



Top row:
 Reclining Dress Impression with Drapery, 2007
 (Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum)
 Vortex, 2009
 Middle row:
 Vortex (detail), 2009; Ink in Water Drapery Study, 2008
 Semi-Reclining Dress Impression (detail), 2005
 Sumi-e Scroll Drapery Study, 2009
 Bottom row:
 Dress Impression with Train (detail), 2005
 (Collection Toledo Museum of Art)
 Reclining Dress Impression, 2005
 (Collection of Chrysler Museum of Art)
 Cover image:
 Ink in Water Drapery Study (detail), 2008
 Photo credit Martin Polak.

KAREN LAMONTE

Drapery Abstractions

KAREN LAMONTE: CHARTING THE ICONOGRAPHY OF DESIRE

by Tina Oldknow

Draped Bodies

Karen LaMonte has become internationally-known for her hauntingly beautiful draped female figures that evoke the fragmented bodies of classical antiquity as well as the *pathos*-ridden statues of 19th-century American neoclassicism. By using translucent, colorless cast glass, rather than opaque marble, LaMonte gives her images a sense of ghostliness, and also spirituality. Her sculptures stand, ever-patient and mute, waiting for warm, blood-suffused flesh, muscle, and bone to inhabit them.

LaMonte says, “For 10 years I have been working with the female figure *in absentia* exploring beauty in the neoclassical sense. A celebration of symmetry and physical harmony. Although beauty might look different in different societies, it is always about pleasure. The absent figure is important to me because it tempers the undemanding pleasure of beauty with insinuations of loss and mortality. I look at the clothed figure as the interplay of two topographies: that of the body and that of the dress. In my mind that parallels the relationship between the individual and society.”¹

In her references to beauty, pleasure, loss, and identity, LaMonte raises themes that have become a significant part of contemporary art discourse in a post-9/11 world. In 1995, Seattle Art Museum curator Patterson Sims asked his seminar audience whether or not they felt that the issue of beauty in contemporary art—such a controversial topic then—would be a valid subject of discussion in 10 years. Well, 15 years have come and gone and beauty is still a complicated topic, but the way in which it is regarded must be contextualized to take into account a worldview that has irremediably changed.

In an essay for the 1999 exhibition catalogue, *Regarding Beauty*, Olga Viso related that, “According to contemporary psychologist James Hillman, the demystification of nature through science and the contemporary awareness of the Earth’s fragile, expiring ecology have made late 20th-century society immune to the world’s complex magnificence... The results of such a view, argues Hillman, have contributed to the ‘repression’ of beauty in our time... In his view, [this]... has created a disinterested, narcissistic, self-referential culture that mistrusts beauty and the senses.”² What is striking about this observation, to me, is that I can remember when it rang true. Now, I believe, there is a vast cultural shift toward the reclamation of this “magnificence” as the aftermath of loss (terrorism, war, and global warming) and scientific and technological discovery (the mapping of the genome). As the painter René Magritte observed in 1938, “We see [the world]... as being outside ourselves even though it is only a mental representation of what we experience on the inside.”³ In the present-day world, the experience of the sublime has acquired new meaning.

Concepts of beauty and the sublime are central to LaMonte’s work. She notes, “From beauty, I have become fascinated with the sublime. For me, the heart of the sublime is a sense of longing and desire. Unlike beauty which we can control, the sublime defines a boundary between what we understand and that which lies beyond our power of reason. We are not in control of sublime experiences.”



Seated Dress Impression, 2005

1) All quotes by Karen LaMonte are taken from her “Meet the Artist” lecture at the Corning Museum of Glass in February, 2008; my conversations with her in November, 2009 and June, 2010; and her lecture at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, in July, 2010.

2) Olga Viso in Neal Benezra and Olga M. Viso, *Regarding Beauty: A View of the Late Twentieth Century*, Washington: Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden in association with Hatje Kantz Publishers, 1999, p. 119.

3) Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, p. 12.

LaMonte’s notion of beauty as something symmetrical and physically harmonious—and thus representing “good” as opposed to “evil”—makes reference to the ancient Greek and Roman canons of beauty that are the foundations of Western art and culture. The investigation of the sublime, and its differentiation from beauty, was famously addressed by the philosopher Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790). The Kantian interpretation of the sublime, as something great, boundless, and distinct from beauty, became a cornerstone of 19th- and 20th-century aesthetic theory. Given the entrenched suspicions about beauty and the “aura” of the object⁴ in recent years, the re-emergence of—and the reassertion of the credibility of—the sublime in art has profound implications.

