

# WOMEN'S CAUCUS for ART

THE LARGEST NATIONAL, MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ORGANIZATION FOR WOMEN IN THE VISUAL ARTS

# BLADES

## are my BODY-GUARDS

### Why I Make Machete Blade Sculpture

BY LINDA STEIN

Yes, I do machete blade sculpture. And, my! the comments it triggers—especially in men: "What's a nice, pretty girl messing around with intimidating knives?" "Why don't you do something less threatening?" "I'm not going to fool around with you!"

And, then, the inevitable question: "How did you get into...Blades?"

It's a multifaceted story. In the late 1980's, I saw a barrel full of machetes for sale on Canal Street. I have always loved tools and resented the societal prohibitions against women displaying expertise with them. At the time, I was producing a sculpture series called "Scepters"—fantasy tools and ritual objects of an imaginary civilization. Gradually, I started to experiment with machetes in my sculpture. In 1989, I was asked to be in an exhibition called *BADGIRLS* curated by Corinne Robins and encouraged to make an outrageous sculpture for the show. The concept of the machete blade was the 'baddest' thing I could imagine. (Didn't I learn that girls should never play with knives?) I thoroughly enjoyed preparing for this exhibition, and afterwards, rather than dissipating, the urge to incorporate blades in my art became more and more compelling.

Visually and viscerally, I was intrigued with the machete's long curve. Its duality held my fascination: hard, cold, sharp steel yielding to its own soft, curving shape. It embodies an androgynous, sensuous fusion of opposites. I now realize that, even when I was a figurative painter, I kept coming back to this kind of slow, smooth arc.

While doing this work, I was diagnosed by five doctors as needing surgery. My blades became the focal point of my sculpture as I unconsciously attempted to arm myself against the doctors' surgical blades. I was determined not to have surgery.

Meanwhile, external violence was all around us. The Gulf War was imminent, crime in the streets was at a peak, and my women friends were typically discussing safety threats in the Big Apple: How late at night should a woman ride the subway? (Our answer: 8 p.m.) What is the best evening street

posture for a woman walking alone? (Our answer: Walk fast with a look of determination, preferably in the gutter and not near doorways.)

I continued to work with the machete. I filed its edge until it became dull. I removed its handle and instead, fused the steel with large soft curves of wood. Sometimes I suspended the finished sculpture from the ceiling so it could gently sway and turn. Was I reversing the destructive potential of the blade? My gallery exhibits were entitled "Violence in New York," "Reversing Violence," "Transcending Violence," "The Psychology of Violence." At gallery events I began to moderate panel discussions with psychologists, experts on aggression, security police, religious authorities, counselors to battered women in an attempt to address the issue of violence, or our fear of it, in our lives, particularly women's lives. I sought the intimacy of dialogue and invited the viewer to become involved by completing the phrase "These blades make me feel..." and I framed and hung these statements in subsequent gallery exhibits.

Writing a catalog introduction for one such exhibit, Ronny Cohen accurately portrayed me. She wrote that "A New Yorker, intent on staying in the city, she found herself, like many citizens at the beginning of 1990, mulling over the subject of violence...the artistic and political strains of thought coincided. The subject of violence struck a resonant chord in her imagination, becoming a catalyst for bringing into mind an array of personal associations in addition to past and present experiences, which she needs to express through words as well as images."

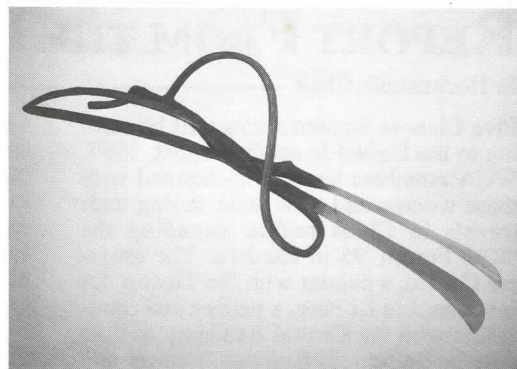
I did not realize it at the time, but my obsession could also be traced back to childhood dreams of being chased and threatened by men. These dreams, recurring and frightening, sometimes had me being cut rhythmically by an unknown force which I could not prevent. I could not defend myself. Incorporating the blade into my art may have been my way of expressing these childhood conflicts, fusing into a single form the chilling threat with childhood needs for warmth and cradling as expressed in the softly shaped wood. (Remember, Freud related wood to mother).

Has the steel machete become a symbol of what frightened me as a young girl, or my fear itself? Is it an expression of my anger for having felt intimidated by a male force trying to catch me, hurt me, while exposing my own inability to fight back? Almost never was I able to confront my pursuers or protect myself, though "they" never did catch me long enough to kill me.

Interpretations come after the fact. When I'm creating a piece, I just work with the shapes and my unconscious guides me. The more that I worked with integrating the machete into my art, the stronger and healthier I felt. It was gratifying that surgery became unnecessary.

Now, I tend to agree with Arlene Raven's observation that my blades are a symbol of my artistic liberation as a woman adventuring into the "forbidden" with tools and materials considered male. I am reliving and simultaneously relieving my recurring childhood fears, this time from a place of strength, where I am creating my own universe and safe haven.

My blades have become my bodyguards.



Linda Stein, *Blades 192*, wood and metal, 39x55x37 inches



Linda Stein, *Blades 208-213*, 1993, steel, wood, stone & mixed media, 8'x9'x8.5'