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ELLEN LESPERANCE: STAY IN THE CENTRE OF NO-MAN'S LAND

Preview: Friday 15 March, 18:00-20:00

Exhibition: 16 March - 27 April 2024

Hollybush Gardens is pleased to present *Stay in the Centre of No-Man's Land*, a solo exhibition of new work by Ellen Lesperance, and her second with the gallery, comprising a group of gouache paintings and terracotta ceramics which explore the often invisible histories and legacies of female activism.

The exhibition expands upon Lesperance's ongoing research into the activity of Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire, a long-standing protest camp organised by women in response to the escalation of nuclear power within the UK, which was established in 1981 and remained active for almost two decades before closing in September 2000. For the past twelve years, Lesperance's research has been concerned with the protest knitwear made by the women of Greenham Common. Working from archival photographs, film and video, she translates the garments in this footage into compositions based on American Symbolcraft, a shorthand form of knitting instruction, resulting in meticulously rendered paintings on hand-gridded tea-stained paper in which each square is equivalent to a stitch. Given the often partial views of the garments captured in the source imagery, and that many of the photographs are black-and-white or faded colour, Lesperance arranges elements such as the colour scheme, pattern and text intuitively. The position of the women's arms, legs and torsos often becomes part of the work, subverting the traditional visual vernacular of figurative painting.

In 2022, Lesperance was awarded a Fullbright Global Scholar Fellowship in order to expand upon her project of locating, documenting and repatterning as many examples of knitted jumpers from Greenham Common as possible, and to investigate whether the practice of ideological knitting was specific to the Berkshire protest camp, or an activity common to international women's communities. Greenham Common galvanised feminists opposed to the nuclear arms race, and initiated a movement to create peace camps outside of other US military bases with nuclear interest or holdings. Lesperance conducted research into this coordinated activist strategy which became the international women's peace camp network of the 1980s, visiting archives in Wales (Greenham Common), Italy (La Ragnatela Women's Peace Camp, Comiso, Sicily) and Australia (Pine Gap Peace Camp in Central Australia and Cockburn Sound Peace Camp in Western Australia, both organised by the Australian feminist peace coalition 'Women for Survival' in 1983).

She discovered a shared imaginarium across these transnational networks, relating to the celebration of alternate spiritualities. Across the garments, banners, printed matter and ephemera of the women's groups associated with the peace camps, she found a common visual vocabulary. As women sought to dismantle and reclaim symbols and historical figures - including the crescent moon, the labrys (a double headed axe motif dating back to Ancient Greece), rainbows, labyrinths, spiderwebs, Amazons and witches - Goddess, pagan and celestial-centred belief systems flourished, testament to a form of collective strength and optimism.

Another significant development resulting from Lesperance's recent research, which inspired a number of paintings and ceramics in the exhibition, is a category of knitwear called the 'anarchist jumper', a term coined by Anna Zilboorg in the pattern book 'Knitting for Anarchists' (2002). While the term 'anarchist' carries a salient political meaning, Zilboorg's description refers to jumpers that structurally embody this ethos because they are composed freely, without patterns, from smaller patches or strips of wool pieced together, often communally. Five of the eight paintings in the exhibition reflect examples of anarchist knitting; transposed into two dimensions through Lesperance's strategy of overlapping patterns in semi-translucent layers (representing the front, back and sleeves of the knitwear), the colourful patchwork garments become grids upon grids.

Lesperance's ceramics, displayed together on plinths throughout the exhibition, are inspired by terracotta tanagra figurines, funerary objects first made in the ancient Greek city of Tanagra in the fourth century BCE, and later throughout the Mediterranean, Egypt and Asia. The majority of tanagras depict working-class women or girls wrapped in thin himatia (cloaks) engaged in moments of daily activity, while others portray Amazons, all female warriors whose battles were documented in Greek mythology and represented in art from the fourth century BCE. Tanagra figurines, usually around 10-20 cm high, are

notable for their naturalistic features, preserved pigments, sense of liveliness and immediacy. Lesperance uses the same ancient vented press mold technique to make her ceramics, which she then paints and clothes using silks and naturally dyed yarn fashioned into miniature jumpers, waistcoats and scarves. Here, the twelve animated figures represent ancient and contemporary women. A number portray Amazons in battle, wounded and on horseback - Lesperance observes that Amazons were often depicted, particularly in Greek red figure pottery, wearing heavily-patterned, patchwork-like clothing, which bears a strong resemblance to the anarchist jumpers worn by the Greenham Common activists. Other works, based on archival photographs, show women from the peace camps practising self-defence, carrying water, and asleep, some wearing anarchist knitwear. Alongside these figures stand contemporary feminist theorists and activists such as Leopoldina Fortunati and Suzanne Santoro, as well as popular icons including the singer Anohni, who performs tracks from her debut solo album 'Hopelessness'.

Ellen Lesperance (b.1971, Minneapolis, USA) lives and works in Portland, USA. She has exhibited widely in the United States and internationally. Solo exhibitions include *The Land of Feminye*, Derek Eller Gallery (2022) *Amazonknights*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; *Will There Be Womanly Times?*, Hollybush Gardens, London, (both 2021); *Together we lie in ditches and in front of machines*, Derek Eller Gallery, New York; *Ellen Lesperance: Velvet Fist*, Baltimore Art Museum, Baltimore (both 2020); *W.I.T.C.H. 1985*, Portland Art Museum, Portland (2017); *Run Now Women, XO*, Project Room, Galerie Anne de Villepoix, Paris, France (2016); and *Ellen Lesperance*, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle (2010). Her work is currently included in the two-person show *Social Fabric* with Evelyn Roth at Ivory Tars, Glasgow.

Lesperance has participated in significant group exhibitions internationally, including the touring show *Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; *Long Story Short*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Triennale Art Industrie, Frac Grand Large, Dunkirk (all 2023); *Confessions of the Century*, Broodthaers Society of America, New York, USA; *Staying with the Trouble*, Tufts University Gallery, Somerville, USA; *Active Threads*, KAI 10 Arthena Foundation, Dusseldorf, Germany; *Art on Paper 2021*, Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA; *The Slipstream: Reflection, Resilience, and Resistance in the Art of Our Time*, Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA (all 2021); *Never Done: 100 Years of Women in Politics and Beyond*, Tang Teaching Museum, Saratoga Springs, New York, USA (2020); *Less Is A Bore: Maximalist Art & Design*, Institute for Contemporary Art, Boston, USA; *Dress Codes: Ellen Lesperance and Diane Simpson*, The Frye Art Museum, Seattle, USA; *Feminist Histories: Artists After 2000*, Museum of Art São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil; *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance*, traveling: Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, UK, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, UK; *To Make Wrong / Right / Now*, Honolulu Biennial, Honolulu (all 2019); *New Materialism*, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden; *Nashashibi/Skaer Thinking Through Other Artists*, Tate St. Ives, Cornwall, UK (both 2018); and *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon*, The New Museum, New York (2017).

For press enquiries and further information, please contact: grace@hollybushgardens.co.uk

Gallery Hours: Wednesday - Saturday, 11am - 6pm; or by appointment.