



FRYE
ART MUSEUM

Dress Codes
Ellen Lesperance
and Diane Simpson

September 21, 2019–January 5, 2020

WE HAVE NO LEADERS HERE,
ALL THE STARS ARE IN THE SKY.

Clothing is both a highly personal and a socially constructed system of communication: a signifying point of contact between individual identities and collective attitudes, customs, and trends. *Dress Codes* brings together the work of two artists who perform acts of translation in relation to clothing's form and ornamentation, pressing images of historical garments—and the values encoded within them—through the interpretive interface of the grid. Though they begin from different types of source material and seek divergent ends, Ellen Lesperance and Diane Simpson both employ gridded formats associated with the applied arts and domestic crafts as a means of transformation across time and dimension.

Lesperance creates gouache paintings based on the attire of women activists, warriors, and cultural figures rendered in the universal shorthand of knitting patterns. *Dress Codes* surveys her work in this vein from 2011 to the present, including pieces inspired by depictions of Amazons found on ancient Greek redware pottery, images of contemporary feminist artists and writers, and documentation of protest movements. Lesperance's paintings serve as stand-alone artworks and as directions for knitting the pictured garments, as the artist herself has sometimes done. They also serve as homage to the original wearers and stimulus to like-minded action in the present.

Spanning forty years, Simpson's sculptural work begins with illustrations from antique clothing catalogues, window dressing manuals, and histories of dress. Her plan drawings₂—modeled on axonometric projection, an architectural tool that integrates multiple viewpoints into a single image—present forms such as collars, cuffs, aprons, and bonnets in a foreshortened perspective that she often maintains when constructing three-dimensional versions. The resulting angular distortions, coupled with dramatic shifts in scale and materiality, both estrange and magnify the garments' relationship to the body, underscoring their sociological significance as imposed expressions of gender norms, class status, and morality.

Dress Codes brings Lesperance's and Simpson's work into conversation for the first time, highlighting their body- and design-adjacent use of the grid as a feminist alternative to patriarchal representational traditions of painting and sculpture.



Left to right: Diane Simpson; Ellen Lesperance. Photo: Rose Dickson.

Diane Simpson (American, b. 1935, Joliet, Illinois) lives and works in Chicago. Recent one- and two-person exhibitions of her work have been held at Herald St, London; Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; JTT, New York; Broadway Windows, New York University; Silberkuppe, Berlin; Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; and Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. She has exhibited in numerous group shows, including the 2019 Whitney Biennial.

Ellen Lesperance (American, b. 1971, Minneapolis, Minnesota) lives and works in Portland, Oregon. Her work has been exhibited nationally at the Brooklyn Museum, New York; New Museum, New York; the Portland Art Museum, Oregon; The Drawing Center, New York; and Seattle Art Museum. She has also shown internationally at the Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, and the Tate St Ives, Cornwall, England.

The Hat Unmakes the Man

Amanda Donnan, Curator, Frye Art Museum

To say that clothing communicates is no major revelation. It can be “loud” and speak in plain terms or in softer, more nuanced phrases. Take a MAGA hat and a pussy bow, for some much-scrutinized examples in today’s parlance.

The question of how attire functions like a *language* is more complicated, and describing the way garment shapes, materials, and decorative elements work as a symbolic system has occupied notable cultural theorists—chief among them Roland Barthes (1915–1980)—for many years. Barthes analyzed the fashion system using terms borrowed from linguistics: “*Langue* [dress] is the social institution, independent of the individual; it is the normative reserve from which the individual draws their *parole* [dressing]. . . . *Parole* is the individual act . . . of ‘getting dressed,’ in which the individual actualizes on their body the general inscription of dress.”¹ As in spoken language, the individual wearer adopts a vocabulary which has formed around cultural norms, making choices that reflect their cultivated identity, quirks of personality, and mood. The system is dynamic, incorporating and normalizing trends that begin as anomalies, just as the dictionary assimilates neologisms.

