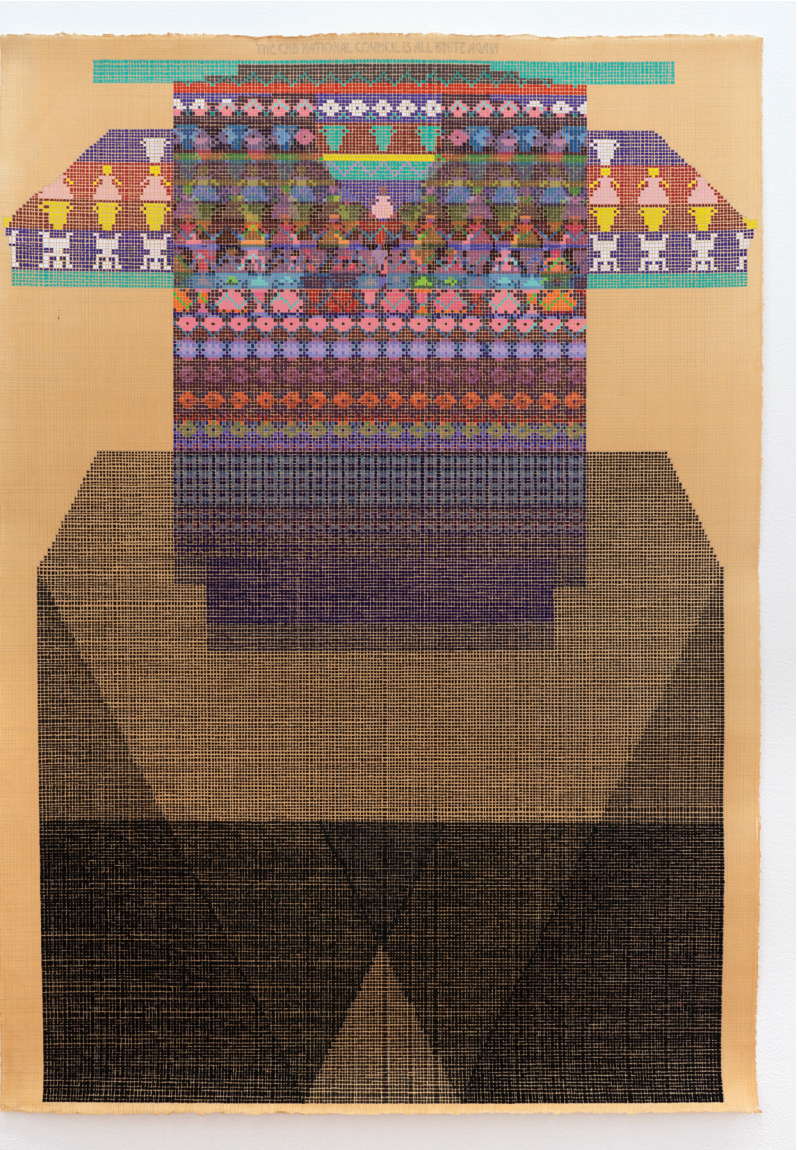


ELLEN LESPERANCE

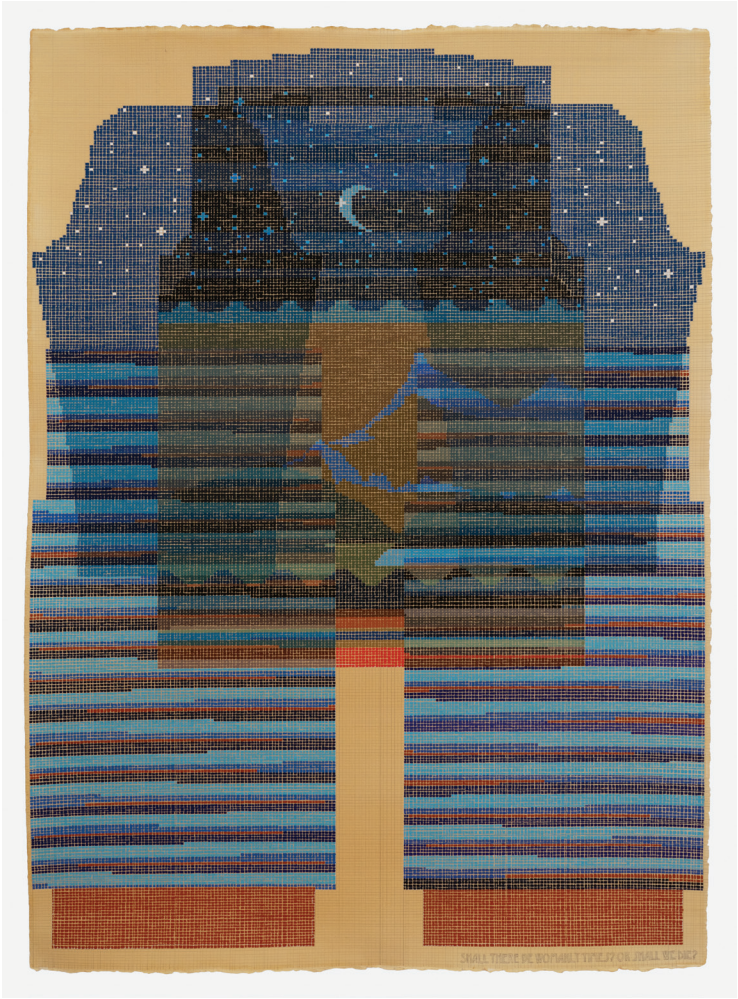




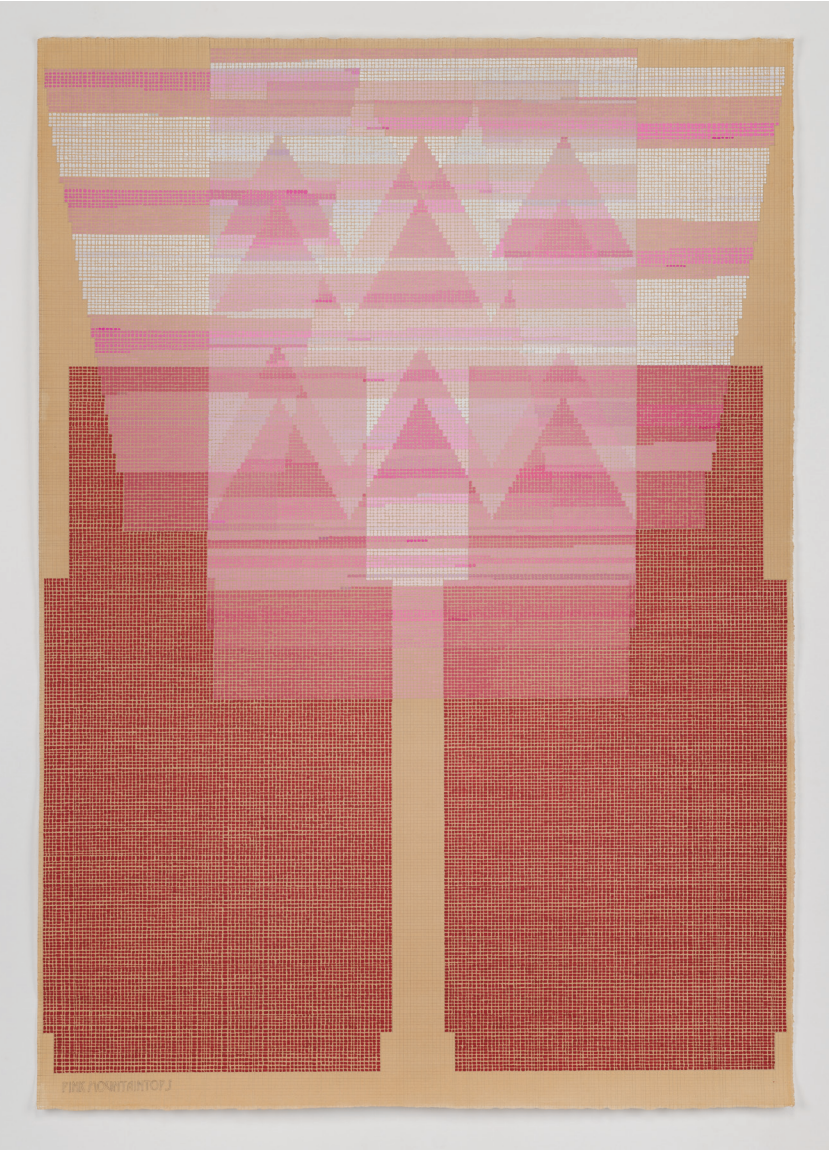
The CND National Council is All White Again, 2018
Gouache, graphite on tea-stained paper
42 x 29½ in



*As If The Earth Itself Was Ours
By New Covenant*, 2018
Gouache, graphite on tea-stained paper
42 x 29½ in



