TODAY'S
MASTERS

KAREN LAMONTE

MONUMENTAL FEMININITY

Most of us may be conditioned to believe that the nude is the most revealing and expressive depiction of the human form — literally and figuratively — but the work of American sculptor Karen LaMonte (b. 1967) boldly refutes that assumption. In the sculptures for which she is best known, disembodied garments fashioned from bronze, ceramic, rusted iron, and most especially cast glass cling to absent female forms. The result is ethereal and haunting, provocative and entirely captivating.

At the *Winter Show* in New York City this past January, a display of LaMonte's work on the stand of the Gerald Peters Gallery beckoned visitors to stop and admire. "The work truly has its own voice that all levels of art appreciators understand on an intuitive level," says Alice Hammond, a director at the gallery's New York location. "We are selling her work to a lot of clients who have never owned sculpture before. They're saying, in effect, 'This is something I never knew I wanted and suddenly it has a place in my collection and is deeply important to me.'" Nothing could gratify LaMonte more than to know that her work achieves her goal: "I hope that the detail pulls them in, that the universality of the human form creates a common language, and that the absence of the body creates an emptiness for them to fill with their own thoughts and emotions," she says.

Thought is the guiding principle of LaMonte's work. The more one learns about the artist, the more one appreciates how much thinking and study go into creating her art. She loves a challenge — artistic, intellectual, or technical — and the resulting work is at once larger than life and sublimely intimate, a dichotomy she calls "Monumental Femininity."

A UNIQUE JOURNEY

Raised in New York City, LaMonte graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1990 and set out to pursue what she claims was her first professional goal: to become "the best female glass-blower in the world." She immersed herself in the study of Italian glass-blowing and produced marionettes and figures, including the charming green glass *Bottle Clothesline* now in the collection of the Tucson Museum of Art. In the process, her interest turned from the figures themselves toward the costumes they wore. "Fashion design was never a part of my career plan, but I've always been fascinated by clothing," LaMonte explains. "In high school I was full-blown Goth, refashioning my clothing to make it different from what everyone else was wearing. As an adult, I have lived in a variety of foreign cultures where I read my surroundings visually by the local sartorial landscape, as a chef might do by tasting local delicacies."



Kabuki (detail), 2013, cast glass, 59 2/3 x 31 2/3 x 21 in. (overall) © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak



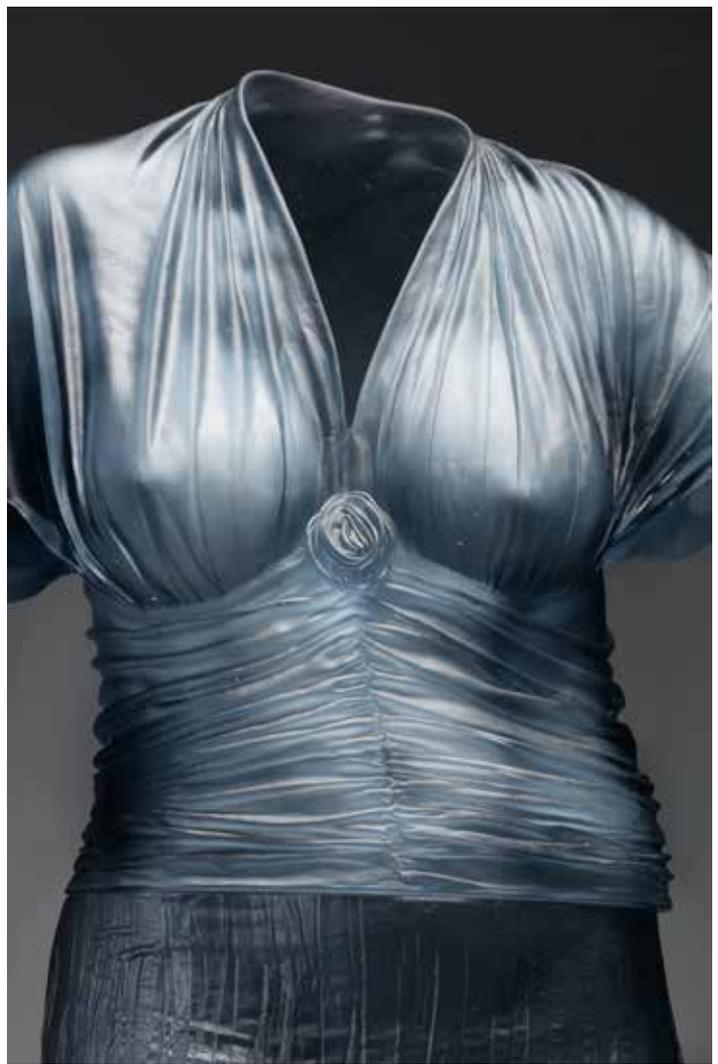
(LEFT) *Young Maiko*, 2010, ceramic, 36 1/4 x 19 1/2 x 16 3/4 in. © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak ■ (ABOVE) A detail of *Young Maiko* ■ (BELOW) *Maiko* (detail), 2011, bronze, 52 x 31 1/2 x 22 1/4 in. (overall) © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak

