

By Eleanor J. Bader

Sculpting Strength

Artist Linda Stein Casts Heroes

THE FIGURES IN SCULPTOR Linda Stein's most recent collection—a series of thirteen leather-wrapped torsos—address a complex question: What does it mean to be male or female? Called *The Fluidity of Gender*, the series is the latest in a decade-long project that explores this question. It also zeroes in on the physical differences that are used to justify sexism.

Stein's interest in gender started early.

"I grew up in a working-class family in the Bronx," she begins. "My sister is ten years older than me, and she and my mom made sure that I was taught the rules. The boy had to be smarter, stronger, and better than the girl in everything." Stein pauses for a few moments, and then chuckles softly. "I was a really good athlete, but I learned to throw the bowling ball into the alley and hit the tennis ball into the net so that the boy would always win."

Stein is sitting in her lower Manhattan studio sur-

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rounded by her art, and as she recalls her childhood, she shakes her head in amazement. We're both aghast that these messages—so absurd by today's standards—were so readily accepted throughout the 1950s and '60s.

At the same time, Stein admits that she was a slow convert to feminism. Despite the 1963 publication



of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, she says that it took her a long time to fully wrap her mind around the concept of sexism.

"I knew something was wrong," she says. "I just didn't connect the dots. For me, consciousness came in steps."

Work came first. After graduating from Queens College, Stein found a job teaching art in a public high school on Long Island. She spent seven years in the classroom and seven years as the school's artist-in-residence, a position that ended, thanks to Reagan-era budget cuts.

For the next two decades, she ran Calligraphy Studios, Inc. Her first client was Tiffany's, and she hand-addressed envelopes and invitations for the high-end jeweler and other clients. The business eventually employed fifteen workers, and lasted until 2004.

"I was spending forty hours a week on calligraphy, and forty hours a week making art, and it was getting harder to juggle both," Stein says. "My heart was with making art, so I sold what I could and closed the company."

After giving this account, Stein stops and backtracks to explain the full story of closing shop.

"On September 11, cops came into the Calligraphy Studio—which was located just a few blocks north of the World Trade Center—and told the six of us who were at work that morning to get the hell out," she recalls. "We left and ran up Church Street holding hands. I thought a bomb had gone off and kept looking south. I saw what I thought was furniture being thrown out the windows. I later learned that it was not furniture, but people, who were jumping."

As Stein speaks, ten years vanish and her account is so vivid it's as if every detail is permanently carved into her memory.

"I didn't live in my home, which was also located downtown, or

work in the studio, for eight months," she says. "Most significantly, I stopped sculpting. I'd previously been doing a lot of abstract wall pieces but after 9/11—I don't know why—I started doing portraits." Her output includes a roster of feminist icons: Bella Abzug, Betty Friedan, Flo Kennedy, Billie Jean King, Margaret Sanger, and Gloria Steinem, among them.

A year later, Stein experienced another artistic shift and began creating sculptures. "Gradually they became figurative," she says. "I realized that I wanted to create women who were symbols of strength and protection." She began the series, *Knights*, in 2002; pieces range from nine to seventy-eight inches high and are made of bone, fiber, leather, metal, paper, rope, rubber, stone, and wood.

While Stein's current work deconstructs a rigid gender hierarchy—with figures that look both male and female rather than one or the other—her *Knights* are unambiguously female. In each, waists are tapered, evoking a feminine physique. Nonetheless, the bodies have neither breasts nor genitals, giving their womanly contours a decidedly androgynous cast.

"The sculptural form I was creating had become a female knight," Stein told interviewer Helen Hardacre in 2006. "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 my viewers."

The result is a variety of provocative and beautiful sculptures that have been showcased—or are scheduled to be showcased—in venues as diverse as Portland State University in Oregon, the Nathan D. Rosen Museum Gallery in Boca Raton, Florida, the Luce Gallery of Cornell College in Mt. Vernon, Iowa, and the Sarratt Gallery of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. (For more information, go to www.lindastein.com.)

Stein is clearly proud of her artistic achievements. But her mission extends beyond art to include social change. Indeed, Stein acknowledges wanting to construct a new kind of female hero, one who combines the best attributes of Kannon, a female Buddhist icon of compassion; Hayao Miyazaki's fictional Princess Mononoke; and Wonder Woman, the comic book character created by William Moulton Marston in 1941 to, in his words, "bring the Amazon ideals of love, peace, and sexual equality to a world torn by the hatred of men." The first Wonder Woman was not the cone-breasted sex symbol of today, Stein reports, but was instead a model of nonviolent conflict resolution—albeit with a magic lasso. "Don't you think she's worthy of feminist attention?" asks Stein.

In addition to fueling heroism, Stein wants viewers to feel safe, so after creating the *Knights* series, she began constructing wearable armor.

"I'm interested in the transformation that occurs when someone puts a piece of sculpture on," she says. "It began with me fortifying myself after 9/11 but I later wanted to give others the experience."

Critic Margo Hobbs Thompson calls it body swapping, and it is something that Stein encourages audience members to do.

"One student from Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania told me that wearing the armor made her feel better able to say no to her boyfriend," she says. "Another woman in her late seventies told me that she always feels afraid when she goes out at night and imagined that she'd be less scared if she wore an armored garment. Another person had the opposite reaction. She said she couldn't breathe in the shield, and had us quickly remove it."

In presentations that accompany the *Fluidity of Gender* exhibit—set to run through 2013 and to take Stein to dozens of colleges across

the country—she lets the thirteen leather-covered figures she displays ignite discussion about what it means to label someone as either male or female. The figures typically provoke debate about how gender stereotypes are conveyed and absorbed. Stein says that she raises a host of pragmatic feminist concerns wherever she goes.

"I address equal pay for equal work and always ask the heterosexual men in the audience if they expect their wives to work and if they should be paid the same as a male friend doing the same job," she says. "I talk about women's status around the world, about the rape of female soldiers, and about the fact that women are still underrepresented in

the art world."

As she speaks her incredulity and anger are palpable.

"I see myself as a practical pacifist," she shrugs. "Eleanor Roosevelt used that phrase. I'm currently fascinated by people's threshold for violence. Some people have found Lisbeth Salander [of Stieg Larsson's books and movies] violent and are turned off by her. These same people watch *Godfather* films or shoot-'em-ups and feel no revulsion. This makes me wonder if the hostile reaction is because it's a woman turning the tables on a man, or if something else is operative."

As Stein speaks, you can almost see a new project taking shape. ♦

