

When Art Protects: Of (K)night, Blades, and Vests

Created By Linda Hoeptner Poling, Ph.D.
Kent State University

Grade levels: 4th-7th grades

Expected length: 3 – 4 class periods

Artist and activist Linda Stein describes a dream she had when she was a child, a terrifying dream in which she was running away from an intruder. This dream led to decades of artistic exploration. Stein said, “I craved a figure of protection that would be impenetrable, powerful, aggressive. It would guard me against potential threats and warn enemies against harming me. It would say, in effect, *stand back; don’t come too close; you will be destroyed if you make a wrong move*” (p. 18, *The Power to Protect: Sculpture of Linda Stein*, in conversation with Helen Hardacre). Fears manifest throughout our lives for a variety of reasons, whether from dreams like Linda Stein’s or from bullies in our childhood through adulthood, from oppressive societal norms, and from grave injustices based on racism, homophobia, ableism, and sexism. In this lesson, students will explore supportive ways to confront their own fears and create a woven textile piece of art that serves as a metaphorical protector over future encounters with that fearful situation. Students’ sense of agency matters in this lesson.

LEARNING OUTCOMES:

Studio inquiry: Students will create a woven textile band in which they insert messages of empowerment and agency over a fear they have.

National Visual Art Standard: CREATING

Anchor Standard: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Enduring Understanding: People create and interact with objects, places, and design that define, shape, enhance, and empower their lives.

Art Criticism: Students will compare and contrast the multiplicity of ways Linda Stein explores the concept of protection in her series *The Blades, Knights, Fluidity of Gender, and Bully Proof Vests*.

National Visual Art Standard: RESPONDING

Anchor Standard: Perceive and analyze artistic work

Enduring Understanding: Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.

Aesthetics: Students will identify how art can be a vehicle to express a personal sense of agency as well as personal protective powers. x

National Visual Art Standard: RESPONDING

Anchor Standard: Perceive and analyze artistic work

Enduring Understanding: Visual imagery influences understanding of and responses to the world.

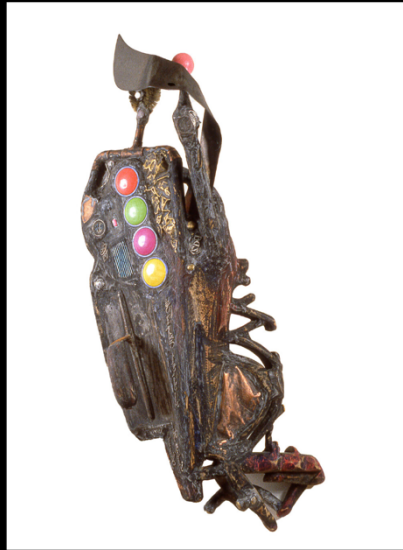
ARTWORKS

The Blades

Linda Stein recounts talking with women friends during a time in which sexual and domestic crime was on the rise everywhere during the 1980s and 1990s. She says, "Concerned by the growing number of women being murdered, raped and battered, my friends and I were repeatedly discussing safety threats in the Big Apple: How late at night should a woman ride the subway? (Our answer: 8 p.m.) What is the best night-time street posture for a woman walking alone? (Our answer: Walk briskly with a countenance of determination, preferably in the gutter and not near doorways)" (Linda Stein, as quoted in Merryman, 2022). While walking past vendors selling their wares one day, Stein came across a barrel of machete blades for sale. She was drawn to the machetes for the duality of their sharp edges and soft curvilinear shapes. From the machete blades, a series of sculptures emerged over a decade that served as metaphorical and ritualistic objects: *The Blades* series (1990-2000) juxtaposed soft and inviting curvilinear elements with warning-like weaponized sharp forms—a clear directive to viewers to engage with the form but to also be wary of its potential to strike when necessary.



