



LADY OF THE KNIGHTS

LINDA STEIN AND THE ART OF SOFT POWER

INTERVIEW BY AMY WOLF

“HER TORSO IS MAGNIFICENT: A THICK, STURDY TERRAIN OF WELDED BRONZE...SHE IS THE KNIGHT OF TOMORROW.”



So wrote Reshma Kirpalani of one of the 37 sculptures by Linda Stein featured in a 2007 retrospective exhibition in Boca Raton, Florida. “The bronze torso...stands out from the smooth yellow wall of the Nathan D. Rosen Museum, a tribute to Linda Stein’s commitment to female empowerment, strength, and justice.” The artist, arriving in the company of her powerful, abstract, larger-than-life torsos, blends right in. A strong woman with spiky hair, Stein casts warrior women in wood, metal, and stone, fusing images of Wonder Woman, anime heroine Princess Mononoke, and Asian goddess Kannon to create art that communicates a complex pacifism and feminism, embraces

contradiction, and maintains a sense of humor.

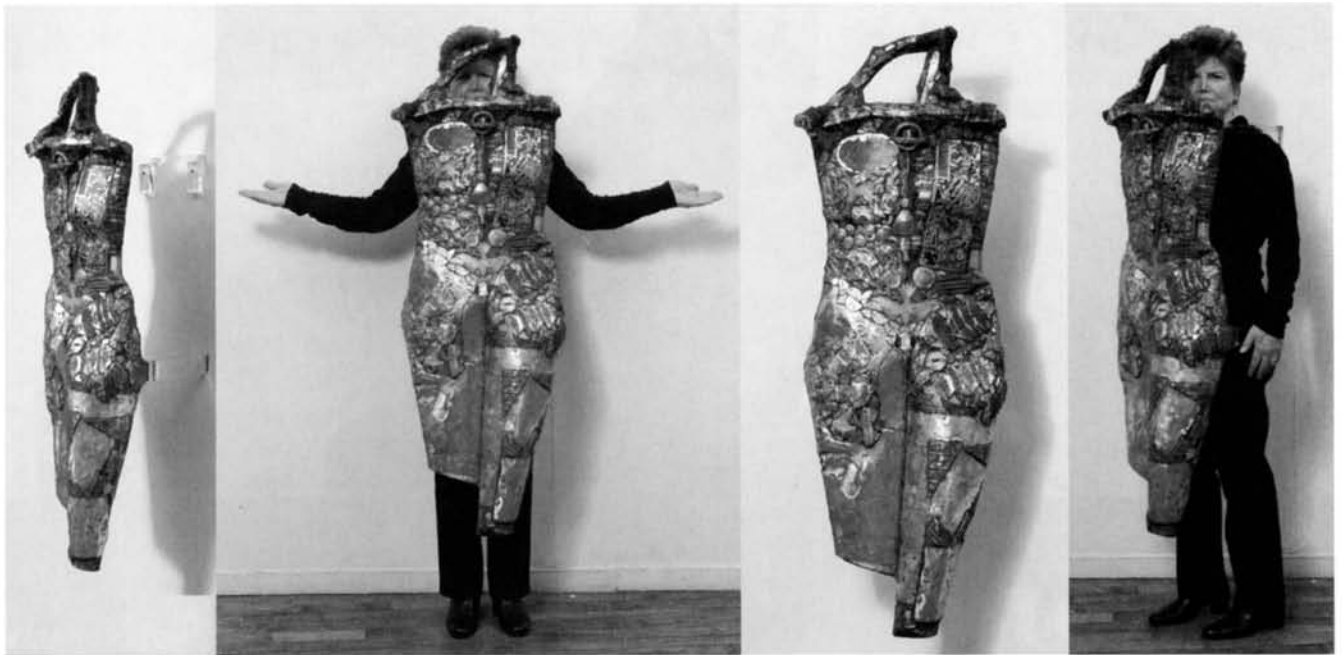
After being tricked into appearing in the megahit *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*—she’s the one who walked out with a curt “this interview is over” after the mockumentarian dissed and dismissed feminism—Stein took charge of the spotlight thrust upon her and aimed it at her work. She appeared on more than 20 TV programs and did dozens of radio and magazine interviews. She even responded to the experience through her art, creating a seven-foot-tall image of Borat, with a small penis inserted into his mankini, as a shadow placed next to one

of her heroic sculptures (*Anti-hero/Hero*). (Borat portrayer Sacha Baron Cohen was invited to the opening of the exhibit at Rutgers University, for which the piece was created, but Stein believes he was probably too scared to come.)

