



# Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Rich, and the Feminist Superhero

*Voice, Vision, Politics, and Performance in  
U.S. Contemporary Women's Poetics*

*Edited by* LAURA HINTON  
*With art by* LINDA STEIN

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Finally, this book would not have been possible without the creativity, drive and enormous feminist passion of two women—in addition to the two poets we celebrate in this collection. From the moment I first met Linda Stein at her New York-Soho studio more than two years ago, I was enraptured by her stunning, provocative sculptures, encountered as if “standing” along her studio walls. Like shamanistic full-body masks, or living alien beings, Stein’s multimedia sculpture stood like apt sentient listeners as Stein and I conversed about feminism and heroism, female protection of self and others, and discussed her traveling exhibitions and events. It was Stein who first articulated our superhero themes about “fierce females” and “protection” (her terms) so important to this collection’s concepts. Stein’s female-superhero “pantheon,” as she calls it, inspired me as well as the other co-writers here. I thank Stein for our conversations, and her thoughtfully guided introductions to her work—wedged amidst her busy schedule of university lectures, gallery installations, and UN PowerPoint presentations. I also thank Stein’s studio assistant, Dr. Ann Holt, Ph.D., for her assistance during editing and production stages.

My friend and CCNY colleague, the late Jane Marcus, introduced me to Stein’s visual work in 2013; in one of her great flashes of intuition, she suggested that Stein’s art become part of this volume. A Distinguished Professor in modernist literary studies as well as women’s studies at the City University of New York—my colleague there for over two decades—Marcus was asked by me to give a keynote lecture for those Rich Louisville conference panels, on the topic of her 1970–1980s correspondence with Rich. Her health was fragile. Nearly fainting in the Louisville library elevator while I held her orange designer purse, Marcus then proceeded to reject an offered chair in the library auditorium, threw away her notes, and gave an off-the-cuff, completely brilliant and moving lecture that dazzled her audience and left some of us with an eye-glint of tear. Recalling those early years of feminist studies in academia, when women’s-studies scholarship was a new and controversial field, when Third Wave feminism had yet to get its groove and young feminist-socialist critics like Marcus remained unemployed, Marcus also recalled the honest and generous mentoring Rich offered her as a then-budding literary critic of Virginia Woolf. One of the letters from their yet-unpublished correspondence exchange is quoted on our dedication page to Marcus (with thanks to Conrad for permission to reprint it). Marcus did not finish her chapter for this book volume. Instead, she sailed off on a post-retirement cruise around the world with her husband; and somewhere in the South Seas, she then sailed off beyond the earth’s stratosphere. She, too, left us—another feminist hero lost.

—Laura Hinton  
New York City  
October 2015

## Introduction

### *Wondering about the Wonder Women in Contemporary American Feminist Poetry*

Laura Hinton

*the heroine is a figure made of glass at which we each get a turn to throw  
our voices, choose the answer the witnesses and the weapons, our most  
intimate proofs.*

—Erica Hunt, *Arcade*<sup>1</sup>

*I can't use the word "heroine." For me that's the woman tied to the rail-  
road tracks waiting for the hero to come save her*

—Linda Stein on naming her women's tapestry series  
"Holocaust Heroes"<sup>2</sup>

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In the "Bridge" section, our book takes a novel turn, as we invite the book's artist, who is also a published writer, to discuss the uses and meaning of feminist superhero characters in her sculpture and multimedia work. Set amidst our more academically formal essays featuring literary criticism on Rich and Cortez's poetics, Stein's essay is a first-person narrative that tells the story of her "Fierce Females and Icons of Protection," as the essay is titled, and her personal-feminist evolution through art. Our momentary pause in this book's discursive structure, forming a first-person account by a visual artist upon her feminist-superhero pantheon and the concepts they offer, allows us to contemplate the meaning and value of the female superhero from a unique, visually informed perspective. A successful Soho-based New York City artist, Stein has received attention in the media as well as contemporary art scholarship for inventing the avatar-like sculptures that feature Wonder Woman and other feminist-superhero icons emblazoned upon their multimedia "skins." Through Stein's writing in our book's "Bridge," we engage with

those *visual* possibilities of a feminist superhero. Stein's writing about her art reminds us Cortez and Rich were special kinds of innovators, for whom the usual practices of language and discourse were to be continuously reinvented and challenged—a feat Stein has also been achieving in her visual-arts field.

If the dual function of a feminist aesthetic *in both poetry and visual media* is to defend and protect the oppressed while generating original creative work, this duality is certainly at the heart of Stein's multimedia art coupled with her educational lectures based in interactive art events. Stein's essay discusses the origins of her interest in themes of protection, for herself as a woman and her friends due to the high-level of rape statistics in Manhattan during the 1970s and 1980s. Stein talks about her discovery of turning machetes and blades found on the urban streets into curved, abstract sculptures—tools not just of potential defense for women but also useful tools of pleasure and work. She furthermore recounts the effects of 9/11 on her work, how fleeing from the falling World Trade Centers so close to her studio made her sculptural work change; the work over the years following 9/11 became more figural and female-embodied, and gained its female-superhero shapes. Stein sifts through recorded dreams and recalls childhood fears about growing up female in the post-Holocaust era, in a working-class Jewish family residing in the Bronx. She revisits the pain caused by her traditional family's views about women, and suggests that claiming her own sexuality and discovering her bold artistic practice helped heal her past.

Stein's series, *Knights*, begun in 2002, reveal womanly sculptural shapes but also playfully androgynous forms. By 2007, the "knight" sculptures had evolved into actual wearable "armor"-like "suits," which could be donned by studio visitors as well as the audience participants at Stein's developing art-show events. The "skins" of her feminist superhero icons have grown since their earlier creation—incorporating images borrowed from Marsden's original version of Wonder Woman, and also Kannon, the Asian deity of compassion; Lady Gaga, who has campaigned against bullying in schools; Princess Monokoke of Japanese anime fame; Lisbeth Salander of the Stieg Larsson novel and film *Trilogy* series; and Storm, created by Marvel Comics and associated with the X-Men. Most recently, Stein developed a new sculptural tapestry series, which she entitles, *Holocaust Heroes. Fierce Females*. This multimedia series of ten hanging tapestries is composed not only of different fabrics but also photographs, letters, other texts, and found objects from buttons and spoons to calligraphic plates—a series which celebrate the names and stories of mostly unheralded women who valiantly fought in Europe to save Jewish citizens from the Holocaust.

