



FIG. 4. *Protector 841* with Wonder Woman shadow. Leather, metal, mixed media; 78 x 24 x 8 inches (*Protector* only); 2014.

The Protector and Exemplar

Linda Stein

It's three o'clock in the morning. You are awakened by a knock on the door. A person in rags, looking close to death, pleads *Let me in your house. Please. They will kill me unless you hide me.*

Quick, what do you do? You know that if you say *Yes*, and the authorities find out, you run the risk that not only you, but your spouse, parents, children and the rest of your family and friends will be murdered.

Most people close the door and say *No* - but some, a few, open it and let the person in. These are the rescuers who protect the vulnerable, giving thought to neither their own safety nor bravery, hardly considering themselves heroes at all. These are the ones who would say years later, *I could have done nothing else. It was the only humane thing to do.*

Often, in the comfort of my home or studio, or on a quiet outing, I think, as many might, of the role I would have played in this setting. Would I be the rescuer, the brave upstander? Or would I be the bystander, the onlooker who notices victimization, but then goes about my day concentrating on my myriad mundane concerns? I'm not sure. Can any of us, except those who have faced it, be sure?

Consider another situation: Now imagine yourself kept captive in a prison where you are tortured and treated so despicably that the simple, everyday spoon becomes a vital tool of survival. It is valued especially because it helps you avoid putting your lips to the tuberculosis-infested urn containing a watery gruel being passed around in lieu of food. Hardly anyone around you has a spoon and you desperately want one. Suddenly, someone comes up to you and presents you with a box. You open it and inside there is a spoon. You express heartfelt gratitude. But slowly it becomes clear that this gift will be given only in return for sexual favors. What then? Do you accept the spoon?¹

To survive under such mental and physical trauma, what kind of protective shell do you need to conjure up for yourself? How do you harden your face into a mask to hide the fear, anger and devastation welling up inside you?² How do you *will* your body into the shell of your former self, one that you hope will steel yourself from further personal atrocities? How, in these terrifying circumstances, do you keep your sanity and self-respect?

If you are fortunate, you will unlikely face such horrific scenarios in your lifetime. Your need for protection will, hopefully, not involve

life-threatening persecution and abuse; your confrontation with evil will not be with a genocidal terrorist. Even so, I would petition that you should not, cannot, must not, be a bystander when witnessing everyday persecution, whether it's psychological brutality, sexual abuse, ostracism, humiliation or any other kind of harassment. With or without life-and-death adversaries, you still have an opportunity to show your mettle through courage, compassion and empathy. You have a chance, almost every day, to stick-up for someone being put down by a bully, someone excluded or slandered by a bigot.³ As I see it, you can take on one of four roles in this scenario. I call them the 4B's: Bully, Bullied, Bystander, Brave Upstander. Possibly, in your lifetime, you have personified more than one of these roles, at one time or another, when confronted with oppression.⁴

Art as Activism

Tackling oppression – including racism, sexism, classism, ableism, homophobia – through the lens of bullying and gender justice, is the mission that has guided me as activist and artist in the making of my tapestries and sculpture for *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*. This is the inspiration leading to my creating *Heroic Tapestries* after choosing ten people who represent different aspects of bravery during the time of the Holocaust: Jew and non-Jew, child and adult, World War II military fighter and ghetto/concentration camp smuggler, record keeper and saboteur. Together they represent the many types of heroism exhibited, with war battle gear and without, during the years of the Holocaust.⁵ And they are female.

Men, as protectors, have received far more attention than women. With these tapestries, I

seek a corrective to this history, and highlight ten women who have been courageous during this period, and I visually address some of the issues they faced. For my *Spoon to Shell* box sculptures (figs. 5 and 16), inspiration came from reading about sexual abuse during the years of 1933–1945, the twelve years of Hitler's power.⁶ The simple, everyday spoon – as valuable as gold in the concentration camp – became a metaphor for me in thinking about the victim's continuous trauma. Shocked and grieved, I beheld how its intended function as a tool for sustaining life, a vessel for feeding, had been perverted into an instrument of evil intent and cruel power over the vulnerable. Correspondingly, the shell, nature's housing of protection, as I see it, also became a metaphor for me, as a mask and defensive covering one had to wear in order to survive. I could not get images of the spoon and shell from my mind. They haunted me. I finally had to physically gather as many of them as I could obtain, in order to express my visual and visceral response to the heinous and grotesque crimes committed during the time of the Holocaust.

