



(Left) Some of artist-activist Linda Stein's sculptural avatars, including one for a child, second from left, are displayed in her gallery and studio space in New York.



(Right) In this July 10, 2014 photo, artist-activist Linda Stein poses with one of her sculptures, constructed with an embedded hubcap, at her studio and gallery space in New York. — AP photos

# Artist creates 'empowering' wearable sculptures



Linda Stein speaks to a group of women visiting her studio in New York while wearing a 'bulleyproof' vest.

Linda Stein wants people to armor themselves in her art. She creates full-length wearable sculptures embedded with all manner of found objects, including driftwood, engraving plates, steel wire, zippers, pebbles and comic book imagery of superheroes.

Her idea grew out of her sense of vulnerability after the Sept 11 attacks, with the aim of giving wearers a sense of empowerment and protection. Her targets are any form of institutionalized oppression, such as sexism, racism and homophobia.

She also designs "bulleyproof vests," made from a patchwork of fabrics featuring such female symbols as the Japanese anime character Princess Mononoke and the comic book hero Wonder Woman, along with words "I will ... not let cultural impediments and sexual stereotypes hold me down."

At a recent "body swapping" at her Tribeca studio, she invited a group of professional women to try on what she calls sculptural avatars, which can each weigh from seven to 20 pounds. Stein asked the wearers to imagine they are trying on another skin "to get in touch with how their bodies feel." "It's like putting on a whole new persona," said Rinku Sen, who struck a "Rocky" pose in front of a mirror in a "Wonder Woman" torso made of acrylicized paper. Another participant, Dana Sparling, donned a heavier metal creation she said felt like a "shield between me and the world."

Stein explained that she features Wonder Woman prominently in the works because "she never killed." "She protected the weak and downtrodden wearing her bracelets and her black lasso. It's very hard to find a female superhero that's not violent and isn't a total sex object," Stein said.

The representation of gender and sexual identity is a longstanding tradition in activist art that dates back



Artist-activist Linda Stein, left, talks to visitors wearing one of her 'bulleyproof' vests at her gallery and studio space.

to the feminist movement, said Muhlenberg College art history professor Margo Hobbs. She said Stein's work is particularly powerful because "it works on the viewer's body to bring about a really visceral rather than an intellectual experience." Reminiscent of classical torsos, a group of her sculptures is making their

rounds at 24 universities, galleries and museums across the country in what is a seven-year traveling exhibition, "The Fluidity of Gender," that runs through 2017. The exhibition is accompanied by a lecture and "body-swapping" performance in which participants explore gender roles and stereotypes. — AP



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Felicia Kobylanski strikes a pose after donning one of Linda Stein's sculptural avatars.



Renku Sen, right, is seen with 'bulleyproof' vests created by artist-activist Linda Stein.



Linda Stein, right, and her personal assistant Henry Galarza help Rinku Sen don a wearable piece of art.