Stein began a unique traveling art-education event program several years ago, through which she uses her art to help transform social stereotypes that

still pervade U.S. society. She also works to educate her audiences about anti-bullying tactics, and to instill pride and self-acceptance for all members of her audiences, reaching out especially to help gays, lesbians, and transgender people. At major colleges and universities, as well as in under-served art communities in rural U.S. regions, Stein has brought her *Fluidity of Gender* lecture and gallery installations through the support of her nonprofit organization, Have Art: Will Travel (HAWT). She discusses her art events further in the "Bridge" essay, and what might occur for a given audience member as she or he puts on one of Stein's gender-ambiguous heroic "breastplates" or body sculptures masks. The poetries of Rich and Cortez hover in the background of Stein's narrative, as women who in different ways also taught about self-acceptance, the fluidity of identity, the problem of violence and discrimination targeted at minority groups, and the call to protect others in society through their political commitments.

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## Fierce Females and Icons of Protection

### *A Feminist Artist and Activist Reflects on Her Journey through Sculpture and Multimedia Installations*

Linda Stein

Bridging two disparate, yet like-minded, poets, I traverse shores that have been alit upon, time and again, for refuge and homecoming. This linkage moves me, as an artist, to reconstruct my own sites of refuge and homecoming, and to reassemble my personal supports that, at times, mirror the ethos of Adrienne Rich and Jayne Cortez. My artistic themes and iconography include a chosen family of female superheroes, religious and pop culture icons, symbols and metaphors of strength and vulnerability. These commingle in my art and with my activist wish to encourage my viewer toward more agency and compassion.

The blend of images paving the way for this section includes four alternations from my artistic series: *Blades*, *Knights of Protection*, *Fluidity of Gender* and *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*. Each series is based on exploring power and vulnerability in relation to masculinity/femininity, safety/danger, aggression/passivity, persecutor/protector. As Rich and Cortez employ words in their search and demand for justice, I use observable tools/weapons, images of fantasy female superheroes, pop culture, and religious icons in my feminist call to action for equality and justice.

As I journey across the landscape between these two uber-women, I convey my own terrain of take-no-prisoners strength and bravery. As I have done for at least four decades, I rely on a pantheon of icons to fortify my art and inspire my activism. As each in their own way joins my family of role models and symbols, I see them as descendants of a common ancestor, with bloodline and lineage tracing back to my own earliest unconscious and unnamed yearnings for feminist egalitarianism.

### THE TOOL/WEAPON AS SYMBOL OF POWER

At the start of the 1990s, New York City was thought to be a place of danger for women. Violence seemed to be breaking out all around. The Gulf War was imminent and newspapers were reporting, daily, on overseas turmoil. Locally, 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 discussed safety threats in the Big Apple: How late at night should a woman ride the subway? *Our answer: 8 P.M.* What street posture should a woman take when walking alone late at night? *Our answer: Walk briskly with a countenance of determination, preferably in the gutter and not near doorways.*

Unexpectedly for me, symbolic protection was found in a barrelful of machete blades offered for sale on Canal Street. I bought these machetes and took them back to my studio to mull over. The *blade* (the term I subsequently chose to use in titles for my sculpture) had an internal attraction for me as a signifier of power. I felt it emitting a warning to those that might hurt me: *Don't come too near, or threaten me, I have these blades to protect me—they are my bodyguards.* Concurrently, I was invited to participate in a group exhibition called *BadGirls*. Curator Corinne Robins had asked several artists to make the most outrageous sculpture possible. The machete blade was just that. I smiled to myself as I thought that a *proper* girl doesn't play with knives. Then I took a leap to another terrain beyond sexist gender constrictions. Mesmerized by the blade's sensual slow curve at its perimeter's tip, I felt it as part of the arsenal missing from my unconscious life. To the question I often received, "What's a pretty girl like you fooling around with knives?" my internal answer was: *Don't mess with me, I have this protection, this threat.*

In working with the machete blade I decided to grind its sharp edge until it was dulled and smooth. I removed its handle and fused the metal of the blade with curvaceous wood forms. Did I choose to work with this potentially lethal weapon so that I could convert the blade from sword to plowshare—bending its cold steel to my will, reforming it into something more graceful? Was my attempt similar to the superhero who converts miscreants into *menschen* with her magic accoutrements? A short video about the machete showing my fingers gliding over the edges of the blade became erotic and hypnotic. In sculptural exhibitions and installations, I attached invisible cords to these sculptures so they could hang from the ceiling and float in air, making it hard for the viewer to discern the blade's presence until close to the art. The blade became my metaphor for power and safety, and it continued throughout the 1990s in various sculptural modes, with series titles such as *Musical Blades* and *Blade Arcs and Bridges*.<sup>1</sup>



*Blades 208*  
(metal, bone, wood, stone, 8' x 9' x 8.5') 1993

It was only after creating many of these sculptures that I could guess at their meaning to me. In an essay published much later I wrote:

My work with the machete provides a means to examine societal notions of gender. I enjoy working *against* association, in that blades are commonly associated with men and violence. In a sense, I am scrambling expectations sculpting a sensuous and androgynous creation no longer capable of destruction. By introducing the machete, best known as a masculine weapon, into a new constructive form, I feel that I am visually controlling violence while allowing the blade to become part of the feminist lexicon of strengths.<sup>2</sup>

