



THE POETRY OF MEANING AND LOSS: THE GLASS DRESSES OF KAREN LAMONTE

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I first became fascinated with the work of Karen LaMonte when I read an essay by her¹ on the state of glass art in one of its main centers, the Czech Republic, where she had gone in 1999 as a Fulbright student to study the craft of monumental cast glass. What fascinated me was less the account she gave of artistic practices in that country than her reason for having gone there in the first place. “I wanted to make a life-size, hollow cast-glass dress,” she wrote. “I knew the piece would be very technically complicated and since the world-renowned center for large-scale casting is the Czech Republic, I decided to pack my bags and go for it.” The essay explained how she realized her project, but told the reader nothing about her reasons for wanting to make a life-sized dress in glass. Where did such an astonishing idea come from? I once read a somewhat similar statement by Charles Dickens. He was explaining how, when a rising young writer, he was offered the opportunity to write some sketches of sporting life in England. “I thought of Pickwick,” he said, “and wrote the first chapter.” “I wanted to make a life-size dress out of glass, and traveled to the Czech Republic” has the same unselfconscious abruptness as that. However interesting LaMonte’s account of large-scale glass casting in the Czech Republic may have been, someone else could have written it. My interest was in the genius of her vision. Finding out how to execute the vision was something that could be learned in the glass-casting factory in Pelechov. The vision itself, by contrast, was bestowed as a gift of the creative imagination, and transformed her into a very different artist than she would have been, had the vision not been granted her.

What is particularly engaging about LaMonte is that she seems to have no idea how extraordinary that bestowal was. When

¹ Karen LaMonte. “Global Glass: Czech Republic.” *Glass Magazine*. No. 75, Summer, 1999. pp. 46-49.

I asked her about it she told me that she was initially interested in translating fabric into glass. She had been working with puppets, she explained, and had the idea of making them into glass objects. She had made some small garments out of glass, but they looked like doll-clothes. So she had to make them larger. Why a dress? Well, she said, I'm a girl, so I naturally thought about a dress. But a dress is a pretty shapeless garment unless there is a body in it. So one thing led to another, and in the end what she wanted was a life-sized glass dress contoured to express the shape of a woman's body. But glass on that scale had better be cast, and since that technique is practiced best in the Czech Republic, voilà! That was her account, more or less, and perhaps one might have gotten the same step-by-step chronicle of how Pickwick materialized in his imagination from Charles Dickens, had anyone pressed him. Perhaps that is how it always is with historical explanations — one thing happens and then another. And all at once we have the Renaissance or the French Revolution. The longest journey, the Chinese say, begins with a single step. "Before tackling the adult size," LaMonte says matter-of-factly, "I started with a child's dress." Her first monumental casting of a woman's dress was called *Vestige* (2000).

Now I have seen LaMonte's glass puppets, as well as the effigies of clothing in works of hers called *Clothlines*. These are engaging, witty pieces in blown glass, but they are certainly not monumental. They are in their nature ornamental, as blown-glass work often is. One would never, on the basis of these earlier works, have been able to visualize a work as beautiful and as powerful as *Vestige*. It would, to use a somewhat forced metaphor, be like visualizing a rose on the basis of examining some rose seeds. Or visualizing a butterfly by studying a cocoon. Nothing like *Vestige* had ever been done, so far as I am aware. It would have been fascinating to read an account of how, as LaMonte puts it, "The dress had been translated in perfect detail into glass." Think of how exciting it is to read the account in the *Autobiography* of Benvenuto Cellini of the casting of his great *Perseus*. But that still leaves the provenance of LaMonte's great idea, of a life-sized dress made of glass, unaccounted for. That vision must already

have been formed in her imagination while she set about applying for a fellowship that would take her to the Czech Republic, and which guided her steps once she was there. In an essay on her Fulbright experience, she writes, “I have found that it is possible to cast the pieces I want on the scale I need to, but more importantly, that using the techniques I have learned, I can successfully communicate my ideas using cast glass as a medium.” But before that could happen, she had to do something even more remarkable — to “introduce my dress project to [Zdeněk] Lhotský, since it differs so greatly from Czech glass.” Lhotský, she tells us “was excited by the idea itself and enthusiastic about the challenge of making so complicated a piece.” But beyond the technical challenge, to appropriate a phrase from Shakespeare, of giving “an airy nothing a local habitation and a name,” I must suppose that Lhotský, like me, was charmed by the poetry of translating into the magic of glass the fluttering lightness of a garment like the one that became *Vestige*. After all, a woman who fills the garment that became *Vestige* herself must become a vision of enhanced beauty:

Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
That liquefaction of her clothes!

Next, when I cast mine eyes and see
That brave vibration each way free,
— O how that glittering taketh me!

Vestige freezes, so to speak, the enchantment the garment is intended to confer upon its wearer.