A Fulbright fellowship in 1999 allowed LaMonte to move to the Czech Republic, where she worked at a glass foundry and made her early cast glass dress sculptures, such as *Blue Dress*, a toddler-sized piece now in the Corning Museum of Glass in upstate New York, and also *Vestige*, her first full-sized piece, now in a private collection.

The learning experience at the foundry was entirely reciprocal. LaMonte benefited from the vast knowledge of the Czech glassmakers. (“Czechs have developed monumental glass casting that basically doesn’t exist anywhere else,” she says.) At the same time, she challenged the artists at the foundry to overcome the technical obstacles inherent in creating the sculptures she envisioned, starting with her idea of adapting the method of lost wax casting (*cire-perdue*) to glass.

Lost wax casting has been used to make metal objects for thousands of years. While this multi-stage process of mold-making and setting takes a long time, it produces durable objects with supremely fine detail and subtlety, which is why Auguste Rodin preferred it for his sculpture. Adapting the lost wax casting process to glass-making, however, was a new proposition. LaMonte begins by making a plaster mold of a live model or mannequin. From this mold, a rubber “positive” figure is made. The positive is coated with hot wax, allowed to dry, then cut in half to remove the rubber, after which the two wax halves are taped back together. Then the wax form is dressed and/or draped with





(ABOVE LEFT) *Nocturne 1*, 2015, cast glass, 57 x 27 x 26 3/4 in. © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak ■ (ABOVE RIGHT) A detail of *Nocturne 1*

Reclining Nocturne 1, 2015, rusted iron, 21 2/3 x 49 x 19 2/3 in. © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak



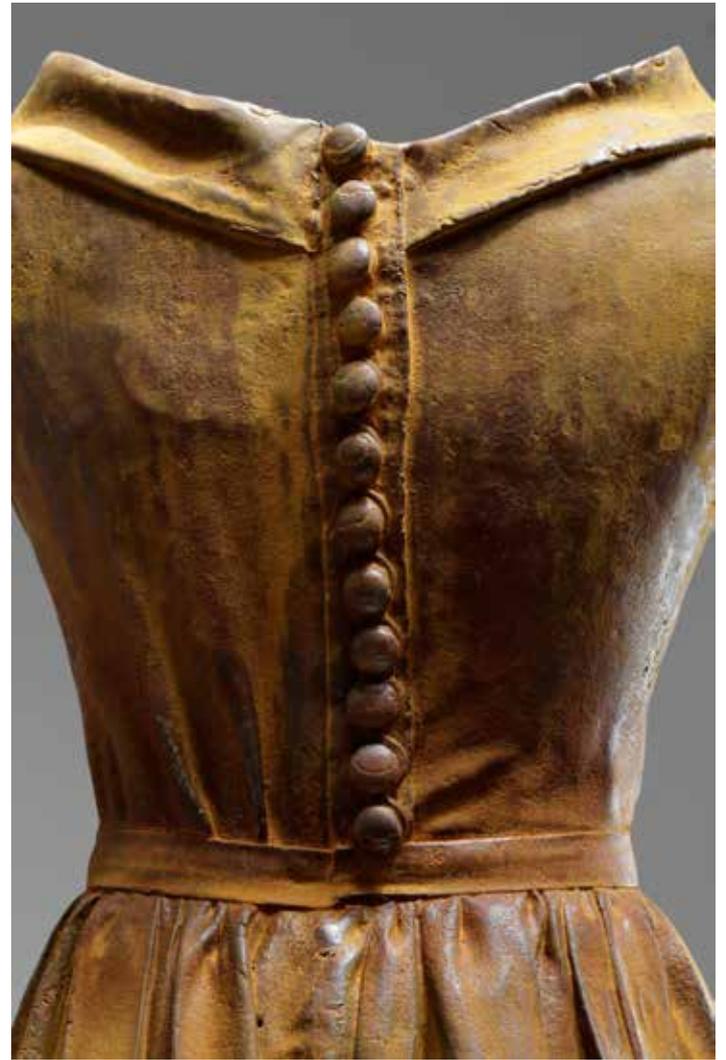
fabric and the fabric is stiffened with wax and hairspray. After the fabric has set sufficiently (a period of approximately two months), a mold of plaster and silica is made from it. The wax is steamed out, leaving a cavity to be filled with molten glass and left to cool slowly (*anneal*) for as long as two months. At this point, the plaster mold virtually crumbles away, revealing the cast glass sculpture within.