Reading two poems by Rich and Cortez, both entitled "Rape," I reflect on my continuous obsession with protection and safety, particularly as a woman. In Rich's poem, she identifies and describes the raped woman's victimhood. She alludes to the cultural training inculcated into female minds through persistent societal instruction: *be afraid, conform, defer, capitulate*. Rich's speaker makes me squirm. I hate submitting to the monstrous power that this poet illuminates. A woman has no choice, the poet's speaker seems to say, but to yield to her aggressor. As I read and reread her poem, I feel myself plunging into a fire beneath the earth, inhabiting a spiritual realm of evil and suffering. It is similar to my experience of reading works by Franz Kafka and Joyce Carol Oates. I have to hold my stomach tightly, grit my teeth, and stiffen my body as I internalize Rich's poem, just as I do when reading works like "Do with Me What You Will" and "The Burrow." But within Rich's poem, different than in those works by Kafka and Oates, there is an added *dare*. The unwritten finale of her poem asks me: *How can you accept these words without ferocious resistance?*

Jayne Cortez's poem, "Rape," follows directly on the heels of that tacit question. Cortez fumes and bursts forth violently and noisily, scattering fragments widely and unapologetically:

What was Inez Garcia supposed to do for  
the man who declared war on her body  
the man who carved a combat zone between her breasts  
Was she supposed to lick crabs from his hairy ass

And what was Joanne Little supposed to do for  
the man who declared war on her life  
Was she supposed to tongue his encrusted toilet stool lips<sup>3</sup>

For me, Inez Garcia and Joanne Little morph into Lisbeth Salander (as portrayed by Swedish actress Noomi Rapace), the protagonist of the Swedish movie version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*.<sup>4</sup> For these females—the

two real-life women Cortez refers to in her poem, and the fictional protagonist based on Stieg Larsson's trilogy—there is an excessive internal pressure buildup within them, brought about by their oppression, which must detonate into a violent explosion of energy. This explosion results in a convulsive *correction* to the evil perpetrated. The villain is vanquished. My choice of Salander as heroic icon, repeatedly called forth in my art, is related both to my blade series and my unconscious longing to internalize the fierceness of both Salander and the machete in order to become my own protector. I needed this to transcend the fears of my childhood and to realize my own efficacy. Perhaps, as observed by Arlene Raven, "blades have become a symbol of my artistic liberation as a woman—adventuring into the forbidden with tools and materials and a force typically considered male."<sup>5</sup>

So these are the questions I join Rich and Cortez in asking: Are only (white) males privileged in having the right to agency and autonomy? Are Salander, Garcia, and Little—and all females forced into this sacrificial gorge of hate and oppression—expected to be passive and accepting when authorities do nothing to stop atrocities? Pacifist that I am, I cannot help but feel satisfaction when I see the enactment of Salander's reckoning: she videotapes her rapist in the act of molestation, returns to him later to make him watch the video, and brands him permanently by burnishing a tattoo including the word "rapist" on his bound body. This is some tough response! I am attracted to this butt-kicking avenger. Moral quandary that she is, ethical dilemma that she may pose, I am nonetheless enthralled by her outstanding intelligence and daring, and feel a cathartic sense of relief.

## A SHIFTING OF GROUND

The image of Salander continues to this day in my art; but by the end of the 1990s, the blade moved to the background as a sculptural motif, and my art became more and more abstract. I enjoyed working non-figuratively with tactile materials and textures until one solitary event with global consequences, forever changed my art and my life. A very different form of violence hit New York City and the country on September 11, 2001. As this day was to affect so many others, it shifted the ground under me, and programmed me to veer off my intended route to another. Only now I was totally cognizant of my obsession with the theme of protection. On that sunny Tuesday morning, I had just finished my daily swim at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. Like so many other New Yorkers, I was beginning my day of work. I had gone to my Tribeca loft on Reade Street and was engaged with my staff. All of a sudden, the police rushed in, evacuated us, and told us to run north

on Church Street. We held hands. Adrenalin-high but calm, like Orpheus, I looked back over my shoulder toward the tower—but instead of seeing Eurydice disappear, my mind's eye etched a very tall vertical rectangle, a monolith, swiftly disappearing straight down, tilt-less, to the earth. I continued running, looking back again to see what I assumed was furniture being thrown from one Trade Tower. Why, I wondered, were they casting out the furniture? Then, I realized that the projectiles were not inanimate.

These hours of running, from before nine in the morning to almost five in the afternoon, presented an exposure of my deepest fears.<sup>6</sup> I remember being low-keyed; perhaps I was numb. My assistant shouted, *Let's run north*, but I answered, *No, they bombed the south, they'll probably bomb the north next*. The ramifications of that day were vast: I didn't live in my apartment for eight months. Dust and debris were everywhere as Tribeca streets filled with people wearing face masks. The National Guard would let no one enter the area without showing identification. I stopped doing sculpture for a year. When I started again, I assumed my art would continue to be non-figurative, only now with a newly desired verticality. But to my surprise, my art took on a bodily form and I saw my creation start to have shoulders, waist, positioning of legs. It became more warrior-like, with echoes of armor and shield. What did this mean? Was I, the pacifist who jogged around anthills, creating aggressive killers? *No!* I was creating defenders, guardians-on-call, symbols that addressed my own, as well as a universal need for a sense of security, safety, protection.

Shortly after that day, I remembered reading Gloria Steinem's book, *Revolution from Within* (1992), in which she asks the reader to think of one word that represents what was most missing from childhood. That word for me was "protection." I ruminated on this word incessantly. I went back and reviewed my twenty-five, one-inch-thick black leather diaries, which I began writing in my early twenties. I saw how the significance of that word informed my early and adult years. The need for security and safety had filled my recurring dreams, especially as a youngster. I ran during entire dreams, away from my persecutors, searching for freedom from danger and injury—which my dreams almost never provided.

