HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

TEXTILE
Cloth and Culture

Will There Be Womanly Times? Reflections on the Work of Ellen Lesperance

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Abstract

This article investigates textiles as translation and tribute through the work of artist Ellen Lesperance. Focusing on her body of work about the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, exploring themes of activism, feminism and knitting. Drawing from photographs and archival footage, Lesperance faithfully recreates the patterns, symbols and colors of knitwear worn by women in the camp through intricate, gridded paintings. The knitwear was worn by the protesters to display messages of intent and affiliation to a political cause. Clothing is often used as a communication of protest, but these distinctive jumpers were each handmade incorporating hours of labor, love, and wear by the women in the camp. Lesperance's detailed knitting patterns can be seen as figurative paintings honoring the female activists who made and wore the original pieces. This article examines how textiles can express ideology and lived experience and draws on my current research into how we can use the past to inform design for the future. It explores archival research, reinterpretation, and recreation as a method to invoke the original.

Keywords: textiles; knitting; knitwear; pattern; exhibition; archive; Ellen Lesperance; Greenham Common

Will There Be Womanly Times? Reflections on the Work of Ellen Lesperance

My first encounter with Ellen Lesperance's work was at her solo exhibition There Will Be Womanly Times at Hollybush Gardens in London in July 2021 (Figure 1). This was the first show that I had been to in person since the start of the pandemic. After a long period of loss, longing and disillusionment; it restored my faith in art and rejuvenated my own desire to make again.

The exhibition presented a series of paintings, hand-knitted garments, and a slideshow of archival images of activists at Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. On closer inspection the links between the photos of the women, the paintings and the knitted jumpers become apparent. Lesperance has drawn from archival footage and found images to investigate the knitwear worn and created by the Greenham protestors.

Ellen Lesperance was introduced to the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp by a chance encounter with one of the long-term ex-campers. Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire, England was established in 1981 by a group of women protesting against the storage of nuclear weapons at the site. The camp was active until 2000 and was the longest running protest camp in the UK. The women recognized that "the gesture of creativity itself was a gesture of non-violence" (Lesperance 2020, 4), they were interested in the act of creating, not destroying. This was evident in the vibrant and colorful decoration of the camp itself, the protest banners, the fences, the gates, and the women's own bodies. Ellen Lesperance (2020, 5) tells us:

As I began gathering together more and more examples of Greenham Common knitwear, I realised that, through these garments' design, one could literally study the Peace Camp women's adoption and interpretation of second-wave feminist and lesbian identity symbolism upon their protesting bodies

The way we choose to dress can directly shape our position and place in the world. The Greenham women's oversized, hand-knitted jumpers were a deliberate departure from the figure hugging "body conscious" clothing of the 1980s. They served as a protective boundary against the elements, the male gaze and body politics. They were also instrumental in taking knitting out of the private, domestic sphere and making "women's work" public. The protest at Greenham Common was often publicized in the media and the campers needed to get their message across with visuals to argue their cause. Using clothing as communication, their bodies carried political statements stitched in wool (Figure 2).

I am interested in the way that, Lesperance has become archivist as well as researcher and artist. She has created her own collection of recovered photographs and taken stills from video and film where the "argumentative jumpers" (Lesperance

Figure 1
Installation view, Ellen Lesperance: *Will There Be Womanly Times?*, Hollybush Gardens, London. © Ellen Lesperance. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Eva Herzog.

2021, 9) are visible. Lesperance approaches this archive with a process of translation rather than replication. Lesperance can sometimes spend years piecing together a garment from images and footage that shows different angles. Her approach honors the way it would have originally been knitted and pieced together, joining front, back and sleeves. Research is always a process of stitching together, unraveling and sometimes starting over with the same yarn.

Although trained as an artist, Ellen Lesperance has always knitted, both professionally and personally. There is an obvious love and understanding of the labor and techniques involved in knitting present in her paintings. She interprets the knitted garments into complex patterns that are overlaid in detailed grids of gouache paint onto paper. Seeking "to pattern them so that they could live on in a future world" (Lesperance 2021, 9) she translates images of the Greenham Common women's garments into Symbolcraft, a stitch chart to show knitting instructions. Her material approach to painting follows a textiles technique. Lesperance carefully paints and overlays each stitch onto a grid which matches the gauge of each yarn used in the original knitwear. These faithful recreations can and have been used by the artist herself as knitting patterns to reproduce the original garments. A selection of the artist's knitted jumpers was also displayed in the exhibition. Using the visual language of knitting means that her paintings can also be followed by other knitters to reproduce the jumpers once again. There is a possibility here for the pieces to regain their identity as garments worn with a new purpose in another "future world" (Figures 3 and 4).

