

KAREN LAMONTE: ABSENCE ADORNED

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To see Karen LaMonte in her studio amid wax figures, cast-glass sculptures and garments, an iron and pins, is to begin to comprehend how intrinsically her work is concerned with the intersection of many traditions — of art history, fashion, and theater — ultimately converging in a dazzling display of exquisite glass gowns and haunting mirrors.

For LaMonte, the preparation of wax models and fabric leading up to the final casting in glass shares equal importance with the foundry work itself. In this way, LaMonte reminds me of the legendary French couturier Madame Grès, who reportedly used up to seventy meters of silk to create a single Classically inspired evening gown. Where Grès ardently fashioned her toile directly onto living models, LaMonte scrupulously drapes and pins garments, sashes, and shawls onto the body molds she creates to form the shapely interior for each of her translucent glass dresses, offering peek-a-boo nudes. Clearly, LaMonte is attracted to the qualities of crystalline glass, yet what is perhaps even more fascinating for her are the qualities of fabric and the brilliant legacy of its treatment in art history and fashion.

LaMonte has used her highly developed art of lost-wax glass casting since the late 1990s. In her earlier works, the dresses were allowed to cascade naturally from the figure with little manipulation. Her most recent pieces, however, represent a pivotal shift in approach as both her mastery of draping and her casting technique impart added emotion and vitality to her work. The effect recalls the voluptuous layers of seemingly diaphanous folds used by Hellenistic sculptors to accentuate the sensuality of the body, strategically concealing and exposing the body and inescapably influencing our notions of female beauty and modesty. LaMonte's reinterpretation of the dress and her methods for incorporating historical references can be understood within a continuum of myriad practices for rendering textiles in art. Extending from Classical times, generations

of artists have created a codified structure for representing and viewing the clothed figure, one that pervades our current views about the power of clothing to ennoble, idealize, and conceal the wearer. Building her work around her keen understanding of our inherited appreciation for clothing, LaMonte openly admits to mining art and fashion history in search of the most superb and iconic examples of these traditions.

As she deepened her investigation of costume and fabric beyond its role as an emblem of wealth and luxury, Gian Lorenzo Bernini's Baroque masterpiece, *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (1645–1652, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome), became a significant inspiration. Bernini's bold sculpting of folds forms a crescendo that for LaMonte amplifies the erotic intensity of the saint's swooning desire for a divine union with God. Through a similar probing into the way cloth holds the capacity to represent and express intensity, LaMonte is bringing an added maturity to her earlier headless and limbless women — pristine, yet somehow lifeless in their still perfection. Her achievement can be seen in her newest generation of models, cast from women of varying ages, and now taken beyond their original upright and pert selves to evoke a widening spectrum of emotions as they languish solemnly or recline seductively like odalisques.

Less interested in contemporary garments than in historical costume, LaMonte has spent a great deal of time mulling over and questioning the relationship between clothing and women in art and theater, arenas of the gaze. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object — and most



Atelier of Madame Grès at the Place Vendôme in Paris, circa 1938
Photo by Robert Schall

particularly an object of vision: a sight.”¹ LaMonte seems to make this observation visible as she explores themes of female identity and fashion in her work. The alluring translucency of her glass dresses draws us into the realm of desire and voyeurism — her figures are adorned, yet have a dual appeal, both erotic and eerie, as nudes. Clothing, our “second or social skin,” as the artist puts it, protects us and creates a defining boundary between intimate and public space. Fashion, however, with its conventions and pervasive influence, trusses us up into our gender and class, masking woman’s unique identity and often making her invisible.

In her work, LaMonte is clearly an artist who has inherited the achievements of the feminist art of the 1970s, yet she confidently explores these conceptions of female identity and beauty without the need to critique feminine stereotypes. Undeniably sensual and beautiful, her gleaming, radiant gowns project ideals of appearance and wealth promoted by haute couture and historical portraiture, while also questioning the psychological and social implications of the way we dress. Thus, her works directly address our culture of vanity, where the dress defines the wearer and the mirror tells us who we are, and how we fall short of the stylized perfection of images in the media. Who can forget the lines spoken by the queen in the Brothers Grimm fairy tale *Little Snow White*?

Mirror, mirror, on the wall,
Who in this land is fairest of all?

Indeed it was the queen and not humble Snow White who lived with that decadent object, the mirror. Once found only in wealthy homes, an elaborately ornamented mirror was a luxury item, something still very true today, just as the value of period picture frames can be higher than the paintings they hold. Historically, the mirror has a solid place in pictorial works as a *vanitas* symbol — a reality check of our own mortality and an irksome reminder of the inevitability of aging. Often depicted in art to caution us to lead a pious life free of pride and lust, a spotless mirror in the context of a betrothal portrait was also understood to symbolize purity and virginity.

Inspired by such historical symbolism, and by memento images of the deceased on gravestones, LaMonte’s intimately scaled *Sleeping Mirrors* and *Lark Mirrors* were created using a special photo-resist process to sandblast the portraits onto cast glass. Meant to be installed in a dimly lit room where the faces can emerge from darkness as though out of a hazy slumber, the mirrors evoke archetypal themes of death and drama. Curiously, some of the mirrors reflect the image of a clown. By juxtaposing human expressions and the painted face of a clown, an outlandish performer who is human and yet not quite human, the artist invests her carefully crafted theater with a sense of artificiality. Circulating

¹ John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995, p. 41; original publication 1972.

between history and illusion, LaMonte's work allows the artist's and our own private anxieties about life and death (presence and absence) to commingle with romantic and elegiac beauty.

Delving into illusory space, LaMonte's imprinting of the invisible speaks to something greater than the limits of our physical self. In her glass dresses, only a few traces of the original figure are carried forward — the curve of a breast, the slope of a back, the indentation of a navel — the dress and imprint of the body are one. And although the life-size scale of her dresses creates an experience of looking at something familiar, their stark colorlessness imparts the sense of a presence physically larger and more significant, inhabiting a space in which time is evocatively suspended. Perhaps it is the expression of this frozen moment that makes the work seem monumental. In their ghostly, translucent forms, there is something of a reminder of the ephemeral quality of our corporeal selves and the fragility of the human condition. By transforming negative space into undulations of curves that allude to both the beauty and evanescence of life, LaMonte does not simply bestow presence on an absence — she adorns it.



ECSTASY OF SAINT THERESA, 1647-1652

Gian Lorenzo Bernini (Italian, 1598-1680)

Cornaro Chapel, S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome, Italy, Marble, 11½ feet (height)

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