

## Why I Make Machete Blade Sculpture:

# My Blades Are My Bodyguards

By Linda Stein

Yes, I do machete blade sculpture. And, my, the comments it triggers. "What's a nice, pretty girl doing, messing around with knives?" "Why don't you do something less threatening?" "I'm not going to fool around with you!"

And then the inevitable question: "How did you ever get into doing art with machete blades?" Well, it's a multifaceted story and I don't have all the answers, but I'll lay bare what I know or can guess.

During the '80s, I was producing a sculpture series called *Scepters* — fantasy tools and ritual objects of an imaginary civilization, accompanied by a "history" that I invented to go along with each piece. Hung from the walls or free-standing, these sculptures were meant to be handled in ceremony or dance.

I came to this series having always loved tools and hands-on utilitarian objects, especially those with embedded fragments that might reveal time or place. Created with an imaginary function in mind, these art pieces were akin to the tools that I loved. It was rebellious, especially a decade ago, to like tools as much as I did; they were a male domain. Nonetheless, I pursued this theme, exhibiting my scepters across the country and abroad.

One day in 1989, walking along Canal Street in Manhattan, I saw a barrel full of machete blades for sale. I was intrigued. The blade seemed to have an internal attraction for me — but as what? As a symbol of power? Hey, I'm the same person who jogs around ants in the road and would never go to a boxing match, much less grab a knife to threaten someone.

discussed safety issues in the Big Apple. How late at night should a woman ride the subway? (Our answer: 8 p.m.) What is the best nighttime street posture for a woman walking alone? (Walk briskly with a countenance of determination, preferably in the gutter and not near doorways.)

I continued to work with the machete. I filed its edge until it became dull. I removed its handle, and instead fused the steel with large, soft curves of wood. Sometimes I suspended a finished sculpture from the ceiling so it could gently sway and turn. Was I reversing the destructive potential of the blade?

### Dream Interpretation

At gallery events, I began to moderate panel discussions with psychologists, experts on aggression, security police, religious authorities, and counselors to battered women in an attempt to address violence and the fear of it in our lives, particularly women's lives. I sought the comfort of dialogue, and invited viewers to become involved in my work by completing the phrase "These blades make me feel . . ." I framed and hung these written responses in subsequent gallery exhibitions.

I didn't realize it then, but my obsession could be traced back to childhood dreams of being chased and threatened. In these recurring and frightening dreams, I sometimes found myself being cut rhythmically. I couldn't prevent it or defend myself.

It seems that incorporating the blade into my art translated in my mind as doing now what I couldn't do then. By fusing the wood and blade into a single form, I was fusing the terrifying threat of the steel blade with my childhood



*Self Portrait with Blades* (1993), a photomontage series to include portraits of notorious people holding blades.

Linda Stein Photo

childhood fears, but this time from a place of strength.

My blades have become my bodyguards.

♦  
Linda Stein, who writes artist profiles for *The Independent*, is currently exhibiting through *A Tale of Two Cities*. The more difficult the tape, the better it works for me because my mind is totally absorbed. Only when I have to decide on a change of direction in the sculpture do I shut off the tape and pay total attention to the process. Otherwise, I'm on automatic.

I tend to agree now with Arlene Raven, author and writer for *The Village Voice*, who observed that my blades are a symbol of my artistic liberation as a woman — adventuring into the "forbidden" with tools and materials

## A World Of Opposites

Yet I began to experiment with the blade in my sculpture. I became preoccupied with combining the steel with curvilinear pieces of wood, so that the two disparate elements unified into one. That same year I was asked to be in an exhibition called "Badgirls," curated by Corinne Robins. I was encouraged to make an outrageous sculpture, and the theme of the machete fit right in. When the exhibit closed, 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 with the machete's long, slow curve. It was different than any other knife. Its duality held my fascination: hard, cold, strong steel yielding to its own soft, curving shape. It embodied an androgynous, sensuous combination of opposites: power/vulnerability, masculinity/femininity, aggression/passivity.

In retrospect, I realize that my fascination with these opposites occurred again and again throughout my career. Even as a painter, when I developed a semi-abstract series of facial profiles, I heightened the distinction between the angularly and strength of the nose as compared to the voluptuousness of the lips and chin.

Moreover, another psychological factor was at work. Violence seemed to be breaking out all over. The Gulf War was imminent, and newspapers reported daily on conflicts overseas. Media attention was focusing on crime in the streets, which was at a peak. Concerned by the growing number of women being murdered, raped, and battered, my friends and I repeatedly

to unlearn someone.  
form. I was fusing the terrifying threat of the steel blade with my childhood need for warmth and cradling as revealed in the softly-shaped wood. The addition of the wood was very important to me; remember, Freud related wood to mother.

Has the machete become a symbol of what frightened me as a young girl, or of my fear itself? Is it an extension of my anger for having been intimidated by the bad guys, trying to catch me and hurt me? Does my bending and twisting of the blade in my sculpture exorcise my Kafkaesque dream script and my inability to fight back?

Interpretations come after the fact and, of course, one can only guess at meanings. When I'm creating a piece, I just work with the materials and my unconscious guides me. I use an acetylene torch to bend the machete and I integrate it with other objects, tools, or even musical parts. As I work, I forget it's a blade and simply relate to the forms and textures.

I embed calligraphic printing plates, bone, rock, or different metals into my sculpture and try to fuse them together so the finished piece looks as though I just found it that way.

## Of Hand and Heart

The work has a pull-push tension. The intent is to welcome and draw the viewer in with the sensual forms and playful details, and at the same time to startle and intimidate with the seriousness and strength of the sculpture.

The results are similar to how we may be in our personal 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.

"Forbidden" with tools and materials and a force once considered male. I guess I am reliving and relieving my