

Art: Design: Culture

# Glass

The UrbanGlass  
Art Quarterly

Karen LaMonte  
Clifford Rainey  
Paul Stankard  
Lino Tagliapietra  
Ana Thiel  
William Morris





*Reclining Dress*  
*Impression with Drapery,*  
**2006. Cast glass.**  
**H 18 ½, W 61, D 23 in.**

PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

# spectral traces

**KAREN LAMONTE** has achieved international renown with her ghostly and erotic cast-glass dresses. In a wide-ranging conversation, contributing editor William V. Ganis asked the artist to elaborate on her process and evolution.



**I****N THE MERE DECADE AND A HALF** since attaining her B.F.A., Karen LaMonte has achieved recognition among elite collectors and institutions for her monumental cast-glass dresses. She's already had major solo exhibitions of her work, such as "Vanitas" (2004) at the Czech Museum of Fine Art in Prague and "Absence Adorned" (2005) at the Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington.

LaMonte's life-size sculptures offer a compelling paradox, as the thick glass seems to contain absent bodies, imprints of which define the shape of each work's central void—an absence made visible through the translucent material and its record of what it once contained. The glass is cast from dresses found in thrift shops but rendered on a living body in order to evoke classical and Baroque drapery. Another series dealing with presence and absence involves glass casts of handheld mirrors; in these, ghostly "reflections" are etched into the surface. While she is best known for these two series, LaMonte has developed other works that deal with clothing and bodies, notably her bas-relief glass works and the monotype prints she calls "Sartoriotypes." Though born and raised in New York City, she now lives in Prague, where she uses unique facilities for large-scale glass casting and works with artisans who experiment with new processes.

*GLASS* magazine contributing editor William V. Ganis began corresponding with Karen LaMonte following a lecture she delivered at the Corning Museum of Glass on February 28, 2008. After a follow-up email exchange in which Ganis asked her to expand on the issues raised in her talk, a wide-ranging dialogue ensued. What follows is an edited transcript of that correspondence in which we learn about LaMonte's process, her evolution as an artist, and how she is planning the next stages of her explorations in cast glass.



*Curtain (detail) 2005.*  
Cast glass. H 91, W 23,  
D 6 in.

PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

*Seated Dress Impression with  
Drapery, 2005. Cast glass.  
H 48 1/2, W 29 1/2, 26 1/2 in.*  
PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST



**William Ganis: Contemporary art literature is rife with theorizations regarding the body, virtualities, and language. Are there any notions that you now use as starting points? Your elegant statements seem to hit so many important ideas dealing with perception and body politics.**

Karen LaMonte: I feel the most important visual experience is making out an obscure image, like seeing trees through the fog, and as your pupils dilate you actually make out what the form is. This is active viewing, and it is a visual epiphany. This is why I like to work with veiled, semi-obscured layers and semi-transparency in the prints, the mirrors, and the cast dresses. The visual experience hopefully mirrors and perhaps reflects (no pun intended) an intellectual one.

**WG: Do you think about gendered looking, the way men versus the way women might view the dress works? Have you received comments about how men or women perceive the works?**

KL: How others see the work is always intriguing to me. Many people mention uncanny ghostliness and then sensual beauty. Somehow, very few people comment on eroticism, but they are probably just shy. Women seem to respond extremely positively to the work; often I receive comments like “feminine not feminist,” “celebrating sensuality and sexuality but not objectifying.” I think it is all positive—I am thrilled that the work inspires a response! Women and men have totally different experiences in looking at everything, not just my work, but I think individualism outstrips even gendered looking—the viewer’s personal experience is what frames their experience of looking