Japan

In 2006, LaMonte was awarded a Creative Artists Exchange Fellowship from the Japan-United States Friendship Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts to study the kimono as an investigation into the Japanese use of clothing as social language. She learned how to don a kimono, how kimonos were constructed, and the complex social rituals involved in wearing them. “What is fascinating is how I found the kimono very beautiful but incredibly rigid,” LaMonte recalls. “Akiko Nakamura taught me about the appropriate motifs you wore in which season and what the fabric needed to be. Everything was specific. It was the most highly-quantified clothing vocabulary that I have ever seen.” LaMonte also spent her time studying traditional *yuzen* dyeing, which utilizes vegetable-derived tints, and *sumi-e* ink painting, which requires a special, saturated black ink made from burnt bamboo or wood. On her way from the studio to lunch one day, she walked by mounds of fishing nets piled on a dock. Under her gaze, the nets transformed into a mountain landscape, and she was thunderstruck. “Immediately, it hit me,” LaMonte remembers. “I had this realization, this discovery of the connection between drapery and landscape. I had to stop everything and work with the nets.”

She began to move the tangle of nets around, shaping them, and extending the “landscape” from the dock into the adjacent parking lot. “It was like this wide road opened up for me out of nowhere,” LaMonte says, “one that I could go down, that was unexplored.” The gray mounds also made her think of *sumi-e* painting: the nets were like a physical, malleable version of ink. There were faint, openwork nets in some areas, and in other areas, the nets were piled up and dark, appearing solid. In their juxtapositions of dark and light, opaque and transparent, the nets behaved like ink and also like smoke.

When LaMonte went back to her studio, she started arranging her yards of kimono cloth on the floor. “I was thinking constantly about kimonos, and I was looking at the light and shadow of the massed fabric,” she recalls. “I was thinking kimono, kimono, kimono, but it was really about the massing of fabric, color, light and shadow.” Similarly, it was not the practice of *sumi-e* painting that would ultimately inspire her, but the way that the ink, when she washed her brush, made wisps and swirls in the water.

Draped Earth

After her return to Prague, LaMonte continued making her figural sculpture while ruminating on how she might move away from it. “I wanted to take the vocabulary I had developed with textiles and drapery and take it off the human figure,” she explains. Drapery began to play an expanded role in her work. For a reclining figure made in 2007,⁵ LaMonte extended the drapery into a pool around the figure. This, for her, became a figure lying in a landscape. Then, she understood the profile of the figure to refer to landscape as well.

“For this reclining figure, I composed exclusively with fabric, the drapery dissolving the figure into abstraction,” LaMonte remarks. “My two topographies of body and dress became joined in a third: the landscape. Where the human figure is an object of beauty, the landscape inspires the sublime.” While this differentiation might seem subtle to some, it represented a fundamental conceptual shift for LaMonte: she had moved from object/figure/beauty to the territory of landscape/nature/sublime. Beauty was the dress, and the drape was the sublime.



Documentation of LaMonte’s Fishnets, Japan. Detail of LaMonte’s design for a painted kimono. Kimono silk arranged, LaMonte’s studio, Kyoto.

4) This refers to Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which his “theory of the effect of mechanical reproduction on the traditional art object turns on the issue of authenticity, since, he argues, only the authentic object (and not a secondary copy) can work the magical, healing effects of the original, cult object. This unique power Benjamin calls “aura,” arguing that “what withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.” Rosalind Krauss in Helen Molesworth (ed.), *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Columbus: The Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University and University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006, p. 88—89.

5) Karen LaMonte (b. New York 1967), *Reclining Dress Impression with Drapery*, 2007, glass, 19 × 61 × 22 1/2 in. (48.3 × 154.9 × 57.2 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James Renwick Alliance and Colleen and John Kotelly 2009.24.

In 2008, LaMonte formulated a strategy to work exclusively with drapery. In a series of cast glass bas-reliefs, she played with massing the drapery, as she had massed her fishing nets, creating contrasting areas of transparency and opacity that read as light and dark. The panels also drew on her experiences with *sumi-e* ink painting. “I am exploring the Japanese idea of *notan*,” LaMonte explains. “It is a concept involving the play and placement of light and dark next to each other in art and imagery. *Notan* is traditionally presented in paint and ink, but I wanted to explore it in glass.” For her, the pieces acted as visual meditations, abstractions inspired by meditative experiences.