Oddly, though the dreams were exhausting, relentless, and frightening, they came to me in a literal form, mixed with humor, and complete with punctuation marks and phrasing. I transcribed them dutifully with a title as spaced numbers representing the date on which each dream occurred to me:

3 9 7 8

*I'm walking down the street and a group of boys try to rape me. I manage to get a pair of scissors, but I'm more frightened by having the scissors than not.*

3 1 2 7 8

*When I'm being chased by military men, I'm Dustin Hoffman—small, frail, on my belly, crawl-running with my horse. If I could attach the rope nearby, the horse might pull me to safety.*

1 0 2 9 9 0

*There is a noise. I go to the door. It is slightly ajar. I have to close it, but as I push against it, I have no strength. Finally I get it to shut, but the huge man is coming in anyway. I'm able to hide under the stairway. Does he see me? Will he hurt me? What happened? It is not that (in the door) there is so much resistance to me. There is hardly any. But, even so, I do not have the strength or power to lock the door. And does a locked door make any difference?*

Within these myriad Kafkaesque dream scenarios, I attempted to escape those who were trying to hurt me. In only one dream do I remember holding what seemed to be an armament, though one which was less than potent. It shot pretzel-like bullets, which were not very effective against an equipped enemy. I had no knowledge of how to reload this pretzel gun in the dream. Regardless, I felt protected in some small way. I had some agency, albeit not much. In yet another dream, I recall having a fully applicable, though quirky, means of defense:

1 1 1 7 2

*The Nazis were rounding up the Jews again. They got me and took me to a room and told me I was going to be, along with the others, electrocuted. "You can electrocute me," I said, "but I want you to know that I have, as I had in the last Holocaust, electrical insurance!"*

Having had these recurring dreams well before September 11th, I experienced a literal, though belated, wake-up call at seeing my worst nightmare unfold: watching the World Trade Center that had loomed so large in the skyline of my Tribeca neighborhood being preemptorily erased. So completely did I internalize its fast downward unswerving *swoosh*, as one tower, then another, disappeared, that two months later, arising in a 3 A.M. semi-somnolence, I unintentionally fell onto one knee, and in my descent veritably *felt like* a falling tower.

During the following year, I stopped making sculpture entirely. I imagined (and sometimes still imagine) tall buildings in front of me going *poof*, as though they could be shot down with the bullet from a handgun. I was curious and confused by my siring of warriors, ostensibly so at variance with my golden-rule makeup and outlook. Unlike other artists who needed no explanation for



the artistic trajectories they took, I required a *raison d'être*, a rationale behind the antithetical and hidden meanings of the art I was creating.

### THE ARRIVAL OF A SUPERHERO

One day, out of the blue, Wonder Woman came to mind. It was as if my family of sculptures, which by then I started calling *Knights of Protection*,<sup>7</sup> had discovered a sibling who might represent all of them as they stood on-call, ready to come to the aid of the weak and downtrodden. With her bullet-proof wrist bracelets, golden magic lasso, and invisible plane, Wonder Woman could take on the bad guys, convert their villainous ways, and steer them onto a path of morality—and do it all without killing. Yes, I thought, *I will absorb her at her feminist “best”, I will bring Wonder Woman into my art as a role model and symbol for protection.*

Wonder Woman's best years, in my view, occurred between 1941 and 1947, when her creator, William Moulton Marston, was writing her comic-book narratives. After Marston's death in 1947, when Wonder Woman morphed into either a more violent superhero or one whose powers were diminished by the 1950s dictates of conventional femininity, I lost interest in her symbolic value. To include Wonder Woman in my art meant I had to hug the road Marston paved in his original stories.

Of course, even at her best, Wonder Woman as a heroic female would make many feminists shriek with dismay. Wonder Woman's conventional heterosexuality—her love of Steve Trevor—may have elicited a response from Rich, who wrote in her classic 1980 essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”—previously discussed by Deborah Mix and Laura Hinton in chapter 2—that such presumed historic conventions are linked to male entitlement and prerogative to occupy, dominate, and possess the female body and soul, those “measures designed to keep women within a male sexual purlieu—the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access.”<sup>8</sup> Taking this one step further, I can imagine a comic book scenario in which Rich tackles Marston to the ground while calling his script an exercise in sexual bondage and objectification. Of course, this is *my own* projection, and not that of the poet. More likely, Rich might have railed against the scenes in which Wonder Woman is bound and must break free of ropes and chains, as well as the flesh-baring garment that Wonder Woman is obliged to wear. As would I. During my lectures, I ask my audiences: *Would you wear a bathing suit to vanquish villains?* In the collaged epidermis forming the new raiment I created for Wonder Woman, I answer



Protector 841 with Wonder Woman Shadow  
(leather, metal, mixed media, 78" × 24" × 8") 2014

this question by rewriting her speech balloons so she declares: *I'd rather wear a more protective outfit!*

I wonder, too, how Cortez might have responded to Wonder Woman. Cortez probably would not have compared some elements of Marston's storyline, as I do, to the ejaculations of a man obsessed with his own private sexual fantasy. But while Cortez may not have taken much interest in such comic book characters, her jazz poems and performances clearly repudiate sexist behavior and socialized violence against women, as amply discussed in the following chapters on Cortez's jazz poetics in this book—leading me to believe that Cortez would have identified, in principle, with the non-violent spirit of Wonder Woman. That both poet and superhero battled against tyranny brings to mind these lines from Cortez's "There It Is," which call for the oppressed—especially females and people of color—to "fight," to "resist," in the classic voice of the feminist superhero:

And if we don't fight  
if we don't resist  
if we don't organize and unify and  
get the power to control our own lives  
Then we will wear  
the exaggerated look of captivity 9

Wonder Women's garb can be seen as having the "exaggerated look of captivity," if one considers how the male gaze reduces women to an essentialist view of "femininity," in its most bare-breasted, bare-limbed state.

Clearly Wonder Woman was not perfect. Yet she nevertheless said something important to me as a child. At a time when I was buying and selling used comics, women from my social background were viewed mostly as potential damsels-in-distress. I noticed how Wonder Woman actually inverted the damsel-in-distress trope, again and again, as she came to the rescue of her favorite man, Steve Trevor. It was thrilling for me to encounter a female superhero so strong, smart, and skilled. Women with these qualities were rarely applauded in the days of my youth. Even by the time of September 11th, when there were many Ground Zero female first responders, the press did not feature those women rescuers as they did the male rescuers. Many women risked their lives to help others during this crisis; some of them died as a result.<sup>10</sup> But the political administration of George W. Bush, in tandem with the media, sought to portray to the world a John Wayne type of he-man, not a woman, doing the saving. We see the continuation of this sexism later in the example of Private Jessica Lynch. The U.S. Army and the government administration colluded with media reporters to tell a made-up story of male heroism and machismo as American troops supposedly "saved" Private

Lynch from torture and death during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>11</sup> This Jessica Lynch fable was just another pasturage on which to plant the firm footprint of a Wayne-Tarzan type of savior coming to the aid of the weak female, and to support the ongoing Iraq War. Just as Rich and Cortez critique this macho hierarchy in their poetry, I reinforce through my art, as Jann Matlock writes, "a corrective to the peculiar masculinization of protection that resulted from the attacks on the World Trade Center."<sup>12</sup> That "corrective," however, was not one endorsed by much of American culture in the months and years following September 11th. An explosion, of sorts, was needed.