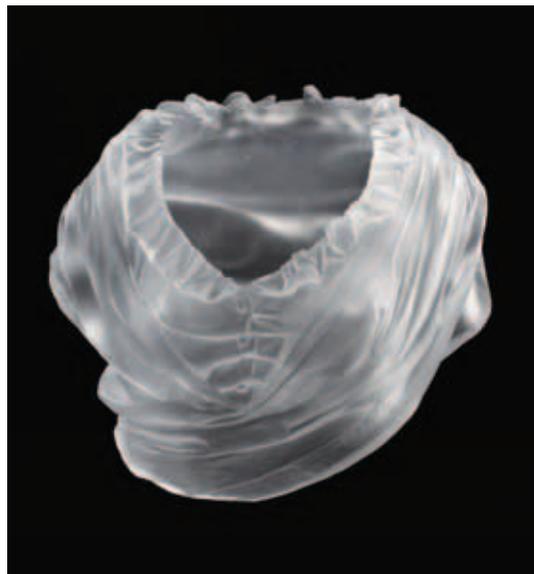
The lost-wax technique I have developed renders details as fine as the stitches of the clothing, the warp and weft of the material, visible in glass. I believe this level of detail invites an intimate relationship between the viewer and the sculpture. The double-walled castings suggest these two skins by intermittently making visible either the body or the clothing, depending on the play of light. I have noticed that people have a very strong and personal response to my work, and I feel it is inspired by the specificity and high level of detail in the sculptures. These are the same concerns I am working with in the “Sartoriotype” prints and the glass mirrors: the tension between individual psychology and society and social perceptions, the history of both clothing and drapery in Western painting and sculpture.

**WG: With your work, the varied thicknesses and opacities make the body in the works play a bit of hide-and-seek with the viewer insofar as one part of the body will seem very detailed (dimples around the spine perhaps), and then if the viewer shifts, the body becomes generalized and sometimes fades away altogether. This leads to another important aspect of the dress works: There is a powerful but understated eroticism. Of course, this interest and pleasure is part of the active looking, especially as the bodies are constantly revealed and hidden in an optical tease.**

KL: Yes, understatement is extremely powerful, erotic but not graphic. Maintaining intrigue, but never completely revealing itself, weaving together a visual and intellectual experience.

**WG: Do you envision and instill these erotic qualities? The sensuality hardly seems incidental.**

KL: I do not try to make something intentionally erotic or not erotic, but I do maintain a belief that fabric is very flesh-like and that flesh anywhere on the body is extremely sensual.



TOP  
*Bust (Impression)*, 2005. Cast glass. H 17, W 19 ½, D 13 ½ in.  
PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

BOTTOM  
*Remnant (Dress)*, 2002. Cast glass, oak. H 50, W 43 ½.  
PHOTO: GABRIEL URBANEK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST



**WG: You use the material in an elegant way to communicate your concerns. Do you have any thoughts on the relationship between intellectual inspiration and the techniques used to realize objects?**

KL: Technique and craftsmanship is critical to any artwork, regardless of medium. I believe that technique is the vocabulary for expressing ideas, that aesthetics are the language of meaning. I have seen many videos, paintings, and sculptures whose concepts did not reach me because they were so poorly made that I couldn't see past the sloppiness. The same is true of all art forms. A poorly written book or article is inaccessible regardless of the quality of the ideas. We demand that a writer have command over language just as we demand that a musician have command over the instrument and music.

I also feel it is important to recognize the individuals teaching in education programs who asked the students not only to learn these techniques and become fluent in them, but also to focus on using the material conceptually. I am thinking specifically of Bruce Chao's program at the Rhode Island School of Design, where both Josiah McElheny and I were educated. Incidentally, neither of us has any additional degrees! I believe this illustrates the level of excellence that the B.F.A. program at RISD achieves.

**WG: So what concepts intrigued you at RISD, and which did you develop or research when addressing your work?**

KL: At RISD I was consumed by the learning process. I did not start working on the ideas and techniques for my present body of work until I left college. I worked in both the sculpture and glass departments, and

printmaking as well. I think the most valuable lesson I learned was how to research; that was Bruce Chao's program our junior year, teaching us how to research and explore a topic and make sculpture as the result.

**WG: I find your mirrors to be powerful in their understatement. I was just not ready for their perceptual complexity. They are intimate and compelling—I want to pick each up and look into it. Do you intend for these to be held by the viewer?**

KL: Exactly, I want people to pick them up and hopefully (like Francis Bacon's paintings behind glass) your own reflection might get caught in the mix, and you will get literally drawn into the work. I am really glad to hear you find them understated—that is just what I wanted!

**WG: Also, who are the people in the mirror images? Some seem to be from earlier times, so are the photos found, or are they somehow personal, mined from family albums and such?**

KL: The images are all my friends, their parents and children. I asked them to pose in my studio and act out the basic human emotions; sadness, fear, joy, etc., using just their faces and hands. It was a lot of fun. None of them are professional actors, just people whose faces I felt were very intense.