*Shall There Be Womanly Times?
Or Shall We Die?*, 2018
Gouache, graphite on tea-stained paper
42 x 29½ in



Pink Mountaintops, 2020
Gouache, graphite on tea-stained paper
41¼ x 29½ in

Previous page
Black Gloves, Gods' Eyes, 2020
Gouache, graphite on tea-stained paper
48 x 31½ in

It is July 2020. I begin this essay about the artwork of Ellen Lesperance by marking the month because I ask you, reader, to consider the following: during the past several months the world has been, and continues to be, inflicted by a pandemic. Its tragic repercussions unfold daily, and lately, alongside social unrest stemming from our catastrophe of systemic racism. Both history-altering epidemics will be, when you read this, still happening, just past and/or long past. The pandemic, specifically, seems to bend time to its will, making it impossible to differentiate between days, months, centuries. The present chaos engenders an acute recognition that art is also a time bender, an elegant device to move between pasts, presents and futures. And Ellen Lesperance's artworks function as couriers that travel along intertwined timelines, delivering messages we need to listen to.

In the mid 2000s, Lesperance was introduced to the history and legacy of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, a direct action protest that began in 1981 and lasted through 2000, during which women, at times numbering in the thousands, demonstrated against nuclear proliferation by occupying the perimeter of a United States Air Force cruise missile base in Berkshire, England. Their protest was largely conducted through distinctly visual actions such as group performances, fence decorations, spray painting a military jet, and costume. They adorned their bodies with handmade knitted sweaters emblazoned with words and, especially, protest symbolism: barbed wire, rainbows, witches, doves, snakes, spiderwebs, and women's symbols. They wore their protest on their own bodies, prefiguring a now conventional mode of messaging via printed clothing.

Lesperance has studied these sweaters over a decade of diligent research in far-flung archives and attics, compiling images of every known example of the protest knitwear made by the women of Greenham Common. She came to recognize that "through these garments' designs, one could literally study the Peace Camp's adoption and interpretation of second-wave feminist and lesbian identity symbolism upon their protesting bodies," as well as their use of anti-fascist, anti-war, and anti-nuclear symbols.¹ Her research led to transformations in her own artwork. She considered the ways the protesters' utilization of their own bodies dovetailed with second-wave feminist artistic approaches that dismantled accepted categories that were male, white and Western alongside the ways she'd sought in her own work a visual vocabulary that circumvented these patriarchal traditions.

Lesperance has used the vocabulary of knitting for over twenty years primarily, as she has explained, for its "implicit limitations and that [because] it's inherently Feminist: because women knit, because the

history of handiwork is a woman's history."² (One of her earliest artworks was a 1:1 scale, knitted "portrait" of her entire body, splayed like an extraordinary hide pinned to the wall.) Adapting a pattern system of knitting called Symbolcraft, she paints arrays of colored rectangles within a tight, hand-ruled matrix penciled onto tea-stained sheets of paper. Each gouache painting records and interprets one garment, its bodice and sleeves superimposed to fit the vertical sheet, a translation of the visual history of protest into a distinctive abstract lexicon. Titles, often quotes from historically-related sources, such as protest signs or words on the portrayed garment, are prominently penciled top and/or bottom: *Stay Safe* (2018), or "*How Does It Feel in Your Chicken Coop, Soldiers? Little Macho Cockrells Parading the Wire? Strutting in Your Dustbowl, Arid and Treeless, You Obey Orders but We Are Free!*" (2018). It is not only knitting that connects her work to putatively gendered crafts such as sewing and quilting, but also her primary medium of gouache on paper, humble materials compared to paint and canvas. Lesperance uses them, in part, as a call out to histories of functional painting such as those used by illustrators and designers, that is, those few arenas available to women artists during previous eras.

The ongoing body of work inspired by the knitters of Greenham Common has at times included sweaters that can be displayed and worn. A participatory project borrows its title from a letter by one demonstrator: *Congratulations on every Section of Fence ever Pulled or Cut Down, on every Minute in Police Custody, Court, and on every Day in Prison. Celebrations for every Police Vehicle Marked, Challenged, Stopped! Congratulations and Celebrations!* (2015-ongoing). Lesperance's hand-knitted sweater emblazoned with a symbol of feminist and lesbian strength, the labrys axe, can be borrowed by anyone to wear "while performing an act of courage." Such collaborative and contingent modes of making honors and extends feminist and artistic activism.

