

# LINDA STEIN

The making of an artist-activist, feminist Jew

by AMY STONE

Linda Stein comes across as one fearless artist-activist, but says, “All my work in the last 30 years is about protection.” Quite simply, her mission is to defy bullying in all its forms and stand up to a compendium of evils: sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, ableism.

With her spiky red hair and athletic build, she doesn't look like someone who grew up scared. But throughout her childhood, she had a recurring dream of “running, always running, But the bad guys never got me.”

Quick cut to 9/11. Stein and her as-

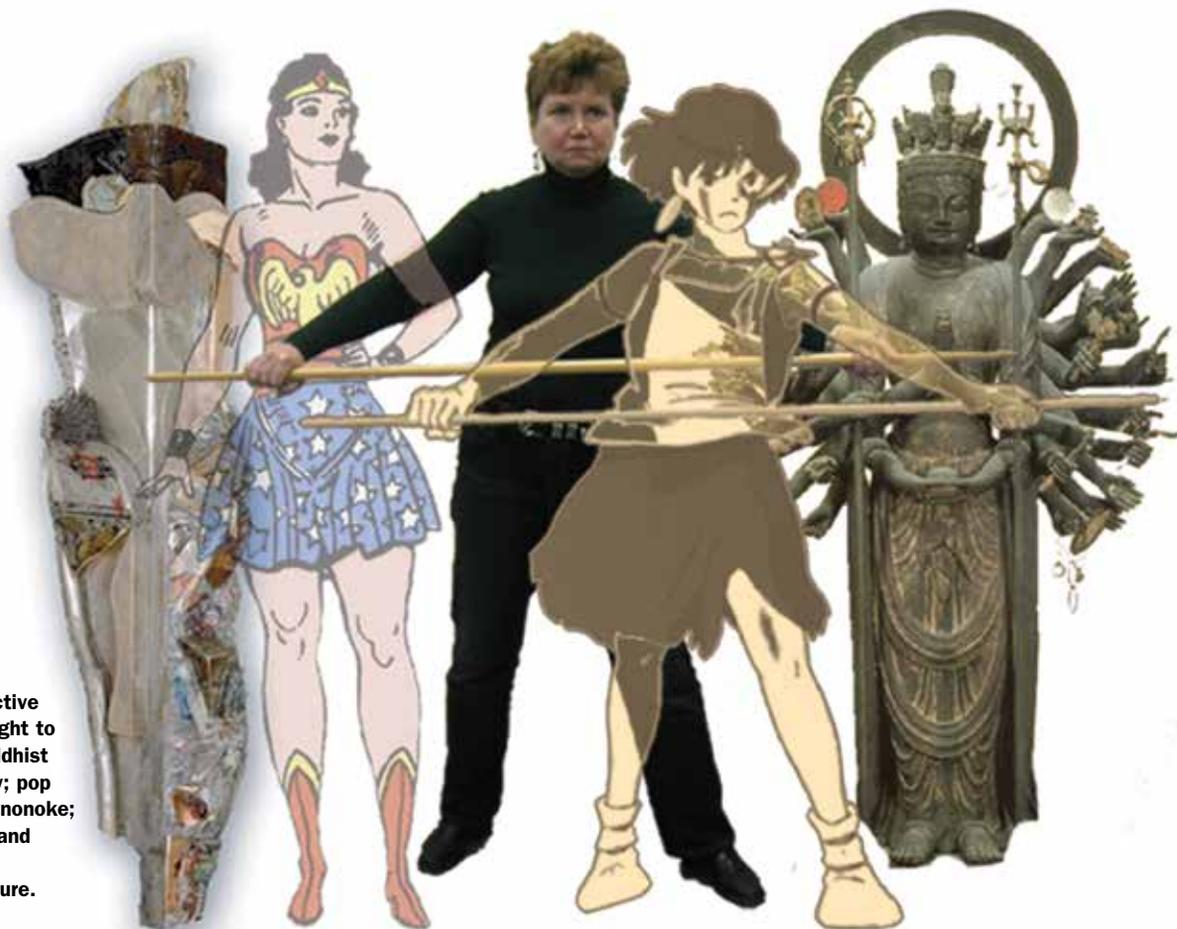
sistants are running, holding hands as they flee her Lower Manhattan studio, in sight of the towering inferno of the World Trade Center.

