

COMPASSIONA

Artist **Linda Stein** Talks to Lester Strong about Gender, AIDS, and Self-Empowerment

Painting, drawing, assemblage and construction, collage, sculpture, jewelry, digital prints, even calligraphy—the art of New York City-based Linda Stein encompasses many genres and styles. She is also editor of the online women’s art magazine *On the Issues (OTI)*. As a feminist, her work has long been concerned with gender, power, and fragility. As a compassionate individual, it has long been concerned with healing and empowerment. And its scope is wide enough to encompass those stricken with AIDS.

Much of this focus was the result of 9/11. Stein’s art studio is located in the Tribeca section of lower Manhattan, within earshot of the jets as they exploded hitting the Twin Towers. Not only was she evacuated as the buildings went up in flames, then collapsed, but she witnessed the collapse herself, and in the early stages of the crisis saw people falling out of the World Trade Center windows.

“It was a horrible day, traumatic to go through,” she said when interviewed for this article. “I was unable to work much on my art for a long while, and when I returned to it I found I was no longer doing abstraction, but



figurative work. Figuration has never been absent from my work since.”

Stein’s art after 9/11 also incorporates a polemical, political element. Asked where the intersection point for her lies between art and politics, she replied bluntly, “I can’t even separate them now. We all have to be political these days. Right?”

Political as her art may be, but it can hardly be called propaganda. These days it is largely (but not exclusively) sculpture. At once tactile and visual, it appeals both to touch and the eye. It is serious but also humorous. Referencing historical iconography like medieval knights and the androgynous Asian religious figure Kannon/Kuan-yin, along with contemporary pop culture icons like Wonder Woman and the Japanese Anime heroine Princess Mononoke, it has a look and feel both antique and modern. Among the issues it addresses: bullying, sexual harassment, sexual and physical abuse, and violence in general. (“As a life-long pacifist, I abhor violence,” she said during the interview.) Each piece embodies a complexity that defies any simplistic attempt to label its meaning or message.

The first series that emerged in Stein’s post-9/11 figurative phase she called *Knights*. In an article she wrote for the May 2008 issue of *OTI* titled “The Art Perspective,” she wrote that the attack on the World Trade Towers left her feeling “powerless and unprotected that sunny day in September 2001....” She was searching for a way to feel protected, a way to unlock her own interior powers of self-protection, and the figure of the knight fulfilled that need.

It may seem strange that what emerged from the hands of a pacifist were sculptural figures usually identified with warlike behavior. It bothered Stein too, until she realized her

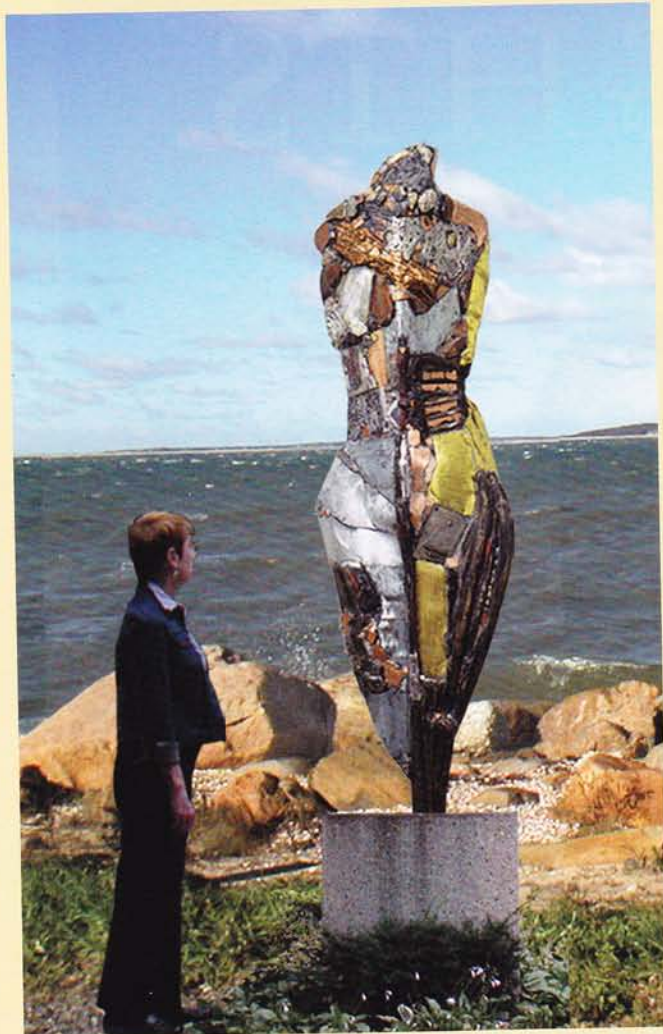
Top: *Knight of Winged Words* 524, 2005, wood, metal, stone, 46 inches by 14 inches by 14 inches