Born and raised in New York, Stein is a lifelong artist, feminist, and activist. At her Tribeca studio/gallery/benefit space, visitors can sit on chairs crafted by Stein to view the commanding and highly textured sculptures. Exhibiting continually at Manhattan’s Flomenhaft Gallery and Longstreth Goldberg Art in Naples, Florida, Stein has developed her own international fan base. Three of the bronzes from the *Knights* series will

Knight of Winged Words 524, 2005, wood, metal, stone, 46" x 14" x 5", Marilyn Falik Collection

Trio 595, 2007, wood, metal, stone, collage with archival inks on paper with acrylic sealant and shadow printing on vinyl, 78" x 125" x 10"



Stein with *Vestment 628*, 2008, wood, metal, 52" x 18" x 6"

AFTER *BORAT*, "I WAS FLOODED WITH E-MAILS FROM MEN SAYING, 'DON'T YOU HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR ABOUT MISOGYNY?'"

be the central sculptural feature of the \$4 million "Walk of the Heroines" at Portland State University in Oregon. And a larger-than-life bronze *Knight* has been included in the Adelphi University 2008 Biennial. Plans are underway for a donor to give the sculpture permanently to Adelphi at the end of the biennial.

Amy Wolf recently sat down and spoke with Stein surrounded by her heroic *Knights*.

Journalists can't seem to write enough about your experience with *Borat*. Once you found out about the ruse, what did you think of the movie?

I don't think Sacha Baron Cohen succeeded in condemning or highlighting sexism as he possibly succeeded with homophobia or racism. The audience, young men in particular, were laughing with—not at—his treatment of feminists. I felt he was exacerbating rather than diminishing the problem of sexism. I was flooded with e-mails from men saying things like, "What's the matter with you feminists? Don't you have any sense of humor?" One e-mail said, "Don't you have a sense of humor about misogyny?"

But you had the last laugh.

I put [Baron Cohen] in the position that he's claiming to be endorsing when he made this film: exposing bigotry. I believe a man should not be judged by the size of his penis any more than a woman for the size of her breasts. I gave *Borat* small genitals because I was responding to his testosterone overload, as I would with Imus, Stern, or Limbaugh. I think Baron Cohen can take the exposure.

You identify as a feminist and are a board member of the Veteran Feminists of America, but you've also resisted being pigeonholed as a feminist artist. Why?

The art world has changed a bit pre- and post-opening of the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art [at the Brooklyn Museum]—the first permanent wing of a major museum dedicated to feminist art—and the exhibition "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution."

Before these things, if you declared yourself a feminist artist, you would have trouble exhibiting in galleries. I am who I am, and my work is feminist, but it would not necessarily help me get a gallery exhibit. There's still difficulty. The art critic Jerry Saltz noted in a *Village Voice* piece called "Where the Girls Aren't" that although today's MFA

programs are composed of at least 50 percent women, only 36 percent of [artists] represented by Chelsea galleries are women, and MoMA's permanent collection is a measly 4 percent women. But I can't focus on this. I have to keep doing my art in spite of any bias—although it would be nice if more women went out of their way to support women artists.

What is the inspiration behind your currently evolving body of work?

9/11. I was with my staff in my Tribeca studio when the police came to evacuate us. We ran northward holding hands, looking over our shoulders as clouds of white dust enveloped us. I wondered, "Why are they throwing furniture off the Trade Towers? Oh, no. It's not furniture...." After that day, my dreams changed. My waking thoughts were filled with images of tall buildings going poof.