**WG: Can you say briefly how you achieve the photographic image in the mirror? Is it etching? Did I detect some pigmentation?**

KL: The images are etched. I take all the photographs in my studio and then etch them on the back. In some mirrors I rub in black ink; any other pigmentation is from the glass.

LEFT  
*Absence (Overcoat)*, 2001.  
**Monotype print on hemp  
paper. H 60, W 42 in.**

PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

THIS PAGE  
*Impression 4*, 2001.  
**Monotype print on Arches  
Cover. H 59, W 43 in.**

PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST



*Lark Mirror, 2004. Cast glass. H 20 1/2, W 15 in.*  
PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST



Right now I am working with very lightly “stained” or veiled glass with some of the mirrors and then instead of photo etching the back I am hand etching. I am working out how to get a blurred image that fluctuates between readable and obscured. I am trying to get mercurial effects so that when you hold the mirror against a white background the image disappears and on a dark background it comes back. It is a modern version of stipple-point engraving. When properly lit, it was said they were “breathed upon” and you could see the image. I like that connection between light and breath.

**WG: The cast-glass works have become your idiom, and you have explored many different expressions of this process. Do you feel there are still lines of inquiry for working in this mode? In your presentation at Corning, you mentioned work in Japan exploring the kimono. Might you start casting these forms? If so, will the bodies that inhabit these glass textiles change from European to Japanese?**

KL: In 2006, I spent seven months in Japan studying the kimono—an extremely codified and socially symbolic garment. The body is padded to have no form: The ideal shape of a female or male body is an androgynous cylinder so the highly symbolic imagery on the kimono can be clearly seen. I am planning to make works inspired by this experience in both porcelain and glass. I feel the combination of vitreous clay and glass together would be a poetic parallel to the uncanny erasure of the body and individual, while simultaneously celebrating and demonstrating individual sensitivity and sensibilities. You will not see the body through the exterior of the garment because in Japan the major point of putting on a kimono is to erase yourself and become the perfect Japanese person.

**WG: I see your work as transcending the boundaries that have come to define “glass art” even while your work has a great integrity in the medium, especially when it comes to casting and material properties. With more exhibitions and works collected, you are starting to receive a broader recognition, yet I would imagine there might be a certain frustration in having to bear the “glass” or “craft” limitations even when entering prominent**

**institutions. But then what makes someone an unqualified “artist” rather than a “glass artist”? I’d argue that the answer is not just media, but a set of concerns parallel to the global art markets, loosely defined as the work we see at international art fairs and biennials.**

KL: All of these issues are momentary concerns brought on by the uncertainty that comes with change and a quickly shifting landscape. The significances of these issues are inflated by all the parties who have something to gain or lose in the short term. In many ways, I think the whole issue is self-explanatory and self-correcting and has been talked about a lot. Each person is responsible for the boundaries he or she chooses to regard or disregard. And one’s world is only as insular as one makes it. In the end, all artworks will be judged on a time frame longer than our lifetimes. Which artworks will end up in museums or in landfills? Our current perceptions of them won’t have much to do with how they will be evaluated. I don’t find the issue frustrating; I stay absolutely true to my intentions and pursue my work extremely intensely. I don’t ask this question with my work, but I hope people will see my work and ask themselves.

We are at a very exciting moment in history when many new materials have entered the vocabulary of the art world. Not just glass, but digital media, plastics, etc. Materials like bronze and photography started as contentious non-art materials, and now they are standard in the fine art world despite the proliferation of uses that are functional or decorative.

My passion in life is working in my studio, and that is where I focus my intellectual and physical energy. I see all of these worlds as connected. I love the galleries—both “glass” and “fine art”—that I work with. I do not feel any pressure at all. Holly Solomon sold my first piece ever when I got out of school. I have worked with and will continue to work with a wide variety of galleries and hope that my work will be placed in a wide variety of private and public collections.

I think my artwork defies easy definition, and I hope it raises this question in everyone’s mind. For example, at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, the curator chose to put my work in the collection of 19th- and 20th-century painting and sculpture, not the room devoted to works made specifically of glass. I am the person that people do not really know what to call, and I think that is good. ■

TOP  
*Sleeping Mirror, 2004.*  
**Cast glass. H 12, W 5 in.**  
 PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
 COURTESY: THE ARTIST

BOTTOM  
*Sleeping Mirror, 2004. Cast glass. H 12, W 5 ½ in.*  
 PHOTO: MARTIN POLAK  
 COURTESY: THE ARTIST



