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LINDA STEIN: MACHETE BLADES AND BEYOND MARCIA NEWFIELD

"Yes, I do machete blade sculpture," says artist Linda Stein. "And, my, the comments it triggers in some people: '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!'"

Since 1989, New York sculptor Linda Stein has been exploring the dialectic of power/vulnerability. Her first opportunity to exhibit work on that theme was an invitation to submit something "outrageous" to an exhibition called "Bad Girls," curated by Corrine Robins as an activity of the 1990 Women's Caucus for Art National Conference on "Shifting Power" in Newark. Stein said, "When I first saw the machete blades being sold in a street barrel, I thought, 'This is the baddest thing I could imagine. Girls shouldn't play with knives.'"

So she began to play...and play...and play. The piece she created for the exhibit was a caricature of a vacuum cleaner placed on a chair with a bouquet of blades, forks, an ax, and brushes (one of which had "BAD" painted on its bristles) stemming out from it. A rope and lead tube were attached to the entity, ending in scissors made from two machete blades attached to the wall.

Stein's incorporation of machete blades into her sculptures has taken various turns. She has dulled the blade's edge, removed its handle, fused it with curvilinear wood and other materials including parts of musical instruments, suspended it from the ceiling or wall so it could move freely in the air (those attached to musical instruments make unusual sounds), used a blow torch to bend the curved blade around itself, and embedded blades within larger collages of metal.



Self-Portrait with Blades

photo credit: Michael Stiles

In the early phases of her work, Stein fashioned a lyrical series—blades fused to wood, again with artifacts inlaid, and suspended from the ceiling. These sculptures create an impression of balance—of softness rooted in strength. The elements dance with each other to the point of synergy where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The blades are no longer scary. The aesthetic experience of them in this context is erotic, totemic, grounding.

“Blades 208-213” is a massive installation eight feet high, nine feet wide, and eight-and-a-half feet deep. More than a dozen curved machete blades protrude from a rectangular base made of dinosaur bones and pre-historic rock fossils (she climbed mountains in Utah to get them), cans, earrings, belts, and calligraphy plates surrounded by blade sculptures suspended at different lengths. The overall effect is of a ritual object, one that evokes associations with violence toward women, danger, and vengeance.

In their most recent appearance during the summer of 1995 shows in Provincetown and East Hampton, the blades have been moved from foreground to background, blending in with other elements in wall sculptures that are metal, copper, and steel-encrusted collages composed of layers of everyday artifacts such as hoses, pipes, brooms, beads, buttons, beer cans, and rocks. In her “Self Portrait in Constellation,” only the shape of a blade is embedded in the metal (a Platonic shadow?), which the artist holds in her hand, thrust protectively across her chest. The piece has a grandeur, evoking images of a warrior goddess forging or rescuing a universe.

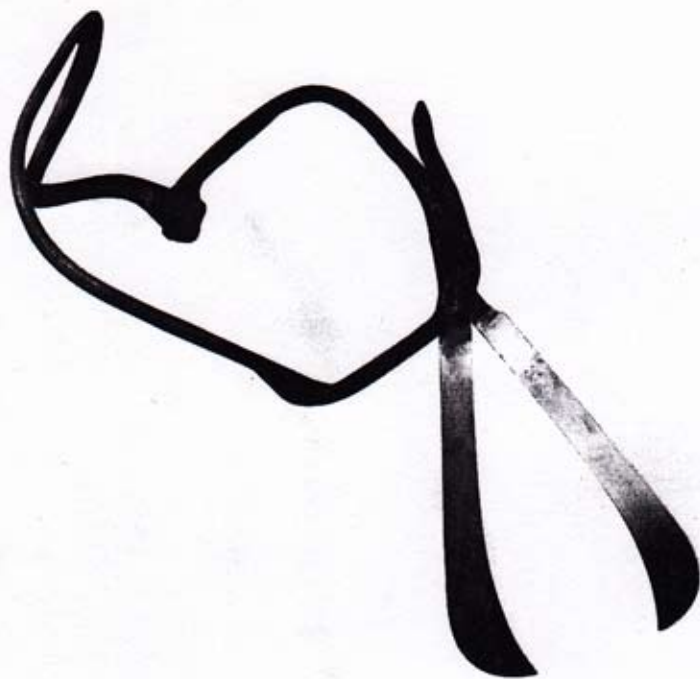
With the emergence of each series, Stein, who is as analytic and verbal as she is intuitive and visual, eagerly expounds about her work. She is visually and viscerally intrigued with what she describes as “the slow long curve.” The contrast between the power and threat of the steel blade with the soft roundness of its curve fascinates her. It speaks of yin and yang, softness and hardness, thrusting and control.



Blades 208-213

Stein also sees in the curve the delicacy of calligraphy to which she is particularly sensitive.

