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 Were 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

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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 unfolding daily, and lately, alongside social unrest stemming from our catalyze of systemic racism.

Both history-wrangling epidemics will be, when you read this, still happening, just past and/or impending. The pandemic, specifically, seems to bind 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 artfulness function as couriers that travel along intimated 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, spider webs, 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. Lesperance has used the vocabulary of knitting for over twenty years in her own work, and sought in her own work a visual vocabulary that circumvented these categories that were male, white and Western alongside the ways she’d second-wave feminist artistic approaches that dismantled accepted patriarchal traditions. Her research led to transformations in her own artwork. She considered the unusual patterned tights and tunics worn by the Amazons—the Wounded Amazon to memorialize tragedies both ancient and recent.

At this time, an extraordinary crisis they’re calling it, Lesperance’s work, her characteristic mode, she painted knitted garments that signify her research. Congratulations and Celebrations! 

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; 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.

In her characteristic mode, she painted knitted garments that signify the unusual patterned tights and tunics worn by the Amazons—the Wounded Amazon to memorialize tragedies both ancient and recent. In her characteristic mode, she painted knitted garments that signify her research. Congratulations and Celebrations!

It is not only figures so garbed—depicted on ancient Greek pots. Instead of her characteristic teal-colored paintings composed on days the artist considers national days of mourning for example, the day in 2016 that would have been Sandra Bland’s birthday she had 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.

2 https://www.nuphila.com/tag/celebration-features/ce0f_2m_article/inside-the-artist-s-eye-lesperance-interview-51945
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.