That explosion, building inside me, did not erupt until I connected the dots to see how "femininity" was subjugated to masculine privilege. As a young girl, I was taught that only men could have the agency to be brave and strong. So I questioned: *Where does this leave me?* I felt invisible in the hierarchy of the powerful. Perhaps I had to shed any trace of femaleness in order to have mobility. It was not penis-envy that I experienced, but portability-envy and power-envy. There were too many things, my culture told me, that I could not do or accomplish as a girl. Hearing the lyrics now to "When I was a Boy," by Dar Williams, or "If I were a Boy," by Beyoncé, I could only wish that I had these referents as a child. I would at least have been able to articulate my confusion and frustration when denied access to what boys could do, and have, and be. A comic book like *Wonder Woman*, even with its flaws, gave voice to some of my vexations. I chose to relate to those traits of hers that I felt were gender-bending, modifying the opening lines of each comic book edition to be:

WITH THE WISDOM OF ATHENA, THE STRENGTH OF HERCULES  
AND THE SPEED OF MERCURY, WONDER WOMAN ARRIVES. NEVER  
BEFORE HAS THE NEED FOR THIS HERO BEEN SO GREAT. TIME  
BECKONS, AND THE WARRIOR WOMAN COMES—TO WEAVE HER  
SPELL AND FURTHER THE CAUSE OF PEACE, EQUALITY AND SECURITY  
IN A WORLD THAT SEEMS TO BE SPIRALING MADLY TOWARD  
PERPETUAL WAR.<sup>13</sup>

This comic came into print at a time when America entered World War II, and few might argue today that the world still "seems to be spiraling madly toward perpetual war." With so many genocides and atrocities that continue to afflict the globe, ours is an era aching for the support of an ethical Wonder Woman-esque figure of power and protection.

Rarely is a *feminist* superhero created with a female body that does not conform to the eroticized objectification of the male gaze. With slim-pickings, I know I have to divert my eyes from flaws, as one rejoices in a Wagnerian opera despite knowing about the anti-Semitism of its author. After research

and reflection, I slowly brought other “protectors” into my art to accompany Wonder Woman and Lisbeth Salander, including the Marvel Comics character Storm, who first appeared in the 1975 comic editions. Storm is a longtime member and sometimes leader of the X-Men, a group of mutant heroes who fight for peace and equality between their kind and humans. She has appealed to me because she was the first female superhero of color to play a major role in the big two comic book houses, Marvel Comics and DC Comics. Notwithstanding the myriad foibles of her character and storyline, Storm is known for her great compassion, a trait that I refer to often as a teacher. Also known for compassion, and included in my bevy of inspirational icons, is Kannon, the Japanese Buddhist Bodhisattva, or goddess of mercy and protection. Not a comic-book superhero or product of American popular culture, Kannon is an important Eastern religious figure who has helped to make generations feel protected. Transcending sex, Kannon personifies the “fluidity of gender” so vital in my art, and is represented throughout East Asia, sometimes with many heads and arms bearing symbols and weapons. Also with Japanese roots is the character Princess Mononoke, who appears in the 1997 full-length anime film directed by Hayao Miyazaki. I have selected her to join my pantheon because I am impressed with her relentless drive to save the environment from polluters.

Another contemporary figure I incorporate into my art is not a fictive female but a live American pop-culture force: Lady Gaga. In 2013, *Time* listed her as one of the “most influential people of the decade.” As with each of my chosen icons, I select carefully those aspects of each persona that have the potential to become teaching moments. Though Gaga might not see herself as a feminist, I can still applaud her for her 2011 launch of the Born This Way Foundation at Harvard University, which supports an anti-bullying, youth-empowerment movement encouraging tolerance. Since so much of my own activism revolves around the issue of bullying and the teaching of tolerance, I feel an affinity with the woman born as Stephani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, who was bullied in childhood, and burst forth on stage with her chimerical, multilayered performances. As a powerhouse of a performer, her phasmagorical musical videos, like “Bad Romance”—even with its sado-masochistic undertones—can start productive conversations that address conventional male-female relationships. With her gender-fluid videos, Gaga compels us to think about the nature of our own identity. She calls upon us all to be outrageously independent and to think for ourselves.

### ART AS “IDENTITY”

As part of my exhibition, performance, and educational initiative I often say: *My art is about identity.* Within five minutes of starting each of my lectures,

I identify myself as Jewish, lesbian, and androgynous. In this way my artistic practice resonates very much with the poetry of Rich and Cortez, for whom identity—Jewish and lesbian, or African American—is central to the word. I need to be open with my audience to feel honest and authentic. It goes a long way to repair the wound from my younger years of hiding my true identity, pretending I was someone I was not. As Rich and Cortez were—and are, through the voices of their poetry—I want to be a visible practitioner of the tolerance and acceptance I preach, to explore my role as an artist to unhinge, break up, scramble, and blur the masculine/feminine binaries of stereotyping. I want to do this so we can each find a comfortable and form-fitting personal identity and presentation of self. Like Rich and Cortez as poets, I want to make the road easier for others—male, intersex, female, and beyond—so they might live in a society without the -isms associated with oppression. With this in mind, I keep experimenting; I keep asking questions and offering new ways of expression through my art.

