



POWER AND PROTECTION: JAPANESE/AMERICAN CROSSROADS
AND THE IMPACT OF 9/11 ON THE SCULPTURE OF LINDA STEIN
A Conversation with Linda Stein by Helen Hardacre ³

HELEN HARDACRE: Linda Stein and I are going to talk about three major issues central to her work. First, Linda will speak about the ways in which her art connects with Japanese religions and popular culture. Second, she will talk about how the concept of protection has permeated her art for three decades. Third, she will discuss how she came to choose Princess Mononoke, Wonder Woman and Kannon as images that reflect her feelings of vulnerability after her 9/11 experience. I will address these issues from an historian's perspective, commenting on one of the oldest themes in the history of Japanese religions and faith: the longstanding connection between religion and the arts. The significance of this theme is intuitively understood in Japan, but I wonder how many people are aware that contemporary artists in other countries also see this theme as important to their own work. In this conversation I would like to view the art of contemporary artist Linda Stein as a sculptor who looks to the arts of Japan—among other sources of inspiration—for images and symbols of protection, the major theme in her work. I hope you will find this conversation an interesting illustration of the global influence of the arts of Japan, as well as an in-depth look at the works of an American artist.

Linda, to give people a reference point, discuss your current *Knight* series and let's talk a bit about this work.

LINDA STEIN: It might be helpful to begin by describing some of the materials I use in my work and my process as I begin a sculpture. I almost never make sketches first. I am usually drawn to a found object in my studio, a piece of driftwood, for example, that becomes the horizontal cross bar between the shoulders, as in *Uplifting Moment 562* (fig. 66), from my *Asian Armor* series. Or I might make a metal or wood template of a torso, onto which I fuse a variety of stone, wood and metals. A wooden bowl may become a breast (back cover), an amalgam of metals may form a pelvic area, stones become hips, license plates form thighs, or leather transitioning from breast to waist.

Lately, I am beginning to translate my work into bronze so that my sculpture can live outdoors. *Knight of Tomorrow 542* (fig. 21) is in the process

LEFT: Fig. 21. *Knight of Tomorrow 542*. 2005. Proposal for commission in bronze. 132" x 40" x 28"

now of being converted into bronze. As a bronze sculpture it will have the appearance of wood, metal and stone, as will the three bronze sculptures I create for the “Walk of the Heroines” at Portland State University. I created *Heroic Vision 561* (back inside cover) as the maquette for this commission.

HH: Now if I may take a step back into the historical perspective before we proceed with a more focused look at your work, let me put this discussion into a Japanese context, the pursuit of the arts as part of a religious path, based on the intuition that the practice of art is a discipline capable of elevating the spiritual level of a human being. For example, religious persons of all kinds have typically practiced calligraphy as a spiritual discipline, and, at least among religious persons of my acquaintance, most practice calligraphy daily, even in an age when email and word processing increasingly make it unnecessary to display one’s handwriting very often. The point seems to be that a beautiful calligraphic style is taken as evidence of a person’s maturity or spiritual depth.



Fig. 22. Deguchi Onisaburo

The continuation of the theme into the twentieth century may not be so well known. Accompanying the modernization of religious life, we find religious associations founded by laypersons who also practiced the arts. Deguchi Onisaburo (fig. 22), who lived from 1836 until 1918, co-founder of an association called Omoto (f. 1892), was also a painter, a potter, and a sculptor. In addition, he was one of the first religious leaders in Japan to incorporate photography and film, producing films to dramatize his understanding of the age of the gods and the history of the world. Had he lived in our age, we might have found him producing *anime* as another means to dramatize his ideas. And this is something we will come back to towards the end of our talk, when Linda describes how *anime* has influenced her art as well.

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RIGHT: Fig. 23. *Knight Rhythm 551*. 2005. wood, metal, stone. 79” x 24” x 13”



But for now can you speak about the art you were making before your current series of female *Knights*?

LS: In my sculpture over the last 25 years I've had a desire to create an archetypal form to metaphorically defend me against an aggressor. It goes back to the dreams I had as a kid (fig. 25) when I was always running away from an intruder, perhaps like the scene from *Psycho* where Janet Leigh runs from Tony Perkins and hides under a stairway (fig. 24). 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.*



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 large 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?