Stein swears that when she's in the process of working, she forgets that it's a machete blade and she is dancing with the curve. In the first years of her work with the blades, Stein was very conscious of the association of blades with violence. At the time she had a progressing uterine fibroid, which five gynecologists insisted demanded a hysterectomy. "I was determined not to have surgery," says the fifty-one-year-old athletic artist (she swims or runs an hour a day). "The blades I worked with became a focal point of my work as I attempted to arm myself against the doctors' instruments. I became obsessed with the internal violence I



Blades 190

51" x 37" x 34"
wood and metal

LINDA STEIN

Photographed by Kevin Clarke

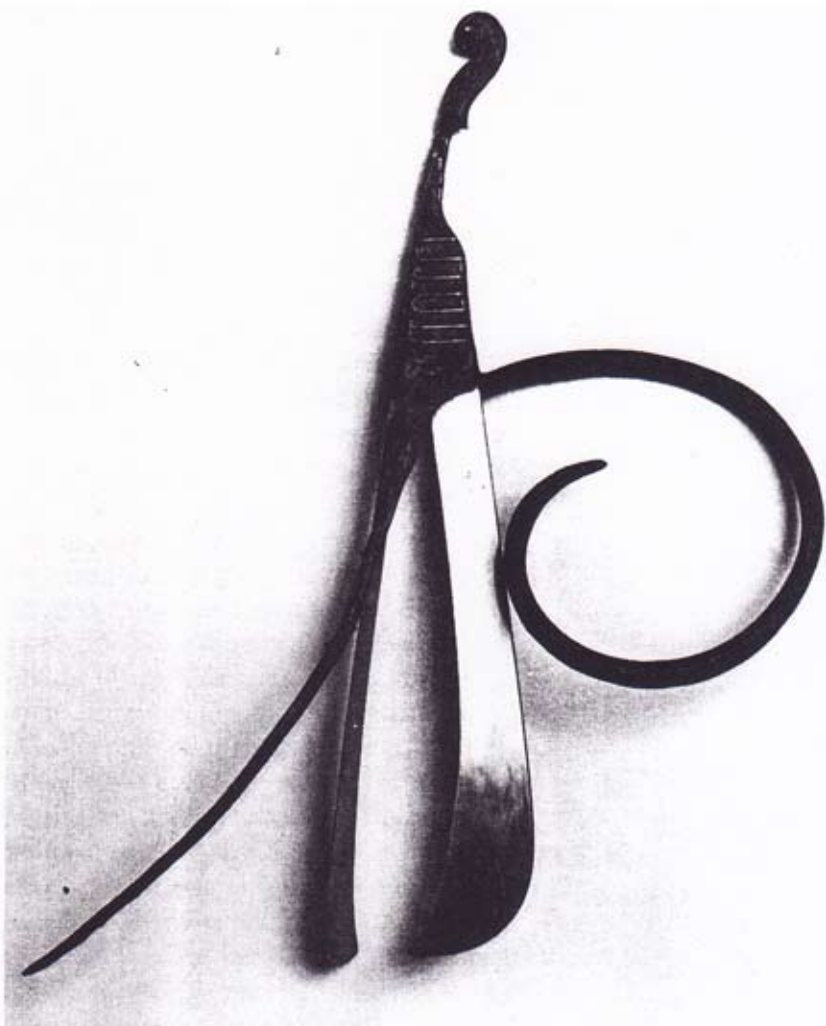
associated with uterine surgery, the statistics that hysterectomies are the most unnecessarily performed operations in America. I did not want to let the doctors cut me. On the contrary, I needed to have the power of the blade within me so I could heal myself. My fear extended itself to the street violence reported daily in our newspapers. I also remembered a recurrent childhood nightmare of being hurt with a knife. Against all this, my blades became my bodyguards."

Stein's early interactions with the blades resemble a brave combat; she is taming them, transforming lions into pussycats. At the same time she is carving out (more accurately, torching, welding, burning, etching, burnishing, and epoxying) a universe where she can make a statement about strength, power, and grace that is not gender bound, where a freedom and fluidity arises from fusing traditionally masculine and feminine icons and auras. She has called it "reversing associations" and "scrambling expectations."

The wall sculptures represent a triumph of the battle: the blades are now just one more element feeding her impulse to collect and collage artifacts that are not usually deemed suitable for the art object. They are post-Dinner Party asymmetric metal quilts. It is no surprise to find out that Stein is also fascinated with the physical materials and designs of tombstones; she views them as time capsules of a civilization and selective representations of a person's life. The wall sculptures can be seen as tombstones of our culture.

Stein revels in her status as a "bad girl": "It's funny. Now accepting myself as a Bad Girl. Even as a child I always wanted to be good. In bed at night I'd wonder why I couldn't prevent myself from being so bad. At age seven, I had no answers except that it was God who made some people good, and others like me, bad. My hands were always dirty, either from playing stick ball or playing with charcoal. I never sat still the way a girl should. My guilt mounted with the years—I didn't make the proper marriage, have children, and live next door to my parents. Surprisingly, with the creation of my machete sculptures, something clicked in me—suddenly the badness of it felt good. Really good. I had come home. I was in my element and enjoyed a new feeling of security and power."

MARCIA NEWFIELD



Blades 198

37" x 32" x 7"
wood and steel

LINDA STEIN

Photographed by D. James Dee