As my events are hosted by museums, galleries, and universities across the country, they provide a safe space where audience participants can try on my wearable “body-swapping” sculptures that are created with a “skin” of images from my extended family of icons.<sup>14</sup> In every exhibition, we hang a mirror on the gallery wall, so that as participants don my shield-like art forms they are invited to visualize and embrace new avatars. Participants can let their guards down while antithetically putting on symbolic body armor. Sometimes participants might be playful in front of the mirror; they might be thinking of just having fun. Then, suddenly, they remark that they are relating to the feats of bravery and superheroic strength in both their fantasies and their everyday lives.

Hopefully, many Americans may never hear a knock on their door in the middle of the night from someone begging for shelter from victimizers as evil as the Nazis; many may never even witness a violent crime or see enormous steel-girded towers fall to the ground. They will, however, on many everyday occasions, observe those who are being bullied and harassed—in the elevator, the lunchroom, the subway, or on the streets. These observers will have a choice: either to ignore or watch the abuse taking place in front of them, or to take a stand and try to help the victim. I have coined what I call the “4B’s:” Bully, Bullied, Bystander, and Brave Upstander, four roles that can be acted out in the continuum of bullying. It is the role of the Brave Upstander that is the rare but necessary role: the one who stands up, takes action, and advocates against the oppressor in order to redistribute, equalize, and correct the use of power. The mission of my non-profit organization, called Have Art: Will Travel!, is to find, educate, and develop tomorrow’s “brave upstanders,” using art as a starting point.<sup>15</sup>

The world so desperately needs heroic defenders and compassionate activists. Where were they in 2012 in Steubenville, Ohio, for example, when an

unconscious sixteen-year-old girl was repeatedly raped by high-school football players, lugged from party to party like a sack of potatoes?<sup>16</sup> And where is the justice for this young victim when one of those convicted rapists, after serving only nine months in prison, was put back on his Steubenville varsity football team? Other examples of the need for the Brave Upstander flood our airwaves, talk shows and media outlets, in stories that report sexual offenses against women.<sup>17</sup> For instance, in 2015, we heard of a cell phone video found on two college students showing another gang rape of an intoxicated teen outside a popular Panama City Beach, Florida, bar during spring break. One media outlet reported a local official saying that “hundreds stood by in ‘broad, open daylight’ as the nineteen-year-old woman, who appeared to be passed out on a chair” behind a beach club, “was sexually assaulted by one man after another.”<sup>18</sup> According to this same official, “Many watched, some recording with their phones—but no one tried to intervene.”<sup>19</sup> Where were the “Brave Upstanders” when this young woman was gang-raped?

I want to encourage the typical passive onlooker to understand that there are many ways to help a victim of violence or bullying, even if it means calling for assistance and showing compassion to the victim after the perpetrator leaves the scene. Not everyone need be as courageous as Rich and Cortez, who, in their poetry, stood up time and again for the persecuted, sometimes at the risk of their own careers and perhaps their well-being. Fusing fantasy and real-life figures into my art, those both heroic and fierce, has helped me ease the way into such discussions with audiences attending my interactive exhibitions and events.

### FEMALE UPSTANDERS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Since these conversations with audiences started in 2008, there has been a natural progression for me to journey from these everyday incidents of violence and abuse in contemporary America to the mass atrocities during the time of the Holocaust. As a Jewish woman, it seemed important for me to explore this time in history. Revisiting the era of Hitlerian genocide through my extensive reading, I discovered not only persecutors but also those who placed their lives on the line to oppose murder and injustice.

As an artist, once again, I needed to respond visually. I know full well that it will take an entire lifetime to study this tragic historical period, while never coming close to understanding how human beings could have allowed the Holocaust to happen. Yet I discovered that while many people have been recognized for their bravery in facing such horrific events, less attention has been placed on the women, both Jews and non-Jews, who

attempted to assist and protect others. In my most recent work, *Holocaust Heroes. Fierce Females*, I highlight historical women from real life who stepped into that difficult role of that Brave Upstander in order to protect others; and I juxtapose them with my family of superheroes and icons. This art has taken form in a series of mixed-media tapestries, sculptural in nature, combining leather, metal, canvas, paint and fabric, buttons, calligraphy plates, zippers, belt and bag straps, medals, earrings—all interwoven into my five-foot-square tapestries that attempt to tell these women’s stories.<sup>20</sup> In a way, I am incorporating traces of our civilization, pieces of our collective experiences and fantasies, into the narratives of ten heroic women, each of whom represents different aspects of heroism and bravery during the Holocaust.



Nancy Wake 802  
(leather, metal, canvas, paint, fabric, mixed media, 60" x 60") 2013

Surely the best known of these females is the young diarist Anne Frank (1929–1945), born in Germany and one of the most discussed Jewish victims of the Holocaust. *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952) has been the basis for several plays and films,<sup>21</sup> which has allowed the world to learn of Frank's powerful resiliency during unspeakable hardship. She symbolizes for me all the brave girls whose names have been lost to history, and is but one of the 1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered during the time of the Shoah. Another woman whose story I include in "Holocaust Heroes" was a Polish leader of the United Partisan Organization's armed resistance in the Vilna ghetto, Vitka Kempner (1920–2012). She fought alongside her future husband, Abba Kovner, who warned Jews not to go "like sheep to the slaughter." Kovner was known as an orator; Kempner was known as a saboteur. Fearless in combat, Kempner was the first woman to play a key role in blowing up a Nazi train. Also profiled in this series is the Russian Noor Inayat Khan (1914–1944), a descendant of Indian royalty and Special Operations Executive (SOE) agent living in Paris, who became the first female radio operator to be sent from Britain to aid the French resistance. Zivia Lubetkin (1914–1976), a leader of the Jewish underground in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, was the only woman in the high command of the resistance group Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa (ŻOB). And there were others my series celebrates: the Catholic nun Gertrud Luckner, who smuggled Jews over the Swiss border; the journalist and photographer Ruth Gruber, who was charged with helping to bring one thousand Jews by ship to America; a woman named Hadassah Rosensaft, who medically provided for and saved hundreds of concentration camp victims, mostly children; the pilot Nadezhda Popova, labeled "night witch" by the Nazis because, undetected, she flew hundreds of bombing missions; Nancy Wake, who left the life of Parisian luxury to go into the trenches to help Jews to safety in Spain; and, finally, Hannah Senesh, who only lived to age twenty-three, who helped rescue Hungarian Jews about to be deported to Auschwitz. Each of these very different women offered a fierce stance against oppression and abuse of power. They were Brave Upstanders, indeed: female superheroes.