It took a year before she felt psychologically able to return to sculpture. Before 9/11, her work, which involved using machete blades and other found objects, had been abstract. Now, female forms were emerging — giant vertical shapes with waists, hips and breasts. In 2002, they became her Knights of Protection — elegant mounted torsos of wood, metal, stone and leather. Modern Aphrodites, they are powerful figures,

even in the absence of heads or arms.

Five years later, the minimalist torsos evolved into something more clearly political. The message was gender bending — muscular black leather torsos that cross sexual boundaries and wearable armor using acrylicized paper. Protection was now bound up with what Stein calls “the fluidity of gender.”

She says, “We don't have to stick to the binaries of what makes a man and what makes a woman.” Indeed, her work celebrates the fluidity of gender and tears down all types of gender stereotypes that people accept unquestion-



Stein joins protective female figures (right to left) Kannon, Buddhist goddess of mercy; pop icon Princess Mononoke; Wonder Woman; and Stein's Knight of Protection sculpture.

Photos courtesy of Linda Stein except where indicated.

ingly as natural. She speaks of “gender constructions and gender constrictions,” and that her work is about finding the courage to break these molds and inspire that bravery in others.

The androgynous black torsos are highly erotic, made of skin-tight leather. With their breasts, flaring hips and mighty build, they defy male/female stereotypes. They could be elegant Renaissance figures or headless motorcycle gangs. Adding identity to the black leather torsos are scavenged materials: elaborate metal latches, a brass NYPD pin, heavy chains, buckles, zippers and the visual pun of CO2 cartridges for

making not war but seltzer. Art historian Christina M. Penn-Goetsch has suggested that the zippers are like scars. With titles like “Tough Love 683,” “Defender 696” and “In Charge 694,” their sex is in the eye of the beholder.

Stein’s other more lighthearted Fluidity of Gender sculptures, the acrylicized paper forms, are made, in part, from *Wonder Woman* comics updated to include her own feminist messages. It’s easier to ask questions like “What defines bravery? What makes a hero?” from inside a cartoon message balloon. Wonder Woman, wearing knee-high red boots and American flag swimsuit, asks: “What are masculine/feminine expectations and limitations?”

Wonder Woman is joined on Stein’s armor by anime pop icon Princess

## “WHAT ARE MASCULINE/FEMININE EXPECTATIONS AND LIMITATIONS?”



Wonder Woman is a primary protector on Stein’s “bully-proof” vests.

Monoxnoke, Japanese warrior girl and fearless protector of the environment; and Kannon, the sometimes androgynous Buddhist goddess of mercy and compassion. Wonder Woman is the primary protector on Stein’s “bully-proof” vests displayed in her Tribeca studio. Explaining the appeal of Wonder Woman, Stein says, “I love her because she’s strong, she’s mobile, she avenges wrongs without killing.”

Stein says she works intuitively. Then once a creative direction materializes, she digs deep. She’s embraced the original Wonder Woman superhero created by William Moulton Marston, the eccentric Harvard-educated psychologist and inventor of the prototype polygraph (lie detector). His 1941 World War II superhero is the lone female in the superhero pantheon. The Amazonian warrior come to Earth to right wrongs, she is protected by her indestructible Bracelets of Submission, Lasso of Truth (a spinoff of Marston’s polygraph) and weaponized tiara. Never killing, she fights for peace, love, justice and sexual equality. Stein rejects the

## “WOULD YOU WEAR A BATHING SUIT TO FIGHT THE BAD GUYS?”



Linda Stein lays hands on her body-swapping armor “Heroic Compassion 665,” with its Wonder Woman images. (2010)

post-Marston “bullet-breasted sex object in swimsuit.” As one of Stein’s updated Wonder Woman cartoon bubbles reads, “Would you wear a bathing suit to fight the bad guys?”

The heavy metal chains on Stein’s black leather torsos may riff on Marston’s proclivity for placing Wonder Woman in chains. Certainly Wonder Woman’s muscular thighs and skimpy garb provide perfect material for Stein’s mission to use art to break down society’s masculine/feminine divisions.