“Clothing,” LaMonte writes, “both protects and projects. It is armor and costume, plumage and camouflage.” That is true, but too sweeping. It is true of the padded garments of the Maoist welder, the bib-overalls of a farm worker, the oilskins of a lobsterman. The vision LaMonte carried with her was of femininity embodied, a garment constructed to project and enhance the grace of its wearer, clinging

and diaphanous. The relationship is reciprocal: the wearer gives life to the garment, like Julia in Robert Herrick's poem. *Vestige* has a tiered skirt, a high neck, long sleeves, and, as the artist likes to say, "a bow on the butt." It does not hang slackly, like a dress on a hanger, it implies limbs, joints, curves. It is inseparable from the en fleshed person within. But it is also co-implicated with the circumstances in which it is appropriately worn. It is worn on and as part of special occasions, under which the wearer is making a statement about herself. It is not a dress in which one does chores or runs errands, it rejects everydayness. It goes with candlelight and music, sweeping staircases and jewelry, flowers and wine. It confers in the language of garments preciousness and beauty on the person it presents to the company in which it belongs. Its wearer is a fairy-tale princess, a bearer of happiness in the way she moves through the space of the ball. It is encapsulated in life the way a dream is. And this I think is true of most of the dresses LaMonte cast in glass after *Vestige*, which, as a title, is evocative in its own right. A vestige is what remains of something that no longer exists. So it is a tangible memory of all that the dress itself stands for, including, perhaps, the body of she whose dress it was. The translucence of glass lends a certain ghostliness to the object, which accounts for half its poetry. It is more than a piece of second-hand clothing, something found on a rack, since it is still filled with what appears to be a living body, bereft, as it happens, of head and extremities. That must, in a sense, be an illusion. So it is a vestige the way a memory is, something that is carried away after the event to which the dress belonged when it was worn. It is evocative the way an old photograph is. So when we see what materialized in the Czech Republic, we begin to realize something of the content of LaMonte's vision. It was a lot more than "a life-size dress cast in glass."

The dress as a sculptural form in its own right cannot easily have been imagined much before the 1960s, when artists took on the project of overcoming the gap between art and life and began to make art out of ordinary objects, in part because of their rich human associations. A good example is Judith Shea's 1980 *Inaugural Ball*, which greatly impressed me when I first saw it in an important exhibition of women's art, *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Enter the Mainstream, 1970-1985*.² It was a life-sized dress, simply shaped, and hung on the gallery wall, and though it was presented as a work of art, nothing obviously distinguished it from a woman's dress as such. In that show, there were some works by Miriam Shapiro, which she called *Femmages*, assembled from articles sewn and embroidered by women — doilies, tablecloths, and aprons — which Shapiro, for ideological reasons, intended to celebrate. They were in effect collages made out of pieces of fancy stitching. By contrast, Shea's work was displayed as such, like a ready-made, which it could have been.



VESTIGE, 2000.
60 × 40 × 30 in.

² Catherine C. Brawer and Randy Rosen, editors. *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Enter the Mainstream, 1970-1985*. Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum; New York: Abbeville Press, 1989.



INAGURAL BALL, 1980
Judith Shea (American, born 1948)
Cotton organdy, 67 × 24 × 1½ in.
Courtesy of the Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York
Photograph by Sandak, Inc.

The seventies were a time when painting, as a medium, was under attack: feminists had raised political questions about painting, based on the lingering *machismo* with which the medium was associated since Abstract Expressionist times, in an atmosphere in which the question of why there were no great women painters had become the topic of intense debate. It was a time when it was of some importance for women artists to find ways of making an art that spoke to women as women, and although there were paintings by women in the show, it seemed clear that its organizers were anxious to show alternative modes of expression that women artists had found. Almost nothing spoke to differences in gender the way articles of clothing do. Shea's work looked like a dress that might be found in any woman's closet, so that, like a ready-made work, it raised the philosophical question of what made the difference between it and a mere garment. If a snow shovel or a bottle rack could be a work of art, why not an evening gown? In any case, it would not ordinarily have occurred to a male artist to see the dress as a ready-made — though of course Marcel Duchamp cultivated a feminine identity as *Rose Selavy*. In fact, Judith Shea did the cutting and sewing, and there is, if one looks at it with some detachment, a certain aesthetic austerity in its lines: Shea had a certain commitment to Minimalist principles as a sculptor. Still, it would have required a great deal of sexual confidence for a male minimalist to have exhibited a pink evening dress made out of cotton organdy. So there was an element of provocation in showing it as an example of Minimalist art on Shea's part. *Inaugural Ball*, in any case, was a highly overdetermined artwork, through which Judith Shea was able to raise a large number of issues in aesthetic politics all at the same time.