Opposite page: *Silver Knight* 666 (body armor), 2009, wood, metal, acrylicized paper, leather, vinyl, fiber, archival inks, velcro.

Gloria Steinem in armor, with Linda Stein. Photo taken by Stein Studios, March 20, 2015

THE KNIGHTS





knights are not aggressors, but protectors, symbols of strength whose aim is to help those who feel unable to help themselves. Moreover, they are obviously female knights, suggestive of strengths traditionally associated with women—nurturing, endurance, resourcefulness.

It may also seem strange to speak of sculptures as actively aimed at protecting anyone when they are made of stone, metal, wood, cloth, and leather, inanimate and unable by themselves to actively confront anyone or anything. But as Stein wrote in her May 2008 *OTI* article, “My sculpture series, *Knights*, responds to a changing world by communicating images of strength, protection, healing...” (*Knight of Healing* 615). The key word here is “communicating.” Viewers bring to her art their personal expectations, needs, hopes, and fears, and Stein wants her sculptures to speak back. She imbues them with certain traits and associations viewers can pick up and absorb into their own

feelings, thoughts, and attitudes.

Asked where AIDS fits into this picture, she said: “In my art, I place the female front and center for a social idealism that aims to transform violence, destruction, and fragility into strength for anyone who finds themselves bullied, harassed, or abused. That certainly includes those living with AIDS, who face physical illnesses and discrimination of all kinds on a daily basis.”

Stein is interested in empowering everyone stricken with AIDS, but her central concern is disenfranchised

women. In her May 2008 *OTI* article, she wrote:

“As a sculptor, I respond visually to today’s feminization of AIDS. I seek in my work to empower the woman who cannot say ‘no’ to her husband or lover who demands sex without a condom. What does it take to say ‘no’? A woman who feels armed and armored like this sculpture?” (*Knight of Winged Words* 524)

She went on to ask: “Who can this vulnerable woman look to as a role model for the strength and confidence it takes to battle the cultural or personal pull to submit?”

Stein looks to her *Knights*, of course, which, composed of stone, metal, and

leather, certainly convey strength and protection. But it is here that the other heroic female and androgynous figures she has incorporated into her art come into play: Wonder Woman, Princess Mononoke, and Kannon/Kuan-yin. To an American, Wonder Woman needs no introduction. Nearly everyone knows something about this warrior princess of the Amazons willing to help anyone in need, either through comic books or the 1970s’ TV series in which she was portrayed by Lynda Carter. Princess Mononoke is the name of a 1997 Japanese Anime film in which the lead female character was instrumental in protecting the environment

from an assortment of evil-doers. And Kannon/Kuan-yin is the Buddhist Goddess of Compassion and great protector of those in need, sometimes considered male, sometimes identified with Mary, the mother of Christ.

Stein uses all three in her art as messengers of strength, endurance, and resourcefulness in meeting head-on the challenging situations people face that can leave one feeling powerless, intimidated, unprotected. And to help viewers internalize her message more easily, she has gone a step further, producing sculpture that is not just viewable, but wearable.