In navigating the great divide, Stein herself has evolved. Growing up in a working class family in the Bronx, she tried to fit into traditional female expectations, stuffing nylons into the bra of her hand-me-down swimsuit to emulate her pin-up girl older sister. At the same time, she describes herself as having been “very, very athletic,” exhilarated playing hard against the most athletic boys, those who she knew could

beat her. The price she paid was bullying in the form of ostracism by other girls. But, she recalls, “If a boy was a weaker athlete than me, it was my job to see that he won anyway. ... I grew up at a time when boys were supposed to be (or at least appear to be) better, stronger, smarter than girls. If a girl wanted to be popular, she learned very quickly that it was her responsibility to play out this masculinist scenario.” Stein accepted that “the male ego took precedence” over hers — and she was proud at the time to have learned her gender lesson well.

Stein went on to become the first member of her family to go to college. She got her B.A. degree from Queens College, City University of New York, and her M.A. degree in art and education from Pratt Institute.

Explaining how she has managed to escape the heterosexual binary, she says, “I was straight for much of my growing up days until I was 40.” But, “I couldn’t fulfill my potential as much with a man as with a woman.” In 2007, the same year that *The Fluidity of Gender* coalesced, she married Helen Hardacre, Reischauer Institute Professor of Japanese Religions and Society at Harvard. Stein says it took courage to come out to her mother, who, as it turned out, needed less protection from the truth than Stein had anticipated.

Professionally, everything Stein does is part of her outreach project Have Art Will Travel! Inc. For Gender Justice (HAWT). Started in 1972,

HAWT was incorporated as a non-profit six years later. Board members include Gloria Steinem and Elizabeth A. Sackler, whose foundation gave the Brooklyn Museum its Center for Feminist Art, home of Judy Chicago’s “The Dinner Party.”

Not mere self-promotion, Stein says

adult, Stein managed to find her victim and apologize to her. Apology accepted. She says, “If only I had been like one of my gender-fluid sculptural Knights of Protection for Carole.”

Participants in HAWT events are invited to put on what Stein calls “body-swapping armor” and try a new avatar



Amy Stone

**Stein, in bully-proof vest, poses with her tapestry of Holocaust hero Vitka Kempner, a leader of the partisan fighters in the Vilna ghetto. The work combines Kempner images and memorabilia with fabric, zippers and Wonder Woman images.**

that HAWT’s purpose is to inspire people to live fearlessly. She sees anti-bullying as the lens for viewing the evils we live with to then confront them. Bringing the message to museums and colleges, *The Fluidity of Gender* torsos and armor have been on the road with Have Art Will Travel since 2010 and will continue into 2017.

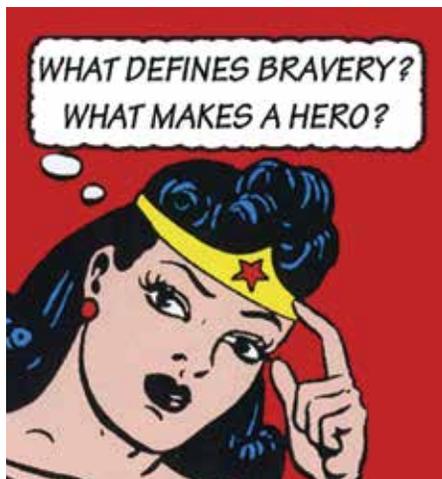
Stein wants to move participants through what she calls the 4 Bs: from Bully, Bullied, Bystander to Brave Upstander, ready to stand up against bullies and to develop the courage to risk failure and unpopularity. Her experience has shown, she says, that “using art to inspire participants to explore their own roles and behavior can help them become Upstanders in their everyday lives.”

She’s come clean on her own bullying. In junior high, she was president of the I Hate Carole Club, mean girls picking on a hapless classmate. As an

to get in touch with their inner courage, to swap bodies and shift genders. With Velcro straps and “armordillo” articulated legs, *The Fluidity of Gender* armor is meant to be worn. Interactive events, an extensive catalog, panels, discussions and videos are part of the traveling exhibit, all for the purpose of inspiring change.