In 2009, LaMonte received a Corning Museum of Glass/John Michael Kohler Arts Center Joint Residency for working with ceramic and glass.⁶ The residency began at the Kohler factory in Wisconsin, where LaMonte explored her drapery studies in ceramic. “In thinking about the landscape, I was inspired to work with ceramic—a literal draping of the earth,” she notes. “In contrast to my sculptures in glass, which are about opacity and transparency, with ceramic I am exploring light and shadow.” In the ceramic bas-reliefs made at Kohler, LaMonte intentionally used crackle glaze, so that the pattern of the glaze would run over the landscape of the drapery like a topographer’s mapping lines. “I put *sumi-e* ink into the cracks, which is an old Chinese technique,” she says. “I intended the vein structure of the crackle to act as a web or net in the landscape of the drapery’s folds.”

For LaMonte, working with clay was a welcome diversion from glass. Clay, she told me, might be from the body, while glass is from the spirit. “It reminds me of earth, nature, ground, groundedness, calm, peaceful, flesh. As you are forming it with your hands, it is like squeezing flesh, the earth’s flesh.” Glass, on the other hand, was “air, ethereal, material/non-material, ungraspable, fleeting, spiritual.”

LaMonte’s glass drapery studies, like the ceramic versions, investigate light and illusions created with light. The glass adds the element of transparency which makes the panels look, in proximity to the ceramic ones, like X-rays. “The glass panels are studies in the transmission of light, and the panels in ceramic are studies of reflected light,” LaMonte remarks. “They both represent drawing with light in different, formal ways. But, it is a very sensual formalism, it is for all of your senses. One work may look like a cave structure or Gothic architecture. Another piece may look like the wafting of incense smoke in a temple. All are references to the natural world, and different people will see different things.”

Although her show at Heller Gallery focuses on her drapery studies, LaMonte insists that her figurative sculpture is not over. “My figurative work was a celebration of empowered femininity,” she observes. “In moving into landscape, I am looking at a grand feminine archetype, which is the earth.”

LaMonte regards her bas-reliefs as sensual, and she associates them with experiences of beauty and the sublime. In Victorian symbolism, the draped object refers to sorrow, loss, and mourning, and LaMonte recognizes these themes, as well as those of impermanence and longing, in her work. It is the tension between beauty, representing love, safety, good, and immortality, and the fearful awareness of the destructive forces of nature, time, and mortality that result in the frisson of the sublime.

The association of drapery with feelings of loss and longing is also expressed by the photographer James Welling when he describes his images of drapery as being “elegiac thinking about mortality.”⁷ And the sublime experience of landscape may be linked with what art historian Simon Schama regards as “one of our most powerful yearnings: the craving to find in nature a consolation for our mortality.”⁸

“Folds of fabric rendered in marble speak of beauty and loss, yet fabric can be as sumptuous and provocative as human flesh,” says LaMonte. “In exploring the expressive potential of fabric, I see sensuality. The attraction of draped flesh, draped earth, alludes to this seductive quality of nature.” In LaMonte’s view, perhaps, it is our yearning to perceive the magnificence of nature as well as the mystery and beauty of the body—and to find a meaningful connection between the two—that will be our ultimate consolation. In her work, the notions of beauty and the sublime speak to the same concern, which is charting the iconography of desire.⁹

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Reflected Landscape, 2009

6) This residency is part of the Arts/Industry program at Kohler, a leading American manufacturer of kitchen and bath fixtures. In its factory, artists are invited to utilize slip-cast ceramic and ironworking facilities. The Corning Museum of Glass residency is one of seven residencies offered each year in glass. For information, go to <http://www.cmog.org/dynamic.aspx?id=1884>.

7) Adam E. Mendelsohn, “James Welling: Works 1980—2008” (Review), David Zwirner, New York, 2008 (http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/blog/art_news/adam_e_mendelsohn_on_james_welling_at_david_zwirner_new_york/4488). James Welling’s photographs of drapery, made in 1987 and 2000, relate closely to LaMonte’s new work although the artists are unaware of each other. These photographs may be seen at the Donald Young Gallery web site (http://www.donaldyoung.com/welling/welling_8.html). Maurizio Catellan’s beautiful and disturbing sculpted marble fabric in *All* (2007) associates drapery with the shroud (http://www.tate.org.uk/images/cms/17546w_mauriziocatellanall2007installationviewofkunsthallegregenzkb.jpg).

8) Simon Schama, op. cit, p. 15.

9) Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*, Los Angeles: Art issues. Press, 1993, p. 12. Hickey stumbled onto the topic of beauty when replying to a question at a seminar. Stating that beauty would be the issue of the 1990s in contemporary art, he concluded his remarks by saying: “... direct your attention to the language of visual affect — to the rhetoric of how things look — to the iconography of desire — in a word, to beauty!”