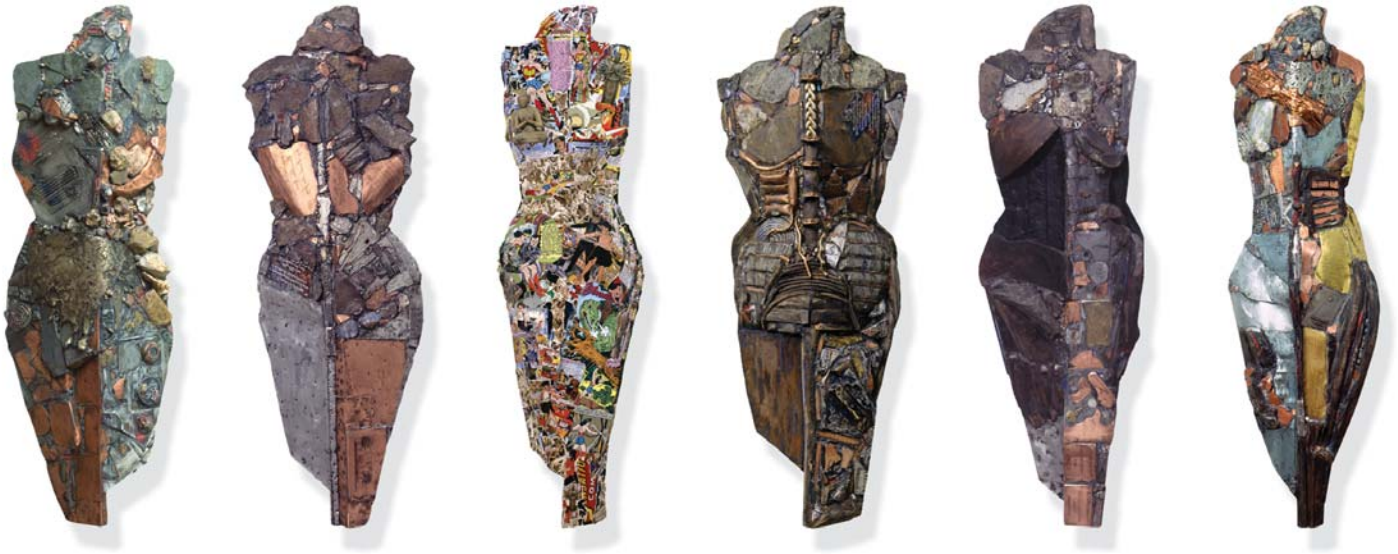


How Linda Stein's Knights Safeguard Our Days

When new firefighters were hired in New York in the months following September 11, out of 600 recruits, only one was a woman. The sculpture of Linda Stein imagines a corrective to the peculiar masculinization of protection that resulted from the attacks on the World Trade Center. Her larger-than-life forms resemble armor but they are made of materials that tell other stories than those of war. She calls them *Knights*, hailing back to an era of ritualized relations between protectors and those they championed. In Stein's work, however, the bodies under the shields are decidedly female.

Of course, a good many medieval and Renaissance literary works relayed the surprising news that female bodies could be hidden beneath steel armor and chainmail. Sometimes those bodies belonged to women who were fighting to protect their male lovers, and sometimes they belonged to androgynous warriors who could not be held back by social conventions. Armor does not, in these texts, necessarily masculinize its wearer. Rather, it frequently places her, like Joan of Arc, "beyond sexuality" and out of reach of gender constructions. It responds to trauma by imagining safety—even from the constraints of being male or female.

Stein's recent series of "bodyguards" insist on their femaleness, however, not just through their curves, but through the connections forged in the materials out of which they are made: salvaged objects and calligraphic plates, fragments of wood splintered into the soft copper on which one can still read, backwards, the traces of invitations to weddings, christenings, anniversary festivities.

Shaman
2006
wood, metal, stone
49" × 16" × 8"

Stein's fantasy figures salvage debris, as if from wrecked buildings. Stein creates female shapes that protect other dreams than the ones the mass media have been relaying. Pieces of domestic life—keys, buttons, belt buckles, broom bristles—have been fused with metal and wood in Stein's *Knights*. Burnished copper and nickel conspire with pebbles and beach wood, but when you look closer, you'll find that some of that metal is someone's lost license plate, a relic from a car that may have long ago rusted out in the northeastern winter.

There is an irony to the way Stein folds these fragments of people's lives into her fantasies of protection for a world after 9/11: the intaglio plates of a business she once ran full-time work here like found objects, even ruins of a world whose celebratory messages hold no more meaning. The people who commissioned these hand-printed announcements long ago agreed that their stories would become part of Stein's sculpture, but one can't help imagining the fragility of the lives

in which such important moments were marked with ceremonial writing.

