

Art in America

ELLEN LESPERANCE

PORTLAND
AT ADAMS AND OLLMAN

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By Sue Taylor



Ellen Lesperance, *Not the Nightmare, Not the Scream, Just the Loving Human Dream -- of Peace, the Ever-Flowing Stream. Bring the Message Home*

Despite wishful arguments for art as an agent of change, art-making itself can never be confused with real activism, where personal liberty, livelihoods, bodies, even lives are laid on the line. Ellen Lesperance copes with the cognitive dissonance common to politicized artists disconnected from direct action. With quietly beautiful paintings, ceramics, dyed silks and knitted garments, she honors the courage of those standing up against injustice or environmental destruction. In Portland, she has found a receptive audience for her craft-based project—witness a 2012 Hallie Ford Fellowship and her selection for the 2014 Oregon Biennial. For her first exhibition at Adams and Ollman, she created six works (all 2013 or '14) that continue to valorize ardent activism.

Each painting represents a sweater worn by a female protester the artist spotted in the news. On tea-stained paper, Lesperance pencils a dense grid and then chromatically deconstructs the woman's sweater almost stitch by stitch, filling each tiny grid unit with the corresponding color. The resulting mosaic roughly approximates the shape of a torso with arms and is part conjecture since, translating from photos of bodies in action, Lesperance has imperfect information about the actual garment. Sometimes she adds an inscription whose source is unclear; the words may be the demonstrator's, or perhaps the artist's in imaginative solidarity with her. "Through a rustling of trees," reads one caption, "and still in the pre-dawn dark, o mother, the police draw their guns . . ." The sweater that inspired this painting, emblazoned with an iconic white bird, belonged to a Mi'kmaq woman who braved Canadian Mounties' pepper spray and rubber bullets last year as her people tried to block shale-gas exploration on tribal land.

Vibrant chevrons traverse the voluminous garment in *Not the Nightmare, Not the Scream . . .*, conjuring a rainbow-colored seismogram. According to the gallery, it is associated with a Fukushima disaster protester. Because demonstrations broke out worldwide in the wake of Fukushima, this sweater may have originated anywhere. The ominous shape of a cooling tower seems embedded within its stylized pattern. *You and I Are Earth* depicts a royal-blue pullover with bands of cloud-flecked sky. The press release says this sweater's owner joined a 2009 Earth First! anti-jogging roadblock in an Oregon state forest. The distinctive garment turns up right away in an Internet search, on a young woman roped to a fellow protester, camped on the ground amid makeshift fencing and caution tape. Lesperance sparks curiosity about the fate of her intrepid protagonists and their struggles, every painting having a rousing backstory: *House Harp* (Occupy! 2011), for instance, commemorates Portland's iteration of Zuccotti Park; *Woman II*, British women's antinuclear Greenham Common Peace Camp of the early 1980s.

This latter work incorporates a woolen outfit knitted by Lesperance—pants, pullover and sleeveless cardigan. The ensemble was hung on a dowel rod near its painted counterpart on the wall. In other installations, the artist has displayed her honorific sweaters on pedestals or in open drawers; here the garments became an effigy, evocative of an absent body. With outstretched arms, the outfit appeared exuberant, or sacrificial, like those real bodies laid down with heroic urgency in the world beyond the contemplative space of the gallery.