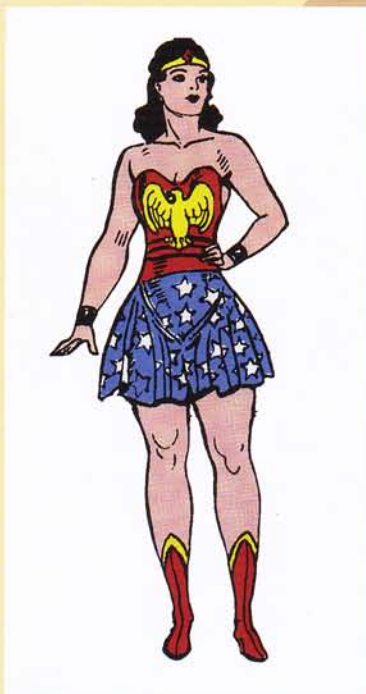
“Body-swapping armor,” as it has been called, allows viewers of her art to experience for themselves a sense of what it means to feel protected by one’s own abilities and strengths, as do the iconic figures she references in her art. In her May 2008 *OTI* article, she described the experi-



Top: *Knight of Tomorrow* 574, 2006, bronze, 45 inches by 17 inches by 7 inches
Right: *Knight of Winged Words* 524, 2005, wood, metal, stone, 46 inches by 14 inches by 14 inches

ence of putting on the wearable armor she has created as follows: It's like "trying on new clothes, if you will, refining additional layers of [one's] being, and creating a new figurative manifestation of [oneself]—fearless and bold." (*Silver Knight 666*)

Stein's body-swapping armor has a feminine look to it, wide at the hips and curvy near the top suggesting breasts. So putting it over one's own body also involves the notion of gender swapping. Women try on protective gear traditionally associated with male warriors, while men put on a type of armor replete with feminine associations. Women can gain a notion of what it means to feel like a powerful man—traditionally depicted as protectors of women—while men can gain a sense of the vulnerability women can feel in a lop-sided world of male privilege.



Clockwise from top: Wonder Woman, Kannon, and Princess Mononoke—all inspirations for Linda Stein's work on self-empowerment



Stein's point here is that everyone alive contends with gender-specific expectations and limitations, and she wants her art to help people break through those often rigid mind-sets so they can become aware of and actualize a wider array of abilities, sensibilities, and emotional resources within themselves than their backgrounds may have allowed them to be familiar with.

This also intersects with Stein's concerns about AIDS. Returning once again to her May 2008 *OTI* article, she wrote:

"AIDS, from my vantage point as an artist, is addressed by scrambling expectations of masculinity/femininity, power/vulnerability, warrior/peacemaker. My sculpture, in its idealism, can give one with AIDS, or at any stage of fragility, an opportunity to internalize a new model for agency and restoration."

Stein of course recognizes the med-

ical and physiological aspects of AIDS—the importance of access to good medical care and affordable medicines, the need for good nutrition—but the focus in her art is the inner, psychological resources needed to cope with the disease as it affects one's life.

To reach a wider audience, her exhibition "The Fluidity of Gender" has been traveling to different venues throughout the country for several years now, accompanied by Stein herself, who interacts with viewers of the show through lectures and question-and-answer periods. During the interview she put it this way: "I address an audience and say to them: 'I'm a Jew. I'm a woman. I'm a feminist. That's me. What's authentic for you? How do you define yourself? What do you want or need to be? How are you going to stand up for yourself? How are you going to stand up for others? Politically? Socially? Medically?' These are questions that are adaptable to anyone's situation, and certainly to anyone living with or concerned about AIDS or being infected with HIV."

Linda Stein is seeking to empower people, and her message is clear: Being locked into social roles—or medical conditions—over which we feel we have no control is not liberating. It's confining, stifling, perhaps life-threatening. Through her art, she is looking for ways to help people access the inner resources needed to solve seemingly insoluble problems. Indeed, we all need to learn how to access those resources. It's the only way one can confront any problem that feels overwhelming, AIDS included, and successfully take charge of one's life.



Linda Stein is represented by Flomenhaft Gallery in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. For more information about her art go on-line to Flomenhaftgallery.com, or to Lindastein.com; those who live in or near Portland, Oregon, can also visit her award-winning bronze sculpture *Knight of Tomorrow 574*, on view as the central installation for the Walk of the Heroines at Portland State University.

Lester Strong interviewed artist Richard Vechi for the March issue.