

**The Spectacular**



**Glass Dresses of**

**Karen LaMonte**

**by Brett Littman**





Previous page:

*Dress 4, back.*

62 x 25 x 25"

This page:

*Dress 4, front.*

28 x 18 x 14"



Fashion is where art and commerce mix. Last year more things that look like clothes (and even exhibitions of brand name designers) popped up in museums and galleries around New York. The Armani retrospective at the Guggenheim, Issey Miyake's installation at the Ace Gallery, the "Uniform: Order and Disorder" exhibition at P.S.1 and Contemporary Art Center, Creative Time's avant-garde fashion installation at the Anchorage in the Brooklyn Bridge are just a few examples of the growing trend of the interpenetration between art and fashion. As well, artists like Louis Bourgeois, Leslie Dill, Mathew Barney, Vanessa Beecroft and Cindy Sherman have been using clothing as a metaphor for self-representation, the body, economic systems and materialism. But why is the contemporary art world so interested

in garments and adornment? Clothing has become the primary way in which we identify class and personal style. Fashion evolutions trace and mirror the political and social changes that we are undergoing in society. Often the current fashion trends—which oscillate between constriction and liberation—tell us more about how the body is viewed in culture than philosophy, science or politics. Artists who want to prompt viewers to think about our inner experiences and the ways that we conceal them and who also want to expose power and gender structures have turned to fashion as the primary vehicle to express these dialects. Paralleling the interest in clothing in the contemporary art world, in the past eight years there has been a resurgence of interest in the glass world in the body and clothing. One of the artists who has been in the forefront of this movement has been glass sculptor Karen LaMonte. Since 1995 LaMonte has been working with the clothed body as her primary visual image. LaMonte's interest in clothing is twofold. "I use clothing as a

metaphor for identity and human presence. I believe we have two skins that outline and define who we are. One of course is our natural skin, but we obscure and conceal it beneath clothing which is a second skin, our social skin." At first LaMonte focused on producing a series of glass puppets based on Dante's *Inferno* and the characters in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. This coterie of kings, devils and jokers allowed LaMonte to explore the expressiveness of glass in both specificity of technique and abstract form. To personalize and differentiate each piece LaMonte pinched and deformed the garments of each puppet to mimic the natural folds of clothing. Later, LaMonte created smaller glass dresses out of recycled bottles and hung them on a miniature clothesline. These dresses had to be made quickly as the bottles came out of the glory hole, as there was a limited amount of working time before the glass hardened. These dresses captured the immediacy of the glass blowing gesture but failed to create the look of fabric so LaMonte began to focus on honing her mold making skills.

Her goals in using the mold blowing process was to better represent the texture of the fabrics she was using as inspiration and to increase the scale of the work. These pieces ranged in height from one to two feet. The results were doll-like—highly textured empty shells headless and armless that seemed to float in space. These pieces were closer to what LaMonte had envisioned, but she still wanted to increase the size. As anyone who has worked in glass knows there it is time consuming and difficult to create large-scale work. Not only do you need large annealers, great molds and skilled cold-workers, you also need a lot of capital for research and development, as there will be a lot of failure. At UrbanGlass and Pilchuck, where LaMonte was creating most of her work, there were technical limitations that made it impossible for her to attain her final goal of making a life-sized dress. So after a year or so of research, LaMonte decided that the only place where these pieces could be realized would be in the Czech Republic. The casting facilities

there were already geared towards large-scale work and had been producing monumental pieces for artists like Libensky' and Brychtová. The only problem was that the Czech aesthetic tended towards complete geometrical abstraction so LaMonte knew that it would be a challenge for them to create detailed figurative molds. In 1998 LaMonte received a Fulbright Fellowship to go to the Czech Republic to study glass casting with Zdeněk Lhotský at the famous Pelechov studio founded by Jaroslava Brychtová in the 1950s. LaMonte says of her initial experience, "I was nervous to introduce my dress project to Lhotský since it differs so greatly from Czech glass, but he was excited by the idea and enthusiastic about the challenge of making such a complicated piece. The mold makers themselves were even more excited—it was refreshing for them to see something new." She started by making a cast of a child's dress and much to the factory workers surprise wanted to participate in the fabrication process. This flies in the face of the traditional way of working in

the Czech Republic where there is a complete disjunction between the artist/designer and the fabricators. LaMonte's interest in learning in detail the casting process from start to finish however, turned out to be quite important as it allowed her to build a relationship with the workers and gave them the impetus to push the envelope of their skills. Over the next two years LaMonte continued to work with the Pelechov factory and began to work on larger molds. She used art students, prostitutes and herself as models for the interiors of a series of human-scaled pieces. These waxes took several months to produce. LaMonte says, "The human body is the single thing that everyone has in common—it is a universal form which speaks to everyone on a personal level. Scale was extremely important to me—the cast glass pieces are made from found objects in their original state—so the final pieces needed to exist on a human scale so they would possess human presence." Once the waxes were created she made castings of the bodies and then added clothing to

these forms. She then took waxes of the clothing and made molds of the clothed bodies. Once these were completed she made hollow castings that would articulate the interior and exterior forms. One concession that LaMonte had to make though, was that the pieces that were larger than three or four feet tall would have to be made in several parts—as even the annealers at Pelechov are not large enough to accommodate anything larger and there would be too high of a risk of mold failure.

The fruits of her labor were realized in 2000 when the first series of dresses that were cast at Pelechov were shown at the Heller Gallery and at Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York. LaMonte showed several types of pieces: large bas-reliefs and the multipart hollow cast pieces. In



*Dress 5, front.*  
58 x 25 x 19 in.

her most recent body of work Dress 4 and 6, 2001 and the smaller Dress 3 and 5, 2001, LaMonte has finally hit her stride. Over the past two years the factory has been able to learn how to refine the mold-making process and the casting of the pieces to create sculptures that perfectly captured a sense of temporality and the gray area between the recognition of the human form and the complete absence of the appendages, head usually, associated with the body. As well, LaMonte has been working on a series of prints made by inking dresses that she showed alongside the dress during her last solo exhibition at the Heller Gallery in May, 2001.

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*Dress 5, back.*  
58 x 25 x 19 in.

*Dress 6, front.*  
51 x 17 x 24 in.



*Dress 6, back.*  
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