



**ASK YOURSELF, WHAT IS MAN?**

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by Mari Winn Taylor



JOPLIN INDEPENDENT editor/publisher Mari Winn Taylor displays a victory sign for the work of sculptor Linda Stein. "The Chance to Be Brave - The Courage to Dare" is the theme of the artist's traveling show. Have Art: Will Travel! that currently is at the Spiva Center for the Arts in Joplin.

Artist/feminist Linda Stein from New York wasn't totally sure what kind of reception her lecture, "The Chance to Be Brave, the Courage to Dare" would get in the Missouri Bible Belt where "traditional values" are legislated in by Republican majorities, mostly male. But while some in the audience at the Spiva Center for the Arts on August 23, 2012, might have missed some of the nuances of her talk, the majority were in sych with her gender bending messages. Admitting that she was in part a member of society living in this time of history--a sculptor, lesbian, Jew, Stein, a petite powerhouse with a M.A. from Pratt Institute and numerous exhibitions to her credit, is fighting for the freedom for everyone to be who they are, not gender stereotypes. In presenting a collage of ideas, she hoped to take the audience beyond her art, to stir emotions towards becoming champions for equality.

Like many others, Stein says she has a desperate need for peace and security. After escaping the horror and chaos of 9/11 having had to leave her studio near the fallen Twin Towers, she told of a recurring dream she has had of "running."

"Protection is very important to you," Stein said. "One word my parents didn't give me as a child was 'protection.'"

But in seeking this protection she doesn't put herself in a subordinate role to that of a man whose badge of honor, she says, is "fighting.. so global wars won't end."

"Do women really want a fighter for a boyfriend?"

Allowing for male superiority over women, Stein, pictured at right, pointed out, has led to crime against them, especially rape. She cited a statistic by the Justice Department that one in three women on tribal land is the victim of rape..not to forget mentioning the "Great Shame"--combat zone women who are being raped.

Stein also might be in agreement with a group advocating that the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia, be revoked. Sirleaf had defended a Liberian law making homosexual sex a crime, as it is in most of Africa, and recently was faced with either following through with her promise to veto a bill criminalizing same sex marriage or reneging on the promise. In tackling gender issues, "don't be afraid to be vocal," Stein emphasized.

In accord with the Pulitzer awarded to Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wu-Dunn, a husband and wife team covering China for *The New York Times*, Stein praised their book, *Half the Sky* for its searing accounts of the global struggle for women's equality by women in totalitarian regimes who dare to expose the victimization of women, from atrocities like sex trafficking, gang rape, genocide and acid attacks. (It should be noted that the authors point out that owning up to the fact that women sometimes are the culprits as well as the victims is necessary is providing solutions to what is considered the "paramount moral challenge" of our era.)

Stein called attention to other struggles for equality that seem to pale in comparison but nonetheless, she believes, should not be overlooked. They include the need to fight for parity in employment and monetary awards, beefing up the number of women elected to Congress, the continuing revolution of women in sports and, in the case of artists, fighting to equalize the number of women chosen for solo shows and opportunities to be published.



**THE ART ITSELF**

Stein considers her work mostly androgynous. Her concept of a protector or defender is not a John Wayne-type but that of Wonder Woman, a hero seeking peace and equality without killing. Okay so William Moulton Morrison's comic book hero had magic wrist bracelets to deflect bullets, a magic lasso and invisible plane. Says Stein, "We have intelligence, empathy, a generation of spirit and the ability to negotiate." The goal is to fight for democracy and freedom, freedom to be who we are.

Her "knights of protection" feature heavy leather armor and lots of zippers that don't necessarily lead to male genitalia. Stein wants to convoy that the masculine/feminine relationship is complex and not a polarizing binary that leads to constraints placed on women.

The world is changing. Ask yourself, what is man?

"The Fluidity of Gender: Sculpture by Linda Stein" will be shown in the Regional Gallery of the Spiva Center for the Arts, 3rd & Main, Joplin, until September 9, 2012. Hours are Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sundays, 1-5 p.m.

Stein's Have art: Will Travel! (For Gender Justice) has received two grants from The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council for what it considers "groundbreaking work." After Joplin the show may be viewed from September 21 to November 24, 2012, at the Alexandria Museum of Art in Alexandria, LA and from March 31 to April 30, 2013, at the Bogigian Art Gallery of Wilson College in Chamberburg, PA.

(Photos by Vince Rosati)



Wonder Woman, the 1941 fictional character created by William Moulton Morrison for DC Comics has become a prominent symbol in Linda Stein's art.