TOP: Fig. 24. Janet Leigh, *Psycho*, 1960
 BOTTOM: Fig. 25. Stein's dream, 10/29/90⁴



RIGHT: TOP TO BOTTOM: Figs. 26-27. Stein holding *Moon Cradle 172*; and Stein working outdoors, both at VCCA, 1989
 Fig. 28. Excavations exhibit, VCCA, Virginia, 1989
 Fig. 29. *Duality 183*. 1989. wood, bone, metal. 42" x 23" x 16"

HH: When this began to appear in your work, what forms did it take?

LS: In the 1980s, it took the form of an instrument, tool or weapon as with *Intrigue 175* (fig. 30) and *Double Circle 181* (fig. 33). While in residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts (VCCA), it began simply with a need to create a sculpture like *Throwing Stick 179* (fig. 31) with extreme verticality. Gradually, it became important for me to hold this sculpture in my hand or on my body (fig. 26), to walk about with it as if it held magical powers, and conveyed those powers to me. Stories from Greek and Roman myth flooded my mind as I worked out of doors in Virginia (fig. 27), and before long I was immersed in a series I later called *Ceremonial Scepters*.

At times, I created them for dancers and choreographers (fig. 29) and imagined that they belonged to Hermes, Daphne or Apollo. They became ritual objects accompanied by a *capriccio* (or made-up story), which I wrote to explain how a long-lost tribe used these scepters during their rites of initiation. Sometimes I made wooden cases for them that opened and closed to allow the scepter to be hinged inside. Some of my gallery exhibitions were called *Excavations* (fig. 28) and next to each sculpture was a description of its ceremonial use and tribal site discovery.⁵ And wouldn't you know, at every exhibit, at least one person would ask me where exactly I excavated these pieces!

HH: What a riot. So a theme of protection emerged in your art with your series of *Ceremonial Scepters* in the 1980s. What form did your work take next?

LS: In the 90s my need for protection found an outlet (fig. 34) in the

TOP LEFT: Fig. 30. *Intrigue 175*. 1988. wood, metal, stone. 67" x 27" x 23"
 TOP RIGHT: Fig. 31. *Throwing Stick 179*. 1989. 62" x 33" x 11"
 LOWER LEFT: Fig. 32. *Moon Cradle 172*. 1988. wood, metal, stone. 54" x 17" x 13"
 LOWER RIGHT: Fig. 33. *Double Circle 181*. 1989. wood, metal, stone. 27" x 10" x 13"

creation of my series, *Blades*, sculptures hanging from wall and ceiling. They fused wood with steel machete blades that I dulled by hand. It was in this series (fig. 36) that I introduced a sensual, curvilinear, warm element



Fig. 34. Soho 20 Gallery exhibit, New York, 1991

that invited the viewer to come hither and be charmed by the gentle sway of the form, before realizing that a potentially lethal weapon was transformed (as with sword-to-plowshare), to make it viewer-friendly.

HH: How long did this series of work last?

LS: It continued until the end of the 90s and into early 2000, when the machete's force and threat was softened further as I bent the hard steel of the blade, and even corkscrewed it. Then, the sculpture became part of a musical series. I had a lot of fun with this series. I began to call them *Soundings* because they incorporated buttons, xylophones, and mbira parts that could be played by the viewer. Gradually, the shape of the machete became less obvious and more subtle. I covered the steel machete blade with various materials. But I had to know it was still there for me *just in case*. One never knows when one is going to have to start running. I'm reminded of the scene from the movie *North by Northwest*, where Cary Grant is running across a field to get away from the crop duster that is trying to harm him (fig. 35).

