

Guestwords: Lichtenstein Across the Net

By Linda Stein

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In 1983, I was invited by Rubin Gorewitz (a man known as *the* accountant for artists), whom I was then dating, to join him for Christmas week on Captiva Island, off the Gulf Coast of Florida. We were to be the guests of Robert Rauschenberg, taking residence at the Bay House, one of his three homes on the island. With its expansive view of tranquil water, this house was distinguished from the Beach House overlooking the ocean, where parties were held, and from the Print House, where the artist and his assistants worked on his limited editions, mostly lithographs and silk screens.

Roy Lichtenstein and his wife, Dorothy, had a home nearby on the island, and they joined in many of our activities during the week, including one double date for dinner at a local restaurant with Rubin and me. After observing how warmly Roy leaned in to Dorothy for advice in choosing what food he would order, and how Dorothy lovingly responded with suggestions, the topic got around to tennis. Rubin, not one to play tennis himself, proudly said, “Linda’s a tennis enthusiast and was the captain of her college tennis team.”

Roy’s ears perked up. He said he loved the sport and played as often as possible. A game of singles was arranged for the next morning at 10.

Before continuing this story, some background information is in order: I grew up at a time when boys were supposed to be (or at least appear to be) better, stronger, smarter than girls. If a girl wanted to be popular, she learned very quickly that it was her responsibility to play out this masculinist scenario.

I was proud, at the time, to have learned my gender lesson well. If a boy was a weaker athlete than me, it was my job to see that he won anyway. So I intentionally threw the bowling ball into the alley and hit the Ping-Pong or tennis ball into the net, and always lost the game. In this way, accepting that the male ego took precedence over mine, I then could take my place as a “proper” female.

Gender inconsistencies and inequities didn’t click with me then, and I recall asking a gym teacher at Music and Art High School why there was no tennis team for girls. He blithely answered, as if I should have known this already, that it was “because tennis is bad for a girl’s heart.” The absurdity didn’t register with me even though I played tennis every day after school without having a heart attack.

And so it was with this deference syndrome, my *modus operandi* toward the male gender, that I walked onto the tennis court to face Roy Lichtenstein on a sunny day in 1983.

Barely a few moments into our warm-up rally, it was obvious to me that I was the stronger player. True to form, my main focus as we rallied was on hitting the ball directly to Roy’s racket to give him the best chance of returning it. For the next half-hour I lived in a quandary, fearing that the man across the net would ask me to play a set.

My distress heightened in anticipating that, if we started keeping score, my old tendencies of deference would crop up and once again, instead of just enjoying the game, I would be in mental anguish. I knew that once a set began, my attention would turn to keeping the score even, which would mean that every once in a while I had to purposely hit the ball into the net.

But this time I didn’t do it. Maybe it was something about Roy that made me feel safe. Or maybe the dots of gender injustice were beginning to connect in my mind. In any case, I just played out each point. True, I didn’t slam the ball at Roy, or slice it at his feet, but I didn’t intentionally lose any points either.

When the match ended, 6-0, I was a bit nervous, but I knew that something very significant for me had just happened. I succeeded in doing what I could never do before. I had decided I was entitled to “own” my abilities.

From that day on, I never again faked my athletic prowess. Roy Lichtenstein will always hold a special place for me in that journey toward my own authenticity.

Linda Stein, an artist, activist, lecturer, and performer, has an exhibition called “Power and Protection: Bully Proof Vests” at the Romany Kramoris Gallery in Sag Harbor through Sept. 2. Her solo show “The Fluidity of

Gender: Sculpture by Linda Stein” is traveling to 23 museums and galleries across the country through 2015. She lives in Northwest Woods, East Hampton.

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