

HLFQ

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REPRESENTATIVE ARTIST

Linda Stein

THE MACHETE BLADE:

AN ARTIST'S SEARCH FOR SECURITY AND STRENGTH

Dream 3/9/78:

Sometimes I'm walking down the street and a group of boys try to rape me. I manage to get a pair of scissors, but I'm more frightened by having the scissors, than not.

Dream 3/12/78:

When I'm being chased by military men, I'm Dustin Hoffman—small, frail, on my belly, crawl running with my horse. If I could attach the rope, the horse could pull me to safety.

Dream 10/29/90:

There is a noise. I go to the door; it is slightly ajar. I have to close it, but as I push against it, I have no strength. Finally I get it to shut, but the large man is coming in anyway. I'm able to hide under the stairway. Does he see me? Will he hurt me? What happened? It is not that (in the door) there is so much resistance to me: there is hardly any. But, even so, I do not have the strength or power to lock the door. And does a locked door make any difference?

Agitated, I would awake from these dreams in a state of fright. They occurred over many years, especially when I was younger. They were similar in that I was left feeling impotent, fragile, unable to defend myself. Entire dreams were spent running away from men who were chasing me. Unarmed, alone and unprotected, I raced over a vast dream terrain in an exhausting search for rest and security.



I remember only one dream in which I held a weapon and was going *toward* some criminals, rather than running away. Certainly unorthodox in its form and function, it propelled “pretzel-like” bullets that I didn’t know how to reload. But even though its potency potential was vague, it was still an armament that could ultimately shoot the enemy. I woke with a feeling of pleasure: I finally had a means of protection in hand.

A sense of protection, it seems, comes slowly and in surprising guises. In 1989, when I saw a barrel full of machete blades for sale on Canal Street, I was stopped short. The blade seemed to have an internal attraction for me—but as what? As a symbol of power? As a threat? Hey, I’m the person who jogs around anthills along the road and would never go to a boxing match, no less grab a knife to threaten someone.

Without dwelling on reasons, I began to experiment with the blade in my sculpture. I became preoccupied with combining the machete’s steel with curvilinear pieces of wood so that the disparate elements unified into one. Later that year, I was invited to be in an exhibition entitled *BADGIRLS*, curated by Corinne Robins. Encouraged to make an “outrageous sculpture,” the steel machete blade spoke to my concerns and vision. After the exhibition, the urge to incorporate the blade in my art became more and more compelling.

Why? All I know is that visually and viscerally I was obsessed by the machete’s long, slow curve. For me, it was different than any other kind of knife or tool. Its duality held my fascination: hard, cold, strong steel yielding to its own soft, curving shape. I must have felt that it embodied an intriguing combination of opposites: power/vulnerability, masculinity/femininity, aggression/passivity, strength/softness.

The cultural factors playing on my psyche in the early 1990s also had an effect. Violence seemed to be breaking out all around. The Gulf War was imminent. Crime in the streets was at a peak. Concerned by a growing number of reports detailing women being battered, raped, and murdered, my friends and I repeatedly dis-

cussed safety threats, particularly in the Big Apple. How late at night should a woman ride the subway? (8 PM was a safe bet.) What is the best night-time street posture for a woman walking alone? (Stride briskly with a countenance of determination, preferably in the gutter and not near doorways.) This focus on women’s issues reflected, perhaps, my feelings of impotency and subjugation as a woman in a patriarchal society. I was angered by the fifties culture that took a girl’s growing up less seriously than a boy’s, who had mobility and authority bestowed upon him from birth.

My work with the machete provides a means to examine these societal notions of gender. I enjoy working *against* association, in that blades are commonly associated with men and violence. In a sense, I am scrambling expectations, by sculpting a sensuous and androgynous creation no longer capable of destruction. By introducing the machete, best known as a masculine weapon, into a new constructive form, I feel that I am visually controlling violence while allowing the blade to become part of the feminist lexicon of strengths.

Throughout the nineties, I continued to work with the machete. I filed its edge until it became smooth and dull. I removed its handle, fusing the blade’s steel with large, soft curves of wood, metals, shard and bone. Robert Craddock wrote that “Linda Stein’s sculptures have richly encrusted surfaces which give the feel of ancient, ritual objects. . . . They are at once powerful and delicate.” I suppose he had the latter thought because, in some exhibitions, I suspended machete sculpture from the ceiling so it could gently sway and turn. Was I reversing the destructive potential of the blade? Was I arming myself from any impending safety threat to my psyche or person? My gallery exhibits were entitled *Violence in New York*, *Reversing Violence*, *Transcending Violence*, *The Psychology of Violence*. At openings, I moderated panel discussions with psychologists, experts on aggression, security police, and religious leaders, I sought dialogue by inviting viewers to complete the phrase “These blades make me feel . . .”—framing and hanging their written responses as a wall grid in subsequent gallery exhibits.