At this time, an extraordinary crisis they're calling it, Lesperance's work, which so gracefully summons struggle, which so elegantly portrays bodies, feels increasingly poignant and timely. Still, illness and injustice are distressingly timeless. In 2015, Lesperance began a series titled Wounded Amazon to memorialize tragedies both ancient and recent. In her characteristic mode, she painted knitted garments that signify the unusual patterned tights and tunics worn by the Amazons—the

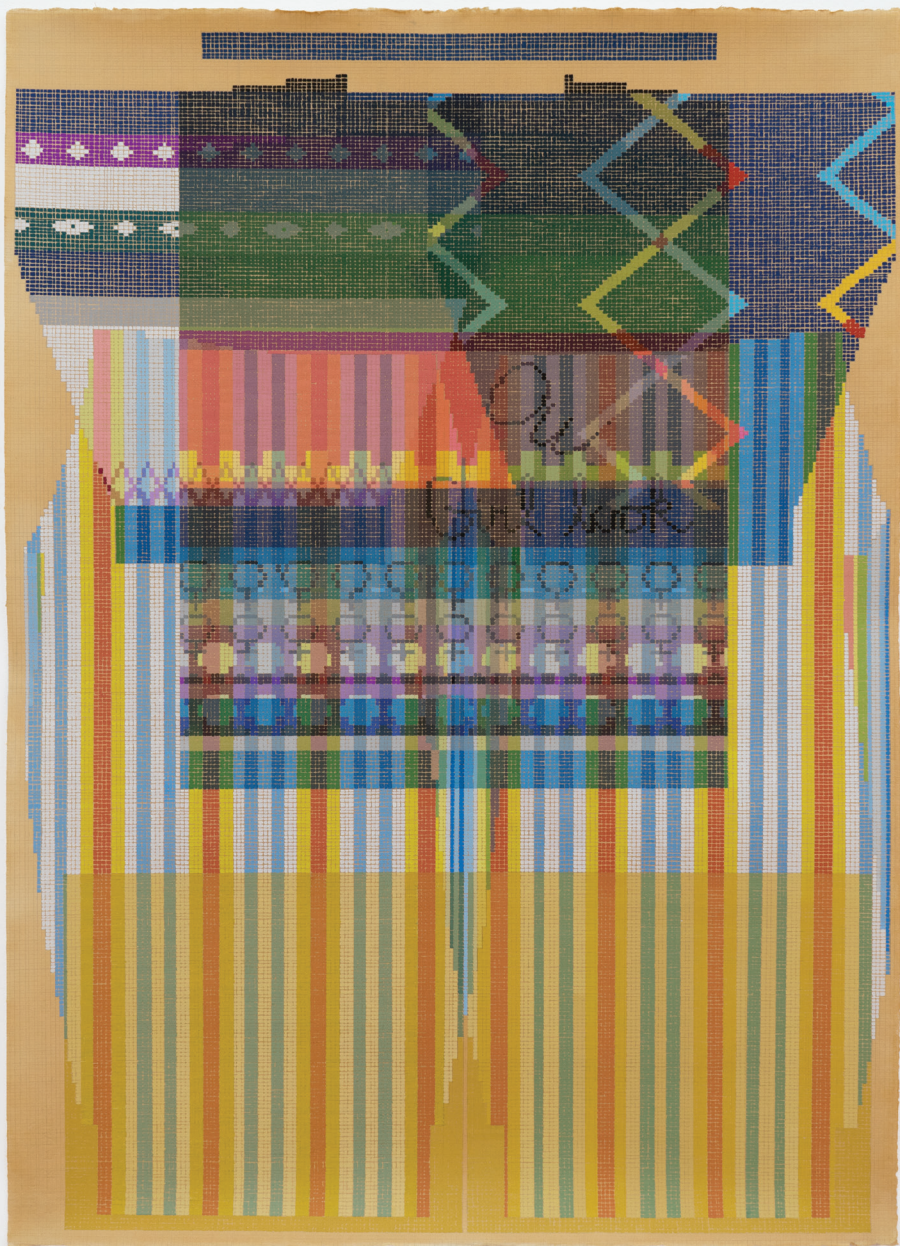


Congratulations on Every Section of Fence Ever Pulled or Cut Down, on Every Minute in Police Custody, Court, and on Every Day in Prison. Celebrations for Every Police Vehicle Marked, Challenged, Stopped! Congratulations and Celebrations!, 2015
Wool
Dimensions variable

only figures so garbed—depicted on ancient Greek pots. Instead of her characteristic tea-stained paper, she painted on cyanotypes (darkened with iron mordant in a process called "saddening") of floral arrangements composed on days the artist considers national days of mourning: for example, the day in 2016 that would have been Sandra Bland's birthday had she not died in police custody, after a bogus traffic stop, in Texas in 2015; or the Ghost Ship fire in Oakland; or the day after the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting during which forty-nine revelers were gunned down in Florida. There will always be too many national days of mourning to reckon. Still, Lesperance points us to the poignancy of adornment, and to its capacity to represent and memorialize.

