

# THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

## Linda Stein's 'Bullyproof' Vests

*"When people wear them, they often say that they feel empowered"*

By Larry LaVigne II | October 23, 2012 - 9:36am

Those familiar with Linda Stein's artwork might be surprised to find needles, thread, and fabrics lying around her TriBeCa and Northwest Woods studios. Ms. Stein, whose earlier works were often composed of such materials as driftwood, drawer knobs, and engraving plates, is now making what she calls "bullyproof" vests.



Linda Stein showed off a nearly complete, custom "bullyproof" vest while she proudly donned one of her own.  
Larry LaVigne II

On the one hand, the predominantly cotton vests stand in contrast to her earlier works; on the other, the transition is all too natural.

Ms. Stein says that bullyproof vests were born from two of her previous series, "Knights of Protection" and "Warrior Women." In both series — created from wood, metal, and stone — she channeled her emotions and conveyed a need for peace and protection after being evacuated following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Her most recent sculptures — armor-like pieces constructed with leather, metal, and acrylicized paper — can be seen in a traveling exhibition, "The Fluidity of Gender." The exhibition is at the Alexandria Museum of Art in Alexandria, La., through Nov. 24. They can be hung on a wall, but they're also wearable for short periods.

"When people wear them, they often say that they feel empowered," said Ms. Stein, who learned to sew from her father. "It made sense for me to start making vests that people can wear all the time."

The bullyproof vests often contain images of Princess Mononoke (a Japanese anime character), Lady Gaga, and early scenes from the Wonder Woman comic strip. But instead of what Wonder Woman said in the 1940s, her speech balloons assert phrases like: "I will fulfill my potential, gain my freedom, and not let cultural impediments and sexual stereotypes hold me down." No two vests are alike. They start at \$1,500, and the artist also creates custom vests for more.

Using art to incite change isn't new to Ms. Stein. In 1972, she founded Have Art Will Travel, a nonprofit organization that worked to foster gender equality through artistic and intellectual exchange. "I love talking about my art," she said. "Otherwise, how do people understand the messages found in it?" At Ms. Stein's studio in New York, Have Art Will Travel hosts an array of artists and lecturers who speak out against homophobia, racism, and sexism.

In August, the organization hosted 12 young people from the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a nonprofit that gives a positive and supportive environment to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning young people between the ages of 12 and 24.

“Many of these kids have been victims of bullying, molestation, and other abuse,” Ms. Stein said. “Through art they are able to express themselves freely, therefore no longer feeling powerless.”

Ms. Stein’s nonprofit doesn’t just make its mark in the New York area. She hopes that her traveling exhibit will be shown in 30 museums and universities around the country before the show culminates in 2015. Through her art and vest sales, she has been able to foot the high shipping costs to get the show to venues that otherwise could not have afforded to host it. And she has funded enhanced programming at conferences that teach acceptance and raise awareness.

“The more people wear a bullyproof vest, the more people will ask about them,” Ms. Stein said. “It gives a voice to people who are overlooked; at the very least, it starts a discussion on the issues.”

***About the Author***

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