Writing a catalogue introduction for one such exhibition, Dr. Ronny Cohen summed up my interest. She wrote, "A New Yorker, intent on staying in the city, she found herself, like many citizens at the beginning of 1990, mulling 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 to mind an array of personal associations in addition to past and present experiences."

Have the associations of my childhood dreams and vulnerabilities coalesced in a defense system symbolized by the machete? Is the blade an extension of my anger for having felt intimidated? Does my playful bending and twisting of the blade exorcise my Kafkaesque dreamscript and my inability to fight back?

Interpretations come after the fact and, of course, one can only guess at meanings. When I am creating a piece, I work intuitively with the materials. I use an acetylene torch to bend the steel of the machete or I recreate its curving shape with everyday materials and forms. I integrate the blade with recognizable fragments of our culture, including tools, keys, musical parts which have sounding effects, and any metal throw-aways that interest me. Lester Strong described my work as "whimsical—another way of making it viewer friendly," and this fun part is very important to me. As I work, I am not conscious of the blade as weapon, but relate only to its sculptural form and texture. While embedding calligraphic printing plates, bone, rock and the various metals, I fuse them together with the blade so that the completed piece looks as if it pre-existed and was just discovered that way by a passerby.

My work has been described by Marcia Newfield as having "a push-pull tension. The viewer is welcomed and drawn in by the sensual forms and playful details and then startled and intimidated by the seriousness and strength of the sculpture." It may be similar to how we are in our relationships: seductive on the one hand, scary on the other—wanting our mates to be close to us and available, but not too intrusive or clinging.

The intrusion of the bad guys in my psychic life, interestingly

enough, never crossed the line beyond menacing threat. Never in my dreamscape do I recall that I was killed by my pursuers, and only once was I caught—but with this surprise ending:

Dream 1/11/72:

The Nazis were rounding up the Jews again. They got me and took me to a room and told me I was going to be, along with the others, electrocuted. "You can electrocute me," I said, "but I want you to know that I have, as I had in the last holocaust, electrical insurance!"

A metaphor for power and protection, the machete blade has become my personal insurance policy. And, as Arlene Raven has said, my "blade sculptures are a symbol for artistic liberation as a woman—adventuring into the 'forbidden' with tools, materials and force once considered male." Finally, in reliving and *relieving* my recurring childhood fears, I am well on my way toward arriving at a place of security and strength.

Following are 15 artworks, © 2000 Linda Stein, reproduced here by permission:

Lucky Charm 210

Blades 208-213

Corkscrew Sweep 285

Xylo Brush 330

Blades 192

East Hampton Sky Ride

Amazon 197

Clock Latch 318

Two Women Standing 322

Blades 198

Woman Warrior 215

Funnel Horn 332

Female Flexible Propeller

Soft Curve 312

Xylo Twist 271

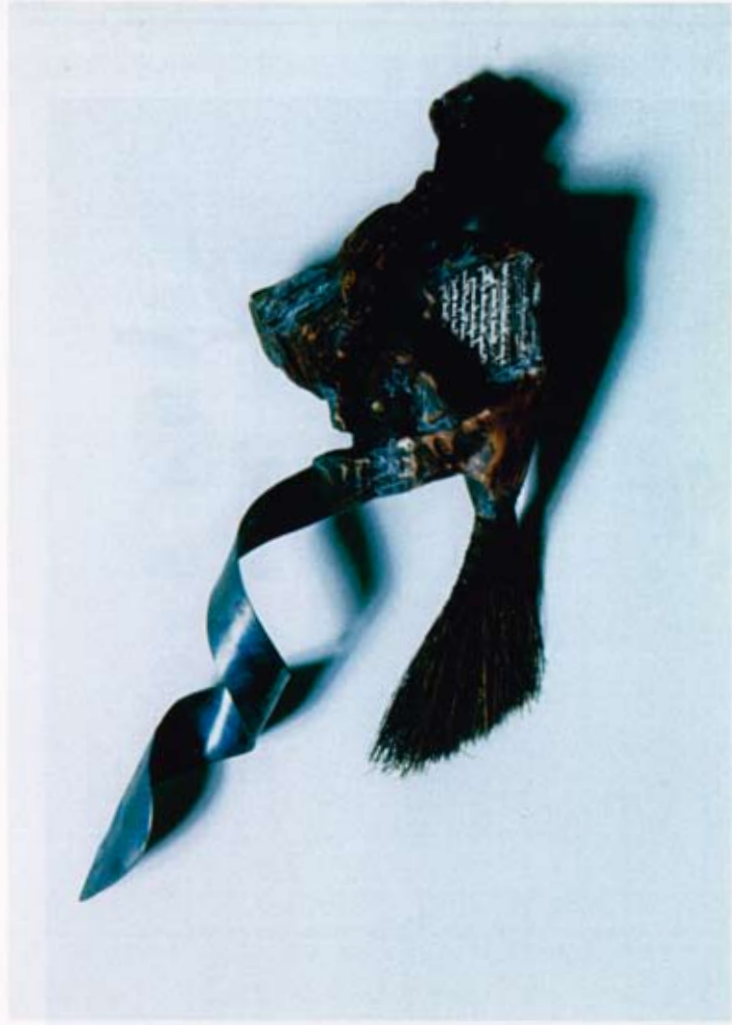


Lucky Charm 210, 1993 wood, stone, metal, bone
29" x 54" x 7"



Blades 208-213, 1993

wood, metal, stone
and mixed media
8' x 9' x 8.5'



Corkscrew Sweep 285, 1997

wood, metal, fiber, stone
13" x 30" x 6"



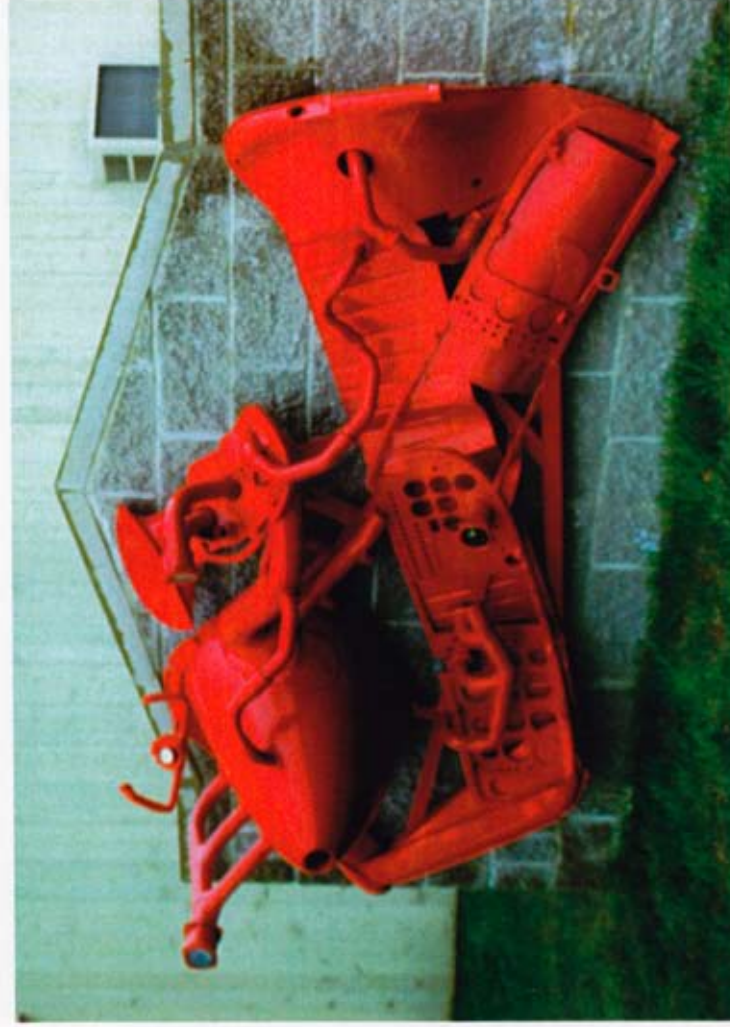
Xylo Brush 330, 1995, 1999

wood, metal, stone
42" x 38" x 9"