While the written messages can sound a bit clichéd, visitors to the exhibit are responding at schools and museums across the country, especially once they find themselves inside knight’s armor. In Joplin, Missouri, a woman farmer thanked Stein, saying, “You’re the first feminist I’ve ever heard speak here.”

In Johnstown, New York, a male theater major tried on the androgynous armor. Later he wrote Stein, “I have come to the idea that gender is just a thing that they say you are and you can



**Stein adds feminist concerns to the cartoon bubbles of Wonder Woman images.**

be what you want to be. ... I feel much stronger now walking around campus as a young gay male because of the empowerment you provided me.”

A graduate student in art education and women’s studies at Penn State University brought her husband and two sons, 9 and 12, to the Fluidity of Gender show. Trying on black leather armor with breasts, her husband felt naked. Her own reaction in Wonder Woman armor: “Man, if I could wear this armor every day, I would feel so tough and protected.”

**Knight of Tomorrow 542 is one of Stein’s Knights of Protection series begun after 9/11.**



**Hannah Senesh is one of the 10 fierce females inspiring Stein’s Holocaust Heroes tapestries.**

Assessing the impact of *Have Art Will Travel*, Stein says, “If I reach a few people at each place, it’s thrilling.”

Now, she’s finally digging into her Judaism. Stein describes her family as Jewish but not religious. In her youth, she dressed up for the Jewish holidays, and she felt pride in her Judaism as a result of the Six-Day War. Now, Stein says, she is obsessed with the Holocaust.

She is currently at work on Holocaust box sculptures — a series of “Spoon and Shell” tableaux using found objects. The spoons and shells are metaphors for protection and nourishment and a reminder of the impossible choices that many women faced during the Holocaust. The inspiration comes from the story of Leah, a Birkenau inmate who had the inner strength to resist a Polish prisoner’s offer of a spoon, a life-saving item, in exchange for her body.

The box sculptures and series of 10 tapestries will form *Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females*. An essential part of Stein’s message: Women have not been

sufficiently recognized for their bravery during the Holocaust. She sees the project as a way to empower exhibit-goers to resist scapegoating and discrimination in their own lives and to stand up for victims.

Stein recounts a related dream from her childhood: “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!’”

The fierce females in Stein’s tapestries have no insurance. Most are operating on sheer nerve, standing up to the Nazi murder machine to protect others rather than themselves.

Emerging from thousands of hours of research, Stein’s choices include 10 women who represent different aspects of bravery during the Holocaust. Some are familiar icons — for example, Anne Frank and Hannah Senesh. Others not quite so well known are Ruth Gruber,

the American journalist, photographer and humanitarian who documented the life of survivors in post-liberation Europe; Zivia Lubetkin, one of the leaders of the Jewish underground in the Warsaw Ghetto; and Hadassah Bimko Rosenhaft, who saved hundreds of Jewish women from the gas chambers in Auschwitz, where she worked in the “infirmary.”

Among the less familiar is Noor Inayat Khan, born in a Moscow monastery to an American mother and an Indian Sufi priest father. Trained in London as a Special Operations Executive agent, she was the



**Knight of New Thoughts 667 empowers the wearer with Wonder Woman images and updated cartoon messages. One reads: YOU'RE A STRONG BOY ... IT'S FUN TO DEFEAT YOU!**

last surviving radio operator sent from Britain to aid the French resistance. Vitka Kempner, less well known than her famous husband, was a leader of the United Partisan Organization's armed resistance in the Vilna ghetto. She fought alongside founder Abba Kovner, whom she later married. Fearless in combat, she was the first woman to play a role in blowing up a Nazi train.

Also less familiar is Nancy Wake, one gutsy dame. Born in New Zealand, she was a British agent who worked with the French Resistance. In preparation for D-Day, she was parachuted into France to collect night parachute drops

of weapons and ammunition for the advancing Allied Armies. At the same time, she set up communication networks and harassed the Germans, who code-named the elusive agent “the white mouse.” She lived to 98, enjoying six gins a day until a heart attack late in life forced her to cut back.

As an artist and activist, Stein remains determined to stay true to her choice of Holocaust heroes. When criticism surfaces over some of these fierce females not being strictly Holocaust figures, she digs in to explain her work. The tapestries are up for discussion but not for censorship.

