



FIG. 1. *Ten Heroes 859*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 56 x 61 x 2 inches; 2016.

Ten Heroes 859

Included in this tapestry are the ten Holocaust heroes chosen by Linda Stein, as well as the artist's pantheon of pop-culture and religious icons of protection. The blending of fantasy and reality figures are meant to start a conversation addressing what it means to be an *everyday hero* and brave *upstander* against bullying and bigotry.

Thoughts on Viewing Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females – Tapestries and Sculpture by Linda Stein

Gloria Steinem

Linda Stein's studio is a magical place. The moment you enter, you see female figures that are larger than life. As a woman, you feel you can take up more space than you did before. You see female bodies that are clothed in mythological symbols. You feel as if you might be a part of myth and history.

This change in feeling is a hint of the power of her *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*, a new exhibit that is part of her ongoing educational program through the non-profit, Have Art: Will Travel! Inc. In this special work, she is helping to restore the reality of women's lives and actions during the Holocaust.

Instead of being presented only as victims and bystanders, those who were acted upon, women are seen here as full human beings who made a difference. In many earlier histories, for instance, female experience, even as victims, has been expurgated. Not until 2010 were Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel able to publish *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, a collection of testimonies to a sexual violence that had died with its victims, or had been silenced by shaming those who survived. Just as the story of war in the former Yugoslavia or the Congo would not be complete without recording the violence directed at females, the history of the Holocaust must not be told without it.

That is the true and negative story. This is also a true and positive one. The story of the Holocaust must include the many brave Jewish male heroes *and* the many brave Jewish female heroes.

Because Linda Stein's work symbolizes, expands upon and makes visible a world of female bravery, our witnessing of her work – seeing her images and learning the stories of the women she portrays – can invite our own bravery. We do what we *see* far more than what we are *told*. Bravery simply means turning our capacity for empathy into action. The human species could not have survived without our need to help another human in trouble. When you and I see someone in need, we are flooded with oxytocin, the hormone known as the tend-and-befriend hormone, the one that floods both men and women when we hold a baby. Yes, it can be inhibited or overcome by an early history of trauma and abuse that convinces us we have only two choices – to be the victim or the victimizer – but this inhibition comes from nurture, not nature. If we have been lucky enough to be raised without trauma or to recover from it, we



FIG. 2. Gloria Steinem (right) wearing a Linda Stein sculpture. New York, 2015.

retain the ability to empathize with each other, to help each other, to become fierce in the cause of protection, nurturing, justice, kindness.

This instinct to share, to be concerned about human beings near us, has been observed even in infants.

Growing up, I remember seeing mysterious newspaper photographs of police dragging black people through the streets of nearby Detroit. My mother explained to me that black Americans – Negroes as then was said – had been enslaved, and that to justify this, an idea had been invented that Negroes were inferior. Our family lived through the Depression, but other families were still having to demonstrate in the street for food, shelter, jobs. I was more aware of racism than of the Holocaust on another continent, yet I did know that my Jewish paternal grandmother had used the remains of her money as a widow to ransom Jews out of Germany and into Israel. Then my mother let me listen to a radio drama about a mother trying to care for her child in a place called a concentration camp. In both cases, I knew she was sharing stories not to frighten me, but to include me in something serious and grown up. I had endless rescue fantasies about helping that mother and child, or driving up in my father’s car and rescuing people in the Detroit photographs. Even at a distance, this impulse to help another human being is within us.

Later, I began to identify with the person experiencing unfairness. This was not a conscious decision, but an instinct. The good

news about being human is that we’re adaptable; therefore the species survives. The bad news about being human is that we’re adaptable; therefore violence and unfairness can be normalized and make us fearful that helping a victim will make us a victim, too. Yet, unless we have been too traumatized by violence or shame or humiliation, there is always an ability inside each of us to identify with others. That’s why the human race survives.

This is also why seeing Linda Stein’s empowering images of women – and learning their stories of using their power – can help to release the power within each of us. It’s true that dominance, aggression and control have been normalized as “masculine” – and submission, passivity and obedience have been normalized as “feminine” – in order to allow male-dominant systems to control females and therefore reproduction. But the basic reality is that we are all human. In the matrilineal societies of the past – for instance, in many Native American societies on this continent, as well as the Kwei and the San in Africa or the Dalits in India, it was the circle, not the pyramid, that was the organizing principle of life. This may be coming true again in the future. Women’s movements around the world are working toward a shared humanity and balance that comes with reproductive freedom, equal education and equal power in governance. Within all of us, female and male, there is an instinct for equality that makes children of the world say some version of, “It’s not fair,” and, “You are not the boss of me.”

Stein’s art intentionally blurs the polarized prisons of gender stereotypes – prisons that punish and endanger men as well as women – by depicting androgyny, a shared and powerful humanity. It is reflected in the worldwide truth that our images and our hopes are changing. Our ideas of the possible are changing. Though we have been told that this change only comes from the top, the truth is that change is like a tree that grows from the bottom. The smallest act of kindness may have unpredictable results.

Linda Stein wants us to relate these Holocaust heroes to everyday, mundane acts of compassion and bravery. The art of creating positive change is behaving. We must behave as if everything we do matters – because it might. ■