

SCULPTOR
LINDA
STEIN'S

WARRIOR Wwomen

THE SAFETY OF OBJECTS

By Robin Gelfand

Call it a prophecy, call it a coincidence, but ever since childhood, artist Linda Stein has sensed impending doom. It came at first in the form of a recurring dream in which she would be running, then hiding, from a nameless, faceless threat. In 2001, it came in the form of a horrific reality, as she ran northward from her downtown studio in lower Manhattan, away from the collapse of the Twin Towers.

That perpetual sense of vulnerability, of her safety and well-being placed in constant jeopardy, seems an awfully heavy burden for one woman to carry, but Stein did not carry it alone. Through her art, particularly her sculpture, she created her own "bodyguards" using nothing but her hands and her imagination. In doing so, she built a fortress of protection around herself, giving her a feeling of refuge from a world spinning out of control.

The remarkable thing is, she didn't realize the meaning behind what she was doing until years later. The abstract work Stein had created prior to 9/11, and even afterwards, began to take on the figurative forms that are recognized and celebrated today as her "Knights."

The armor they wear is a conglomeration of metals: aluminum, copper, zinc, or magnesium, and familiar objects such as coins, keys, jewelry, even flattened license plates. It evokes what you might see underneath your feet walking down a city street, fragments of everyday urban life that have been forever preserved in the pavement. "You know when you walk in the tar gutter? There are just all kinds of things that have been squashed into the sidewalks or tar gutters by cars and trucks in New York. I like that embedded feeling," says Stein. The bodies of her Knights range from the androgynous to the distinctly female, but one thing they all have in common is their resolve. The Knights possess a quiet strength, sending a clear message to would-be provokers that they are not to be messed with.





It was a year after 9/11 that Stein was able to return to her studio and resume her work. It was three years after 9/11 that she had a revelation. "I said to myself: 'These are warriors. Why am I doing warriors? I'm a pacifist. When I jog, I jog around anthills.'" She was perplexed by the paradox of why a woman of such gentle nature like herself would create sculpture associated with war. Oddly, it was a fictitious warrior, a comic book superhero, who helped her make sense of it all. It came to her that her art was somehow connected to Wonder Woman. "Wonder Woman was strong and powerful, she was here to save people from the bad guys, and then I said 'that's what these represent to me.' Then I realized all my work over the last 30 years was about protection."

Reflecting back on her work, Stein further uncovered the common thread, from her "Ceremonial Scepters" series in the eighties, to her "Machetes" in the nineties, right up to the "Knights" in the new millennium. "They were all about protection and that came as a surprise to me," she says. Her moment of clarity launched a further exploration of this theme, one that took her on a journey to other cultures. Stein found the counterpart to the popular American female iconic hero, Wonder Woman, all the way on the other side of the world. She had traveled to Japan with colleague Dr. Helen Hardacre, the Reischauer Institute Professor of Japanese Religions and Society at Harvard University, where they led a tour for the Harvard

Alumni Association, lecturing on the arts and culture of the country. It was there that Stein discovered Princess Mononoke, a Japanese animated character, a warrior girl who fought for the preservation of the environment as fearlessly as Wonder Woman fought for justice. In Mononoke, Stein recognized a profound connection to her sculpture, to her self-made personification of good over evil, and this recognition helped deepen her understanding of her own work.

Still, these two warrior women weren't enough for the artist. She felt a need for a third icon, one that was rooted more firmly in history than the other two more contemporary figures. Stein's search, and research, for such an archaic figure

led her to Kannon, the Japanese goddess of mercy and compassion. The circle was complete. Stein had her third Warrior Woman, her third embodiment of safety and protection, and finally, had a solid point of reference that enabled her to proceed with her art.

"When I came back, I had this desire to work only in wood, and pieces like this started coming out," says Stein, lifting a sculpture of contorted branches that almost resembles a giant snowshoe, off the wall of the Nathan D. Rosen Museum at the Jewish Community Center of Boca Raton where her show was on exhibition earlier this year. "Then I said, 'What is happening now? Am I going into a different series? Is it no longer female knights and warrior women?' Then some-

one came to the studio and said 'Gee, that looks like Japanese armor' and it was continuation of the same theme." The "armor" so happens to be almost Stein's precise height, a fact that the artist says was "unconscious" but is in perfect keeping with the central themes of safety and protection.

mate where the world is blowing up in front of our faces? And they're just very strong and steady. And they just say to me: 'Keep going. Do what you're doing. You're doing okay.'" They offer her reassurance, and tell her that she, too, is a warrior woman.

Through her Knights, she derives strength, and strength is just what it took to face off with Borat. Yes, Linda Stein appeared (unbeknownst to her until someone recognized her in the trailer) in the recent runaway box office sensation, "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." Under the pretense of filming a documentary to help third-world women, Stein fell victim to the character, who had selected her due to her place on the board of directors of the Veteran Feminists of America, not to mention her being an easy target since she admittedly never watches television and had thus never heard of Borat, Ali G, or Sacha Baron Cohen. It was Stein who threw him out of her studio following a series of insults and inappropriate comments.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Linda Stein's sculpture is the dichotomy of power and vulnerability. Take the "Machete" series, for example. Some of the blades appear to float harmlessly in midair. "First you think maybe it's a musical note, and then, you're like, oh, it's a machete blade," says Stein. "I think there's something there that says, 'Just don't hurt me.'" Then there's Double Circle, which at first looks like a weapon until Stein picks it up and draws an imaginary circle in the imaginary dirt below her feet. Now it seems more like a tool, made from stone and moose antlers. "In my mind it was made by a lost civilization. Everything within the circle would be safe and protected."

The juxtaposition is also evident in her figures, like Knight Adagio, where some parts protrude to show aggression, and others are recessed as though shrinking from conflict. "It's a desire for power, being in control, and also feeling vulnerable. And I like to express both parts of that in my sculpture," explains Stein.

The former owner of a calligraphy business, Stein's fascination with writing finds its way into her sculpture through her use of printing plates, brass or copper dies that might have been used

for wedding announcements and such in the past. She calls those pieces "Glyphs," because the word represents ancient writings. The words on the plates are reversed (in their original intended use, they would have been pressed onto paper to appear correctly) and the fact that this makes them difficult to read pleases her. "I love the backward illegibility of the work," Stein says. "It's very interesting to me to have fragments of writing, glyphs. You see some kind of archetypal writing but you can't make out what it is."

Though the words pressed into the Knights' "bodies" don't clearly express what's on their minds, Stein says they do, indeed, speak to her when she talks to them. "I ask my Knights, 'Can you really protect us?' or 'What would you do in today's political cli-

