



## LINDA STEIN An Artist of Contradictions

BY SHERIDAN SANSEGUNDO

There are artists who work with brutal materials, using welding irons and chisels to bend metal and stone to their will, the floors of their studios littered with detritus. And there are artists who work at clean white tables, their pencils sharp, their paintbrushes pristine, everything in order.

Linda Stein, an artist of contradictions, has a little of both. For some time she has been making sculptural torsos that are massive agglomerations of copper, steel, iron, found objects, stone, wire brushes, bronze, and tin. Their composition of lumpy and irregular chunks, with their suggestions of rubble and debris, are honed and eroded and polished until they reach the desired form.

"I love for all the disparate elements to fuse together," said Ms. Stein.

Her earlier work has always been abstract, but in each piece in this series there is no mistaking that what the viewer sees is female, a sculptural fragment in the tradition of the Venus de Milo, encrusted and armored with metal in the way that tube worms armor their carapaces with bits of shell and pebbles.

These warrior women, these female knights, are not about violence and aggression but about strength and protection.

They arose from her conflicting feelings when she and her assistants were evacuated by the police from her studio in Tribeca on Sept. 11. Although she felt terrified and completely vulnerable, she was conscious of an adrenalin-induced rush of strength that allowed her to move and act very rapidly.

"Running north, I kept looking south. 'They're throwing furniture off the Trade tower. Why? Oh no, it's not furniture. . . . Cellphones were not working. There was pandemonium. I kept wondering who was bombing us.'"

When she reached Canal Street, there was a huge truck parked on the northeast corner. The windows were wide open and, although the driver had fled, the radio was blasting news.

"I sat on the truck's running board. The others sat on the sidewalk curb. It was a perfect fall day. We listened. We waited. . . . It seemed senseless to run toward someplace else when we had no idea of the reason or origination of the attack or of where the next strike might occur."

They found refuge and water in a bar, some food on Broome Street, and then went their separate ways. Ms. Stein starting walking uptown to a friend's apartment on 82nd Street. Around 4 p.m., completely disoriented, she saw three young people piling into a taxi and persuaded them to take her with them and

so, late in the afternoon, finally arrived at a place of safety.

Although she did not write down her experiences until three years later, and to this day cannot bring herself to go Ground Zero, she unconsciously started to address her concerns in her art.

The contrast between the armored strength of the female knights and the underlying weakness that needs the armor, between warrior and peacemaker, reflects Ms. Stein's own fear and her way of dealing with it.

"I'm the kind of person who jogs around anthills," she said. "In my sculpture I take what I am most afraid of and try to make it into something constructive."

She talked about an earlier series of abstract sculptures that were like ceremonial scepters, symbols of power, and another that incorporated machetes.

"I took these potentially evil things, weapons, things that frightened me, and, by grinding their edges to bluntness or twisting their blades, I took away the fear and exposed what was left — a beautiful shape. Swords to ploughshares."

But the play between vulnerability and invulnerability is far from the only contradiction in Ms. Stein's art. Her current work is monolithic, impenetrable, brutally hard and unyielding. But on the walls of her East Hampton studio are earlier works that you can hardly believe were made by the same person.

Delicate three-dimensional collages, reminiscent of Joseph Cornell's boxes but as insubstantial as dandelion seeds, made of feathers, paper, leaves, embroidery thread, occasionally something as weighty as a paper clip or a small brush. They seem to float in the space of the boxes as if their contents were in freefall.

Near them are drawings that appear to be made up of thousands of tiny Arabic letters, the rhythmical, flowing characters surely an inscription of some ancient text, maybe the work of Ali Tabrizi, the 14th-century Persian calligrapher. . . . Then you look closer and see that every letter is a tiny drawing of an eye or a nose, lips or a chin.

The contrast between the ethereal old work and the forceful new is almost shocking.