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LS: It continued until the end of the 90s and



Fig. 35. Cary Grant, *North by Northwest*, 1959



Fig. 36. Various Sculptures from *Blades* Series. See notes ⁶

Fig 37. *Blades Note 195*. 1990.
wood, metal. 51" x 17" x 25"
INSET: Fig. 38. *Blades 197*. 1991.
wood, metal. 18" x 45" x 17"

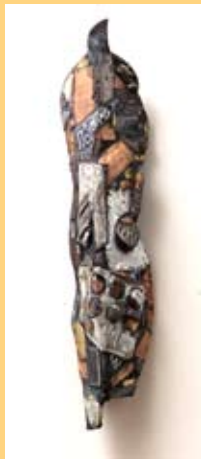


INSET: Fig. 39. *Blades Whip Down 187*.
1990. wood, metal, leather, 74" x 21" x 56"
Fig. 40. *Blades Wall Rope 186*. 1990
wood, metal, rope. 83" x 14" x 74"

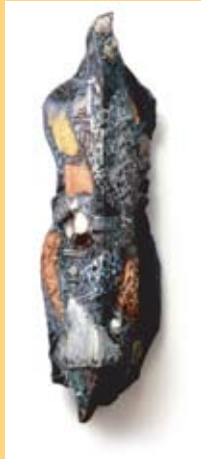




Fig. 41. Wall Installations from 3 series:
Ceremonial Scepters, Blades, Knights



HH: So, you developed two series on protection from 1980 to around 2000. And then, perhaps not coincidentally, you were personally affected by the events of 9/11. That must have had an enormous impact on your work given all that you have said so far.



LS: A great impact, both artistically and personally. I was with my staff in my Tribeca studio when the police came to evacuate us. We ran northward holding hands, looking behind our shoulders as clouds of white dust enveloped us. *Why*, I wondered, *were they throwing furniture off the Trade Towers? Oh, no. It's not furniture...*

HH: You were evacuated on 9/11 from your home and studio. Isn't that correct?

LS: Yes. After that day, I didn't live downtown for eight months. My dreams changed. My waking thoughts were filled with images of tall buildings going *poof*. Following an unexpected surgery two months later, I fainted after getting out of bed too quickly. I felt in my core that I *was* the World Trade Tower, neatly and softly falling straight down upon one knee, as I had seen the Tower fall quickly, without fanfare, upon itself.

HH: I would imagine that this caused a serious disruption in your work.

LS: I stopped doing sculpture altogether. I went back to a series of profile faces I had painted many years before. It was comforting for me to focus on the nose, lips, chin and shoulder shapes that were my obsession in prior years. It was as if I was holding my feelings in abeyance as I sorted out my recent experiences. I did *Mood Portraits*, including ones of Virginia Woolf, Gloria Steinem and Florence Kennedy.

HH: But you did go back to making sculpture. Can you describe how you did and when that was?



Fig. 42. *Slow Curve 352*. 2002. wood, metal, stone. 53" x 18" x 6"

Fig. 43. *Protection 469*. 2002. wood, metal, leather, fiber, stone. 48" x 15" x 9"

Fig. 44. *Memory 468*. 2002. wood, metal, leather, fiber, stone. 62" x 15" x 10"

Fig. 45. *Curved Connection 357*. 2002, 2004. wood, stone, metal, fiber, stone. 50" x 20" x 7" Siemens Collection

RIGHT: Fig. 46. *Knight of Acceptance 556*. 2006. wood, metal, stone. 47" x 17" x 7"





Fig. 47. *Two Knights with Names and Numbers 540*. 2005. collage & acrylic. 22" x 17" x 1"



Fig. 48. *Calligraphic Knight 546*. 2005. collage. 42" x 21" x 2.5"



Fig. 49. *Calligraphic Knight 548*. 2005. 3D Limited Edition Fine Art Print. 42" x 21" x 2.5"



Fig. 50. *Red Knight 537*. 2005. collage & acrylic. 22" x 17" x 1"



Fig. 51. *Knight of the Book 526*. 2005.
wood, metal, stone. 46" x 17" x 7"



Fig. 52. *Knight of Promise 558*. 2006.
wood, metal, stone, leather. 48" x 16" x 10"



LS: It took a year. At first it seemed as if I were continuing from where I left off. But that wasn't so because my abstract work was gravitating toward the figurative (figs. 42-45). I didn't realize this at first. I didn't see the very gradual formation of a torso, the expansion of pelvis and hips, the introduction of breasts. The materials I used now had more of a feel of an archeological dig.⁷

HH: I know you've done a good deal of writing about your art over the years. Were you able to write about your experiences on 9/11?