Where today are the parents of the child whose birth is heralded on one piece of metal? What has become of the fiancé of the woman whose parents announced her upcoming marriage? Where were they on September 11? Did they run uptown too, like Stein, away from her studio in Tribeca? Were they covered with white ash like the figures in the photographic images from that morning taken by Susan Meiselas and Gilles Peress? Did they know any of the people whose faces lined storefronts in lower Manhattan for days after the towers fell, their names slowly fading with the rain? Or were they, like nearly 2,300 men and 700 women, among those who perished in the tragedies of those days? Rescue became a male occupation in the days and weeks after 9/11, or so the news media seemed to think.

Knight of Tomorrow
2007, bronze
78" x 25" x 14"
Adelphi University 2008-2010
Biennial. Garden City,
New York

Erasing the presence of hundreds of female first-responders—doctors, nurses, paramedics, ambulance drivers, search-and-rescue workers, emergency operators, firefighters, policewomen, and security officers—the press focused on male heroes and insisted, if poignantly, on the tragedy of nearly 400 male New York Fire Department workers who lost their lives in the collapse of the towers. Three women responders died, one of them a policewoman who had just helped hundreds to safety.

The reluctance of the news media to celebrate the women on the scene in the days after the tragedy had parallels, scholars and journalists have pointed out, in the run-up to war by an administration obsessed with cowboy rhetoric and militaristic jingoism. Americans were being told they needed fathers, brothers, men with guns, guys with a mission, shock and awe. Women shied away from the impending war, supporting the action 20 percent less than their male counterparts. But the news media didn't stop telling them they needed a hero with testosterone and bulging muscles, at the very least keeping watch in their local firehouse or excavating the ruins of Ground Zero.

— Jann Matlock

Excerpted from "Vestiges of New Battles: Linda Stein's Sculpture after 9/11" an insightful essay by Jann Matlock in Feminist Studies, *(Vol.33, No.3 www.feministstudies.org). Matlock is a senior lecturer in the Department of French at the University College London where her research and teaching center around visual representation and cultural history between 1789 and the present. She has written two films for the Musée du Louvre and is the author of* Before the Voyeur *and is completing another book,* Pilfered Letters from the Archive.

Vital & Vulnerable

Living and working in Tribeca, sculptor Linda Stein found herself in a disaster zone on September 11, 2001. Residents of lower Manhattan were horrified as office workers fell from the flaming World Trade Towers. Stein was evacuated from her studio, and not able to return for several months. Not surprisingly, her sculpture has taken a new and very dramatic direction since 9/11. Armored figures have appeared in her art—not the "knights of yore," but female warriors as symbols of protection in an increasingly hostile environment. Like classical torsos; they are sculptural fragments in the tradition of the Venus de Milo. Such ancient figures convey strength and vitality within the body trunk itself. Stein's figures are similarly powerful. Encrusted with materials such as wood, metal and stone, her sculptures have a dazzling visual effect. One figure in wood seems to hold up her arms in a protective position across her upper body. Others fuse leather and fiber with dynamism and force. Stein has incorporated many materials: copper, brass, steel wire, wood, metal pipes, and stone fragments. There is a suggestion of the rubble from fallen buildings, or debris resulting from an explosive force, that has been appropriated to arm these figures. Script, coins, hardware, and calligraphic plates are also to be found, and these elements suggest an emerging life—a strength that is salvaged from the ruins.

Larger than life, Stein's figures are both vital and vulnerable. While they convey femaleness, some with breasts and curving torsos, they are monumentally postured and unyielding. Their protective body empowers them, and assures these remarkable images a continuing relevance in our world.

—Joan Marter

Joan Marter is a professor of art history at Rutgers University and the author of several books, including Alexander Calder and Theodore Roszak: The Drawings.

The Power to Protect

Linda Stein's sculpture series, Knights, *represents her feminist, anti-war position. The heroic torsos respond to war and contemporary culture's testosterone overload, by scrambling expectations of power and vulnerability; masculinity and femininity; warrior and peacemaker. Embedding images and words in her archetypal sculpture, Stein draws comparisons to the comics of Wonder Woman, the animé of Princess Mononoke, and the Asian goddess of compassion Kuan-yin/Kannon. These figures from popular culture and religion have a special meaning for Stein; as symbols of protection, they represent the major theme of her art since the 1980s. Stein's sculpture can be seen as both a call to action and an invitation to contemplation.*

"After 9/11, it took a year before I started making sculpture again," Stein said. "At first it seemed as if I were continuing from where I left off. But that wasn't so because my abstract work was gravitating me toward the figurative. I didn't see the very gradual formation of a torso, the expansion of pelvis and hips, the introduction of breasts.