When I named this latest exhibit and traveling event *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*, I thought for a long time before choosing my title. Some people have questioned my use of the word "fierce" in my exhibition title.<sup>22</sup> To them, perhaps, "fierce" implies violence and aggression. But my use of this word "fierce" is not about maiming or killing. The meaning I intend to elicit is about intensity, about being fervent, forceful, ardent, impassioned. These women were fevered in their belief that they could protect others facing harm or death. As with the word "fierce," after much contemplation, I

selected the word "hero" instead of "heroine" to represent those women who exhibited such bravery in countries torn by war and genocide. The movie-clip in my mind sees a "heroine" as the fragile woman tied to the railroad tracks, screaming for help as the train is fast-approaching—only to be saved by the gallant lad who unties her in the nick of time. These women were heroes not heroines. They had a strong yearning to stand up for an idea, a longing to take action and to fight injustice. Although Anne Frank, for example, did not literally fight the Nazis, she was "fierce" as she pursued her writing and her young dreams to the best of her abilities given her dangerous circumstances and ultimately tragic end in a concentration camp. Her "fierceness" that readers discover in her diary has moved and influenced so many over the years, including myself.

### AS A FEMINIST LESBIAN JEW

Absorbed in my "Holocaust Heroes" project, I've been increasingly inspired over the last several years, to ponder my identity and roots as a Jewish woman. Reading Rich's 1982 essay, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," I relate to being *half-Jewish*. How profoundly I feel Rich's words when I read:

But it came to me that every one of those piles of corpses, mountains of shoes and clothing had contained, simply, individuals, who had believed, as I now believed of myself, that they were intended to live out a life of some kind of meaning, that the world possessed some kind of sense and order; yet *this* had happened to them.<sup>23</sup>

I found that I could not stop reading everything I could get my hands on that had to do with the years between 1939 and 1945. Devastated as I was by the brutality and senselessness of the Nazi acts of inhumanity, I was drawn in—as I once was to the machete blade—and read more and more about the inhumanity toward the Jewish people with whom I had so long felt those "split" feelings. Yet while Rich writes about her duality of literally being half-Jewish, growing up with "Christian imagery, music, language, symbols, assumptions everywhere," my own duality comes from experiencing a strong repulsion to the patriarchal nature of religion in general, juxtaposed with a certain pride in having links to a group of people accomplishing so much in the world in spite of their harsh treatment.

Growing up Jewish in the Bronx, I was always sensitive to issues of anti-semitism, discrimination, gender, and power. My father had left Germany

as a child, and recounted the many beatings he was given while his assailants yelled out to him “*verdammten Juden*,” “goddamn Jew.” He didn’t talk much about it, but we were all aware of how he was bullied and tormented as a boy through these anti-Semitic slurs and bashings. Knowing of my father’s past—combined with learning more about Anne Frank, World War II, and the Holocaust—infused me with fearfulness as a child. Growing up female and Jewish, I felt like a pariah within my religion. I recall at the age of twenty-three watching from behind the vertical bars of what felt like a women’s second-floor prison, while a *minyan* of males performed their duties below me on the main floor of an Orthodox synagogue. How could I have any feeling of kinship and inclusion with a religion that so adamantly ostracizes me? I thought at the time: *What is so wrong with me that I can’t even be in the presence of those taking an active part in this Jewish ritual?* Differently from Rich, I saw myself as “half Jewish” in this way: one part of me loved and was proud of my heritage, while another part of me hated it for what felt like its despising and disowning of me—simply because I was female. I developed a block that prevented me from remembering Jewish holidays and their significance. I felt even more of a separation after learning that the Jewish morning service prayer included these words: *Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast not made me a woman.*

In recent years I have been rereading my diaries written when I was little more than a teenager, trying to understand my fears and depression. Reviewing these diaries has been painful: I feel sad when I relive my anxiety, especially intense in the exploratory sketches and notations of my youth, which chart the confusion about my sexuality, my desire to become an artist, to read/learn/excel—within a family that did not prize education for a girl. “Become a teacher or a nurse,” family members and society instructed me. “You will need to fall back on this if something happens to your husband. Your job in life is to help your husband succeed.” These were the words I heard. I was taught that a male must always be smarter, stronger, better than a female person.

My decade-older sister, Carole, was Miss America to me at a time when Marilyn Monroe was the rage. She was my role model for femininity. With her 38DD breasts, head-turning figure and tall, statuesque posture, she modeled furs and sang on television and stage—until she married at nineteen, when all “good Jewish girls” in my extended family and neighborhood were supposed to give up any career they might have started, and settle down to being a housewife and helpmate to a husband. As a youngster, I so admired Carole. And me, a skinny, little, stick-ball-playing kid—who always found herself in trouble for bringing home street-found toilet

plungers which, when rubber-less, made perfect stick-ball bats—stuffed my big sister’s hand-me-down bathing suit bras with nylon stockings to look like my beauty-queen sibling. Slowly, the realization came to me that I could not abide the beauty myth that was being pressed upon me by my culture and elders. Tellingly, in two figurative etchings I made in college, one called *Marilyn or Moving* and the other called *Stills*, I exposed Monroe, the blonde bombshell, as the undesirable foil to a more authentic self with agency and mobility.

Growing up in the Bronx as a working-class kid, my “dual world,” unlike that of Rich’s, was between my parent’s religious admonitions, and my own intense aversion to the patriarchal dictates of Judaism. I was warned never to marry anyone non-Jewish because, unfailingly, the first thing my *goy* husband would call me when we had an argument would be “a goddamn Jew.” With a constant parental demand to, above all else, find a Jewish husband and get married—in contradiction to my own antipathy toward Judaism’s requirement of female deference to males—I could not bring together the two halves of my religious aggregate of associations.

