

Linda Stein’s “Fluidity of Gender” (2009–2010)

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Abstract Linda Stein’s recent sculptures are abstracted human figures tightly encased in black leather. Some hang on the wall, some are free standing; all are headless, armless, and have truncated legs. The scavenged leather “skin” is old jackets and bags that reveal their original uses in the embossing, zippers, and buckles that Stein uses for textural accents. This paper will survey the new work’s claim, as stated in the exhibition title, to represent the “Fluidity of Gender.” The tactile nature of the medium itself prompts certain questions about the role sensuality plays in gendered experience, and how sexuality and power are intertwined. The distressed surfaces of the sculptures suggest the paramount significance of experience as contributing materially to body image. In conclusion, this essay will explore the way representations of bodies whose gender is unfixed may influence the viewer’s body image.

Keywords Art · Body image · Gender · Identity

Since 2006, sculptor Linda Stein has investigated the way gender identity is experienced by staging encounters in which the viewer’s awareness of his or her body is heightened. Her *Knights* series (2006–2009) evolved from wall-mounted abstract figures of mixed media to wearable shells, from guardians to suits of armor. Donning the carapaces, viewers found themselves suddenly slipping between genders as they experienced how it feels to have a different body—masculine, feminine, or androgynous. Stein’s *Knights* operated

on the viewer’s body image directly. Her current work while not to be worn also destabilizes gendered body image: it challenges the audience’s assumptions about which qualities such as toughness, sensuality, power, and strength are associated with masculinity or femininity. Stein has carefully undermined the viewer’s ability to securely determine the sex of her figurative pieces. Consequently, the viewer becomes aware of the way gender stereotypes are formed and function to shape body image. This survey of Stein’s *Fluidity of Gender* series explores the ways the visual arts contribute to theories of gender and body image. (More works by Stein, along with essays and press, are available on-line: www.lindastein.com. Stein is represented by the Flomenhaft Gallery in New York City: www.flomenhaftgallery.com.)

Stein’s recent sculptures have an uncanny presence. *In Charge 694* (2010), for example, is a free-standing torso that is breathtakingly dominant and powerfully embodied despite its lack of limbs. The primary medium is black leather, which the artist has scavenged from thrift stores and solicited for donation on listservs. The leather brings with it associations from its former life as jacket sleeve, pocket, handbag, or belt. As with any collaged material, it retains its original identity at the same time as it takes on a new one as part of a cohesive artistic conception. Black leather also bears cultural allusions to sex and violence, dominatrixes and *Mad Max*. Stein takes advantage of her material’s potential for multiple meanings, making sculptures from it which extend her previous explorations of gender stereotypes.

This essay analyzes Stein’s claim that her work represents “The Fluidity of Gender,” as her exhibition title phrases it. Her sculpted figures themselves suggest the problematic of body image as a productive contextual frame: the visible traces of the leather medium’s former use is a metaphor for the way gender is inscribed on the body. Two main lines of inquiry will be pursued: the way

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experience forms body image, and the relation between body image and sexuality. The distressed surfaces of the sculptures suggest the paramount significance of lived incident as contributing materially to body image. The tactility of the leather prompts questions about the role sensuality plays in gendered experience, and how sexuality and power are intertwined.

Since 2004, Stein has interrogated the “constructions” and “constrictions” of gender roles, and has offered her audience a means to think about the way gender identity is inhabited and performed (Stein 2009). Importantly, Stein stages the viewer’s encounter with her sculptures as a formative experience that destabilizes one’s secure gender identification: Her *Knights* series were like suits of armor that the viewer was invited to put on and move in, so as to experience a different body and loosen gender identification. Men and women alike had their gendered bodily experience altered wearing the *Knights*, and reported feeling powerful, gravid, suffocated, and newly sympathetic to the “opposite” sex’s position in the world. As stand-alone pieces, the *Fluidity of Gender* series operate differently. They confront the viewer with a human-scaled physical presence. The figures resist secure identification of their gender. For example, *GenderBend 682* (2010) reads as more womanly from one angle, more manly from another: It has broad hips and small breasts from the front, and strong shoulders and a straight waist from the back. The performativity of gender that Judith Butler has articulated over the last 20 years illuminates what Stein means by the “fluidity of gender.” Gender is always performed in relation to a gender ideal according to the discursive “constraints” and “constrictions” to which Stein draws attention. Yet the ideal remains out of reach to the extent that the performance is never perfected and perpetually in process (Butler 1990). Butler’s proposal of incommensurability between gender ideal and gender performance is analogous to Stein’s projected gender fluidity. Her sculptures furthermore invite viewers to explore consciously what shapes their gender ideal, and to imagine themselves in relation to other ideals, perhaps a model that is anomalous to their sexed body.