LS: Not for a long time (and, incidentally, I still can't bring myself to go to the Ground Zero pit). It took three years to put pen to paper. Three years to realize that, in my mind's eye, the sculptural form I was now creating had become a female Knight, a Warrior Woman with a combination of antithetical qualities like: power/vulnerability, masculinity/femininity, warrior/peacemaker. By scrambling expectations of the masculine, the strong, the fighter, I was attempting in my sculpture to ask questions, agitate, alarm, and arouse a visceral response in myself and in my viewers.

HH: You have spoken of a dialogue with your sculptures. What do you mean by that?

LS: As with my *Ceremonial Scepters*, my *Knights* began to communicate with me. As with *Knight of Dreams 531* (fig. 49), I felt they assured me protection. They would watch, and wait, and prevent any attack. They became my bodyguards, like the *Blades* of the decade past.

HH: It sounds as if, in your creative process, the work comes first, intuitively, and then later, after the work is done, you start thinking about models or other images that resonate with your *Knights*. Is that so?

LEFT: Fig. 54. *Quiet Strength 472*. 2004. wood, metal, stone, fiber. 51" x 15" x 8"
RIGHT: Fig. 54. *Offering 374*. 2006. wood, metal, stone. 50" x 18" x 10"



LS: Yes, mostly I am responding unconsciously as I work on my sculpture, but, intellectually, there was something about these *Knights* that gave me pause. How could I create them as warriors when I felt they were symbols of pacifism? How, I wondered could they be fighters in battle when they represented to me everything that cried out for peace? I mulled this over and over until I reached deep into some kind of dense nucleus containing my own traditions and cultural background.

It was then, after years of making my *Knights* that Wonder Woman came into my mind. This über-female of my youth struck a chord in me and addressed the same issues I was unconsciously addressing in my current sculpture. I began rereading all of her comics and was enthralled with her once again. I was captivated with how each comic book began. Helen, do you remember this? It always started with something like: *WITH THE BEAUTY OF APHRODITE, 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.*



Fig. 55. Wonder Woman, Princess Mononoke and Kannon.

HH: Oh, I remember her vividly. She first came to America in 1941, at a time when war, with its accompanying fear and insecurity enveloped our country. As a comic book character, she was accessible and popular.

LS: Yes. Remember how she helped the downtrodden, saved the weak, promoted Democracy and represented Justice? Time after time, she battled for us and triumphed over every villain and enemy. She was my role model. And, oh, how I loved her.

HH: Ahh, we were a lot more innocent in those days. And was it then, after you explored your connection with Wonder Woman that you reached to other cultures to make more connections with your *Knights*?

LS: Yes, I saw a full-length feature animation of Princess Mononoke and felt a similar connection to my sculpture. It was nothing I could have planned. Princess Mononoke is another Warrior Woman—a girl, actually—but this time from Japanese *anime*. She is fearless in protecting the environment.

HH: Yes. She's a real favorite of mine. Her character and film became popular at a time when Japan was in a relentless pursuit of economic development at the expense of the environment, and against all that was important and central to the traditions of the country.

LS: Yes, Mononoke confronted evil on behalf of humanity, in spite of her vulnerabilities as an adolescent.

HH: So now you related your *Knights* to two popular culture figures and we've brought the discussion back to the *anime* that we briefly mentioned at the beginning of the conversation.

LS: Yes, both Wonder Woman and Princess Mononoke helped in my conversation, if you will, with my *Knights*. I felt by revisiting them, I was better able to understand my reasons for making my sculpture.

Fig. 56. Wonder Woman with Knight of Tomorrow 542

HH: And then at some point you felt that Wonder Woman and Princess Mononoke were too specific and representational, and, therefore, didn't tell the whole story of your *Knights*. Right?

LS: Exactly. My *Knights* were more abstract and archetypal. In my sculpture, I sought a more timeless symbol, one that referred to an archaic presence existing for centuries. So what did I do? I began researching for such an historical or religious figure, one that made generations feel protected and safe. The key words for me were *protection* and *safety*. I looked for one that promised salvation and deliverance from problems, a sense of morality, a role model. And soon I discovered Kannon.