"It is the cauldron of opposites, contradictions, and internal battles existing in each of us that excites me in my life and my art," she said. "By scrambling expectations — male and female, power and vulnerability, warrior and pacifist — I attempt in my sculpture to ask questions, agitate, alarm, and arouse a visceral

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A preliminary drawing for Linda Stein's "Knights" series.

### Linda Stein: An Artist of Contradictions

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response in myself and in my viewers."

The origin of this can be found with some digging into Ms. Stein's past. She was born in the Bronx, a tough city kid who played stickball with the boys but had an obsession with penmanship. She would pester her parents to tell her whether they liked her "I's looped or straight, her writing more upright or more slanting. It led to a lifelong fascination with calligraphy that has turned out to play a big part in both her art and her finances.

"As a teenager corresponding with a young man in the Army, I was struck with how he wrote his 'e' and pondered changing mine. It was not an instant decision; as always, it took time, and for months it cluttered my mind. It felt as if changing my 'e' would be cataclysmic. Finally I accepted this new form into my alphabet and took additional months of disciplined practice to make the new letter flow into my script," she said.

She studied at the High School of Music and Art and then became the first person in her family to attend college, taking jobs making signs for stores and trucks to earn a little money.

She became an art teacher, getting a master's degree at Pratt Institute while she was teaching and living in TriBeCa when there was nothing there but a cheese market.

"I tried selling cheese but it wasn't for me. Because I had always loved penmanship, I taught myself calligraphy and

tried to see if I could make a living from it. I sent out 12 packets and only had one reply — from Tiffany's."

Soon overwhelmed with orders, she set up her own company, which before long was the main one in Manhattan, with a staff of 12. Ninety-five percent of the work was handwritten, much of it for Tiffany's and Cartier, including one order for 500 wedding invitations that took five calligraphers a full year to complete.

She sold the business only a couple of months ago. Now she can work full time on her art, and not just on weekends and at night.

"I love working. Even now that I don't have a business I'm still working 80 hours a week. It's athletic work, always carrying heavy things, so it keeps me fit, and when I am out here in East Hampton, I am out of the house by 7 a.m. every morning to swim."

Ms. Stein's most recent show was "(K)night Watch," which occupied all of New York University's Broadway Windows for most of April and May this year. A film of the exhibit was recently shown on Manhattan's Cable Channel 34 and another film about her work is being made for HBO.

Her next solo show — another milestone in Ms. Stein's transformation from introspective miniaturist to artistic Bar Girl — will be in Naples, Fla. This time the Knights will be much bigger — seven feet tall.

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Russell Simmons, Alec Baldwin, Donna Karan, Star Jones Reynolds, Victoria Gotti, Alexandra Richards, Douglas Hannant and B. Smith all turned out to help raise over \$100,000 at the Third Annual Save the Music Benefit. Guests at the event, held at the East Hampton home of Jaci and Morris L. Reid, were treated to a 20-minute grand finale performance by Toni Braxton.

East Hampton artist Linda Stein should be grinning from ear to ear. Her Female Knight Sculpture was purchased for . . . the highest amount paid for a piece of art in the East Hampton Studio Tour.

Tonight Jane Rosenthal and Craig Hatkoff will open up their Water Mill home and join co-hosts Jimmy and Jane Buffett for the Picnic for Parent Corps event, benefiting the Parent Corps program at the NYU Child Study Center.

### South O' the Highway (and the North too)

Looks like Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton will be having quite the weekend. This afternoon she will be in Quogue at the home of Joe and Nazee Moian before heading East for an evening fundraiser at the Gin Lane home of Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel and Carl Spielvogel. Mrs. Clinton will round out the weekend in East Hampton at a brunch hosted by Donna Karan and Nancy Corzine.

Vera Wang will be the honorary chair tomorrow night at the 47th Annual Summer Party benefiting Southampton Hospital. The items in the silent auction are incredible. Lucky guests can bid on a golf vacation in Africa with lodging at Peter Beard's Hog Ranch in Kenya, a knitted Mink wrap from Dennis Basso, a Gibson