I am not confident that anything like this was true of *Vestige*, made two decades later. It is difficult to believe that it was conceived of in a polemical spirit at all. For one thing, there was a tradition in glass art of making large objects, like pieces of furniture, out of glass. The Baccarat Museum in Paris displays glass thrones and the like, though most of them seem to me to have been occasions more for demonstrating virtuosity than anything else, and none had the depth of meaning one responds to in LaMonte's glass dresses. Nevertheless, *Vestige* almost certainly raises questions that bear on the issues of gender that defined the art world of the nineties, which can be brought out by comparing LaMonte's work with that of her contemporary, Howard Ben Tré, who also worked in cast glass on a monumental scale, but whose work seems almost flagrantly masculinist alongside LaMonte's. Ben Tré's signature forms are large uninflected monoliths, cast in American factories that produce industrial glass. They are powerful and proletarian, and one can imagine them as subject to mass production for large-scale structural projects. They project brute strength. LaMonte's pieces, whatever their weight, proclaim beauty and evanescence, fragility

and delicacy, transparency and light, luxury and magic. There is a logic in a fairy godmother's decision to underscore her protégée's femininity by fitting her out with glass slippers. A girl who can dance in glass slippers must be as airy as a song! I admire both artists greatly. I juxtapose them solely to dramatize the difference in their imagination. What interests me is the way that Ben Tré's monoliths imply their industrial provenance, whereas LaMonte's somehow transcend the circumstances of their manufacture. They leave behind the heavy labor that Ben Tré's work celebrates as part of its meaning, even if, in her case, they are part of her works' history.

This difference is almost certainly a consequence of LaMonte's decision to make the dress her central motif, and of the kind of dress she chose for transubstantiation into glass, where the fragility of the glass augments the fineness and translucency of the fabric, as well as the lightness expressed by ornamentation of the garment — flounces, bows, ribbons, ruffles. At least initially, the dresses she chose were declarations of radical femininity on the part of their wearers — garments so constructed as to project an image of ideal grace. In her brilliant book, *Seeing through Clothes*, Anne Hollander argues that “the primary function of Western dress is to contribute to the making of a self-conscious image, an image linked to all other imaginative and idealized visualizations of the human body.”³ The garments LaMonte worked with were not, except from a cynical perspective, working clothes — housedresses, business suits, uniforms. They were ornamental garments for special occasions, and they translated into visual terms the metaphor of the woman as herself an ornament, whose substance was aesthetic through and through. There is a language of clothing that itself belongs to the discourse of gender. Since the 1970s, gender has become a subject of intense examination, in art and in life, and there is a wide understanding that there is, as with language, a large element of social convention in the rules through which it is governed. That has been taken to mean that, in principle at least, the rules can be changed and that the roles that have governed women's lives and the way women are represented in society are not inalterable. And in particular that the forms of beauty are themselves not immutable: the full-figured beauties of Lorenzo Lotto mark one extreme, the sleek, almost metallic slenderness of Tamara de Lempicka mark another. Lotto's women embody a dynastic role in that they are expected to furnish heirs. Lempicka's women dress to express their independence: airplanes and fast cars are their fashion accessories. Gender differences may not be genetically inscribed, but the degree to which they can be altered at will is limited. Nevertheless, they do change with the times, which is the chief deep difference between gender and sex. The clothes women wear define their moment in history.

“I create clothing in glass,” LaMonte wrote, “to represent animated yet absent beings, a human form without a body.” Most

³ Anne Hollander. *Seeing Through Clothes*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. p. xiv.



LA BELLE RAFAELA, 1927 Oil on canvas, 24 × 15 in (61 × 38 cm)
Tamara de Lempicka, © Tamara Art Heritage 2006 Licensed by MMI New York

of the dresses that LaMonte has cast in glass are as much vestiges of a vanished time as of an absent person. They are as dated as old photographs, found in the backs of drawers or forgotten between the pages of books. This brings me to one of the most interesting features of LaMonte's work. We can see through the fabric to the naked body of the women who wore it, as if the body left its imprint on the dress that concealed but alluded to it. It is as if the beauty of the wearer's body were preserved in her garment, and we see the navel, the nipples, the shadowed delta between her legs, her buttocks. Critics I have spoken with have deplored this as gratuitous eroticism, but I see it as adding a dimension of tragedy to the poetry of the work. The dress belonged to a moment when the wearer was, to use an expression of Proust's, *en fleur*. The dress belonged to a certain moment of history, which it preserves — it shows how women dressed for certain occasions at a certain moment. The wearer will have aged. She looked like that then, but, if she is still alive, it is certain she will not look that way now. There is a double melancholy — the melancholy of fashion, and the melancholy of bodily change, from nubility to decrepitude. The breasts have fallen, the waist thickened, the skin has lost its transparency and luminescence. The poignancy of LaMonte's dresses is a product of two modes of change in which we participate as human beings, composed, as we are, of flesh and meaning. Their poetry is the poetry of beauty and loss.