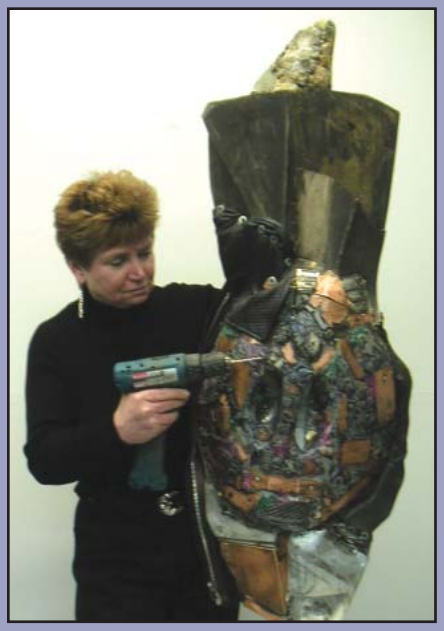
"It took three years to realize the sculptural form I was now creating had become a female Knight, a warrior woman with a combination of antithetical qualities: power/vulnerability; masculinity/femininity; warrior/peacemaker. By scrambling expectations of the masculine—the strong, the fighter—I was attempting to ask questions, agitate, alarm, and arouse a visceral response in myself and in my viewers. I didn't specifically gender the work…it seems my torsos were meant to transcend gender.

"My *Knights* began to communicate with me. I felt they assured me protection. They would watch, and wait, and prevent any attack. They became my bodyguards. Intellectually, there was something about these *Knights* that gave me pause. How could I create them as warriors when I felt they were symbols of pacifism? How, I wondered, could they be fighters in battle when they represented to me everything that cried out for peace?"

Masculinity, Femininity, Collaboration

Remember the mockumentary *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*? There was a scene where Sacha Baron Cohen, playing the title character, is insulting women. During the "interview," in an artist's studio, one of the women tries to set him straight. Linda Stein was the artist and the studio was hers. And she was the one who walked out in the middle of filming when Borat's insults crossed the line.

Stein, who serves on the board of Veteran Feminists of America, has been a decades-long professional artist, currently represented by the Flomenhaft Gallery in New York City. "I really thought I was going to help women in Third World countries," Stein recalled, referring to *Borat*. Film representatives had duped her, suggesting she would be part of a film on the plight of women. According to Stein, Baron Cohen's characterization of Borat as a "tool" designed to expose and challenge racism, homophobia and sexism missed the mark. "He may have done better with homophobia and racism, but he just didn't do very well with sexism," she says, referencing some of the e-mails she received following the incident. One, she says, was representative: "What's the matter with you feminists? Don't you have any sense of humor about misogyny?" Stein later included Baron Cohen in a series called "Anti-hero/Hero" in which the actor appears under-endowed, wearing a thong.



Linda Stein

Her brush with a kind of fame one could do without notwithstanding, Stein is encouraged by the possibility for women and men collaborating on issues related to gender justice. Since 9/11, her work shifted to reflect the fragility of life, including a series of "Knights," figures who have, Stein says, "the inspirational power to protect."

Unlike male knights going off to battle, Stein's figures are, according to art historian Dr. Joan Marter, "both vital and vulnerable."

Stein's interest in themes of masculinity and femininity led her to launch a public conversation series last February, "Masculinity/Femininity," at her studio exhibition space in Tribeca in lower Manhattan. "I'd read a commentary by *Voice Male* editor Rob Okun written for Women's eNews about men benefiting from women gaining full equality," Stein recalled, "and I realized that instead of giving a single artist's talk during a recent exhibition, I'd rather do it as a dialogue with Rob."

The gathering in February paired Stein and Okun in Stein's packed studio-exhibition space. Stein shared several scenarios describing male behavior and asked Okun to comment. A lively Q and A ensued with an audience that ranged from women in their 20s to men in their 70s. Another public conversation, in April, was scheduled as a dialogue between Stein and Michael Kimmel, professor of sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and author of a number of books on masculinity.

Stein's female *Knights* (three larger-than-life bronze sculptures) have been chosen as the central sculpture commission for the $4 million "Walk of the Heroines" at Portland State University in Oregon. She is represented by Flomenhaft Gallery, in New York City's Chelsea district and Longstreth Goldberg in Naples, Fla. To learn more about her work, visit www.lindastein.com.