To some extent, visual artists Diane Simpson and Ellen Lesperance approach the language of dress from opposite directions, engaging it from the top down and the bottom up, respectively. Without overburdening the linguistic metaphor (as neither artist is attempting an exhaustive or analytical study of her subject), Simpson’s work generally can be thought of as approaching the *langue* of dress—its structural, morphological aspects. Accordingly, she is drawn primarily to manufactured clothing forms that reflect the ways culture shapes the body, superseding the personal. By contrast, Lesperance’s work is concerned with the *parole*—individual “utterances,” or uses of its given vocabulary to perform a communicative act—and focuses on handmade articles that express the wearer’s will to exert a countercultural force. The gridded schematic acts as an important translational tool for both artists, serving to isolate the chosen item from its original context in historical illustrations or photographs and transform it into procedural information. This is not the straightforward, transcriptive process it might seem: between source image and diagram, each artist’s intuition, prior knowledge, and material contingencies intervene to imprint her sensibility onto the object. That which emerges from the grid out into the world is a concrete, even functional, yet abstracted thing.

Simpson’s sculptural objects often retain an uncanny sense of relationship to the two-dimensional drawings from whence they came but only distantly resemble the image that inspired the drawing, whether an illustration from an encyclopedia of costume, a catalogue, or a window dressing manual; a historical painting; or an article of clothing or armor photographed in a museum. Made and titled in typological series such as *Sleeves*, *Aprons*, and *Headgear*, and often displayed with their plan drawings or compiled with appendices of source images, Simpson’s sculptures are meant to recall, and radically estrange, preexisting things; the instinctual leaps and distortions that occur through the translational process are part of the fascination of her work. The impeccably handcrafted forms—somehow both essentialized and elaborated—that she arrives at in the end suggest archetypes of wardrobe conflated with furniture and other elements of the designed environment that contain and order the body.

Simpson developed the distinctive drawing system with which she bridges from source image to sculptural object in the late 1970s, early in her career. She intuitively discerns a basic structural sense of the object at hand and then further simplifies the form through iterative renderings modeled on axonometric projection, or parallel perspective, a method used primarily in engineering and technical drawings to integrate multiple views of a three-dimensional object into a single two-dimensional image. In axonometric projection, the “drawn object is rotated axially away from the picture plane” and all three axes are equally foreshortened, as opposed to linear perspective, which yields an optically correct sense of spatial recession at the expense of actual proportions.² More faithful to what is understood than what is perceptible from a single vantage point, this tilted “bird’s-eye view” technique was developed in ancient China and subsequently used in Japanese scroll paintings and Ottoman miniatures (both traditions were influential for Simpson) before being adopted by Modernist European architects in the early twentieth century.

In Simpson’s idiosyncratic adaptation of the method, the projecting sides of an object are usually rendered at 45 degrees to the picture plane. Until the mid-1990s, she almost always maintained this angle when constructing the volumetric version—rather than interpreting it as a 90-degree conjunction as would normally be done—which gives the object a skewed, too-shallow appearance that signals its origin in representational space. This is visible in the exhibition in works such as *Green Bodice* (1985) and *Underskirt* (1986), based, respectively, on an illustration from a Victorian clothing catalogue and a drawing of a folding whalebone pannier (ca. 1750), an elliptical structure for widening women’s skirts at the hips.

Though later works often forgo this particular translational “slippage,” they are no less alienated from their sources or perceptually disorienting. In all her works, Simpson’s use of construction materials, including wood, fiberboard, and metal mesh, as well as domestically inflected veneers such as vintage linoleum, transforms the familiar contours of clothing into ambiguous, rigid structures with architectural resonance. In *Formal Wear* (1998), two outsize sleeves with ample cuffs hang on a suspended rod, yet they are compressed and seemingly impervious to gravity, remaining stiffly bent at the elbow. Reminiscent of a truncated woman’s “power suit,” one might never guess that the work was inspired by the ornate velvet sleeves worn by one of the anonymous Renaissance-era subjects in Lucas Cranach the Elder’s painting *Three Young Women* (ca. 1530).

