

THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART PRESENTS
ELLEN LESPERANCE: VELVET FIST

Members of the public invited to borrow artist-knit sweater for a personal act of courage

BALTIMORE, MD (UPDATED July 15, 2020)—The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) presents *Ellen Lesperance: Velvet Fist*, a solo exhibition of works by the Portland, Oregon-based artist known for paintings inspired by the attire of women activists, warriors, and cultural figures. On view January 26–September 20, 2020, the exhibition features seven works from Lesperance’s ongoing *Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp* series, as well as a new artist book of archival sources. Also featured is Lesperance’s participatory project, *Congratulations and Celebrations*, through which members of the public can borrow a hand-knit sweater depicting a labrys battle axe to perform a personal act of courage. These acts—big and small, public and private—will be documented on Instagram, with some becoming part of the exhibition



“Ellen Lesperance’s vivid and masterfully rendered works have immortalized the legacy of brave women activists who recognized that creativity itself can lead to mobilizing acts of nonviolence. I am proud to recognize both her achievements and theirs in this powerful exhibition of socially engaged art,” said Christopher Bedford, BMA Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director.

Ellen Lesperance: Velvet Fist is curated by BMA Associate Curator of Contemporary Art Cecilia Wichmann. The exhibition is generously supported by the Estate of Margaret Hammond Cooke.

For over a decade, Ellen Lesperance has collected imagery of life at Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp (1981–2000), the separatist feminist camp that formed in protest of U.S. nuclear weapons storage in Berkshire, England. Campers made and wore sweaters not only to keep their bodies warm but also to express their politics through knitted symbols such as rainbows, peace signs, battle axes, and celestial skies. Lesperance reimagines these garments as figurative paintings by using Symbolcraft—a shorthand used by knitters in the U.S. that details the stitches needed to make a garment. Each painting doubles as knitting instructions with sleeves, neckline, and front-and-back designs that may fold in or layer with trousers and scarfs. The artist reimagines colors and motifs when the garment’s reference image is unclear.

In 2015, Lesperance knit a sweater inspired by a Greenham Common camper’s garment featuring a labrys battle axe, an ancient Minoan symbol of female divinity that came to represent feminist and lesbian strength in the 1970s. Since then, more than 100 people have borrowed the sweater from the artist to wear it for a personal act of courage. Accompanying the sweater is a score, “Solo for Congratulations and Celebrations: An action is performed with courage,” to guide participants in performing actions visible and invisible, public and private. This ongoing project will be active in Baltimore during the exhibition.

The sweater will be available for weekly loans through a lottery system beginning in February. Participants will have two opportunities to enter the lottery: on Monday, January 13 and at the end of March—the exact date will be announced later this winter. Entries may be made online at artbma.org/candc or in person at the BMA box office. Those interested in entering must be able to visit the BMA to pick up the sweater and return it. Participants will be

notified via email during the first week of February or in April. Interested participants may have their stories added to the exhibition. To see a record of the project, visit @congratulationsandcelebrations on Instagram.

Visitors are also invited to attend the following special events presented in conjunction with this exhibition:

- **Friday, January 31** – This edition of the popular ticketed late-night series Art After Hours will focus on radical self-determination and courage as expressed through fashion. The event will feature art-making activities, music, performances, light bites, and cash bars. Artist Ellen Lesperance will be in attendance and will initiate a collaborative ‘anarchist’ sweater workshop, to be completed on Sunday, February 2.
- **Saturday, February 1** – Artist Ellen Lesperance will participate in a conversation at the Greenmount West Community Center on the subject of courage with Nykia King, a high school senior who has participated in the *Congratulations and Celebrations* sweater project.
- **Sunday, February 2** – Join artist Ellen Lesperance to help complete the ‘anarchist’ sweater in a collaborative hands-on knitting workshop. Knitters of all experience levels are welcome.

ELLEN LESPERANCE

Ellen Lesperance (b. 1971) has been exhibited widely in exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (MA), Portland Art Museum (OR), the Frye Art Museum (WA), the New Museum (NY), the Drawing Center (NY), as well as in numerous international group exhibitions. The artist’s work is represented in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Brooklyn Museum Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Museum of Art and Design, Portland Art Museum, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, and Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Germany. Lesperance has been the recipient of a Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Grant, Ford Family Fellowship in the Arts, Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, and a Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Fellowship. She received her MFA from Rutgers University and BFA from the University of Washington in Seattle and has participated in residencies at the Skowhegan School, the MacDowell Colony, the Djerassi Foundation, and the Atlantic Center.

THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

Founded in 1914, The Baltimore Museum of Art is a major cultural destination recognized for engaging diverse audiences through dynamic exhibitions and innovative educational and community outreach programs. The BMA’s internationally renowned collection of 95,000 objects encompasses more than 1,000 works by Henri Matisse anchored by the famed Cone Collection of modern art, as well as one of the nation’s finest holdings of prints, drawings, and photographs. The galleries showcase an exceptional collection of art from Africa; important works by established and emerging contemporary artists; outstanding European and American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts; significant artworks from China; ancient Antioch mosaics; and exquisite textiles from around the world. The 210,000- square-foot museum is also distinguished by a grand historic building designed in the 1920s by renowned American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of 20th-century sculpture. The BMA is located in Charles Village, three miles north of the Inner Harbor, and is adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University. General admission to the BMA is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

VISITOR INFORMATION

General admission to the BMA is free. Special exhibitions may be ticketed. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m. The museum is closed Monday, Tuesday, New Year’s Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit artbma.org.

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Image: Ellen Lesperance. *Velvet Fist*. 2014-15. Courtesy of Adams and Ollman, Portland and Derek Eller Gallery, New York