



Karen LaMonte
(American, born 1967)

Ojigi-Bowing

2010

Cast glass

52 1/2 x 23 x 19 in.

Signed and dated, with edition number (1/3), etched into glass at the bottom edge of the drapery at the back, proper right of center

Gift to the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in loving memory of Janis and Jimmie Sabel from their children, John Sabel, Keith Sabel, and Katherine Sabel Gayden; and the Sabel Acquisition Fund, 2012.0002 a-c

Born in New York City in 1967, Karen LaMonte grew up visiting world-class museums such as the Frick Collection and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹ It was in institutions such as these where LaMonte encountered classical Greek and Roman statuary, 19th-century neoclassical marbles and Baroque paintings, objects that later provided inspiration for her own art. Her inspirations were only part of the equation; LaMonte also attended the Rhode Island School of Design to learn the techniques necessary to create her complex works. At RISD, LaMonte initially studied painting and printmaking before turning to glass. In regard to finding a medium she says, "I felt limited by painting so I started looking around for other things. When I discovered glass I knew that was it. Working with glass is really challenging physically, which I really like because I think I'm hyperactive."² Her professor of sculpture and glass, Bruce Chao, also had a great impact on her approach and specifically with how she researches her projects.³

After graduating in 1990 with a B.F.A., LaMonte worked in glass centers such as Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle and UrbanGlass in New York creating glass marionettes and puppets, a way to work figuratively without incorporating the actual figure. Basing her characters on those in the historical



Italian street theater productions known as *Commedia dell'Arte* and on Dante's (Durante degli Alighieri, c.1265-1321) *Inferno*, the first book of his epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, LaMonte shaped the clothing on each figure into individual garments by pinching and pulling the still cooling glass. Taking her interest in garments a step further, LaMonte began altering recycled bottles to fashion small glass dresses that she hung on diminutive clotheslines. For a while, she also worked in the glass blowing tradition of using Italian filigree canes as a way to replicate the warp and weave of cloth.⁴



Bottle Clothesline, 1995, blown glass, Tucson Museum of Art Collection; image courtesy of the artist.

In 1999 LaMonte shifted her process from blown glass to cast glass as a way to capture the finer details of cloth. Her molds, at that time, formed small, child-size garments ranging from one to two feet in height. Her successes with cast glass spurred her

Undine, 2009, cast glass, life size: 59" x 24" x 20.5"; image courtesy of the artist.

¹ Resources pertaining to LaMonte's work and process are numerous. Primary sources for this essay come from the following: Information on file, (Artist's Vertical File, MMFA Library and MMFA Objects Record File, 2012.0002 a-c) Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, Montgomery, AL; Juli Cho Bailer and Arthur Danto, *Karen LaMonte: Absence Adorned*, Tacoma: WA: Museum of Glass, International Center for Contemporary Art, 2005; and Karen LaMonte lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, February 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwMPbk2tdco>.

² LaMonte quoted in Johanna Lenander, "Bonfire of the Vanities," *Spoon: Taste of Contemporary Culture*, January-February 2006, p. 72.

³ LaMonte interviewed by William V. Ganis, "Spectral Traces," *Glass Quarterly*, No. 112, Fall 2008, n.p.

⁴ LaMonte first mentions this in her lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, February 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwMPbk2tdco> and further clarifies in an email to the author on May 13, 2012.

interest in creating monumental pieces—life-sized cast glass dresses. However, the only place in the world with the technical means to create such works is in the Czech Republic. In 1999, LaMonte received a Fulbright Grant to travel to the Czech Republic and explore the glass factories and to attend the Applied Arts Academy.⁵

Located just outside of Prague in Pelechov is Lhotský, the factory where LaMonte began working. Founded by two well-known artists, Stanislav Lebensky and Jaroslava Brychtová the factory became famous for their large-scale cast glass designs that are geometrically abstract. In introducing her figurative works to them LaMonte says,

I was nervous to introduce my dress project to Lhotský since it differs so greatly from Czech glass, but he was excited by the idea and enthusiastic about the challenge of making such a complicated piece. The mold makers themselves were even more excited—it was refreshing for them to see something new.⁶

Throughout the process of creating her first piece, LaMonte worked closely with the technicians and even learned to speak Czech while working in the factory. She became the first American to work there and now other artists are beginning to take advantage of both the technical capacity for large-scale works and the lower associated costs of working there. Even here, however, LaMonte still faces limitations in scale, as the kilns are not large enough to accommodate a single life-size piece. Thus, she works in sections with her life-sized dresses comprised of up to three segments.

LaMonte's first large-scale piece created with the factory took a year to fabricate. The initial mold making itself takes quite a bit of time and the process of casting glass can take up to nine months to complete. This is partly due to the very slow cooling process of annealing. For the mold, LaMonte uses a complex dual molding process that incorporates lost wax casting.

