

The Power to Create, Survive, Act

by RAHEL MUSLEAH

herself feels especially powerful in “W 629,” dominated by a Winnebago hubcap around the abdomen.

The “Knights” series scrambles expectations of power and vulnerability, masculinity and femininity, and what it means to be a warrior or peacemaker. It was partially born out of Stein’s traumat-



Linda Stein

Linda Stein’s art is meant to be worn. But hers are hardly ordinary garments. Stein crafts suits of armor suggestive of the female body. She fashions them from metals, bits of urban debris, acrylicized paper, wood and found objects from garage sales: magnesium printing plates, security badges, flattened silver pillboxes, brass numbers from laundromats. Put on one of Stein’s “Knights” (many encircle the body with velcro straps), look in the mirror, and the updated classical torsos embrace the wearer with an empowering feeling of protection, strength and vitality. “Knight at Ease 652,” a 3-D sculpture of black leather, metals and zippers, exudes a potent authority. Stein



ic experience on 9/11. When the planes exploded into the World Trade Center, she was working nearby in her studio. Running north holding hands with her studio assistants, she witnessed the towers’ collapse. Two months later, following major surgery, Stein fainted and fell in her bathroom. “It was only for a brief moment,” she recalls. “I fell straight down, not atilt: simply, quietly, softly onto one knee. No damage. No panic. But as I fell, I was aware, at my core, of being the Twin Tower, as I had seen it neatly disappear in its vertical descent.”

When Stein returned to her studio eight months after 9/11, the abstract

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Above: Linda Stein wears a suit of armor from her “Knights” series. Left: Stein’s “Coat Rack Installation with Two Sculptures, ‘Silver Knight 666’ and ‘Knight of New Thoughts 667,’ 2009.”

sculptures she had been creating took on figurative forms. “It was a complete surprise to me,” says Stein. “As I looked

at these figures with curiosity and wonder, I said, ‘What am I doing? I’m a peacemaker! I jog around anthills! Are these women warriors?’” Stein realized she was creating a fearless manifestation of herself to combat her vulnerability.

Her process of reflection brought Wonder Woman to mind. The 1941 Amazon comic-book heroine, a guardian of justice, combined power and compassion. “She never killed,” says Stein. “She confronted the bad guys, using her indestructible bullet-deflecting bracelets and magic lasso that bound people to tell the truth. I loved that. One wonders how she did this wearing a swimsuit. But she was the least sexist of the superheroes and the least violent.” Stein began incorporating Wonder Woman icons into her body-guard figures, imagining the heroine’s thoughts about today’s world. “What defines bravery? What makes a hero?” one bubbled reflection reads.

She has since added two other symbols of female protection: Princess Mononoke, the Japanese anime environmental warrior; and Kannon (or Quan-Yin), an Asian goddess of mercy and compassion. “Swords to plowshares: This is what my work is all about,” she says.

Stein agreed to be filmed for Sasha Baron Cohen’s film, “Borat,” because he said he was exposing anti-Semitism, racism and homophobia. Incensed by his anti-feminist comments and behavior, she threw him out of her studio and now uses him as an anti-hero in her sculpture.

Stein was always sensitive to issues of discrimination, gender and power. Her father, who left Germany when he was a child, recounted being beaten up and called a “goddam Jew” as well as other instances of anti-Semitism. Growing up in the Bronx, Stein had recurring dreams of running away from danger. In one, she escaped electrocution at the hand of the Nazis only because she had “electric

cal insurance.” For a long time, she says, she signed her pieces “Linda J” (J is the initial of her middle name), both because she was afraid her obviously Jewish last name would hurt her artistic advancement

and because she was “waiting for a husband to give me a last name and a life.” As an adolescent, she says, “I turned myself inside out to be feminine and girly.” She was an exceptional athlete, but always made sure the boys won.” Practicing deference began to grate on her. With determination, therapy, and the support of friends and feminist writers, she learned to express herself and fulfill her potential, strength and Jewishness. Today, she is a member of the Veteran Feminists of America and takes pride in being a Jew. Stein’s sculptural knights help her internalize protection. “They make me feel stronger,” she says, “so that I can be whoever I am.”

Stein has founded the nonprofit corporation “Have Art: Will Travel” to encourage “constructive male/female gender roles leading to parity, protection and peace.” She views HAWT as a “laboratory of social change” and dialogue through exhibitions, readings, videos, lectures, interactive performances and collaborative associations with art experts. (See her Web sites www.lindastein.com and www.haveartwilltravel.org.)