The tapestries in somber tones, measuring five feet by five feet, incorporate found objects and materials, such as leather, metal, canvas, paint and fabric. Possibly as a nod to her father, who worked in the garment industry, old fabrics are worked into each tapestry.

Zippers, first embedded in Fluidity of Gender, are part of the unzipping of these heroes' stories. Buckles and purse straps are also familiar from Stein's earlier work.

Within the tapestries, Stein's fierce Holocaust females coexist with pop icons. Wonder Woman is joined by Princess Mononoke and Kannon. Tapping into multi-generational cul-

## The Accidental Upstander

**L**ike everyone else in the subway car, I am ignoring the four teenage girls fighting with each other. In New York, you don't mess with something that could trigger racism, classism or worse.

One girl has another in a stranglehold. The strangled girl breaks loose, screaming, “I'm going to kill you.”

They go back to pummeling each other.

A third girl: “We're in a subway. Act civilized.”

More fighting.

No agonizing over whether to get involved. I just stand up, walk over to them and say, “She's right. You're in a

subway. Act civilized.”

One girl: “What right does that lady have to talk to me?”

Another girl: “She's right.”

They stop fighting.

Who knows what happened once they got off the subway.

But, unexpectedly, Linda Stein's message of standing up to bullying has transformed me from Bystander to Brave Upstander — standing up against bullies.

That felt good. I'm up for more. Wish me luck.

— Amy Stone



**Na'amat Woman's fearless correspondent Amy Stone in Stein's body-swapping armor.**

tural connections, Stein has added Storm of Marvel Comics X-Men; Lisbeth Salander of *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* renown; and Lady Gaga, who's endowed an anti-bullying foundation at Harvard. Stein sees combining pop culture heroes with Holocaust heroes as a way of making the historical women more relevant and starting a conversation. She says, "A lot of people will say that Lisbeth Salander is too violent. That's a discussion I invite."

Printing plates from the days of hot metal typesetting nest into each tapestry. The enigmatic reverse letters that are part of the bygone printing process become part of the layers of the heroes' identity. The heavy metal also links to Stein's own past as a calligrapher whose clients included Tiffany, Cartier and the International Monetary Fund.

In these dark tapestries, the heroes' pale faces stand out, black-and-white photos transferred to canvas.

With no central focus, the tapestries display pictures of the fierce females in their youth and, for those who survived the Holocaust, into their old age. We see Hannah Senesh in military uniform before her parachute jump into enemy territory. What a surprise to see the entrancing figure of the adolescent Senesh holding out the long skirt of a white satin dress like a bird's wings or an unfurled parachute.

As part of her own education, Stein is putting together a catalog for the project with essays by a distinguished and diverse range of writers.

Collector Raymond Leary has already acquired the Anne Frank tapestry from the preliminary exhibit of Holocaust Heroes at Flomenhaft, the Manhattan gallery that represents Stein. Leary and his wife, Melva Bucksbaum, serve on the board of trustees of the Whitney Museum of American Art and regularly appear on the *ARTnews* list of the world's top 200 collectors. With Holocaust tragedy in his own past, Leary says that Stein's tapestry "captures in a very sensitive way a very grim but historic moment."

Like all her HAWT projects, Holocaust Heroes: Fierce Females will include panelists, videos and interactive events and will be available to museums and schools.

Stein wants to get people thinking about the opportunities in their daily lives to stand up for victims of bullying. She says: "We have to protect all kinds of people — people from different races, sexes, classes." She sees everyday bullying taken to the extreme as persecution on the grand scale of the Holocaust. She explains, "What I want more than anything is to begin a discussion."

Stein, artist-activist, is certainly not timid in taking on the evils that even Super Woman couldn't extinguish. But what happens if a bad guy slips into Stein's protective armor? Is he transformed or does evil get shielded? In all likelihood, this is a challenge Stein is ready to take on.



A participant tries on Stein's androgynous armor during a Fluidity of Gender event, part of Have Art Will Travel at Coastal Carolina University in South Carolina.

*Amy Stone is a founder of Lilith magazine and blogs for Lilith at [www.lilith.org](http://www.lilith.org). She lives in New York City.*