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.⁷

By working this way LaMonte can create not only the outer "skin" of the clothing but also traces of the body underneath. She has said, "Apparel radiates its wearer's physicality like a discarded shell or an outermost layer of skin. It is our second skin, our social skin."⁸ For her dress series, or "Dress Impressions," LaMonte first creates a plaster mold of a model's body. She then forms a rubber positive and paints hot wax on this rubber body to generate a shell. On this shell she composes clothing, working similarly to one of her inspirations, the

⁵ A few articles list this date as 1998 but most cite it as 1999, as does the biography on Karen LaMonte's website. See <http://www.karenlamonte.com/biography.html>

⁶ LaMonte quoted in Brett Littman, "The Spectacular Glass Dress of Karen LaMonte," *Glass Magazine*, Number 86, Spring 2002, n.p.

⁷ LaMonte quoted in William V. Ganis, "Spectral Traces," *Glass Quarterly*, no. 112, Fall 2008, n.p.

⁸ LaMonte quoted in Robin Rice, "Karen LaMonte," *Wheaton Arts*, March, 2002, n.p.

French, mid-twentieth-century fashion designer, Madame Grès (Germaine Krebs a.k.a Alix Barton, French, 1903–1993), who often draped her clothing directly on her models.⁹

In this laborious process, LaMonte uses what she considers feminine and domestic skills and tools to create her works—sewing, irons, blow dryers, and hairspray. She often alters or repairs dresses she finds in places such as thrift stores (she has amassed over 400), and the hairspray stiffens the folds of the drapery in place in order for the hot wax to adhere to it. LaMonte states, "Clothing to me is the unspoken language of a society."¹⁰ She goes further, to say,

We use clothing to conceal our bodies in a practical manner but also to obscure and protect our individual personalities. We simultaneously use it to project a public personality and that is where my interest is; in this interplay between the inner layer of the body, the individual, and the exterior layer of the clothing which is the society.¹¹



Gown by Madame Grès;
Image source: trendland.com

To further this idea, LaMonte removes any part of the body that is not in direct contact with the dress or the fabric. For her, "That becomes a metaphor for the individual defined by the society in which it lives."¹² Yet, LaMonte depicts her subjects in active poses such as standing, sitting, or reclining imbuing them with personality and individuality.

Fashion history and art history, particularly classical sculpture, directly inspired LaMonte's "Dress Impressions," which she worked on for a period of ten years. This is apparent in her emulation of draping and also in her removal of heads and limbs to resemble fragments of many Greek and Roman antiquities. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's (Italian 1598–1680) marble *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, 1647–1652 from the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome is a specific inspiration in both posture and draping. LaMonte also looked to paintings in which clothing symbolized spiritual wealth. For her, "Fabric can be as provocative and sumptuous as human flesh."¹³ LaMonte sees herself as a "baroque minimalist."¹⁴ She reinterprets these classical and baroque pieces in a contemporary way to investigate issues of gender, identity, and the female body. While LaMonte addresses these issues she does so not in the manner of feminist artists



Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *Ecstasy of Saint Theresa*, 1647–1652 from the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome; image source: <http://www.wga.hu/art/b/bernini/gianlore/sculptur/1640/therese1.jpg>

⁹ Madame Grès began working in the 1930s. Her signature was to cut on the bias and drape her fabric, utilizing folds and pleats to follow and enhance the contours of the body. The result was a flattering silhouette that often recalled curving Grecian columns.

¹⁰ LaMonte lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, February 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwMPbk2tdco>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ LaMonte lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, February 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwMPbk2tdco>

¹⁴ Ibid.

primarily interested in critiquing stereotypes; instead, in this body of work, LaMonte embraces and celebrates the feminine while highlighting the sensual and erotic nature of the body.

LaMonte is very sensitive to color, and thus she avoids using it.¹⁵ The lack of color allows for notions of translucency, presence and absence, and the visible and invisible to come forward. Critic Arthur Danto asserts, "LaMonte's pieces, whatever the weight, proclaim beauty and evanescence, fragility and delicacy, transparency and light, luxury and magic."¹⁶ These qualities lead to ghostly, haunting works that contrast the hard with the fragile and illusion with reality. Furthering the idea of the ghostly or the remaining spirit that is embodied in our clothing, LaMonte, in addition to the "Dress Impressions," created several other related bodies of work. Her mirrors, ranging in size from hand held to larger vanity wall mirrors, often have faces photo-etched on the surface. These faces are only visible in certain plays of light. The viewer, if looking from one side of the room may not catch a glimpse of another visage, but on close inspection, another face overlays their own. In addition, LaMonte ventured into printmaking, creating her own process called sartoriotypes wherein inked clothing is pressed directly onto the paper to depict a translucent outline of the garment revealing details and imperfections invisible to the naked eye. Coined by LaMonte, the term sartoriotype refers to the combination of "sartorial" meaning clothing and "type" in regard to the printing process.

