. They made large-scale sculptural installations, elaborate costumes, and performances. Incredibly, I also noticed that the Greenham women frequently knit and wore what I like to think of as "argumentative sweaters." Their garments utilized a sweeping set of symbols, some developed at the camp, some traditional, some political, some poetic, but all communicative. These garments were, and continue to be, jaw-dropping for me. I have been researching them for over a decade now. Through visiting public and private archives, watching footage from the camps, contacting past participants, etc., I have amassed over one hundred examples of them. In this way, I became involved in my own effort to rescue this epic creative knitwear history from erasure, and I realized that re-patterning the sweaters in gouache would do this.

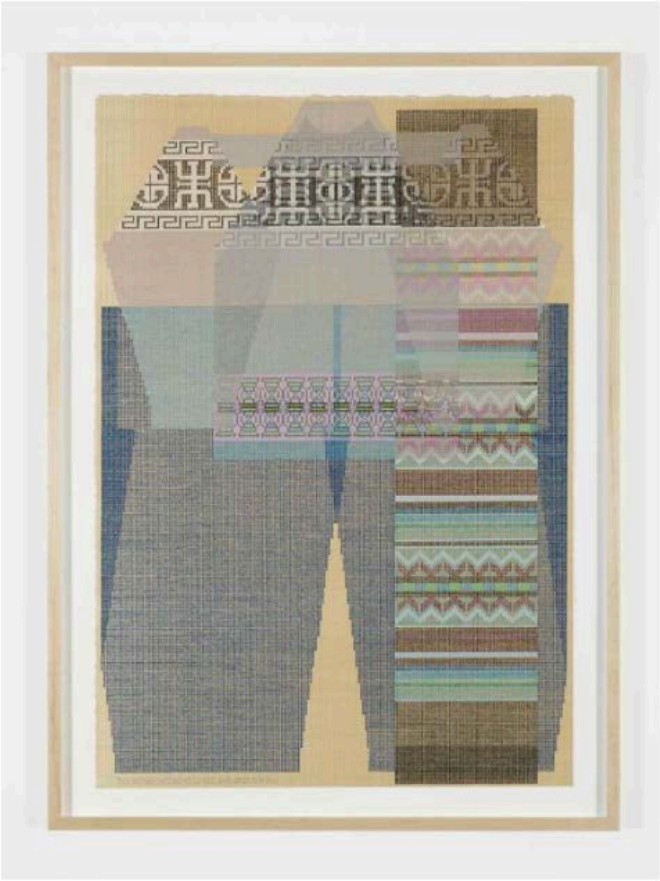
Ellen Lesperance, *Violet is for the Goddess*, 2020, gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper, 42 × 30 inches. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

JQ
Your work creates a sort of hierarchy of access that's different from the typical power dynamics of art viewership; perhaps my difficulty in finding the right words for it is a good illustration of this! I'm interested to hear more about your engagement with these "argumentative sweaters." In other words, how we get from these incredible garments and images of garments to your finished paintings? I've read elsewhere how involved your process is, and I wonder if there is an ethical dimension to this investment of time and labor?

EL
The easier thing to explain is how to go from a photograph of an activists' sweater to one of my paintings. I can look at one of those images and pretty easily discern its major attributes: colors, graphics, shaping, sizing, how fine or thick a yarn was used. Sometimes I need to assign colors myself because a source image is in black and white, and I just imagine them based on the values presented in the image. Often I need to extrapolate what a garment's back design might be, or if its other sleeve mirrors the one sleeve I can see. Based on all this information, I can create a pattern for the re-creation of the garment. I pencil in a graph on my paper that corresponds to a given garment's likely yarn gauge. Then I draw out all of the pattern pieces in a superimposed design that vaguely resembles a figure: two sleeves or arms at the top left and top right sides of the paper, overlapping and staggered front and back pieces in the middle, two pant legs on the bottom. Paintings can get more complicated with the inclusion of pattern elements like collars, hoods, pockets, or scarves.

Ultimately, every square in the grid represents a stitch, and each stitch is filled in with a brush using gouache. Where shapes overlap, colors mix, and often overlapping patterns combine, making the paintings sometimes more and sometimes less legible as literal generative patterns. I really try to maintain an illusion of transparency as shapes overlap, however, so that they could always—in theory—be followed.

To respond to the other component of your question, the one about time and labor, I certainly think that there is a devotional ethic to this work, as if I could prove through invested time and labor my marked commitment to these histories and these women. But I think it would be a missed opportunity to just leave it at that, because I think for most people—and certainly a vast majority of craftworkers—time and labor don't get to be conceptual instruments. Superficially, I think most would agree that the labor of craftwork is good work, that it is non-alienated work that skilled people get to do on their own terms. I have been a production knitter at multiple times in my life, and I can attest that this work is precarious and that engaging in craft labor at poverty wages is not its own reward! I recognize that knitting a sweater takes so much longer than any painted pattern I might conceive of, and, in the end, regardless of its labor investment, that sweater is going to be deemed pretty valueless. In a decade spent researching Greenham sweaters, I have yet to encounter even one that has been saved in an archive. I think this speaks volumes.



Ellen Lesperance, *This Woman Says No to Corrie Anti-Abortion Bill*, 2020, gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper, 42.5 × 29.5 inches. Photo by Andy Keate. Courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

JQ
How to honor histories of labor and craftwork without romanticizing them is certainly a complex problem. Part of your success in navigating this seems to lie in the degree of functionality you preserve in your finished works. Their diagrammatic nature gives them a certain liveness or present-ness. I won't say agency, but I'm tempted to—maybe something closer to slipperiness or resistance.

What happens when you run out of sweaters?

EL
Yes, Greenham Common sweater resources will for sure one day come to an end. There are other histories to explore, and I have a couple of other research projects currently in process. One that I am excited about is the visual history of femme faces and bodies in handknits. It is a touchingly separatist and future-tense portraiture zone: women technicians mapping out designs to be brought to life by women knitters for animation on women's bodies.

Ellen Lesperance: Will There Be Womanly Times? is on view at Hollybush Gardens in London until July 31.

Jared Quinton is a writer and curator based in Chicago.