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Protected Honker 288

1997; 33" x 18" x 12"; wood, metal, horn, musical box

Spiva Museum Collection



Blades Installation 208-213

1990s

Various Sizes

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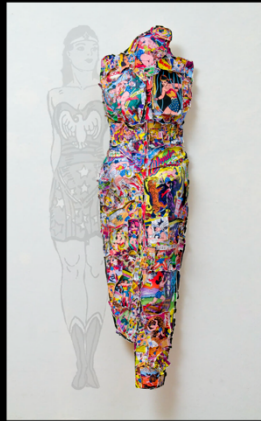
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Heroic Visions: Knights sculptures

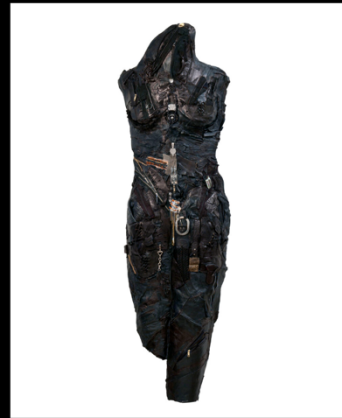
Likewise, in the Knights Series begun in 2002, Linda Stein recounts encountering the terror of 9/11 as a resident of the TriBeCa neighborhood which is mere blocks away from the World Trade Center that was struck that day, among other sites, including Washington D.C, and Pennsylvania, by terrorists from the militant extremist network al Qaeda, killing nearly 3,000 people. Being so close to "Ground Zero" of the World Trade Center, being displaced and evacuated from her home, Stein is open about her shared sense of horror, grief, anxiety, and outrage that resulted from that day of terror. Female warriors who emerge as knights who protect emerged out of Stein's reaction to 9/11. These powerful female figures—"female bodyguard[s] and protective spirit[s] that cannot or will not completely disclaim insecurity in the face of danger" as Stein refers to them, are encrusted and saturated with debris, detritus, metal, wood, and various fragments suggesting "an explosive force, that has been appropriated to arm these figures...these elements suggest an emerging life—a strength that is salvaged from the ruins" (Marter, p. 3: Box 3: AX: SP: 10097:04:10005 Linda Stein Art Education Papers: Linda Stein Heroic Visions: Knights Sculpture: Longstreth Goldberg Gallery, Naples, Florida). In these sculptures, Stein said that she arrived at a form that makes her feel safe. In them, she finds solace and protection.



Knight of Hope 552
2005; 79" x 21" x 14"; wood, metal, stone
Puterbaugh Collection



632
2008; 76" x 20" x 9"; 3D collage with acrylicized paper



Protector 706
2010; 77" x 25" x 10"; leather, metal, mixed media

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Knight of Tomorrow 542
2005; 80" x 24" x 17"; wood, metal, stone

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Heroes, 2007
78 x 40 x 10 inches, collage, archival inks/printing on vinyl

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More (K)nights protected New Yorkers as they illuminated the night—literally—in 2005 when five sculptures were installed in windows and were brightly lit 24/7 on the corner of Broadway and East Tenth Street (Box 3, “(K)Night Watch”: Broadway Windows, Solo Exhibition, Manhattan Installation, April 8 – May 15, 2005). They stood “watch” like the presence of powerful women knights, a persona which passersby could meld with as their heads were

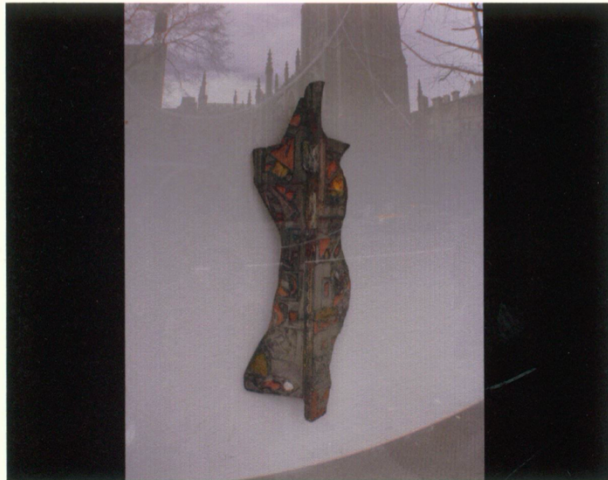
merged with the torsos of the knights via the reflection on the glass (Box 3, Marion Wolberg Weiss, Dan's Papers, *Arts & Galleries*, May 13, 2005).



Box 3: AX: SP: 10097:04:10005 Linda Stein Art Education Papers: Solo Exhibitions 2012: "(K)night Watch": Broadway Windows Solo Exhibition: Manhattan Installation. April 8 – May 15, 2005. New York University.