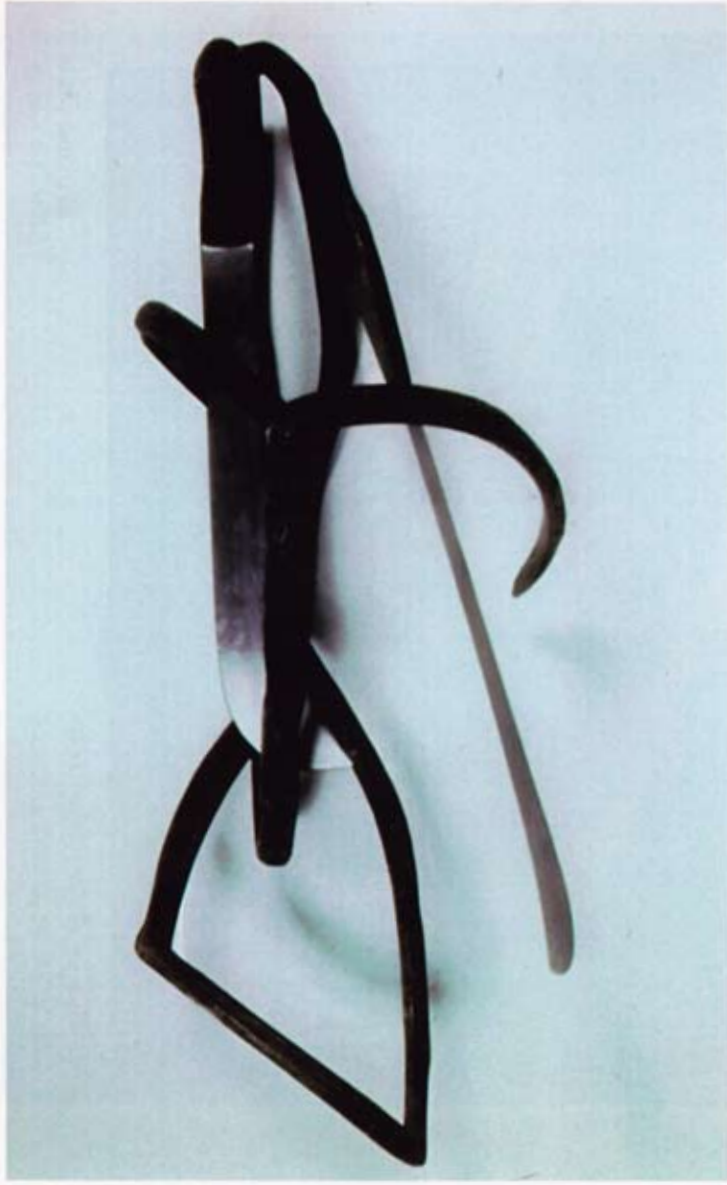
Blades 192, 1990

wood, metal
39" x 55" x 37"



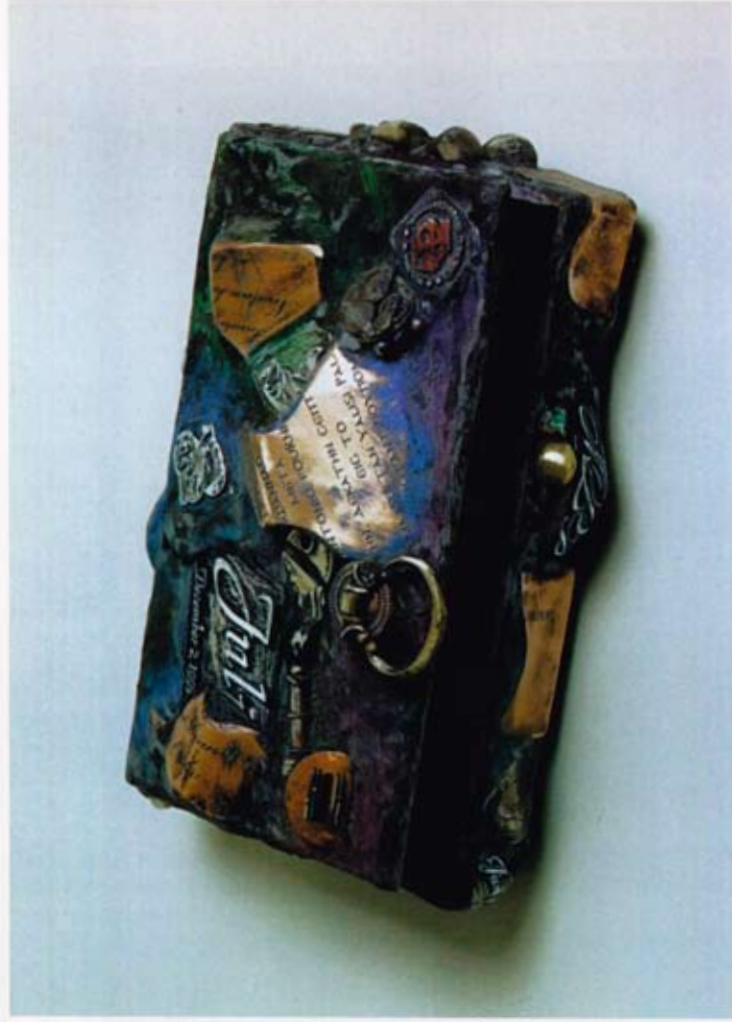
East Hampton Sky Ride, 1998
Commission at airport entrance

airplane parts
5' x 10' x 3'



