

# Clothing Cast in Mystery

## K a r e n L a M o n t e

by Marilyn Millstone



Climb the grand staircase of the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery of American Craft, turn toward the high-ceilinged Octagon Room, and a translucent, life-sized glass dress—lying on its side—floats into view. It's a haunting piece: a gorgeous yet ghostly garment clothing an absent body, a seemingly fragile work that actually weighs a hefty 360 pounds and is as durable as marble.

"Glass is contradictory," says Karen LaMonte, who created the work. "It is made of nothing but light yet is massive and strong."

"Strong" is a term that also aptly describes the artist. LaMonte—a New York City native who graduated from Rhode Island School of Design in 1990—was repeatedly told that her dream of casting life-sized glass dresses was technically impossible. But in 1999, after finding a casting facility near Prague that had the equipment she needed and was willing to work with her, LaMonte traveled to the Czech Republic on a Fulbright Fellowship. *Vestige*, her first successful cast-glass dress, was completed at the end of that trial-and-error year.

Glass is a harsh mistress," LaMonte writes in e-mail correspondence from the Czech Republic,

where she continues to live and work. Even now, the failure rate for her cast-glass pieces still hovers at around fifty percent. But her many glorious successes have been exhibited around the world; several are now in permanent collections in museums around the US and in Australia.

KAREN LAMONTE *Reclining Dress Impression with Drapery*

Cast glass, life size: 18.5" x 61" x 23", 2007.

Collection: Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.



**Karen LaMonte**  
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**KAREN LAMONTE** *Reclining Dress Impression* Cast glass, life size: 20" x 63.5" x 15.75", 2005. Collection: Chrysler Museum of Art.  
*LEFT: Undine* Cast glass, life size: 59" x 24" x 20.5", 2009. *CENTER: Detail of back.*

While the casual observer may be moved solely by the striking beauty of her sculptures, LaMonte views her work as an exploration into the complex relationship between a woman's body and the culture in which she lives. She sees each piece "simultaneously as a traditional nude but also as the trace of a woman who once inhabited this vacated dress." "I hope," writes LaMonte, "it inspires one to muse: Is the clothing defining the body, or is the body defining the clothing? How much does clothing reveal about the individual or the society in which it exists?"

LaMonte's work provokes other questions as well. Any woman who's ever worn a feminine, form-fitting dress recognizes its allure. Yet why such a dress—or any garment, for that matter—powerfully affects both the wearer and the viewer remains mysterious. LaMonte's ethereal glass dresses deepen that mystery.

Her references range from ancient Greek statuary to paintings of odalisques to the garments of Alexander McQueen. LaMonte also draws inspiration from the models she selects; among them have been artists, prostitutes and homeless people. "Each person and body brings rich layers of meaning," she says.

In a February 2010 lecture at the

Renwick, LaMonte described the "unbelievably laborious" process of creating a cast-glass dress. She begins by taking a plaster body mold of a live model. From this mold, she creates a rubber positive that captures every detail—even goose bumps. Then, using the 5,000-year-old technique known as lost-wax casting, she paints molten wax directly onto the rubber body, ultimately creating a wax shell about an inch thick. Using one or more of the 400 dresses she's either found or sewn herself, LaMonte then begins "composing" a dress onto the wax surface.

"I cut away the body where it is not in contact with either the dress or the fabric," she explained. "To me, that becomes a metaphor for the individual defined by society."

A liquid mix of plaster and silica is then poured over the wax shell. The wax is removed (or "lost") using pressure cookers and rubber hoses, then steam is blown into the mold, which causes the wax to melt and flow out (with the fabric as well). After the mold has dried for several weeks, it is loaded into a kiln, which is slowly heated to the melting temperature of the glass.

Then the 80-day cooling process called "annealing" begins. For LaMonte, it is an agonizing wait. Different parts of the dress cool at different rates, depending on their thicknesses; these



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KAREN LAMONTE *Child's Kimono* Ceramic with celadon glaze, 45" x 20" x 18.5", 2010. CENTER: Detail. ABOVE: Back view.

differences stress the glass and can cause breakage. Such failures, says LaMonte, always “hurt.” But when the process works, she feels, understandably, “fantastic.”

Nicholas Bell, the Renwick curator who orchestrated the 2009 purchase of *Reclining Dress Impression with Drapery*, praises LaMonte’s attention to detail. For the Renwick piece, he explains, LaMonte used a 1930s ball gown found in a Prague consignment store, combed wax through the fabric to accentuate the warp and weft, and stiffened the fabric with hairspray. LaMonte also added large swaths of drapery to cover the joints. The result, says Bell, “shows off mastery of form.” He chose the reclining dress over one of LaMonte’s erect works. “Reclining is a more vulnerable position for a woman,” he acknowledges, “but the piece has great presence.”

Certainly the piece attracts attention.

On a recent weekday afternoon, visitors to the Renwick—many of whom were tired tourists who’d spent the morning visiting the nearby White House and other attractions—hovered near the work. “Wow,” said one man, stopping to point out the details of the dress to his two rambunctious young daughters, “that’s really neat.” A woman circled the work, commenting to no one in particular about how much the frothy folds of glass looked like real fabric. Finally, she confessed to a sympathetic female security guard, “That’s a hard one not to touch.” Such reactions would no doubt delight LaMonte.

In recent years, LaMonte began to explore female dress in Japan. With a fellowship from the Japan-US Friendship Commission, she spent seven months in Kyoto, focusing on the “vocabulary” of the kimono—how a kimono is worn and the meaning of its various styles and decorations.

“Clothing oneself in Japan is a completely different endeavor than in the West,” says LaMonte. “In Europe and the United States, one dresses to express individuality. In Japan, one dresses to express one’s place in the greater society. Before someone puts on a kimono they pad their body, expanding the waist, flattening breasts, making themselves into a cylinder to create a clear plane for the imagery. Imagery and the details of the construction of the kimono—sleeve length, the position of the collar—describe your role in society.”

To render the kimonos, LaMonte used clay—a material she considers as humble as the Japanese people themselves. She also used bronze, in homage to the bronze temple bells and prayer bowls that “mesmerized” her. Occasionally, she also used glass, but worked from a mannequin rather than live models “since

wearing the kimono is about erasing the individual.” She notes: “I was more interested in the evanescent qualities of the glass as it parallels the Japanese awareness they call *Mono No Aware*—or *Mu*: the beauty of absence and all that is impermanent.”

LaMonte’s kimonos were exhibited in 2011 at the New Mexico Museum of Art in Santa Fe; one of her glass kimonos is now in the permanent collection of the University of Kansas’s Spencer Museum of Art in Lawrence. To find museums that permanently house her Western-style glass dresses, view the map on LaMonte’s impressive website: [www.karenlamonte.com](http://www.karenlamonte.com).

—A Maryland-based playwright, Marilyn Millstone writes frequently about the arts for various national magazines.