

art on view

■ national gallery of australia



The true artist helps the world by never believing in mystic truths

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DAVID MOORE • INTERNATIONAL NEW MEDIA ART • CRYSTAL CLEAR

Dress 4 is a monumental cast glass work by the American artist, Karen LaMonte. Currently on display in the Gallery Foyer, it is dramatically illuminated by Canberra's clear daylight, creating an illusory human presence in the context of the Gallery's brutalist but crystalline concrete and stone architecture.

Karen LaMonte is a leading figure among a younger generation of American artists using glass in large-scale sculptural work. This cast glass work is depicted as if worn on an invisible female figure, combining references to classical Greek and Roman figure sculpture and to contemporary imagery of women's formal evening wear. Its internal void retains the impression of the human

The lady vanishes

body; its transparency a commentary on identity, the role of clothing in gender politics and the objectification of the female body in art and fashion. The role of enveloping clothing in rendering women opaque, if not invisible, in some non-Western societies continues to provoke debate about the power of flimsy cloth as a mediator of sexual relations. While one part of our perception of LaMonte's work wants to celebrate its sculptural assertiveness and its commanding craftsmanship, her translucent clothing drifts us helplessly into the highly-charged realm of the woman made invisible and its attendant territories of voyeurism, fetishism and desire.

Karen LaMonte

Dress 4 2001 Pelechov

cast glass 154.0 x 59.0 x 39.0 cm

National Gallery of Australia

Gift of David and Barbara Thomas 2002

Photograph courtesy of Karen LaMonte



LaMonte's work has developed from her interests in marionettes and the costumes of the Italian *Commedia dell'arte*, which she reinterpreted in blown and assembled glass. In these earlier works, the concept of the 'invisible' human presence, which animates the behaviour and the physical movements of the marionettes is explored. The traditional theatrical device of blackness enveloping and obscuring the puppeteer is replaced in her work with almost total transparency, where costumes are animated by invisible presences. These works are a metaphor for the invisible, but culturally conditioned, forces that determine human behaviour.

LaMonte's work presents us with a visual conundrum, light and diaphanous at first glance yet with monumental gravitas and cold, hard physicality on closer inspection. The object is clearly hollow, but the imprint of the wearer of this glacial carapace remains visible through the glass, and the artist herself becomes the invisible manipulator, not only of the organisation of materials, form and process, but also of the imprinted image and evidence of this invisible woman. Was she Cinderella, in a frantic dash against time, leaving behind her entire dress and not just a shoe, or Lot's Wife, punished further in some bizarre transmutation of salt to glass? Perhaps she was the voluptuous Anita Ekberg, whose wet ball gown in the classical surrounds of the Fontana di Trevi crystallised forever the concept of *la dolce vita*; or Princess Diana, the media-constructed image of her fragile and vulnerable fashionability snap-frozen in time. In the popular imagination, such fabulous women transcend earthly constraints, leaving the rest of us with the usual catalogue of remnants to reconstruct in their memory.

While LaMonte's crystalline dress rekindles our memory of the way we saw and imagined ourselves in relation to the real and fictional lives of such women, its implied wearer remains anonymous. The shadow and imprint of her pose joins the lexicon of classicism and idealised beauty, yet its obvious sectionalised construction allows us to mentally catalogue its parts as coldly and analytically as a magazine editor assessing a fashion model's physical attributes. Here we have not just a dress on a figure, but a dress that *is* the figure, an external and disposable skin that stands in for the wearer. As the effect of perfume in a corridor can heighten our perception of a woman previously there, light shines through this enigmatic personage, revealing her form and posture but proving that she has indeed vanished. We are left to imagine the tilt of the head and shoulders, the movements of the arms and hands, the hair and the voice of this now ethereal wearer, and to speculate on the event at which she wore this garment. As haute couture encapsulates a particular attitude and period in time, outlasting its clients and wearers in museum costume collections, so LaMonte's dresses encapsulate an assessment of the classical ideal in the modern world of body imaging and fashionable manipulation.

LaMonte was born in New York in 1967 and undertook glass studies at the Rhode Island School of Design, gaining a BFA with Honors in 1990, becoming engaged with the glass world at the Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle, and later at UrbanGlass in New York. She has lived and worked in the Czech Republic since 1998 and from 1999 to 2000 studied at the Academy of Art, Architecture and Design in Prague. She developed a series of cast glass dresses (including *Dress 4*) while in the Czech Republic, working in the Pelechov glass

casting foundry studio of Zdenek Lhotsky, whose contribution to the technology and tradition of Czech cast industrial and studio glass is highly valued among artists. Working with the foundry's experienced mould-makers, LaMonte made wax models of her own and others' bodies, from which lost-wax castings were made for the inner forms. Clothing and drapery was added to these forms and further casts made for the exterior skins of the sculptures. Glass was cast between these moulds, over a long firing process, resulting in a thick-walled hollow form of almost pearlescent translucency.

LaMonte's *Dress 4* was purchased for the International Art collection of the National Gallery of Australia in 2002, with the generous assistance of glass collectors and enthusiasts, David and Barbara Thomas. Their enthusiasm for contemporary studio glass has allowed Australians to enjoy at first hand LaMonte's extraordinary and accomplished work.

Robert Bell