In 2006, LaMonte embarked on a new body of work. She received a Creative Artists Exchange Fellowship through the Japan-US Friendship Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, allowing her to spend seven months in Japan exploring the kimono and, specifically, the codification of clothing within Japanese society. Ultimately, before creating the cast glass, ceramic, and bronze pieces relating to this subject LaMonte spent four years researching her topic. While in Japan LaMonte had the opportunity to collaborate with master kimono designer, Akiko Nakamura, on a new kimono design. Not only did she learn about the kimono from this master but he had a profound impact on her other works; Nakamura's insistence on adding color into the kimono led her to begin including subtle washes of color into some of her pieces, specifically her drapery studies. During her residency in Japan LaMonte also learned about what the kimono means in Japanese society and how to wear one—a ritualized process of dressing and acting. In fact, LaMonte claims kimonos are very uncomfortable to wear, partly due to the padding that creates a perfect spherical shape and obscures the natural curves and particulars of the individual body.¹⁷ This is done to erase the individual in order to become purely Japanese. To LaMonte, "What is fascinating is how I found the kimono very beautiful but incredibly rigid."¹⁸ This fascination compelled her to bring over 200 kimonos from Japan to her studio in Prague for future projects.

Unlike the "Dress Impressions," LaMonte does not reveal traces of the body in her kimono pieces. This is because, as LaMonte explains, "In Japan the major point of putting on a kimono is to erase yourself and become the perfect Japanese person."¹⁹ To create these pieces, instead of working with live models, LaMonte built a cylindrical form to make her

¹⁵ Robin Rice, "Karen LaMonte," *Wheaton Arts*, March, 2002, n.p.

¹⁶ Arthur Danto, "The Poetry of Meaning and Loss: The Glass Dresses of Karen LaMonte," *Karen LaMonte: Absence Adorned*, Tacoma: WA: Museum of Glass, International Center for Contemporary Art, 2005, p. 15-16.

¹⁷ LaMonte lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, February 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwMPbk2tdco>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ LaMonte quoted in William V. Ganis, "Spectral Traces," *Glass Quarterly*, no. 112, Fall 2008, n.p.

molds on. She based this form on information compiled by NASA detailing the biometric data of the Japanese population. After reviewing this information LaMonte chose to emulate "the fiftieth percentile of forty-year-old Japanese women in the year 2000 in 1 g (gravitational force)."²⁰ She states, "My mannequin is the exact average Japanese female—the exact everywoman or no-woman."²¹ With this "average" form, LaMonte continues the process that she perfected on her "Dress Impressions," that of draping the clothing, in this case, the kimonos, directly onto the form and creating a dual mold to capture every detail of the outer garment along with the inner skin. However, in this case it is no longer the skin or the body, but instead, the barrier of padding that the Japanese wear under their kimonos.

LaMonte's time in Japan also stimulated a series of work focusing on drapery without the body. Out walking one day LaMonte saw fishing nets piled on a dock. The play of material resembled mountain landscapes in her mind, and inspired a new way of thinking about massing the fabric into hills and valleys of light and shadow. These ideas also played into the Japanese idea of "natan," a concept often used in paint and ink involving the placement of light and dark in relation to each other.²² She says that upon her return from Japan to Prague, "I wanted to take the vocabulary that I had developed with textiles and drapery and take it off the human figure...My figurative work was a celebration of empowered femininity...In moving into landscape, I am looking at a grand feminine archetype, which is the earth."²³ For LaMonte, these drapery studies are explorations into the topography of land and she uses both ceramic and glass to further this investigation.

Ojigi-Bowing, 2010, is one of the first cast-glass kimonos LaMonte created as she embarked on this new series of work that goes beyond the western culture of dress to take a wider world view. The kimono as a garment is very symbolic. This piece of clothing originated during the Heian period (794–1192 AD) and was known at that time as the "kosode," meaning "small sleeve" or "gofuko" which translates as "clothes of Wu."²⁴ However, since the mid-19th century, the term "kimono" meaning "thing to wear" has come to signify the type of robe that is familiar today. The straight lines of the sleeves and body of the robe form a T-shape that drapes over the figure and falls to the ankle. Worn by both men and women, the kimono as daily attire saw a decline after World War II when western-style clothing became fashionable. In the 21st century, however, a resurgence of interest in this historical garment has brought it into high fashion once again.²⁵ It is a deceptively simple piece of clothing: "A kimono is worn over several pieces of undergarments and with numerous belts, strings and pads that keep the obi in the exact place it belongs on the kimono, which in turn must fall perfectly straight and show designated creases."²⁶ It is always wrapped across the body with left side covering the right (unless clothed for burial) and held in place with an obi, or sash that ties in the back. Decorations and patterns adorning the kimono shift from the simple to the elaborate, each signifying religious or popular beliefs; the season, the age, class, and martial status of the wearer; and the occasion or event.