Stein’s 2009–2010 sculptures are sensual. Their surfaces are seductive, intensely tactile; they invite the viewer’s caress and inspire imagining the weight of leather on the body, or a feeling of snug encasement. In the history of art, visibility has won out over tactility as a higher order of sensation, as visibility is intellectual and spiritual rather than physical. The visual-tactile binary has a gendered dimension, as well. For women, being the object of the gaze, their own or another’s, is formative. As John Berger observed in 1972, “*Men act and women appear*” (p. 47, emphasis in original). The objectifying gaze as feminist film theorists defined it with reference to psychoanalytic theory in the 1970s challenged artists who wanted to

represent a female subject, always threatening to undermine subjectivity by reducing her again to a body. A generation of feminist artists in the 1970s, including sculptors Harmony Hammond and Hannah Wilke explored tactility as a strategy to explore feminine subjectivity and sexual desire, and to avoid objectifying and exploitative gazes (Thompson 2006; Thompson 2008). Stein also emphasizes tactility in these figurative pieces but with a different aim, to draw attention to the body’s surface. Body image, gender identity, and sexuality are all inscribed and inflected at the level of skin in *The Fluidity of Gender*.

The patched and creased surfaces of the *Fluidity of Gender* series are metaphors for lived experience’s marks on the body, which consequently influence body image. The past life of the leather used to make the *Fluidity of Gender* is everywhere evident as a metaphor for experience and the way it literally inscribes the body. The original uses are visible, as in the hand bag straps on the backs of *MascuFem 681* (2010) and *Defender 696* (2010; Fig. 1), the collar on *MascuFem 681*, and the epaulettes on *GenderBend 682* (2010). The zippers are particularly suggestive. In some pieces, such as *On Alert 691* (2010),



Fig. 1 Linda Stein, *In Charge 964*, front view. 2010. Leather, metal, mixed media. 37"×20"×16". Photo courtesy of Linda Stein

they decorate and animate the leather surface with silver or gold-toned toothed lines. Other zippers seem to show how a piece was assembled: *Honor Guard 688* (2010) zips all the way down the front median that defines the lateral halves, and the curves along the sides of a breast and buttock in *GenderBend 682* are outlined by zippers. The traces of former functionality are like scars or tattoos that keep the past in the present mind. Such marks have functioned in many different cultures and subcultures as signs of adulthood, accomplishment, and beauty. Stein's figurative sculptures allude to ordeals endured, from which one emerges healed and stronger.

On the other hand, scars mar the body in a cultural context that values corporeal integrity. They are signs of morbidity. There is a trace of abjection connected to scars inasmuch as they are reminders of the body's insides, the viscera and fluids that must at all costs be sealed out of sight. Clothing and cosmetics cover scars so that they are almost never seen in public; television personality Padma Lakshmi's seven-inch scar on her upper arm, from a childhood automobile accident, doubly qualifies her as brave in her audience's eyes: for having endured the trauma that caused it, and for refusing to cover it up. Stein's sculptures likewise represent integrity in the form of a refusal to conceal marks that distance the figures from culturally ideal flawlessness.

Stein represents the body as fragile yet resilient, cut and mended. Other artists have made bodily transformation the subject of their work. Jo Spence in her photographs titled "The Picture of Health?" (1990) and Yvonne Rainer in her film *MURDER and murder* (1996) reflect on their experience of breast cancer and its treatment. Their body image and sense of self shifted irrevocably with their diagnoses. Women may be used to "watch[ing] themselves being looked at," in the words of art critic John Berger (1972, p. 47), but suddenly breast cancer subjected Spence and Rainer to the invasive and uncomfortable looks of the mammogram and the needle biopsy. How to retain autonomy over one's body during cancer treatment is part of the literature to which patients have access on the Internet and in hospital brochures. Spence and Rainer, blessedly free of pink ribbons, control how they will be seen and by whom. In Stein's *GenderBend 682*, zippers like sutures can be found where scars from breast, heart, or lung surgery would be. But dramatic as disease and medical intervention may be, a still greater range of experiences that shape body image is suggested by the metal plates for a printing press, straps, buckles, toy soldiers, and jewelry that the artist has also incorporated. With these allusive details, Stein invokes the body as playful, functional, and adorned, all of which contribute to a flexible and resilient body image.