What force could I evoke to stand in as the counter to this egregious evil? What symbol could I summon to represent the antithesis of the genocidal oppressor? The answer came to me in the heroic countenance of my *Protector* sculpture (fig. 4). Larger than life, this fantasy form was roused from the depths of my fears, from my deep-rooted feelings of vulnerability,⁷ and soon became my concept of fierceness-and-strength-incarnate. With its skin of black leather, blend of zippers, badges, buckles and mixed-media, it morphed into my surrogate for the brave defender who brings security and safety. It is not a figure actively looking for battle;



FIG. 5. *Spoon to Shell* (left to right) 823, 832, 837. Spoon, shell, and mixed media; 11 x 14 x 2 inches; 2015.



FIG. 6. Wall installation from three different series: *Ceremonial Scepters, Blades, Knights.*

it is a sentinel, watching and waiting, on-the-ready to protect the persecuted. As a sculptural archetype, it combines the androgyny that I believe all humans share; it is as much masculine as it is feminine.⁸

Such is an overview of the personal coded mapping for my project. It took hold of me by surprise. Never a religious Jew, I always felt pride in my heritage, albeit not in an established religion that demanded deference from females to males. This project became an opportunity for me to revisit my Jewish ties through feminist eyes, to cherish my background and tradition without becoming religious; I remain a secular Jew.⁹

A Feminist Journey from the Abstract to the Figurative

My quest for justice and equality (the words, very simply, I would use to define feminism), and my hunger to become exposed to new psychological terrain, provide the spur for me to meet and learn about *others* who are different from me. This exploration has continuously led me on unpredictable paths, reflected in my previous art series, including: *Scepters* in the 1980s; *Blades* in the 1990s; and then *Knights of Protection* (fig. 6) and *The Fluidity of Gender* after 9/11.¹⁰

I was primarily an abstract artist during the years before running from the falling Twin

Towers on one very sunny Tuesday. I abruptly put creating sculpture on hold. My return to three-dimensional art a year later addressed my unconscious need for safety and protection,¹¹ as vividly demonstrated in my childhood dreams, where I ran and ran from pursuers who would do me harm.¹² As each of my post-9/11 sculptures symbolized my concept of the champion for justice – and my work became more and more figurative – I was in touch with my feelings of vulnerability. I was exploring and reinforcing my own strength and power as a protector, as well as my desire to be there for those who are persecuted.

It follows, for me, that my obsession with this theme of *Persecution to Protection* would naturally progress to studying the years of the Holocaust. My research has resulted in far more questions than answers, including whether educators should address bullying as being on a continuum. We see that micro-aggressions, starting out as unintentional slights at the expense of others, sometimes can develop into monstrous harassment and abuse. But is it counterproductive to instill young people with thoughts that their everyday bullying might lead to victimization on a macro level? I continue to read and reflect about this issue, and remain, as of now, still questioning.

Without question, we all – and young people, especially – need to have role models to admire

and respect. Providing inspiration, these moral exemplars help set our personal standards for what is decent and brave. But how do we choose them? Do we have to have a sense of morality first, before being able to make a selection? After so much reading and researching, I've made my best decision, and chosen nine women and one girl to represent exemplars of humaneness and bravery. My selection of females, rather than males, was very much in keeping with my feminist values and the gender-bending themes of my art, activism and life.¹³

Words Matter

Some have asked why I chose the word *fierce* in my exhibition title. They have adamantly said to me don't use it; it implies violence and killing. With my use of *fierce*, I don't focus on violence or killing. I define *fierce* as having intensity, being fervent, powerful, forceful, ardent, impassioned, fevered, strong – as in a fierce defender. I connect the word with a hunger for something, a desire to take action, do the right thing, stand up for an idea, right a wrong. Can we speak of Anne Frank as being *fierce*? I think we can. She was very brave as she went about her daily chores in the face of such brutality. At a young age she fiercely pursued her writing while in hiding. This fierceness grounded the influence her words had on so many. In fact, learning about her was my own introduction to World War II and the Holocaust.

I'd like also to address my selecting *hero*, not heroine, to describe each of these ten females. Understand, please, that a movie-clip goes on in my mind when I think of the word heroine, in which the fragile gal is tied to the railroad tracks, screaming for help, as the train is fast-approaching, only to be saved by the gallant lad who unties her, just in the nick of time! Our culture encourages us to think of the gal being saved as the heroine, the lad doing the saving as the hero. I could not let this stereotype stand for these ten brave females. They, indeed, are heroes.