Amazon 197, 1991

wood, metal
18" x 45" x 17"

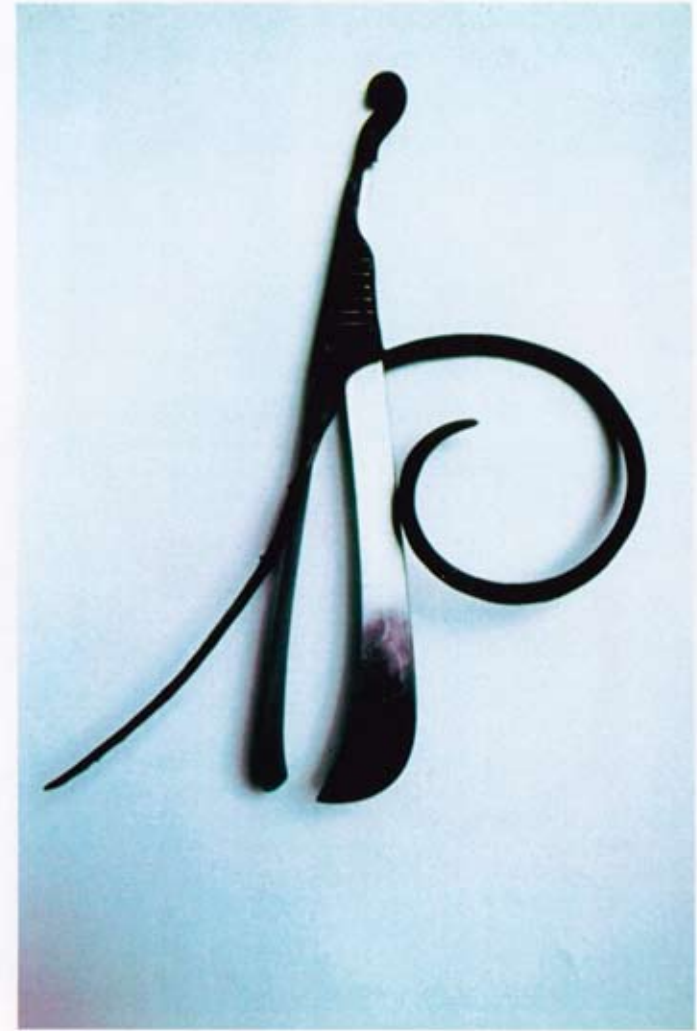


Clock Latch 318, 1999

wood, metal, stone
3" x 10" x 7"



Two Women Standing 322, 1985, 1999
wood, metal, stone and mixed media
37" x 24" x 16"



Blades 198, 1991

wood, metal
37" x 32" x 7"



Woman Warrior 215, 1994

wood, metal
24" x 36" x 5"



Funnel Horn 332, 1997, 1999

wood, metal, bone, rubber
28" x 30" x 10"



Female Flexible Propeller, 1996

wood, metal, stone
30" x 25" x 4"



Soft Curve 312, 1998

wood, metal, stone
19" x 18" x 8"



Xylo Twist 271, 1996

wood, metal, stone,
working xylophone
27" x 28" x 16"

Linda Stein is a sculptor, curator, lecturer and writer who has exhibited throughout the United States and abroad. She received her Master's degree from Pratt Institute, her Bachelor's degree from Queens College and she attended the Art Students League, the School of Visual Arts and the Pratt Graphics Center, all in New York. Reviewed as one of the BADGIRLS, Stein's sculpture addresses the issue of power and vulnerability with an emphasis on gender equality. She was recently awarded the outdoor sculpture commission for the entrance to the East Hampton airport and currently exhibits regularly with Arlene Bujese Gallery in East Hampton and the Nabi Gallery in Sag Harbor. She lives in Manhattan and East Hampton and would enjoy hearing from you at SteinArt20@aol.com.