I was drawn to her paintings at Hollybush Gardens as they spoke to my own practice and current PhD research into point paper designs from Paisley Museum's historic textile collection. Enlarged textile patterns painted in a grid were used to inform the holes punched in Jacquard cards that programmed the looms. Weaving instructions were also produced as a code to show the different designs and colorways. I am interested in the different stages of a textile and although I often stop with the design

Figure 2
Installation view, Ellen Lesperance *Will There Be Womanly Times?*, Hollybush Gardens, London. © Ellen Lesperance. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Eva Herzog.

on paper in my own work, I still consider it to be textiles even when it is never translated to cloth (Figure 5).

Lesperance's paintings look like textiles, each square of color describes a stitch, but they also act as portraits. Her detailed knitting patterns can be viewed as figurative paintings honoring the female activists who made and wore the original pieces. Lesperance acknowledges the problematic history implicit in painting the female figure which caused her to move away from portraiture. She has reconnected to it through her ongoing investigation into Greenham Common and tributes to the women in the camp.

Her extended engagement with the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp has also resulted in a beautiful publication, Velvet Fist. Published alongside her exhibition of the same name at The Baltimore Museum of Art in 2020, it is a collection of all the patterns and symbols she has discovered in examples of Greenham Common textiles. The photos and stills of video depict violent struggles with police and warm embraces between the women, each one shows a different example of knitwear. There is also a glossary of all symbols used and the meaning behind them.

The knitwear was worn by the women to display messages of intent and affiliation to a political cause. Clothing is often used as a mode of protest, but these distinctive jumpers were each handmade incorporating hours of labor, love, and wear by the women in the camp. They bore slogans and symbols. However, they are not just objects, but belongings; textiles embedded with memory, ideology and lived experience.

It is worth noting that there is only one known example of a remaining jumper from Greenham Common existing in an archive or a museum, "the dearth of surviving examples of their knitwear speaks volumes regarding the textiles being overlooked as holding value" (Lesperance 2021, 10). Whether they were undervalued by the women themselves or more broadly by society is unknown. Many of them will have been taken from the camp by police. At the time protestors' belongings were regularly seized and destroyed. These were artifacts of both symbolic and practical use, but

Figure 3
Ellen Lesperance. *Violet is for the Goddess*, 2020 (detail). Wool sweater hand-knit by the artist. 65 × 73 cm. © Ellen Lesperance. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Eva Herzog.

they have not been given the place in history they deserve. Lesperance has made visible once again the significance of their action (Figure 6).

It is important to consider the value of these jumpers and whether they would have been deemed fashionable at the time. There is a lot of prejudice around this kind of clothing, as Lesperance refers to in conversation with artist Nadia Hebson; questioning whether they might be viewed as "icky" or "repellent" (2021, 6–9). Greenham Common brought together women from many different backgrounds and ages together in an act of community and kinship. It was about peaceful protest, but it was also about women's cultural identity and autonomous selfhood. Their style and rejection of conventional taste played a vital role in gender presentation and getting their message across. I am reminded of the quote "the clothes I wear help me to know my own power" (Luther Hillman 2013). This knitwear should be valued for its contribution to a feminist repositioning of craft that is as important now as it was then. Lesperance's body of work about the Greenham Common knitwear has helped to resuscitate that history through art, adding marginalized voices to the canon.

Although there are not many existing examples of the original garments, Lesperance's work aids in their preservation through renewal and recontextualization. I am interested in her approach to research and making as an iterative and generative process. Her tacit knowledge of knitting extends to all aspects of her work; research, writing and painting. They are all approached with the same care and respect for the transmission of skills that is evident in the knitting itself.

In short, this review is about using textiles as a language. They can speak of the original or of future possibility; they can speak to each other

Figure 4
Ellen Lesperance. *Violet is for the Goddess*, 2020 (detail). Gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper. 120.4 × 89 × 4.5 cm (framed). © Ellen Lesperance. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Andy Keate.

and the people that make them; they can speak in code or speak directly; they can also shout. At the time of writing, amendments to the Policing, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill are being progressed through UK Parliament that will significantly reduce our freedom to peacefully protest and replicate action like this. As

Figure 5
Ellen Lesperance. *Will There Be Womanly Times*, 2021. Gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper. 106.68 × 74.93 cm. © Ellen Lesperance. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Eva Herzog.

Kirsty Robertson acknowledges in her essay on Craftivism, "it should not go unnoticed that, eventually, the activists at Greenham Common won" (2011, 200). Ellen Lesperance's work is prescient and empowering, "there will be womanly times, we will not die" (The Danish Peace Academy 2009).

Figure 6
Ellen Lesperance. *The Only Revolution This World Has Ever Seen is the Little Man Against the Bigger Man, but They're All Mens to Me, 2021* (detail). Wool sweater hand-knit by the artist. 96 × 70 cm. Rennie Collection, Vancouver. © Ellen Lesperance. Image courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Eva Herzog.

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