

Gender Bending with **Linda Stein**

by Joyce Beckenstein



At first glance, Linda Stein's mixed-media sculptures stoke the gender stereotypes they reproach.

Truncated female torsos clad in sexually charged leather provoke. Curvaceous figures collaged with Wonder Woman comic-strip pulp dazzle. But Stein leaves no doubt about her feminist intent. A master of paradox, she revels in psychological conundrums, as evidenced in *Fluidity of Gender*, a five-year-long traveling exhibition of her gender-based works. Wit enlivens resolve in this show, which uses surface and texture to explore sexuality along a spectrum of definitions, many of them relatively new to contemporary jargon. From biological sex—the male or female gender nature assigns us, Stein moves to issues of sexual identity, the extent to which we psychologically experience our maleness or femaleness. Issues of sexual orientation (straight, gay/lesbian, transgender) further blur identities, as does sexual expression, the myriad ways people present themselves through behavior and dress.

All of which recall psychiatrist Carl Jung's theory that maleness and femaleness overlap in the unconscious mind. The female principle he called the *anima* resides in the male psyche; the male principal, the *animus*, belongs to the female archetype. Stein deftly plays with these inversions. Her densely layered constructs suggest armor worn by medieval knights—most of them plunderers inappropriately romanticized as protectors of women. Stein transforms the knight into an able-bodied woman who, in a variety of guises, emerges as her own champion; a bulwark to all who fall within her embrace. The dismantling of this oxymoronic knight prototype is the perfect metaphor for gender fluidity, none of which is meant to deprive the male his due. Stein's torsos hang on androgynous frames.

A series of black-leather-wrapped figures dramatically reflect anima/animus archetypes. Stein channels this duality in works such as *GenderBend 682*, a figure that recalls the ancient Greek, Roman, and Renaissance ideals of female and male beauty that established Western standards of perfection. She reminds us that many well-known works, such as the Greek *Kritios Boy* and Michelangelo's famed *Sistine Chapel* figures, are unabashedly androgynous.

Viewed frontally, *GenderBend 682* is a full-bodied female. From the rear, the figure's broad shoulders visually slim the waist and buttocks to portray a well-proportioned mature male.

LEFT: LINDA STEIN *GenderBend 682* (front and back) Leather, metal, mixed media, 38" x 19" x 16", 2010. Photos: D. James Dee.

RIGHT: LINDA STEIN *Justice for All 698* Metallic paper, acrylic paint, archival inks, vinyl, mixed media, 79" x 40" x 9", 2010. Photo: Stein Studios.



MascuFem 681 wears a
NYPD medal on her leather
uniform in homage to the
deserving women ignored in
post-9/11 histories.

Reminiscent of tight girdles that imposed hour-glass shapes on bodies otherwise configured, Stein's constricting leather renders the wearer vulnerable, in need of cloaking her "self" in tough outer garb. The zippered, skin-tight garment, riffing on woman as dominatrix, humorously vies with an updated chastity belt set against the figure's groin.

Stein, a master of symbolic form, deftly layers these visual puns into profound insights. For example, *GenderBend 682* features a disciplined line-up of toy soldiers above the breast. They contrast with the random inverted lettering of metal typeset plates embedded around the waist like exposed bone or shrapnel. Taken together, these metaphoric objects allude to the conflict between military heroics and wartime violations of humanity. From here, Stein's iconography extends to her feminist political perception of women as both strong and vulnerable to abuse.

Her torsos, fabricated with leather-wrapped wooden armatures and embellished with found objects screwed, glued, or welded in place, are made as three-quarter or full-length figures. The repeated use of a classical

prototype provides unity to an extensive oeuvre rendered in wildly varied surfaces with shifting symbolic content. With their related references to ancient ideals, Stein translates 2,500 years of warped gender perception into a 21st century lexicon of sculptural forms.