This divide was manifested in my signing all my adolescent-age paintings “Linda J” or “Linda Joy,” in preparation for (in wait for?) my Jewish husband’s last name and the life he would bestow upon me. My heart goes out to any girl I see today who is living through this kind of false, self-effacing, other/male-oriented existence. As a gifted young athlete, I learned my femininity lessons well. Playing sports with my less skilled boyfriends, I dutifully and purposely threw the bowling ball into the alley gutter and the ping pong or tennis ball into the net so the boy would always win. I learned well that boys had to be better.<sup>24</sup>

When I became old enough to date, I would go out with a boy and listen intently to his male monologue of boasting and bravado. And I would exclaim as if on cue: *Wow! You’re a plumber, tell me about it. What do you do with faucets and drains?* The constructs of gender and Judaism seemed always to hold me back, hamper my movements, handcuff me in my attempt to fulfill my potential. I was aware of no female role model who had agency, and I did not know I had alternatives.

Becoming a secular Jew and a lesbian opened a way out of this double bind. Abhorring the restrictions I felt placed on me by my religion, my gender, and my sexuality, I chose a path allowing me to cast aside the performance aspect I experienced with this posing, posturing, and pretense that came with being a female/straight/religious Jew. Of these three “identities” I felt being female to be the most muzzling. My biological sex informed both my sensibility as a Jew and my sexuality. It showed up as well in the dug-in misogyny of the art world and in the lifetime struggle I had with displaying deference to men.

Through my art, my curiosity, and my drive to define the fierce female of my fantasies, I seek to inspire and bring forth the empathy and the spirit of the protector in each of us, as Adrienne Rich and Jayne Cortez—fierce-feminist upstanders against oppression—have achieved through their poetry. We each have inside ourselves bravery that we may not have even recognized. I believe that courage and bravery is not the lack of fear. Rather, it is proceeding in spite of it. Continuously, as a visual artist, I strive toward my own authenticity. And certainly, I strive to be fierce.



*Boxing Ring W 650*  
(wood, and metal, 49" x 18" x 6") 2009  
with Linda Stein featured in photograph

## NOTES

1. Further references to the series "Pre-9/11 Musical Blades" can be found at my website, [www.lindastein.com](http://www.lindastein.com). Specific web page located at <http://lindastein.com/new/series/pre-911-musical-blades/>
2. Linda Stein, "The Machete Blade: An Artist's Search for Security and Strength," *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly* 1.4 (2000), 43–62.
3. Jayne Cortez, "Rape," in *On the Imperial Highway: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2009), 47
4. *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, film DVD, dir Niels Arden Oplev (Sweden: Nordisk Film, 2009).
5. Arlene Raven, "Is Bad Good or Bad?" *The Village Voice*, April 19, 1995.
6. This video entitled, *Running 634*, is produced and directed by myself (2008). It can be viewed on my website at the page <http://lindastein.com/new/series/videos/running-634/>
7. Further references to "Knights of Protection" can be found at my website, [www.lindastein.com](http://www.lindastein.com). Specific web page located at [www.lindastein.com/knights-of-protection/](http://www.lindastein.com/knights-of-protection/).
8. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York: W W Norton, 1986), 49.
9. Jayne Cortez, "There It Is," in *On the Imperial Highway*, 50.
10. For more information about the women responders, see Susan Hagen and Mary Carouba, *Women at Ground Zero. Stories of Courage and Compassion* (Indianapolis: Alpha Books, 2002).
11. John Kampfer, "The Truth about Jessica," *The Guardian*, May 15, 2003, accessed July 14, 2015. Web page located at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/may/15/iraq.usa2>.
12. Jann Matlock, "Vestiges of New Battles: Linda Stein's Sculpture after 9/11," *Feminist Studies* 33.3 (2007): 569
13. A variation of this introduction was featured in the opening pages of the original Wonder Woman comics of the 1940s. The emphasis of using all capital letters here is intended to honor the style of the comic book as the opening introduction was featured using all capital letters.
14. Further information and images about the exhibition *Fluidity of Gender: Sculpture by Linda Stein* is available on my website. This is an event that combines lecture with an art exhibit and performance. This event began in 2010 at Cornell College in Iowa, initiated by Dr. Christina Penn-Goetsch, who also authored an essay for the accompanying exhibition catalog. The exhibition *Fluidity of Gender* has now traveled to twenty-four venues in the United States.
15. Have Art: Will Travel! is an umbrella entity assisting in the administration and transportation of people, exhibition crates, and materials for my traveling events. It also assists in developing and supporting curricular initiatives through encounters with art.
16. Richard A. Oppel Jr., "Ohio Teenagers Guilty in Rape that Social Media Brought to Light," *The New York Times*, March 17, 2013, accessed July 18, 2015. Web page located at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/us/teenagers-found-guilty-in-rape-in-steubenville-ohio.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/18/us/teenagers-found-guilty-in-rape-in-steubenville-ohio.html?_r=0).

17. Alix Bryan and CNN Wire, "Steubenville High Football Player Convicted of Rape Returns to Team," August 12, 2014, accessed July 18, 2015. Web page located at <http://wtvr.com/2014/08/12/steubenville-high-football-player-convicted-of-rape-returns-to-team/>

18. Jeremy Tanner, "Hundreds Watched Gang Rape in Panama City Beach during Spring Break," *Pix 11*. April 13, 2015, accessed July 18, 2015. Web page located at <http://pix11.com/2015/04/13/hundreds-watched-gang-rape-in-panama-city-beach-during-spring-break/>

19. Ibid.

20. In addition to ten tapestries, there are two other components to the traveling exhibition: twenty box sculptures in a series called *Spoon to Shell*, and one larger-than-life *Protector* sculpture, epitomizing the notion of the fierce female.

21. Originally published in Dutch in 1947, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* was published in English by Doubleday & Company in the United States five years later. The play version, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, by screenwriters Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett, premiered in 1955; the same screenwriters adapted the play for the screen for the 1959 Hollywood movie directed by George Stevens.

22. *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females* includes an illustrated catalog with scholarly essays, a video about the project and my artist process, and a teaching guide for educators.

23. Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York: W W Norton, 1994),

24. See Linda Stein, "Guestwords: Lichtenstein Across the Net," *The East Hampton Star*, July 10, 2013.

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