



Wounded Amazon (Roe Falls), 2022, gouache and graphite on tea-stained cyanotype on paper, 42 x 30.25 in.

Ellen Lesperance

The Land of Feminye

October 15 – November 12, 2022

Opening reception: Saturday, October 15, 6–8 pm

Beside the land of Chaldea is the land of Amazonia, that is the land of Feminye. And in that realm is all women and no man; not, as some men say, that men may not live there, but for because that the women will not suffer no men amongst them to be their sovereigns.

- The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, c.1356

Derek Eller Gallery is pleased to present *The Land of Feminye*, a solo exhibition of new paintings on paper, sweaters, and terra-cotta sculptures by Ellen Lesperance. Expanding upon her exploration of the visual language embedded in hand-made garments worn by women engaged in acts of empowerment, Lesperance turns to the distinctive clothing of the Amazons, a nation of all-female warriors whose battles were chronicled in Greek mythology and depicted in art from the 4th century BCE, particularly red-figure pottery.

Amazonomachy — battle scenes between the Ancient Greeks and Amazons— portray the Amazons clothed in heavily-patterned leggings, tunics, skirts, and pelts, emblazoned with repeated imagery including animals, evil eyes, zigzags, stripes, and polka-dots. Lesperance translates the garments within this source material into knitting patterns in Symbolcraft, rendered as layered abstract gouache paintings. The paintings are executed in palettes to match naturally-dyed yarns which might have been used in ancient times: red-browns, yellows, and pinks from organic material like madder root, oak leaves, wild chervil, tansy, and ferns as well as the undyed black/brown yarn of the ancient Hebridean sheep.

As is typical of her practice, Lesperance's examination of the past is infused with the current moment. Three paintings, rendered on a rich black ground, picture clothing worn specifically by slain Amazon women. This ground is, in fact, a tea-stained cyanotype photograph of a flower bouquet gathered on a day of mourning, and these three works are intended as somber memorials to women's recent losses: the day Roe vs Wade was overturned, the day Yelena Grigoryeva was murdered, and the day Sandra Bland would have turned 35.

Similarly, Lesperance addresses the present in her terracotta ceramics inspired by Greek *tanagra* figurines from 300-400 BCE. Tanagras were secular depictions of young females, painted and clothed in fabrics; they were often buried alongside women and girls. Lesperance has used the same vented press-mold technique of antiquity to make her ceramics and has painted and clothed them using compost-dyed silks or hand-knit material with naturally dyed yarn. Her subjects include Amazons alongside contemporary era women like Russian activists, prisoners, Pipilotti Rist, and Beyoncé.

Ellen Lesperance mines history to uncover narratives about courageous, ideological women: activists, warriors, outliers. Recent scientific evidence calls into question the mythic status of Amazons and the so-called Land of Feminye. Analysis of mound burial sites across the steppes north of the Black Sea has revealed that ancient Scythian tribes may indeed have had less defined gender roles for men and women, making ancient, horse-mounted warrior women a historical possibility. Why these women chose to wear such distinctive dress encoded with particular motifs remains a mystery. However, by interpreting their garments through knitwear patterns, Lesperance effectively commemorates the individuality of each woman, fusing past, present, and future into one unconventional portrait.

Ellen Lesperance (b.1971) lives and works in Portland, Oregon. She had recent solo exhibitions entitled *Amazonknights* at ICA Miami and *Velvet Fist* at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and has been included in group shows at The Brooklyn Museum, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, The Frye Museum Seattle, ICA Boston, Bonniers Konsthall Stockholm, The New Museum of Contemporary Art New York, and KAI 10 | ARTHENA FOUNDATION, Düsseldorf. Lesperance received a 2022-23 Global Scholar Fulbright Award and a 2020 Guggenheim Fellowship. This will be her third show at the Gallery.