By its nature, Simpson’s source material presents impersonal, paradigmatic articles and reflects the embeddedness of the Body—not a specific body—within a cultural milieu and certain social roles. As in the preceding examples, she has frequently focused on garments associated with domestic work (aprons, bibs), propriety (bonnets, underskirts, bodices), and embellishment or enhancement (collars, cuffs, peplums) that speak to the ways social expectations around gender, class, morality, and beauty are linked and encoded within the language of clothes. Certain pieces refer to elements of clothing that developed out of the belief systems and ritualized behaviors of a very particular subculture. Among these are *Amish Bonnet* (1992), included in *Dress Codes*, and series such as *Samurai* (1981–83), ten pieces based on warriors’ costumes seen in the 1980 film *Kagemusha* and Japanese firemen’s hoods and capes.

However, forms that follow from function (or ideology) are of interest to Simpson not because of their sociological implications but because they are compelling shapes that reflect a cultural vernacular. She has linked this to utilitarian buildings like the water towers and grain elevators photographed by German conceptual artists Bernd and Hilla Becher, noting that “really beautiful patterns develop, not self-consciously but as a direct result of the shape and function of each structure.”³ Visual styles in which certain abstract motifs carry across disciplines, such as architecture, industrial design, and

fashion, to create a distinctive period aesthetic—for example, Art Deco of the 1920s and 1930s—have also been important to Simpson’s thinking. She explored this notion of stylistic integration in the series *Window Dressings* (2007), six sculptural tableaux created for the street-level windows at Racine Art Museum, formerly a department store. In each window, Simpson created a backdrop inspired by a range of sources, including Deco-period manuals for shop window dressers, found architectural details, and vintage wall and floor coverings. *Window Dressing: Window 6, Collar & Bib-deco* effectively telegraphs the geometric “look” characteristic of the time, seamlessly incorporating clothing forms and display architecture to evoke the ways in which culture envelops, or eclipses, the individual body through fashion.

Lesperance, by contrast, has generally sought to maintain a connection to specific personalities through her work, approaching the distinctive attire of feminist icons as an outward materialization of their personal power. Working from photographs, video footage, and representational paintings, she carefully translates her subjects’ clothing into the language of knitting patterns, deconstructing garments into their composite parts and individual stitches within the confines of standard-size, hand-ruled paper. Her source material is always incomplete—rendered in black and white or captured from low-resolution video on a computer screen, offering only partial or obstructed views of her chosen article—and so she extrapolates to fill in areas that are invisible within the images. Sometimes she invents an entire color palette based on the tonality of a grayscale photograph and her knowledge of period style.

In select cases, Lesperance then follows her own instructions and knits the garment, completing a translational cycle of reality into representation and back again. The resulting sweater or ensemble is a wearable, composite object, and the artist, a medium, not only for transfiguring a pictured thing from two dimensions into three but for channeling the strength of the original wearer and amplifying the messages embedded in their clothes. Whether realized by the artist or by a viewer of her paintings—who is addressed as an active recipient of the encoded communiqué and a potential ally in the struggle against oppression—the sweaters function as utilitarian totems and manifestations of the personal, everyday nature of political participation. Knitting’s traditional status as a domestic handicraft practiced and passed down by women, and its integration of physical structure and symbolic ornamentation, made it a natural expressive vehicle for many of Lesperance’s subjects and a clear choice for her contemporary interpretive project.


Lesperance learned to knit as a child and picked it up again in the mid-1990s, when she was a recent graduate of the University of Washington and working as a Metro bus driver in Seattle. As one of only a few women drivers at her base, and among the youngest employees overall, she was consistently assigned less desirable routes and harassed by male coworkers and riders. In response, she began knitting lumpy garments to wear under her uniform, as a way of insulating her psyche and obscuring her physique. She subsequently worked for several years as a pattern writer for *Vogue Knitting* and, in the early aughts, collaborated with artist Jeanine Oleson on a large-format photographic series titled *Off the Grid*, in which the two performed with handmade costumes and props as “mythical characters of prehistoric huntresses, earth goddesses, and pioneer women.”⁴ Her interest in the performative and ritualistic purposes of wardrobe and her fluency in the language of knitting patterns came together in the 2011 project *Dear Pippa Bacca*, dedicated to the Italian artist who was murdered in 2008 while hitchhiking from Milan to Jerusalem in support of world peace. Lesperance designed and knitted the sweater included in *Dress Codes*—green, Bacca’s favorite color, with white “peace” doves—and wore it to retrace Bacca’s intended route, collecting materials along the way to be used for tinting paint and dye for a group of memorial paintings and sweaters.

