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art

Here, women are warriors

After witnessing the 9/11 attacks, Linda Stein began to see a world where gender lines are fluid and women should feel empowered.

By Teresa Annas
The Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK

All her life, artist Linda Stein has had nightmares about running. Running from planes. Running from bad guys. Running, running, running.

Her studio is in downtown Manhattan, and she was there on the morning of 9/11. After the planes hit the twin towers, just a few blocks away, she and her studio assistants clasped hands and fled.

They ran, ran, ran. It was just like her dream.

Traumatized, she couldn't make art for a year.

When Stein went back to work, her sculpture was no longer abstract. She said the work seemed to evolve of its own accord.

Vertical forms began to suggest figures. "Then I was surprised to find out that they looked like female warriors." She thought, "What am I doing? I'm a peacemaker!"

That's when comic hero Wonder Woman came to mind, and entered her work.

All of these references be-

came central to her art, and can be seen in her dozen or so body-scaled pieces on display through Feb. 16 at Virginia Wesleyan College. Stein's work is in the 2-year-old Neil Britton Art Gallery in Hofheimer Library, a room dedicated to changing exhibitions.

These latest works, from 2009 and 2010, look like patched-together, black-leather garb for gals on a hard-core mission.

It's a punk look, silver studs and zippers and all.

Some pieces hang on the wall and are about the size and shape of mummies. Other objects are installed on mannequins, like a showroom for post-apocalyptic fashions.

A few of the pieces can be worn. During the opening reception last month, the artist allowed viewers to try on a few of her sculptures.

These pieces are beautifully crafted; Stein uses a commercial sewing machine to make them. But what makes the work sculpture rather than costume are the ideas imbedded within.

At the show's entrance,



Linda Stein installs a sculpture featuring Wonder Woman comic strips, a theme often repeated in her pieces.

"Tough Love 683" has a clear front and a back and is worn like a sandwich board with a shoulder strap.

The front looks more masculine, with lots of zippered pouches and buckles. The rear is knee-length and fringed, a tad more feminine.

"Tough Love" best illustrates Stein's concept for the touring show, called "The Fluidity of Gender."

"The whole rigidity of gender and what it means to be a man and a woman should be more fluid," Stein said.

"Men would be allowed to be

softer, more nurturing. And a woman would be allowed to be whole and strong."

Stein exhibits wit in piecing together these "hero skins" with badges, pulls and medallions she scavenges from friends and thrift shops. One called "MascuFem 681" features a metal plate bearing the New York Police Department initials, a quiet reference to 9/11.

The torso piece has pulls from the front (a leather hoop on a strap) and the back (a purse handle); this character can be yanked in two direc-



"MascuFem 681," a sculpture by Linda Stein made of leather, metal and mixed media.

tions at once, as from gender to gender.

Stein recognized the work symbolized her own need for protection in the aftermath of tragedy.

Then the work absorbed her concern for women's rights with Wonder Woman, the ideal protector of the 1940s. She lassoed the bad guys and magically reformed them.

But the character was redesigned last year, and to Stein's dismay, made to look weaker and more sexualized.

Several of the works on view are covered in Wonder Woman strips, although the artist has retooled the text. In one image, Stein has Wonder Woman contemplating in a thought bubble, "What defines bravery? What makes a hero?"

Stein got a burst of recognition as a feminist for her appearance in "Borat," a 2006 mock documentary of a "third-world reporter" visiting America.

As the scene was shot, actor Sacha Baron Cohen made her believe he was a reporter trying to understand feminism.

"I was told it was to help Third-World women," she said. "There was a woman warrior aspect to my whole encounter with him ..."

"Because I threw him out twice within an hour."

And the bad guy was the one running.

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if you go

What "The Fluidity of Gender: Sculpture by Linda Stein"

Where Neil Britton Art Gallery in Hofheimer Library, Virginia Wesleyan College, 584 Wesleyan Drive, Norfolk

When Through Feb. 16

Hours Open during library hours: 8 a.m. to midnight Mondays through Wednesdays, 8 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Thursdays, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays, noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays, 10 a.m. to midnight Sundays

Cost Free

More info (757) 455-3257

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