HH: Yes. Kannon is the Japanese name for the Buddhist Bodhisattva or goddess of mercy and compassion. The Bodhisattvas are sworn to delay their own salvation until all other beings have been saved. Like all Bodhisattvas, Kannon has theoretically transcended sex, but throughout East Asia is frequently represented as an androgynous or female savior, sometimes with many heads and arms that bear symbols and weapons. You have added Kannon as a third symbol of protection. So now, Linda, you are using these three as a reference in your current sculpture?

LS: Yes, because I needed to understand my creative process and chose Kannon, Wonder Woman and Princess Mononoke, three figures from tradition to help me to understand this (fig.55).

HH: And this is the part I find the most fascinating. As I see it, as an historian of religions, struggle is central to your creative process. When the events on 9/11 happened, you were totally shaken and unconsciously you found yourself in need of some referent to help you make sense of these events as they related to your long-term focus on protection and safety. You then reached into traditional and popular culture for ideas and images to help you make sense of your own situation. You were rebuilding yourself from your need for protection by infusing yourself with strength. These female icons, if we may call them that, may have helped you to find the visual representations you needed in order to rebalance and continue to make art.



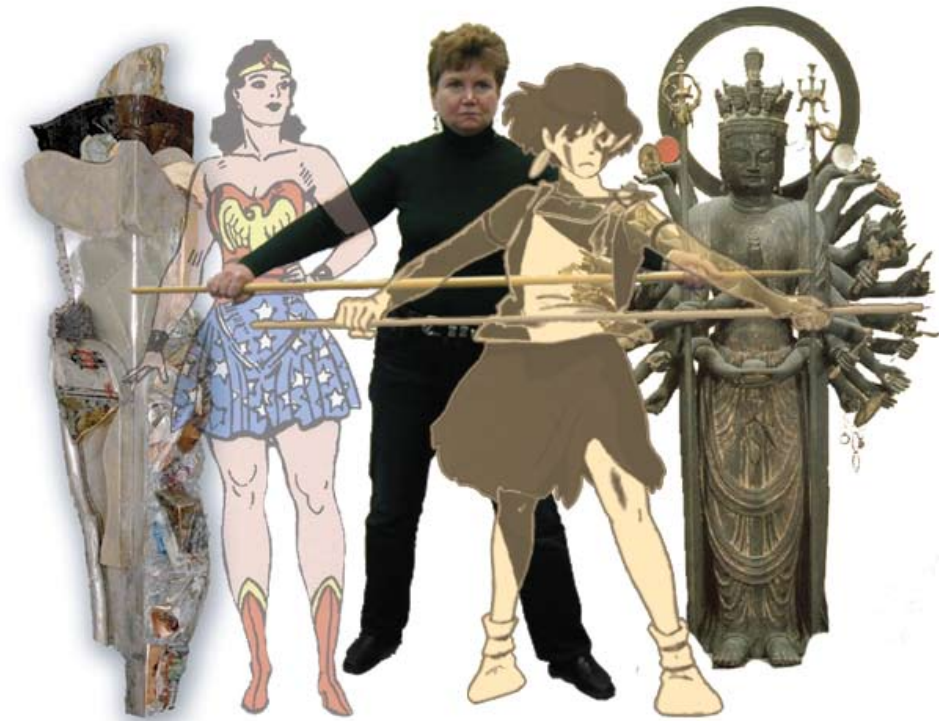
Fig. 57. *Knight Twist 562*. 2006. wood. 60" x 19" x 7"



LS: Perhaps, for me, these three archetypal symbols of strength, protection and morality merge with the fourth figure of my *Knight* sculpture and a fifth figure, which is me. I tried to express this visually in a montage, and with a short QuickTime movie I made called *Heroic Inspiration*.⁸

HH: Are you aware of all of this while you are creating your sculpture?

LS: Well, not really. In fact, I listen to mostly nonfiction books on tape while I do my art, preferably biographies. Frankly I'm not exactly sure what propels me to get there. Though I think I am in charge of what I do, I don't really have as much control as I might think. I can create my own world. I can make things big or small or blue or purple. And so I may feel I am in the driver's seat. But, you know, I might really just be the chauffeur responding to an internal voice that pushes me to turn right, left or go straight ahead.