In the meantime, she had begun work on an ongoing series based on the clothing of women activists involved in demonstrations coordinated by Earth First! (an international environmental advocacy movement engaged in civil disobedience), protests in Tahrir Square during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, and the peace encampments at the Greenham Common nuclear weapons facility in Berkshire, United Kingdom, to name a few movements that are referenced in the exhibition. The longevity and visual ingenuity of the Greenham Common campers—an ever-shifting community of women who staged actions ranging from road blockades and base break-ins to helium balloon flyovers and perimeter fence weavings over the course of nineteen years (1981-2000)—have provided particularly abundant and rich fodder for Lesperance's work, inspiring four of the pieces included in *Dress Codes*. These works speak to the symbology the campers deployed in order to manifest their group ethos and visually broadcast their message to a wider audience through media coverage of their disruptive actions at the military base.

Some emblems used by the Greenham Common campers, such as the snake, spiderweb, and sunrise—which appears in *We Have No Leaders Here, All the Stars are in the Sky* (2015)—analogically signify concepts like renewal, tenacity, and new beginnings and acquired “meaning through [the] self-identified symbolic order” of the group.⁵ Others, such as the red and orange God's Eye, or Ojo de Dios, pattern on the pullover in *February 7, 1983* (2014) and the crone/witch figure in *We Are the Witches* (2018), have historical associations with egalitarian societies or pre-patriarchal archetypes and were mobilized more broadly by feminist movements beginning in the 1970s. Another example of this latter type is the labrys, the Cretan sacred double ax, that appears in *Members of the A.I.R. Gallery Cooperative Meet on a Saturday Morning in 1977 Soho to Redress History* (2015). Lesperance based the work on a 1977-78 group portrait of contemporary feminist artists by painter Sylvia Sleigh (1916-2010), wherein it is worn by Rachel Bas Cohain (1937-1982). The labrys has complex ancient roots but is most closely associated with Minoan “Mother Goddess” depictions and with the Amazons, a legendary Eurasian tribe of women warriors described in Greek myths.

In recent years, Lesperance has gone directly to portrayals of the Amazons for inspiration, creating pattern paintings based on representations of the tribe in the surface designs of ancient Greek redware pottery. In these images, the Amazons are distinguished from Westerners by their densely patterned tunics and pants. The artist has taken up this sartorial demarcation of “otherness” and deployed it as a badge of honor, positioning the distinctive two-piece suits as attire for a mythical world called Feminye that is inhabited only by women and, in some cases, dedicating (via the artwork's title) an Amazonian ensemble to a specific, present-day victim of systemic injustice. In looking to a historical typology of clothing—in this case, one that may have existed only in the representational realm—Lesperance here comes closest to Simpson's model but with the desire to reanimate symbolic touchstones of matriarchal wisdom, power, and protection.

The feminine Body/body is present, even if not represented directly, in all the works presented in *Dress Codes*. Eschewing the fleshy sensuality of traditional Western depictions, both Lesperance and Simpson approach the body obliquely through the signifying second “skin” of clothing, thereby underscoring the ways it is circumscribed by and mobilized within culture. Rather than an irrational and obscure object of desire, rendered in the self-effacing (but no less coded) manner of naturalism, the female form is here held at a remove and submitted to the transparently artificial logic of the grid. So doing, the artists return the grid format—for the past several decades firmly associated with anti-referential modes of midcentury minimalist abstraction—to the practical ethos of the applied arts and domestic craft, connecting the language of dress to wide-ranging cultural and political histories. Encoding structure into schematics, Lesperance and Simpson transform their source material into something new, weaving their own perspectives into translations of the past.