You've said your art deals with ideas of safety and protection.

I wanted to create an archetypal form to metaphorically defend me in battle. It goes back to dreams I had as a kid. I craved a figure of protection that would be impenetrable, powerful, and aggressive. Figures that would confront my childhood foes and say, in effect, "Stand back; don't come too close; you will be destroyed if you make a wrong move."

It's also important to me that this figure of strength be very much involved with social justice, so in those *Knights*, which are montage and collage paper sculptures, I use images of Wonder Woman, Princess Mononoke, and Kannon, an Asian goddess of protection and compassion. Note that Wonder Woman never killed. Yes, she's coming to save America in 1941 during World War II when everyone's afraid of communism and the threat of Germany, but she vanquishes the foes without killing them.

For many of my *Knights*, I used rock, metals of all kinds—copper, zinc, brass—and I also used printing plates that provide some kind of historical feeling of civilization, or even rubble, coming up from the ground. It took me three years after 9/11 to realize that the sculptural forms I was creating had become female knights possessing a combination of seemingly antithetical qualities: power/vulnerability, masculinity/femininity, warrior/peacemaker. I didn't specifically gender the work or even consider it. It seems now that my torsos were meant to transcend gender.

You talk about the "soft power" of your sculptures. Why this term?

"Soft power" is a term that distinguishes the subtle effects of culture, values, and ideas on others' behavior from more direct, coercive measures I call "hard power," such as military action or economic incentives. In my

work, I use [the idea of] soft power to help people internalize feelings of empowerment and protection when viewing my work.

As art editor of the recently relaunched feminist magazine *On the Issues*, I was asked to talk about AIDS recently and about women who can't say no to men, particularly boyfriends and lovers who want to have sex without a condom. So I responded, "What does it take for a woman to say no to her boyfriend or husband? Does it take her feeling like one of my sculptures? Does she have to steel herself, arm herself, so she can say, 'No, I will not do this?'"

When I first began to create these sculptures, I realized that they looked in a way like warriors, and I was a little dumbfounded because I am so much a pacifist. But as I looked at them, Wonder Woman came to mind, and it really jelled with me—because then I felt that they were symbols of protection and guardians of justice. They are like sentinels, standing on guard, at attention. They represent the types of leaders we need—ones with both traditionally masculine traits and traditionally feminine ones. Many men feel they have to save face and look strong—bringing to mind the now-famous George W. Bush quote, "Bring 'em on!" This posturing is not what we need in a leader. We need someone strong, savvy, reliable, stable—but someone who will know when and how to approach dictators without resorting to the sword. One should be able to have qualities of both masculinity and femininity existing at the same time, and that's very much what I want my sculptures to have.

What are you working on now?

The increased use of moving images and the combining and blurring of media categories is very exciting to me. I'm now working on a multimedia installation in which I'll incorporate video, sculpture, and performance into a future exhibition at both Flomenhaft Gallery and Longstreth Goldberg Art. I have an exhibition at the National Association of Women Artists in the spring of 2009. I'm also working on a new sculptural theme [of] Soft Power Knights, some with serene Buddhist heads and powerful superhero bodies. And I'm fascinated with the idea of having some of my lightweight *Knights* become wearable "skins," armor, or vestments. I've extended Lucite rods so the sculptures rest a foot away from the wall and can be placed on one's shoulders. There are so many ways I want to reference peace, justice, and empowerment in my *Knights*. I just hope I have the time to do it all. ●

To find out what Buddha looks like in a silver bodice, visit lindastein.com, where you'll also find information on Stein's upcoming exhibits and speaking engagements. **Amy Wolf** is a writer, videomaker, and communications specialist. She has contributed to *AlterNet* and *Avantoure* magazine, and is the former sex columnist for *The Independent*. She currently heads up the IndyVideo project at the New York Independent Media Center. E-mail her at howlmedia@gmail.com.