One of Stein's subtexts, shared by Rainer and Spence, is that one can control how experience influences body image

through representational strategies. The zippers, embossing, and visible seams in Stein's sculptures bring to mind the self-selected marks, such as tattoos, piercings, and other ornaments by which an individual preemptively inscribes her body and resists objectification, paradoxically by attracting it. Women are culturally aligned with the body; adornments that draw the gaze to the body emphasize that fact so that it may be critically addressed. This is a strategy of self-representation as parody, along the lines of young gay and lesbian activists reclaiming the word "queer," because initially at least body art appears only to reinforce marginalization through ready identification as the Other. The parody in which Stein's sculptures participate is an overstatement of aggressive sexuality through the black leather medium that represents body and clothing at once. Photographer Catherine Opie exaggerates Stein's gambit in a 1994 self-portrait that also features black leather and offers an extreme example of inscription and resistance. Opie wears black leather S&M gear and bleeds from cuts in her flesh, references to a sexual subculture that remains oblique in Stein's black leather assemblages. Her bare arms have been pierced multiple times by metal spikes, and her bare chest has the word "pervert" carved into it. Opie has taken an epithet intended to wound and ostracize by inscribing her as a sexual Other, and literally incorporated it into her self-presentation, cutting it into her skin above a decorative design of scrollwork and curlicues. When she made another self-portrait 10 years later, holding her son tenderly while nursing him, the faint scars from the earlier cutting are still legible on her skin. Pleasure and pain converge in sexual role playing of dominance and submission, and in childbirth. In these photographs, Opie establishes identities that according to gender and sexual stereotypes are mutually exclusive, mother and sexual outlaw. Yet both are clearly visible in the 2004 photograph: her body has been touched, her experience shaped, her body image altered. Stein's sculptures likewise undermine gender and sexual stereotypes with the rich associations that her medium elicits, which the artist enhances with prominent but non-functional straps, buckles, and zippers. Their content is only implicitly sexual and needs further explication.

Inasmuch as Stein's chosen medium is a suggestive reference to lesbian, gay, and queer sexual subcultures, this series of sculptures represents diverse and complex trajectories of desire. Stein's sculptures as noted above awaken in the viewer a desire to touch them, and sensuality is a powerful component of the aesthetic pleasure they offer. As Opie's 1994 self-portrait illustrates, black leather has a strong association with sado-masochistic sex. Nancy Grossman's *Head* (1968) and Robert Mapplethorpe's *X Portfolio* (1978) are earlier instances of artworks that used black leather to represent a sexualized exercise of power. While according to

Stein none of these artists influenced her directly, there is a hint of a representation of sexual outlaws in her work as well, which introduces the issue of sexual desire to 2gender identity. Desire cuts across gender, according to Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender* (2004): gender identity is not predictive of sexual object choices.

In *The Practice of Love* (1994), Teresa de Lauretis theorizes lesbian sexuality as a “perverse desire” organized on fetishes for the lost or forbidden female body. Clothing and costume, she writes, have tremendous significance within lesbian subcultures as metonyms for the female body. They not only signify subcultural identity, but as fetishes are the very sites of lesbian desire; without them, “the lesbian lovers would be simply, so to speak, two women in the same bed” (de Lauretis 1994, p. 243). The suggestion of toughness and dominance that black leather carries is a masculine code and sign of lesbian desire, because masculinity correlates to desire for the female body (de Lauretis 1994). Stein’s sculptures do not wear leather, rather it constitutes their surface which is thus inscribed with both gender and sexuality. Black leather wear also has strong associations with 1970s gay male clone culture, which was organized around highly elaborate sexual rituals, as sociologist Martin Levine and art critic Douglas Crimp have documented (Levine 1998; Crimp 2002). Gay male sexuality, as encoded and enacted by clones, was in activist John Preston’s words, “a celebration of the male body which is not dependent upon the denigration of the female body” (1997, p. 518).

The queerness discernible in “The Fluidity of Gender” presses Stein’s implicit call to arms against gender constrictions and constructions beyond what she accomplished with her *Knights* series. Her decision to use leather as the primary medium is crucial in this regard because of the way it becomes a metaphor for lived experience and references sexual subcultures. Her *Knights* were far more chaste, as befits gallants whose vocation was to protect the weak and defenseless. By representing these other subjectivities and yearnings through her sculptures’ surfaces, Stein opens a conduit to a diverse gender politics that accommodates desire in all its variety of expressions. As Butler writes, with some optimism, such a sexual politics can produce more inclusive social conditions to resist assimilation to constrictive gender constructions (2004).

Stein reimagines the body as a site where gender and sexuality are in constant flux, and body image cannot be fixed but rather accommodates change and fantasy.

The *Fluidity of Gender* series addresses the ways that experiences of gender influence body image. They operate by making visible how gender is encoded on the body: because Stein deliberately makes her figures androgynous, the viewer becomes acutely aware of his or her expectation that the represented body’s gender will be legible. Stein suggestively brings to the surface the means of gender’s inscription on the body. Because the artist literally inscribes her sculptures with zippers, pockets, and embossing over every inch of them, the viewer may recognize how often are hidden the traces of experience that mark the body. Viewing Stein’s sculptures is an iteration of gender performance, but one in which the viewer becomes critically conscious of his or her assumptions about gender. Thus the *Fluidity of Gender* series offers alternative models of gender ideals, and a means by which gendered body image may be transformed.

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