Stein's message also draws deep from her personal experience, reflecting her sensibility as an artist and her perspective as a lesbian feminist. Her life and work as a passionate political activist were irrevocably changed by the events of September 11, 2001. A ghastly blast jolted Stein from her downtown Tribeca, New York, studio that fateful day. As bodies leapt from the World Trade Center, she became one with the ash-coated mob fleeing Armageddon. Days later, she was appalled when media praise heaped on male fire-fighters and cops gave nary a nod to women first-responders risking their lives. Vulnerability, coupled with this veil of invisibility, hit a nerve.

Born to a lower middle-class family in the Bronx, Stein says she grew up "torn between a life of authenticity and hiding." A bright, strong, athletic young woman who attended Music and Art High School, she vividly recalls being told to soft-pedal her abilities and not compete with men. She hid her homosexuality, not knowing how to protect and present herself. Finally, at age 40, while playing tennis with Roy Lichtenstein, "wondering whether or not to let him beat me," she suddenly felt empowered. She aced him 6-Luv!

Decades later, she saw in art a means to help others expunge their feelings of powerlessness. *MascuFem 681*



LINDA STEIN *MascuFem 681*
Detail, leather, metal, mixed media,
36" x 18" x 16", 2010.
Photo: D. James Dee.

wears a NYPD medal on her leather uniform in homage to the deserving women ignored in post-9/11 histories. But it is Stein's larger-than-life works that fully tap the theme of woman as hero, a force in her own right. Most striking are the Wonder Woman figures that appropriate imagery from the 1941 DC comic series created by William Moulton Marston.

Her wall-hung Wonder Woman-based work *Justice for All 698* consists of a cast-paper base covered with comic strips that she scanned and then altered using graphics software. Wonder Woman's overlapping legs, partially amputated like classical sculptural ruins, bestow an element of helplessness. So, too, they suggest the gait of a catwalk model. Part Venus, part pop queen, part superhero hero, Stein's Wonder Woman, voluptuous and curvy, sheathed in glitzy wrap, is avatar for all women. She avows it okay to be beautiful, sensuous, heroic, and strong. "She doesn't believe in violence. She's a force of peace and reason," says Stein, who often rewrites the captions of the comic strip bubbles with her own missives: *Justice for All 698* wears a bubble that asks, "What defines bravery? What makes a hero?"

Stein's wearable-art series *Body Swapping Armor* includes beautiful garments made of flexible panels that men, women, and children can wear and interpret during the interactive performance segments of *The Fluidity of Gender* exhibition as it tours the US. They include the elegant jewel-like gown *Heroic Compassion 665* and *Vestment 628*, a richly embellished suit of armor made of wood, metal, typeset plates, buttons, and a variety of ornaments.

In the series *I Am the Environment: My Gender, My Nature*, Stein takes her cues from the primal earth mother goddess. Though classical poses connect the series to leather torsos, knights, and wearable art, this species of woman is created from earth's bounty. *Solstice 576*, made from naked dead branches with angulated twisting limbs, conveys struggle, growth, life, and death, while *Hard Cover 775*'s panoply of nut shells and seed pods assumes a timeless stance on her pedestal.

Stein's feminist subject matter, like her appropriation of popular iconography, isn't new to contemporary art. What makes Stein's work unique is her seamless merge of the familiar with shifting perspectives that provoke new thinking about old dichotomies. The response to her *Fluidity of Gender* exhibit, especially in small towns across America, is mixed. Some find it upsetting. Others greet the exhibit with relief and thank Stein for acknowledging what they always felt but would never say. As Catherine Pears, curator of the Alexandria Museum of Art in Louisiana commented, "Our community is mostly conservative . . . I wasn't aware of a feminist art exhibit in our time . . . It was time."

Linda Stein's traveling exhibition *The Fluidity of Gender* will be on display at St. Edward's University Fine Arts Gallery in Austin, TX (September 5–27, 2013); think.stedwards.edu/fineartsgallery/. Future tour venues and dates can be found on her website at www.lindastein.com.

—Joyce Beckenstein is an art critic and art historian living in New York.

LINDA STEIN *Heroic Compassion 665* Wood, metal, paper, acrylic, mixed media, 65" x 18" x 14", 2009. Photo: Stein Studios.

