



KAREN
LAMONTE

With its focused core embodying a rich spectrum of meaning and interpretation, the work of Karen LaMonte is both an acknowledgement of cultural tradition and a forum of exploration into issues pertinent to contemporary society. Her monumental glass sculptures and monotypes are inspired by an engaged interest in the cyclic theatre of the human body, more precisely the persistent presence it infuses into the clothes it inhabits, shares a common destiny with and then abandons. In this sense, the humblest garment is a gateway to a startlingly complex range of questions relating to identity, gender, social structure, mortality and ultimately how we attempt to define our existence.

Rather than being a constant physiological entity (as people would vainly like to believe), the body is a continual process of decay and regeneration, a cellular robe that undergoes innumerable changes - both within itself and in terms of our perception of it - until its inevitable demise. It is an envelope endowed with ever-changing contours and predestined to limited duration, a vessel of contamination and purification. Skin is our first and most essential vestment, one that is soon, however, concealed under the clothes that form the life-long mediator between one's inner self and the external 'otherness' of the world outside: class, religion, ethnicity, the male-female divide, and, of course, the pervasive and historically binding influence of fashion. Clothes project what the individual imagines to be a unique self-image, yet on the contrary they symbolise just as much the reverse pressure brought on the individual to merge into collective or corporate being. What we wear is as much the patching together of inward disintegration as it is a statement of reassured inner integrity. The mind, the body, and all that occurs in the 'non-self sphere' lying beyond find their mutual juncture precisely in the textile buffer zone we bond ourselves with, day after day.

Through keen observation and diligent execution, Karen LaMonte has succeeded in elaborating a vivid artistic topography of the endlessly fluctuating status of clothes (to use Tadeusz Kantor's phrase) as objects 'suspended between garbage and eternity'. Her glass sculptures are the product of a painstaking dual casting process mapping, with a single shell, the surface of the body inside and the surface of the garment outside. Taken from real bodies and real clothes, the literally life-size cast becomes a kind of abandoned dwelling place, a permanent imprint of ephemeral and fragile human presence. In this sense, her work finds parallels in the approaches of both Magdalena Abakanowicz and Rachel Whiteread. Arising out of the organic templates of body and cloth, the transposing process is not simply physical but metaphysical, as movement and life are frozen in the timelessness of glass. The vulnerability of the moment is preserved and taken outside the flow of time, while interdependent layers of flesh, garment and identity are symbolically revealed and united in their translucence. It is a specifically female corporeality that we witness here; stylised, scorned, deformed, depersonalised, abused and marginalized by society over the course of history, a fecund bearer of

new life that the modern age has transformed into the most potent media commodity. LaMonte's sculptures seem clear-headedly to encode the age-old dilemma of perceiving the female body, tantalisingly balanced as they are between the detached ideal of 'the seen' and the direct tactile involvement of 'the felt'. Bereft of their wearer, LaMonte's glass dresses are, even so, invested with an almost inexplicable life of their own, as if radiating the residual energy of their departed 'other half'. Armless and headless, they unexpectedly recall the effigies of classical antiquity whose broken incompleteness bears symbolic witness to the pathos of human mortality.

Along with her sculptural pieces, Karen LaMonte has evolved a special monotype technique on both opaque and translucent paper that enables her to make perceptive records of the life latently encoded in the apparent lifelessness of old clothes. She calls them Sartoriotypes (sartorial of or relating to tailored clothing, plus type meaning image and impression). Blind to colour but hypersensitive to texture, the paper on which the monotypes are printed renders an almost X-ray-like image of the garment, a view through the layers of fabric - and through the tissue of time, to when the ripples and crumples we see in the prints were created by the active limbs of a unique human experience. It is an experience portrayed somehow fleetingly, an apparition of reanimated identity. LaMonte's monotypes are made, as she says herself, in relation and communication with her glass sculptures; recently, she has made prints comprising the complete image of a dress and its outline which, viewed together in semi-transparency, creates a subtle and haunting shadow play evoking the fragility of our cognition in the passage of time. A key channel of the dialogue between LaMonte's three-dimensional sculpture and her prints is her work in glass bas-relief; here, the dress and the overcoat become simple, monumental symbols recalling Giacomo Manzù's masterful understanding of the powerful humanist charge that can be achieved through the illusory volume-and-void architecture of relief.

Karen LaMonte's highly distinctive understanding of the human condition has, over the past few years, been profoundly enhanced by living in Prague, a city at the crossroads of tangled Central European fate. The Czech Republic represents an historical context of diverse interaction across divides of nationality and religion that was, however, brutally severed in the 20th century by war and totalitarianism. Filled with the myriad echoes of individual lives determined by social, political and cultural upheaval, this milieu cannot fail to make a significant impact on the artist sensitive to the hidden layers of intimate consciousness. It is precisely this fabric of memory, with its ever-shifting locus and imprints, that forms the essence of LaMonte's creative expression. In her work, it is at once elegy and moral conscience.

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