

Ellen Lesperance

DEREK ELLER GALLERY

“Woolly minds in woolly hats”: That’s how critics disparaged the female antinuke protesters who occupied the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp in Berkshire, UK, from 1981 to 2000. As disdain mounted between US president Ronald Reagan and Soviet general secretary Leonid Brezhnev in the early 1980s, a distaff coalition of pacifists rolled up to the perimeter of a Royal Air Force base to protest the installation of US nuclear warheads targeting the Soviet Union. Their encampments—destroyed periodically, but ever resurgent—persisted for nearly two decades. The women’s minds were not fuzzy, but their jumpers were: For their blockades and other demonstrations at the base, many donned hand-knitted sweaters featuring doves, snakes, witches, crescent moons, bombs, tents, and other symbols of their ideological formation and the camp’s physical instantiation. Against belligerent forces, they deployed their bodies as a message, with messages on their bodies.

For her first solo outing in New York, Ellen Lesperance reanimated the agitators’ attire in the form of multicolored gouache paintings of knitting charts—meticulous reconstructions that she produced by studying extant Greenham protest footage. Working out an approximation of what she could see on-screen and extrapolating or inventing what she couldn’t, Lesperance composed the pieces of the garment—arms, front, back—stitch by colored stitch on a pencil-gridded page.

(The area of a knitted stitch is wider than it is tall, and so the specialized graph paper for such charts features squat, broad cells. Lesperance’s hand-ruled matrices are gently anomalous in other ways: She seems to eyeball her intervals with a fetching imprecision.) The artist superimposed parts of each sweater’s separate components—and sometimes even graphically “folded” their forms to fit within her standard page size—by mixing and darkening the patches of color in cells that represent overlapping stitches through a palette computation of her own devising. When seen from afar, these foliated nets coalesced into blocky forms recalling colonnaded architectural entablatures or coronal views of craggy, four-legged creatures.

Walking around this show, I got to thinking about the use of loaded historical and cultural phenomena as spurs for art production. In the past, art and life dovetailed with ease when

an era’s medium-specific dictates were consonant with relevant representational needs—when a vast painting could place suffering citizens in a sublime landscape, when cast bronze could be deployed to make a majesty of a manual laborer. In many contemporary cases, however, artists gesture toward resonant events by performing arbitrary physical transformations—or virtually no alterations at all—on archival images or objects. This tends to result in artworks that merely index existing social value, while offering few value-adds of their own. Iconic modernist furniture, jacquard-weave patterns, standardized shipping pallets, governmental cruft—all have been endlessly remade, re-presented, rephotographed, or recovered in the service of political critique, etiolated “journalism,” or patent pseudery.

Lesperance’s work avoids all such traps. How? As Andrea Bowers, another artist interested in the history of activism, has accounted for her time-consuming Photorealist drawings of protest materials, and I’m paraphrasing, *I make them this way because the intense investment of labor forces the viewer to pay attention*. In short: Behold this thing. Do not dutifully follow a manicule pointing at what is merely interesting, but attempt to discover why the image provokes this level of devotion. To examine Lesperance’s work in this way compels doubly, for it also interrogates our own commitments: Is there anything for which you would put your body on the line? Would it matter enough that one day in the future someone would tenderly commemorate your body’s adornments? Could you make of your life, your flesh, a symbol so unyielding that it hardens into a seal—the kind that leaves an ineradicable impression?

—Claire Lehmann

Ellen Lesperance, *Stay Safe*, 2018, gouache and graphite on tea-stained paper, 42 × 29½”.