Jenelle Porter is a curator and author.

1 Ellen Lesperance, *Velvet Fist* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 2020), 5.
2 https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/meet_the_artist/meet-the-artist-ellen-lesperance-interview-53404



Oui Girl, Look!, 2017
Gouache, graphite on paper
42 x 29½ in

ELLEN LESPERANCE

b. 1971. Lives and works in Portland, Oregon

2012 Hallie Ford Fellow

Ellen Lesperance's work has been shown internationally, including the Tate, St. Ives and De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, and Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, in the United Kingdom; Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, Sweden; New Museum and the Drawing Center, in New York, New York; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland; Seattle Art Museum and the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Washington; Portland Art Museum and Portland Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA), in Portland, Oregon. Her work is represented in collections including the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; the Museum of Art and Design, New York, New York; the Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon; the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle, Washington; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts; and the Kadist Art Foundation, San Francisco, California. The artist has received grants and awards from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, Robert Rauschenberg Foundation, Art Matters, Pollock Krasner Foundation, and Headlands Center for the Arts' Chiaro Award.

Hallie Brown was born in 1905, outside of Tulsa, in Indian Territory that would become the state of Oklahoma. She supported herself as she earned a bachelor's degree at East Central University and taught in Oklahoma before her parents moved their family to rural Oregon. In 1935 Hallie married Kenneth W. Ford and together they established Roseburg Lumber Company in the midst of the Great Depression.

Hallie Ford was drawn to art all her life, specifically the accessibility of artmaking. She took classes with the painter Carl Hall at Willamette University in Salem, and painting became a central part of her life. Her philanthropy established and supported key Oregon visual art museums and universities.

After Hallie's death in 2007, The Ford Family Foundation's Board of Directors honored our co-founder by establishing a Visual Arts Program. The first element of this program was the Hallie Ford Fellowships in the Visual Arts, awarded since 2010. Through these unrestricted fellowships, we seek to make significant awards to visual artists who have worked to establish their voice and craft.

Another of our goals is to help support the ecology that builds connections and capacity in the visual arts community of our state. As the Fellows become the focus of exhibitions throughout the world, they bring more attention and support to their Oregon peers. We are certain that Hallie Ford would be pleased to see how both individual artists and the visual arts community in Oregon have flourished since the establishment of this program in her honor.

We could not be more excited each year to bring new Hallie Ford Fellows into this family, and to share their work with you.

Anne C. Kubisch
President, The Ford Family Foundation

The Hallie Ford Fellowships are the flagship element of The Ford Family Foundation Visual Arts Program. The Foundation commits to an ongoing relationship with our Fellows through exhibition support, convenings, and professional development opportunities. In addition, the Visual Arts Program offers grants to visual artists for unanticipated career opportunities; supports artists-in-residence programs in Oregon and nationally; brings curators and arts writers from outside the region to Oregon for studio visits and community dialogue; commissions arts writing and publication; supports exhibitions, catalogues and other forms of documentation for Oregon artists; and awards grants to enhance exhibition spaces.

The Foundation is pleased to partner with the Oregon Arts Commission, University of Oregon, Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA), Portland State University, Reed College, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA), Creative Capital, Native Arts and Cultures Foundation, United States Artists, and the artists and visual arts organizations of our state.

The Ford Family Foundation was established in 1957 by Kenneth W. and Hallie E. Ford. Its mission is "successful citizens and vital rural communities" in Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. The Foundation is located in Roseburg, Oregon, with a Scholarship office in Eugene. For more information about the Foundation and its Visual Arts Program, visit www.tfff.org.



VISUAL ARTS PROGRAM

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Roseburg, OR

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Essay © 2020 by Jenelle Porter

Designed by Martha Lewis

Photographed as credited

Edited by Abby McGehee

Printed and finished in Portland, OR,
by Brown Printing

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Congratulations and Celebrations!:* Courtesy
the artist

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