

ArtSeen

Ellen Lesperance: *Velvet Fist*

By [Elizabeth Buhe](#)



Velvet Fist, the title of Ellen Lesperance's show at the Baltimore Museum of Art, condenses the longer expression "an iron fist in a velvet glove," which, as a wall text explains, describes someone whose gentle demeanor camouflages a firm will. The exhibition presents seven gouache paintings of matching proportions, hung equidistant from one another in a single gallery. These are accompanied by copies of an artist's book published in conjunction with the show, as well as a digital screen that displays, on a loop, photographs of people wearing a sweater knit by the artist. The title's synecdoche—in which something modestly sized stands for something larger—resonates throughout the exhibition, whose unassuming scale belies the ambition of the work, which extends beyond the museum's walls and reaches into both the past and the future.

Lesperance paints sweaters pressed through the syncopated regularity of imperfect grids drawn in graphite. Each garment is partitioned into two flattened arms and a torso, and these appear in varying degrees of superimposition depending on their size and position on the page. Inside gridded compartments, Lesperance's painted marks record the pressure and direction of her brush, often leaving traces which suggest the fibers of the individual stitches they describe. As patterns, each painting is akin to a score, or to conceptual art's text-based instructions, and in this way they anticipate creative acts yet to occur. (Imagine a throng of knitters gathered together in front of Lesperance's works at the BMA, heads down, needles clicking.) The paintings themselves are matched by another score waiting to be enacted: Lesperance's offer to lend an actual sweater, emblazoned with a double-headed axe, to members of the public who agree to wear it while carrying out self-defined acts of courage. The work is thus extended to distant locales, which are in turn brought together online under the Instagram handle [@congratulationsandcelebrations](#) and into the gallery as projected images drawn from the Instagram posts.

This attentiveness to potential future activities, however, is tempered by the artist's focused research into the past. Since 2005, Lesperance has compiled her own archive of photographs documenting protests at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire, England, which was active from 1981 to 2000. There, at the site of a Royal Air Force Base, a community of pacifists—all women—stood up against cruise missiles installed by the United States through

blockades, song, and knitting. The sweaters they made and wore kept them warm; their knitted symbology of snakes, hearts, eyes, and spider webs spoke the coded language of protest; and the act of creation itself knowingly performed an alternative to military readiness to destroy. Lesperance's paintings, which draw on her knowledge of this practice, honor the creative labor and protest work of the Greenham Common women. At the same time, her grid structure keeps representation at bay, since the paintings do not depict sweaters so much as hold space for the possibility of creating them, routing figuration through an alternate path that implies the body but does not show it. This complex relationship with depicted subject matter relies on structures developed within the formal and ideological language of (women's) textile art, rather than, for example, the (mostly male) history of painting.

The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange funds from the Pearlstone Family Fund and partial gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. © Ellen Lesperance. The historic sweaters that appear in Lesperance's source photographs provide the logic that underlies her painted designs. *Who are the witches? Where do they come from?* (2019) takes its cue directly from a Greenham Common sweater, in which a violet sorceress brandishing a bolt cutter and adorned by a women's peace symbol rides off into an inky black ground. More compelling is *The CND National Council is All White Again* (2018), in which Lesperance seems to pull from the whole photograph, rather than a single sweater pictured in it. In neat registers, the photograph shows a seated audience, a band of women with posters held high, a row of potted flowers, and another row of speakers seated behind a table. Taken together, these elements formally echo the bands of folk women and flower symbols in Lesperance's painted sweater, showing that the work encodes the historical specificity of a particular setting in its entirety.

Lesperance is careful to allow museum visitors access to her source materials: she correlates painting and photograph via page numbers—her photographs are reproduced in the book that accompanies this exhibition—indicated on the wall labels. Similarly, the book's appendix enumerates the various symbols, from Anarchist to XOXO, employed by the women at Greenham Common. Rarely is iconography made so legible to viewers of art, but Lesperance's gesture of demystification accords well with her work's reminder that a symbol's power to function lies in relation to the conditions of its circulation and deployment. In powerful contrast to the restrictions corporations and governments place on proprietary motifs, Lesperance's generous engagement with these symbols, and her citation of their past, encourages their continued use as mighty tools of potentially subversive expression.