LEFT: Fig. 58. *Asian Armor 560*. 2006. wood. 49" x 19" x 7"

ABOVE: Fig 59. *Heroic Inspiration Montage 569*. 2006. 6" x 7.5"

HH: Well, let's shift gears here and have you talk about the individual sculptures. How do they differ for you as the creator? Does each *Knight* express a different aspect of protection?

LS: They have different personas as I am creating them, but much of the time, as I said, I am not aware of this as I work. After they're completed, they each may take on a "personality" for me, or bring to mind certain characteristics, such as fragility or power. For instance, it was after creating (*K*)night Figure 470 (fig. 60, 3) that I wrote:



A Figure
 Naked albeit
 Vested in Finery
 Defenseless Armored
 Vulnerable Invincible.
 A Monument
 Sewing Template
 Gesture of
 Life's Tease
 Random Precise.
 A Warrior
 Still yet
 Commanding
 Thrust into Battle
 Strength Fragility.

HH: Can you tell us more about this sculpture?

LS: As I look at this sculpture and let my eyes travel up and down its materials and textures, I feel that the upper portion, which is raw, stained wood, is naked and exposed. It reminds me of a sewing model before being draped with fabric by the tailor. The black leather, on the sculpture's left side, feels more confrontational to me, as it transitions to the lower part and prepares me for the take-no-prisoners toughness and grit of the lower, shield-like part, which is a burst of all kinds of metals. To me (*K*)night Figure 470 also demands a visceral as well as a visual response. I see the inside, the guts of the figure.

Fig. 60. (*K*)night Figure 470 (also see Fig. 3.) and Poem of 2004

HH: This bottom part, the pelvic area, certainly seems shield-like to me. Talk about your other sculptures.

LS: Well, others, like *Knight of Hope* 552 (fig. 61), *Knight of Plenty* 553 (fig. 13), *Knight of Dreams* 531 (fig. 62), *Knight of Triumph* 530 (fig. 15), seem more archetypal to me, perhaps because they are more androgynous. In their abstractness, they encompass all my thematic goals as an artist in this Warrior-Woman series, including having an archaic or ancient feel, without being as time-specific or contemporary as *Quiet Strength* 472 (fig. 53). But this is how I feel when I look at my work. The viewer might feel differently.



Fig. 61. *Knight of Hope* 552. 2005. wood, metal, stone. 79" x 21" x 14"

HH: *Knight of Winged Words 524* (fig. 3) is very powerful to me, and yet very elegant at the same time.

LS: When I gaze at it, I have the feeling of being in the presence of a soldier who is “at attention” while being ribboned and honored, perhaps for saving a town from attack. I like its feminine curves and its androgynous strength.

HH: Your use of letters and calligraphy is very intriguing to me. I see how you fuse words into your work. Where did this interest in writing come from?

LS: Since childhood, I have loved calligraphy and writing. I used to pester my sister and parents as I created and changed my handwriting. I spent hours and hours deciding how to sign my name. I even worked as a sign painter and owned a calligraphy business. In *Calligraphic Knights 548* and *549* (figs. 48, 49), limited edition prints, I used torn pieces of envelopes addressed in fine calligraphy. Here’s another example of my fascination with contradictions. On the one hand I want my work to be timeless, abstract, ancient, archetypal, and at the same time I’m using specific, time-bound elements of everyday life: coins, keys, license plates, hardware, and calligraphy plates on copper, zinc, steel, magnesium and brass.

HH: I find that there is an enigmatic quality to your having the embedded words both in hard metal and in reverse.

LS: Well, you probably know that printing plates must be in reverse, so that when they are pressed onto the paper they will appear correctly. I like the semi-legibility of this reversal. I’ve called many of my sculptures *Glyphs*, because the word brings to mind an ancient writing system. It would ruin it for me if the words were complete and totally accessible.

HH: So then, in looking at your sculpture, I see exquisite writing but cannot easily read it. In a way, it makes it more magical.

LS: Yes, art can indeed be magical. □

RIGHT: Fig. 62. *Knight of Dreams 531*. 2005. wood, stone, metal. 51” x 15” x 7”