My Selection of Icons and Superheroes

Travel back with me, if you will, to after 9/11, when I pondered my new sculptural creations. Gazing at these figures, they looked like armor

to me, warrior-like and battle-ready (fig. 7). What was I doing? Aren't I still the pacifist who jogs around anthills? I found my new work puzzling. It remained troubling to me until one day, without warning, the thought of Wonder Woman came into my head, and I felt a sense of closure. Yes, I thought, *my work relates to her spirit, to Wonder Woman as a sentinel for peace, on guard to defend the weak*. I remembered, as a kid, buying her older used comic books, and went back and read every issue about her.

Wonder Woman has become a moral exemplar for me. For my current art I choose images from the first years of her creation (1941 until the death in 1947 of her creator, William Moulton Marston). I love that she is able to turn around the villains and help the downtrodden – by using her magic wrist bracelets, lasso and invisible plane – and without ever killing. She isn't perfect, I'll admit. Flaunted as a sex object, Marston played out his own sexual fantasies of bondage. Yet, I still feel Wonder Woman is the best of the female superheroes.¹⁴ In my art, I re-create the graphics of her comics to reflect my own gender justice/anti-bullying proclivities. The comics of the 40s didn't show this superhero standing like



FIG. 7. *Knight of Tomorrow 582*. Bronze; 105 x 32 x 12 inches; 2005.



FIG. 8. Stein channels Wonder Woman and imagines her thoughts in today's world.

a sentinel with her arms straight at her side; I created her that way: standing at attention, ever on the lookout for trouble. I then used this new Wonder Woman stance as a “shadow” next to my *Protector* sculpture. I also changed her text-bubbles to reflect my own message: *Would you wear a bathing suit to get at the bad guys? What is the role of strength in contemporary culture? What defines bravery? What makes a hero?* (Fig. 8.)

There are other female superheroes and icons from religion and popular culture that inspire me and serve as role models (fig. 9).¹⁵ Princess Mononoke, in the Japanese anime full-length feature film of the same name by Hayao Miyazaki, is a youth trying to save the environment from polluters.¹⁶ She's brave and determined. Kannon, called by other names, including Guan-yin in China, is the Buddhist deity of mercy and protection, whom people turn to when seeking solace. Lisbeth Salander – the heroic protagonist played by Noomi Rapace in the Swedish movie version of Stieg Larsson's “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” – is a many-layered and excellent exemplar for discussions on violence and aggression in defense of the victim. Storm, a superhero of color (we need

more non-white superheroes) from X-Men comics, is known for the compassion she displays as she helps to rid the world of danger. Lady Gaga, though staunchly declaring she is no feminist, behaves like an ardent one in many ways. I also commend her for launching her anti-bullying foundation at Harvard University. And Nausicaa, in an anti-war anime by Miyazaki, is a protagonist who shows her commitment to love and understanding. She can calmly talk down an aggressive monster into quietly turning around and going home. Would that we had Nausicaa's ability, especially in today's world of perpetual war and hatred for the *other*.

There are, unfortunately, few female superheroes and icons that a feminist can embrace entirely. So many of them are sex-objectified and created with the male gaze in mind. As with everything else I do, I have selected those that can draw people into discussions of compassion and diversity, power and protection. For me, gender justice seems always to be at the heart of these issues.¹⁷

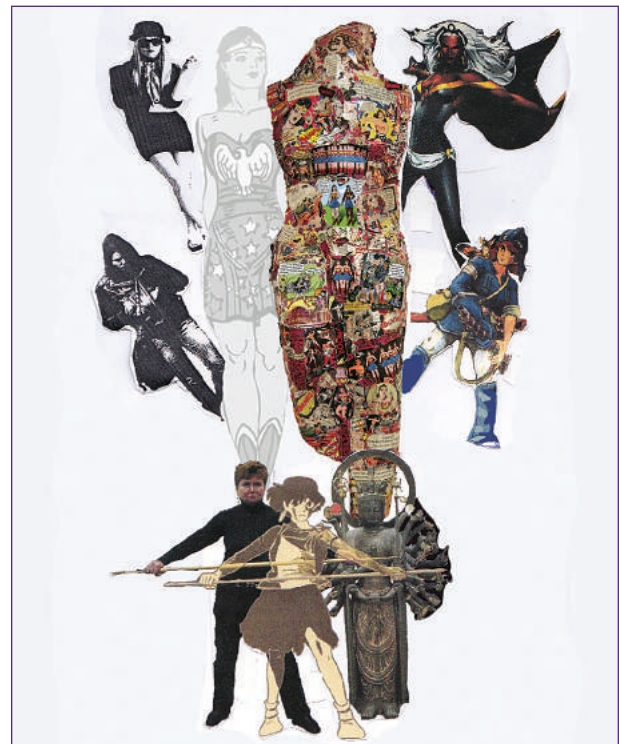


FIG. 9. *Standing with My Icons as Exemplars 216*. Limited edition fine art print; 24 x 18 inches; 2016. Clockwise from top left: Lady Gaga, *Justice for All 698* with Wonder Woman shadow, Storm, Nausicaa, Kannon, Princess Mononoke, Linda Stein.



