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In Conversation: Nicholas Bell on Karen LaMonte

January 25, 2010



Karen LaMonte's [Reclining Dress Impression with Drapery](#)

The Smithsonian American Art Museum's Renwick Gallery recently acquired Karen LaMonte's [Reclining Dress Impression with Drapery](#). LaMonte, a glass artist, went to Prague in 1998 on a Fulbright scholarship to learn how to cast large-scale works in one of the most famous glass studios in the world. The glass dress series, of which the new acquisition is a part, took about ten years to complete.

On February 26th, LaMonte will be presenting an illustrated [lecture](#) at American Art's McEvoy Auditorium. She will also be here on the evening of February 27th for [ARTrageous](#). Prior to that event, LaMonte and Nicholas Bell, curator at the Renwick, will engage in conversation about the artist's work and process.

We spoke with Bell to ask about LaMonte's work, which is both translucent and mysterious at the same time.

Eye Level: There seem to be a lot of contradictions in LaMonte's work: the living body vs. the draped figure, absence and presence, clarity and opacity, erotic yet a bit icy at the same time, classical yet contemporary. Can you talk a little about that?

Nicholas Bell: This is something that really drew me to her work and helps her work cross "party lines." It doesn't matter if you come from a craft or fine art background, LaMonte's work appeals to people across the board. In part, what you've touched on are the competing narratives in her work. There are several art historical influences evident in *Dress*. The pose and drapery are evident in the Elgin Marbles' representation of Aphrodite, as well as many nineteenth-century odalisque paintings, which depict female slaves in harems. I'd say goddess of love vs. love slave is a pretty dramatic contradiction!

EL: I find the references to Greek and Roman drapery (with a nod to [Madame Grès](#)) to be fascinating. You can imagine the Venus de Milo dressed in one of these.

NB: Viewing this work is a remarkable experience. Your first impression is of looking at a solid mass, but when you catch it at particular angles, the body-shaped hollow pops out at you. It really makes you gasp. There's an incredible presence for something that is not there, a woman who is conspicuously absent.

Karen's work draws attention to clothing as a cultural construct--an identifier that relays who you are and your place in the world. The history of the dress is fundamentally tied to what it means to be a woman. Yet Karen has stated that the subject of her work isn't so much feminism, but femininity.

EL: LaMonte also uses everyday items in the making of her work that are unexpected. These include irons, hairspray, sewing needles, and hair dryers. Her work seems to comment on everyday life, as well as those events that require us to wear special clothing.

NB: Again, Karen's work overlaps with prominent themes in feminist art, such as the focus on various forms of labor. The items you describe are tools employed to create the illusion of perfection for others. It is entirely fitting that this absent body and its monumental dress are prepared via the same rituals. Karen is also in uncharted territory from a technical standpoint. When she expressed her creative vision at the glass studios in Prague, they said it would be impossible to achieve. She not only had to invent the process by which to create this work, she had to discover the tools.

EL: She has ended the cast-glass series, begun in 2000. It seems fitting that the Renwick has one of these sculptures. How does her work fit into the Renwick's collection?

NB: We are so grateful to the James Renwick Alliance and to Colleen and John Kotelly for making this acquisition possible. *Reclining Dress Impression with Drapery* is an extraordinary example of craftsmanship—a technical marvel at the pinnacle of American glassmaking. Beyond the inventiveness of its creation, there is a complex narrative at work that allows the *Dress* to bridge a traditional divide between craft and fine art, where the former emphasizes process, and the latter, content. Because Karen works from live models, *Dress* is also one of the most intimate works in our collection. The reclining figure is both clothed

and nude, inviting but forever distant. This push and pull makes it a compelling work of art.

EL: I read a quote where the artist said, “I think my work defies every definition, and I hope it raises this question in everyone’s mind. For example at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco, the curator chose to put my work in the collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century painting and sculpture, not to works made specifically of glass. I am the person people really do not know what to call and I think that is good.” What would you call her?

NB: I call her brilliant. Art historical conversations too often focus on how styles, materials, and bodies of work can be isolated from one another. Sometimes it takes an individual like Karen LaMonte to illustrate that the artistic terrain is a little more interesting and a little more complicated. I think her work calls out for broader definitions of craft and fine art in this country.

EL: Thank you, Nicholas Bell.

- [Karen LaMonte](#), [Renwick](#), [Glass](#), [American Art](#), [Smithsonian American Art Museum](#)

Posted by [Howard](#) on January 25, 2010 in [American Art Here](#)

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