LaMonte's human-size works typically are cast in two or three pieces — lower body, torso, and upper body — which are then put together and finished to eliminate rough edges and other imperfections. Yet throughout the process there is an element of mystery (sometimes even trepidation) as there is no conclusive way to determine whether the sculpture has sustained cracks or damage until the final plaster mold is brushed away.

After years of working with her, the glass foundry in Železný Brod has installed equipment specifically designed to accommodate LaMonte's sculpture. "They decided I wasn't



(ABOVE) *Nocturne 2*, 2017, white bronze, 59 1/4 x 19 1/3 x 15 3/4 in. © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak ■ (BELOW) *Reclining Nocturne 3* (detail), 2015, white bronze, 22 2/5 x 59 x 31 in. (overall) © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak



Etude 8 (detail), 2014, rusted iron, 23 2/3 x 11 1/4 x 10 2/5 in. (overall) © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak

going away any time soon,” she jokes. Indeed, her home studio is in Prague, although she travels to the U.S. and throughout Europe for her work, most recently to the 58th Biennale di Venezia to exhibit at Glasstress 2019.

In 2007, LaMonte spent seven months in Japan on a research fellowship to study the kimono, broadening her fashion focus beyond Western dress. For the sculptures based on her study there, she made a mannequin figure of the Japanese “everywoman” with body proportions based on biometric data obtained from NASA. LaMonte worked in glass, and also in bronze, rusted iron, and clay, incorporating the principle of *kintsugi*, in which broken or damaged ceramic is repaired with gold. The resulting kimono sculptures became the basis of the solo exhibition *Floating World*, at the Museum of West Bohemia in Plsen, Czech Republic; the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; and the Marshall M. Fredericks Sculpture Museum at Michigan’s Saginaw Valley State University. Individual kimono sculptures are now in the permanent collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Knoxville Museum of Art; Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Alabama; Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas; and Seven Bridges Foundation, Greenwich, Connecticut, among other institutions and collections.

The sculptures for which LaMonte is best known are the *Nocturnes* dating from around 2012 to the present. It is these and the one-third-scale



Etude 10, 2016, cast glass, 28 1/2 x 16 1/2 x 7 1/5 in. © 2019 Karen LaMonte, courtesy Gerald Peters Gallery, photo: Martin Polak

Etudes, as well as the *Floating World* kimono sculptures, that are the focus of the *Embodied Beauty* exhibition on view at Gerald Peters Projects (Santa Fe) through August 17 and then at Gerald Peters Gallery (New York City) from October 28 until December 20. (These shows are conceptually similar to LaMonte's largest solo exhibition to date, also titled *Embodied Beauty*, which appeared at Chattanooga's Hunter Museum of American Art last year.)