FIG. 10. *Masculinities: Soft vs. Hard 860*. Leather, archival pigment on canvas, fabric, metal, zippers; 65 x 67 x 2 inches; 2016.

Have Art: Will Travel! Inc.

This is why I established Have Art: Will Travel! (HAWT), my non-profit corporation, which addresses issues including racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and homophobia.¹⁸ It is the umbrella organization now facilitating my two current traveling exhibitions and educational initiatives: *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* and *The Fluidity of Gender*. Other traveling exhibitions, including *Masculinities* (fig. 10) and *I Am the Environment* (fig. 11) are in progress.

HAWT's educational initiative includes an international team of scholars and educators planning curricular "encounters" with my art.¹⁹ We work with all ages, either traveling to venues or inviting groups to come to our Tribeca loft in lower Manhattan to discuss bullying and bigotry, masculinity and femininity, persecution and protection. Summer 2016 marks HAWT's first annual Summer Teaching Institute, where international educators will come to Stein's studio to explore ways to incorporate *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* into their curricula. These discussions, starting with art, inspire participants to reinvent and visualize

bravery for themselves: to look at the armor they wear, the protection they need, the safety they seek.

Components of *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females – Tapestries and Sculpture* by Linda Stein

My four-part exhibition includes (1) ten *Heroic Tapestries*, each highlighting a female hero during the time of the Holocaust, and referencing female superheroes, popular culture and religious icons that I chose when first creating *The Fluidity of Gender* series; (2) twenty *Spoon to Shell* box sculptures addressing victimization and masked self-effacement; (3) one larger-than-life *Protector* sculpture representing the fierceness and strength of the brave upstander and rescuer; and (4) a seven-minute looped video elucidating my art and activism.²⁰

In working on my art, albeit the content and symbolism involved, I work as an abstract artist (fig 26). I first choose the images I expect to include in my *Heroic Tapestries*, such as a particular profile of Zivia Lubetkin, a passport



FIG. 11. Left: *Feathered Upstander 861*. Feathers, caste paper; 38 x 22 x 15 inches; 2016. Right: *Shell Homes 723*. Shells, caste paper; 37 x 21 x 12 inches; 2011.

for Nancy Wake, or a view of the house in which Anne Frank lived. Then I begin to combine these images into a whole, as one would combine shapes, colors and random bits of metals and fibers into an abstract composition. Aside from making some rules for myself (each *Heroic Tapestry* will be about five foot square, the left and right sides will be edged with black leather, the top and bottom will have a wide band of material; each box for the *Spoon to Shell* sculptures will be of flat black paint and 11 x 14 x 2 inches; each *Protector* sculpture will have one leg longer than the other and have a *skin* of black leather), I lose myself in listening to audiobooks, almost always

Holocaust-related. Perhaps I am *occupying* my left-brain, while letting my right-brain take the lead in my art-making. This is especially true while creating the *Spoon to Shell* series, where I find myself working with shapes and forms, with little regard for content and narrative, much as I did in my abstract days prior to 9/11.

Conclusion

It is thrilling for me to see that my art, with its fantasy and real-life figures, can inspire people to begin a discussion about Gender Justice, Bullying and Bigotry. Magically, viscerally, empirically, art can help people experience new feelings and thoughts, leading to empathy for the

other, the disdained *other*, the *other* that people don't want on their shores, in their work places, and certainly not in their homes.

I like to think that we each have inside ourselves bravery, yet to be tapped. Courage and bravery doesn't mean the lack of fear, it means proceeding in spite of it. We each need to ask ourselves: *What would it take for me to be a Protector?*

Art can inspire us to become *Brave Upstanders* rather than bystanders. We just need to want this for ourselves, even in a small, everyday way. We need to be able to try on other avatars and choose moral exemplars to lead us to compassion and empathy. And, moreover, we have to be *fierce*. ■



FIG. 12. Eleanor Roosevelt Center Girls Leadership Worldwide Workshop at Stein Studio, 2015.