²⁰ LaMonte quoted in Laura Addison, "Kimono: Karen LaMonte and Prints of the Floating World," *El Palacio*, Summer 2011, p.59.

²¹ Ibid.

²² LaMonte quoted in Tina Oldknow, "Karen LaMonte: Charting the Iconography of Desire," *Karen LaMonte: Drapery Abstractions*, Corning, NY: Corning Museum of Glass, 2010, n.p.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "The Art and History of the Kimono | Uncommon Threads," <http://blog.peruvianconnection.com/fashion-trends/the-art-history-of-the-kimono/>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kumiko Makihara, "Kimono Lessons," *The New York Times*, March 3, 2011, accessed online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/04/opinion/04iht-edmakihara04.html>.

From afar, the life-sized freestanding, in the round, glass kimono *Ojigi-Bowing* seems to glow from within. Without a head or hands, it seems almost ghostly. On closer inspection, the piece reveals the glow to be the overhead light refracting through the hollow interior out through the slightly frosted, but still translucent glass. Like her earlier works, LaMonte constructed this piece in three stacked sections: the first, from feet to knees; the second, knees to waist; and third, waist to neckline. Yet, unlike work from her "Dress Impressions" series, LaMonte leaves only an impression of the clothing, not the wearer. No physical trace of the body remains other than the posture, that of a slight forward bow from the waist, arms relaxed at sides. This stance exudes grace and elegance.

What is interesting is that LaMonte, through her molding process is unable to capture the signifying designs and patterns of the kimono. Yet, for LaMonte, "how the kimono is worn, the cut, the obi, and the gesture of the absent figure are more significant than the patterning. The decoration might tell you about the season but the way she wears it, how far the back collar dips exposing the back, the length of the sleeves showing marital status, and the tie of the obi all speak to her role in society, her class, and about who she is."²⁷

Like her "Dress Impressions," LaMonte is able to construct an identity and a narrative about her subject without certain identifying characteristics. Viewers are able to draw conclusions about the woman who wears this kimono: she is female as evidenced by the type of obi or sash she wears. Securing the garment, wrapped left over right, the wide obi brings together the gentle tucks of fabric at the waist. Constructed of two woven belts, the upper, knotted at the front with a large wide single knot sits above a complex lower band tied into a series of four thin knots. Both strands come together and twist around the back of the robe into a large bow that dips down on the right. The shorter sleeve length, ending slightly above where her wrist would be, with extra fabric pooling at her sides indicates she is married, and she adopts an air of respect and reverence as depicted in the type of bow she employs, the *ojigi*, which is a bow from the waist.



Detail of back with bow

LaMonte's ability to capture intimate details breathes life into this sculpture, impressing a personality upon it despite the lack of a corporal presence. For example, she includes the folds of a decorative collar around the neckline to emulate the additional layers of fabric worn closest to the skin and often hidden beneath the kimono. The back of the robe's neckline dips slightly conjuring up the graceful arc of a long neck and, draping in a gentle pool at the floor, the robe swirls to the left and billows out slightly behind her without much of a train to hide the invisible wearer's delicate feet. Additionally, LaMonte's skill with various techniques allows her to exploit the medium of glass in a way that mixes reality and illusion. This is clearly seen in the way she focuses on details such as in the obi where the elaborate weaving and embroidery clearly come through in the glass and her rendering of the kimono as tactile, soft, and revealing of all the wrinkles of the fabric, unlike the hard glossy sheen that often

²⁷ LaMonte quoted in Laura Addison, "Kimono: Karen LaMonte and Prints of the Floating World," *El Palacio*, Summer 2011, p.59.

characterizes glass. LaMonte subtly reveals various layers of the original fabric through the glass. She emphasizes creases left from folding the garment for storage prior to wear along with the weft and weave of the fabric, both of which are visible in the sleeve area and in the lower parts of the robe.

All of these elements combine to create an individualized portrait, despite not knowing the exact identity of this woman. For all of her pieces, LaMonte explains "I wanted viewers to take part in an imagined story, mine or theirs, doesn't matter, suspended in a world where glass transforms our mundane world into a fragile drama."²⁸ In *Ojigi-Bowing*, LaMonte does just that, transporting the viewer into another world.

Jennifer Jankauskas
Curator of Art, MMFA



Detail of sleeve

²⁸ LaMonte lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington DC, February 26, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwMPbk2tdco>