Images: Cover: Ellen Lesperance. *We Have No Leaders Here, All the Stars are in the Sky*, 2015. **Poster: From top left:** Source for *We Are The Witches*. Courtesy of Paula Allen; Ellen Lesperance. *We Are The Witches*, 2018; Diane Simpson. *Window Dressing: Background 6, Collar and Bib-deco*, 2007/08; Source for *February 7, 1983*. Biban Kidron and Amanda Richardson. Film still from *Carry Greenham Home*, 1983; Ellen Lesperance. *February 7, 1983, 2014*; Source for *Underskirt: Hinged, folding Pannier made of cane or whalebone connected with tapes*. English and French, ca. 1750; Source for *Formal Wear: detail of Three Young Women* by Lucas Cranach the Elder, ca. 1530; Diane Simpson. *Formal Wear*, 1998; Diane Simpson. *Amish Bonnet*, 1992; Diane Simpson. *Underskirt*, 1986; Ellen Lesperance. *Members of the A.I.R. Gallery Cooperative Meet on a Saturday Morning in 1977 Soho to Redress History*, 2015. All images of works by Ellen Lesperance courtesy of the artist; Adams and Ollman, Portland; and Derek Eller Gallery, New York. All images of works by Diane Simpson courtesy of the artist; Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago; JTT, New York; and Herald St., London.

Endnotes: 1. Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 8–9.
2. Kate Nesin, "Source Code: The Art of Diane Simpson," *Artforum* 54, no. 3 (November 2015), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201509/source-code-the-art-of-diane-simpson-55535>.
3. Diane Simpson, interviewed by Dan Byers, in *Diane Simpson* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston, 2015), 54.
4. Francine Koslow Miller, "Ellen Lesperance & Jeanine Oleson at Samson Projects, Boston," *Tema Celeste*, January 2006, https://web.archive.org/web/20160422192505/http://www.jeanineoleson.com/press/tema_celeste_jan_2006.html.
5. Ellen Lesperance, *Creative Direct Action: The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, 1981–2000*, self-published broadside (2011).

Dress Codes: Ellen Lesperance and Diane Simpson is organized by the Frye Art Museum and curated by Amanda Donnan. Generous support for this exhibition is provided by ArtsFund50. Media sponsorship provided by Crosscut.

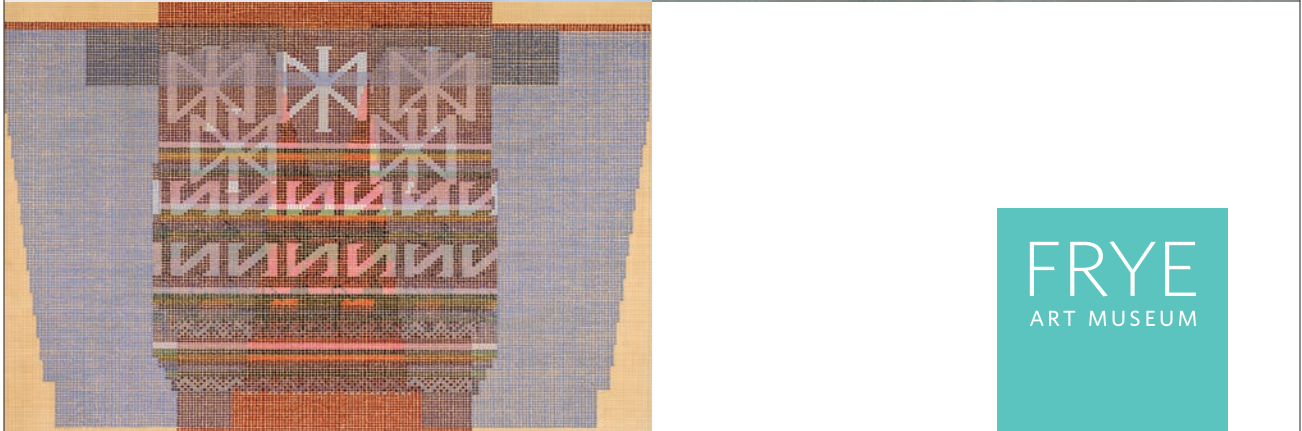


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