

Down the Rabbit Hole

-Brett Littman

I first met Karen LaMonte in 1995 at UrbanGlass, a nonprofit glassworking facility in Brooklyn, New York, where she was the organization’s education director and I was its associate director. Both of us were relatively recent college grads trying to make our way in the art world—she as a practicing artist and I as an art professional in nonprofits. Karen and I not only worked together, but also talked about shows and exhibitions we saw, got into philosophical discussions about art, and socialized after work with many of the artists who were part of the UrbanGlass community at the time. It truly was a “golden era” at the institution, and one that was extremely formative for many of us who were there.

The mid-1990s at UrbanGlass under John Perreault’s direction was also artistically a very interesting time. The intersection between the fine art world and the glass art world—maybe more than any other time that I can remember in the last twenty years—was quite intense, positive, and fluid. There were many artists in the UrbanGlass orbit including Kiki Smith, Rachel Feinstein, Matthew Barney, Charles Long, Tony Oursler, Robert Rauschenberg, Maya Lin, Louise Bourgeois, and Dennis Oppenheim, all making or having glass fabricated at the studio, all interested in using glass as a material and highlighting the handmade and process-oriented nature of glassworking in their art. Since I didn’t study art or craft history (I had been a philosophy and poetry major at University of California San Diego), I didn’t really see much difference between glass art and fine art sculpture. I wrote a lot about glass between 1996 and 2002 and generally took the position that materiality and process were important to understanding contemporary aesthetics; if the artist grasped what was at stake in making sculpture using glass (as opposed, let’s say, to putting a bunch of exquisite vessels on a table and calling it an installation), then I was willing to address it critically as art with no qualifiers.

Because Karen studied both sculpture and glass at Rhode Island School of Design, she was one of a handful of people at the studio who really understood how to think through her ideas in sculptural ways, and she excelled at it. I saw her earliest three-dimensional works—a series of blown glass puppets and, later, small dresses made from recycled bottles and hung on a clothesline—and remember being immediately impressed. **Karen was thinking about how glass could represent the human form and emotions and embody presence and absence. Her early work showed a level of maturity and seriousness that made it stand out among her peers and other glass artists at UrbanGlass.**

Karen has always had an absolute dedication to research and going “down the rabbit hole” to learn more about what she was interested in. She is a rare breed of artist willing to spend the

time necessary to dive deep into a topic before actually trying to make something. Karen left UrbanGlass in 1998 after she got a Fulbright grant to go to the Czech Republic to study glass casting. By 2001, when I visited her and her husband, Steve Polaner, in Prague to write an article for Glass magazine, Karen had already made incredible strides in perfecting her series of epically scaled life-size glass dresses. While I was there, I watched Karen work with master mold makers on her hollow-walled molds, which allowed her to articulate the interior structure of a woman's body as well as the exterior folds and details of draped fabric. Karen's dedication to and research into the history, tradition, and limits of glass casting truly allowed her to push the technical and artistic limits of the medium. As well, these early glass dress sculptures allowed Karen to explore the social and material culture of fabric, draping, and what "dressing" signifies, adding another layer of meaning to the work that propelled them far beyond conversations about the decorative, beauty, and skill.

From her earliest sculptural experiments in glass with her blown glass puppets and dresses, which were almost elemental in form and execution compared to what she is doing today, she has shown singular focus in her pursuit of her own ideas. For example, Karen's research on dressing and the body took her to Japan on a fellowship in 2006 to study the kimono and yuzen dyeing techniques, which eventually led to her *Floating World* series. Simultaneously, a fortuitous encounter with fishing nets, together with the development of a series of reclining figures in which the drapery looked like topography of the natural environment, grew into a branch of research that inspired a new body of work based on the idea of landscape, *Drapery Abstractions*.

Continuing to push her work in new directions, Karen has incorporated printmaking and large-scale bronze, iron, and ceramic casting as well as photography, bioglass, and monumental carved marble into her repertoire as ways to express these ideas. Her work still focuses on the dress and the body as objects but she has made a conscious choice to be more abstract in her approach, echoing an earlier shift that Tina Oldknow referred to when describing *Drapery Abstractions*: "While this differentiation might seem subtle to some, it represented a fundamental conceptual shift for LaMonte: she had moved from object/figure/beauty to a territory of landscape/nature/sublime."

I have known Karen for twenty-four years; she is probably the artist whose work and career I have followed the longest. **As I trace the exciting interconnections and evolutions of her "rabbit holes," from those early discussions and small glass works to her current diverse explorations, I cannot wait to see where they take her next.**

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