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The Knights further morphed into physical avatars—gender-empowering wearable sculptures--participants can literally try on through Stein’s *Fluidity of Gender* series, in which empowerment and sexism are confronted: “They are designed to scramble gender expectations and to merge opposites—female/male, soft/strong, defensive/aggressive. Viewers may find them jarring and formidable as well as seductive and inviting” (Box 3: *The Fluidity of Gender: The Sculpture of Linda Stein*, November 21 – December 17, 2011, Kathryn Burke, Martin Art Gallery, Muhlenberg College). In this way, we can explore our gender identities, and the often-oppressive conditions that surround them, safely. Likewise, we can explore our gender identities and expand our sense of empowerment. The wearable sculptures in the *Fluidity of Gender* series provide multi-layered protection for the wearer.



Knight of Courage 655 & Silver Knight 666

2009; Installation: 64" x 60" x 26"

acrylicized paper, archival inks, leather, Velcro, mixed media on coat rack

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Tough Love 683

2010; 65" x 21" x 19"

leather, metal, Velcro, mixed media

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Knight of New Thoughts 667

2009; 41" x 16" x 5"

acrylicized metallic paper, archival inks, Velcro, mixed media

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Bully-Proof Vests

Not to be underestimated, we can also wear creations of protection every day. Stein, with the help of a tailor, hand-sews one-of-a-kind wearable art in the form of vests adorned with ancient and contemporary women heroes, to envelope us in our own sense of upstander heroism, to help propel us to stand up to oppression and to practice active empathy in our daily lives. Surrounding our torso in a reminder of our upstander potential empowers and protects us. If we wear it, we emblazon to the world our upstander values—a powerful signifier, indeed. Linda Stein, herself was bullied. Tricked into appearing in a movie, the actor, posing as a journalist who wanted to highlight Stein for her sculptures that tackle issues of gender, it became clear the actor had other intentions.



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DISCUSS:

Part I

There are endless things that can make us feel fearful. A failed audition. Coming out to friends and family about who we love romantically. Wanting to be something when we grow up that is typically not something our sex (male or female) does. Not having enough money to be comfortable in our everyday lives. Being bullied. The poor health of a loved one. Being physically or sexually assaulted. Having a friend who has threatened to hurt themselves. Climate injustices. Unequal rights for some people, including women, LGBTQI people, people with disabilities, and BIPOC people. The extinction of animals. Even world war. *What makes you fearful right now?* You do not have to share those fears out loud. They are private. If you do need help dealing with your fears, please know that there is help. (*Teachers: be sure everyone is aware of the support resources in your school.*)

Linda Stein works through her fears in her art through various protector-like sculptures that you can literally wear to make you feel more empowered over your fears: for example, over crushing gender societal oppression, and against bullies. She takes power back stolen by the fear she feels when oppressed.

Part II

In what situation do you feel most protected and safe? When and where do you feel the safest and protected? Why do you feel so safe and protected here, and who is with you in that safe space? If others are with you, why do they make you feel so safe and protected? Was it a safe time or memory of your life in the past? Or something in the present? Is it something you say to yourself, or someone else says, to help calm your fears?

TO DO: Write down SAFETY, SUPPORT, and PROTECTOR WORDS you just thought of in answering these questions. Keep the list—you will need them later for our band weaving.

ART VOCABULARY:

Backstrap loom weaving: The oldest, most portable, and non-mechanized form of weaving combining warp and weft strings. For more information on its ancient history: research traditional Andes Quechua backstrap weaving.

Weft: Horizontal strings and other items (in our case, ribbon strips) that are added that move over and under the warp strings to make the weaving using a shuttle or one's fingers.

Warp: Vertical strings used to hold the weft materials past through the heddle.

Heddle: A rigid loom designed to hold the weft strings. In this activity, it is made from craft sticks.

Shed: When the heddle is lifted, an opening, or shed is created.

Shuttle: Mechanism which is loaded with weft yarn.

Tabby Stitch: Simple stitch in which the weft string goes over and under the warp string. Stripes and variations are created by alternating colors and materials.

MATERIALS:

Craft sticks: enough to construct a loom for each student

Yarn of various colors and thicknesses

Various craft ribbons (minimum ½" wide) for Safety, Support, and Protector Words, cut to the length of the weft

Alternatively, cardstock pieces for Safety, Support, and Protector Words, cut to the length of the weft

Cardboard pieces for shuttles

Thin markers

Baggies to store in-process work

Scissors (including adaptive scissors for students with motor disabilities)

PREPARE:

Pre-cut weft-lengths of ribbon and/or cardstock strips of papers for Safety, Support, and Protector Words.