Inspired by her study of Théâtre de la Mode, a collaboration of fashion designers, ballet dancers, and artists in Paris after World War II, and especially the Grecian-inspired work of the fashion designer Madame Grès, whose salon the *New York Times* once deemed "the most intellectual place in Europe to buy clothes," *Nocturnes* and *Etudes* elegantly drape the female form in haute couture that shimmers and floats. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Dr. Steven Nash, founding director of Dallas's Nasher Sculpture Center and director emeritus of the Palm Springs Art Museum, writes that LaMonte "transmutes material into the immaterial, density into light, solidity into something highly ephemeral."

It's the juxtaposition of hard and soft, ephemeral and industrial, that makes LaMonte's work so arresting. "All the materials I work with have both sculptural and architectural or industrial histories," LaMonte explains. "I use rusted iron because it suggests both beauty and decay, progress and decline. Despite its hardness, the flowering rust appears soft and powdery."

Alice Hammond adds, "No one works with iron in the same way [LaMonte] does; no one is taking iron and making it soft."

Busts, 2005, cast glass, 17 x 19 2/3 x 13 2/3 in.; 16 1/2 x 19 x 13 in., installed with neoclassical busts, Ricau Gallery, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, 2009, photo: Ed Pollard





(LEFT) *Dress with Train*, 2007, cast glass, 58 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 43 1/2 in., installed with *Isis*, 150 BCE, Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio, 2017, photo: Andrew Weber ■ (BOTTOM) *Undine*, 2007, cast glass, 61 1/2 x 19 1/2 x 24 in., installed with neoclassical sculptures, Ricau Gallery, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia, 2009, photo: Ed Pollard



When LaMonte's sculptures are exhibited alongside classical statues and antiquities, as they have been at the Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia, the De Young Museum in San Francisco, and Ohio's Toledo Museum of Art, they come to life with palpable motion and emotion. One sees the depiction of the human form throughout history and recognizes that LaMonte has claimed a place in its timeline. It's as if she has extracted the best parts of what came before and made them better, infused them with life. As splendid as the ancient works are, when seen alongside her contemporary pieces, the marble may leave one cold.

ALWAYS THINKING

LaMonte's pursuit of intellectual engagement is as exciting and dynamic as her artwork. As a student, striving to comprehend the physiological space where ideas come from, she sent an e-mail inquiry to the esteemed neurologist Oliver Sacks to gain his insight. When she began working on *Nocturnes*, she spent two years developing her own glass that would "gather darkness like the night sky, wrap the figure in dusk" so the woman would appear to "rise up from a darkened pool."

When she was preparing to make the model for *Cumulus*, the cloud study LaMonte exhibited at Glasstress 2017, she consulted with the Climate Dynamics Group at Caltech. Working in marble because she wanted "to use a material forged by the forces of nature to represent the forces of nature," she replicated not only the appearance but the physical weight of the cloud in proportion to what it would weigh in the natural world.

LaMonte spent 2018 as the artist-in-residence at Corning's global research headquarters in Sullivan Park, New York. There, in collaboration with materials scientists, she experimented in making sculpture using biomimetic bone-glass and bioglass, substances that were invented to replace or help regrow damaged human bones and internal organs. One piece from her time at Corning is a depiction of a stratocumulus cloud made of bioglass ceramic, which, LaMonte points out, "nucleates and grows crystals in the same way that rain drops are formed in a cloud." (Discovering that the phase separation process involved in making glass is analogous to the natural process of cloud formation must have struck her as the ultimate serendipity.) LaMonte admits she is currently "obsessed with clouds" and that her artistic concentration has shifted to the subject of climate change. "Weather, like the human body, is universally experienced on a personal level," she says, explaining the organic evolution of her focus and the direction her work is likely to take in the near term.

"She's exceptionally intellectually curious," Hammond notes. "What makes Karen LaMonte a top-tier artist who will continue to be relevant is that she's constantly thinking about the next phase, always looking forward. She's effervescent and full of ideas. That's how we know she'll keep forging ahead and surprising us." ●

Information: karenlamonte.com, petersprojects.com, gpgallery.com. Watch a video about *Nocturnes* at [youtube.com/watch?v=bRkKXOBGfTk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRkKXOBGfTk).

LESLIE GILBERT ELMAN writes about art, antiques, and travel. Her most recent piece for *Fine Art Connoisseur* was "The Bennett Prize: Celebrating Women Painters" in the August 2018 issue.