Construct looms the desired length: Simple directions can be found here:

<https://www.worldinaspin.com/sites/default/files/BUILD%20A%20BACKSTRAP%20LOOM%20SING%20A%20RIGID%20HEDDLESYSTEMA%20small%20rigid.pdf>

Optional: Pre-cut small cardboard shuttles. Students may also choose to wrap the yarn around their fingers instead.

Steps:

1. Write the **Safety, Support, and Protector Words** on the pre-cut ribbons or cardstock strips, the same width of the weft strings using colored markers, colored pencils, or other art medium of choice. These will later be woven in as “stripes” once weaving on the backstrap loom begins.
2. Set up the backstrap loom. There are various backstrap loom kits for sale. However, assembling simple craft sticks, via the simple directions provided, is quite cost-saving.



A good “how-to” video: “Band weaving tutorial, belt weaving, backstrap weaving” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkFHLT-RbJ4>

Pair children in teams to help each other, telling them to take turns setting up one loom at a time, then switch to their partner’s loom. Use smooth yarn for the warp strings that go through the drilled holes, as textured and “fuzzy” yarn will not easily go through. Tie each end of the loom to secure it, one end to a stationary object like a table leg, the other around the child’s waist. A central location outside, like a tree or pole where all children can gather around in a circle also works well.

3. If you are using a shuttle, small notched thick cardboard pieces suffice in place of store-bought shuttles. To start, select a warp string and wrap it around the shuttle. Note: a few arm’s length of string, rolled up into a small ball works fine, as well.

4. Once the loom is secured onto each child (be sure it is tied so that it is easily removed—you do not want to be struggling to untie children from their art if there is a fire drill, for example!), create taut tension with the warp strings, and demonstrate how to operate the loom by creating the two sheds, or openings, by changing the position of the heddle up and down so that the string woven in is secured properly, creating the weave pattern. This will create the simple **Tabby Stitch**. Change colors by leaving the tails (at least 4-6” inches long) hanging out on the sides to be secured later.



6. Decide where ribbon strips or the slips of cardstock **Safety, Support, and Protector Words** will be inserted. Secure them between colors.



Studio art example: Jade Brundelet: *Be Here Now*



7. If weaving becomes too long (it typically does not, but for some younger learners, it may): warn them in advance to avoid the backaches by rolling up the band of weaving, and tie the in-progress weaving around their waist at the first sign of ache, and continue the weaving until the desired length is achieved. It can be as short--or as long--as they like.

8. Once the desired length is achieved: cut the strings long enough so that the ends can be braided, knotted, or tied so that the weft strings and ribbons and/or papers stay in place securely. Finally, secure the tails on the edges.

Modifications: Use a tabletop rigid loom made of cardboard or other material. These are widely available for purchase or easily constructed by evenly notching a piece of thick cardboard on which warp strings can be attached.

For students who do not like being constricted in the loom structure, as it may be triggering or uncomfortable: adhere the loom between two heavy stationary objects such as two upside-down chairs on top of a table. Students can then weave while being detached from the loom itself.

Choose smooth yarns over “fuzzy” yarns. This is especially important for students with tactile sensitivity. Less textured yarns will more easily go through the craft stick loom holes and enhance the workability of the weaving process for all students.



REFLECT:

Discuss where the finished weaving will be worn on the body—as a belt? Around the neck?--or displayed as a reminder of its protective power? Will students wear them, like Linda Stein’s *Bully Proof Vests*? Will they function like Stein’s *Knights* who “watch” over the students and remind them of their protective functions and their hidden (woven in) messages? Or will they serve as sculptural pieces like Stein’s *Blades*—as reminders of the protective powers that students have in their lives? Ask students if they are comfortable displaying them on the classroom wall in a “gallery of protection”. Do a “protection walk” in silence, circulating

calming, taking in the protective powers of each piece. Give each student a sticky note. Have them write supportive statements to their peers. (Teacher: remind them to move on to works without sticky notes, and be prepared to write notes yourself and place on pieces with less notes.

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Box 3: AX: SP: 10097:04:10005 Linda Stein Art Education Papers: Solo Exhibitions 2012: Have Art: Will Travel! Inc. For Gender Justice.

Box 3: AX: SP: 10097:04:10005 Linda Stein Art Education Papers: Solo Exhibitions 2012: Have Art: Will Travel! For Gender Justice. Power and Protection: Bully Proof Vests by Linda Stein.

Additional resource:

Kimberly Hammill Weaving: “How to Make Your Own Backstrap Loom”

<https://www.kimberlyhamill.com/blog/2019/5/22/how-to-make-your-own-backstrap-loom>