Audio except: Oral history interview with Karen LaMonte, 2012 November 2-3

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Transcript

Preface

This oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Karen LaMonte on November 2 and 3, 2012. The interview and photo portfolio is part of Hirshhorn Curator Kelly Dempsey's research for the exhibition, *Transformation: Contemporary Sculpture by Women*, a Hirshhorn exhibition and the Smithsonian American Art Museum's Lab 3 Interactive Museum. Jennifer Mass, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, conducted the interview in LaMonte's studio in Brooklyn, New York.

Karen LaMonte received her bachelor's in 2000 and her master's ceramics degree in 2002 from Alfred University. She has been a full-time artist since 2002 and has been a part-time faculty member at Pratt Institute since 2006. She is working on a transcription of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[00:00:00] This is Kelly Mass with Karen LaMonte in the artist's studio in Bushwick, in the Brooklyn, on November 2, 2012, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Karen, I'd like you to begin by pronouncing your name for the record, please.

KAREN LAMONTE: Karen LaMonte.

MEAG MEDEIROS: Karen, what's the most current, or the emerging, work you're doing? Maybe you can describe the process, and what it means to you. Kelly, Kelly Dempsey, I'm sorry, Kelly Dempsey, wanted to talk to Karen about the work she's been doing for the last three years, and we thought that would be a good place to start. Karen, can you tell us about the work, the process, and what it means to you?

KAREN LAMONTE: In New York City.

MEAG MEDEIROS: In New York City, 2007.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MEAG MEDEIROS: And what's the work?

KAREN LAMONTE: Sculpture.

MEAG MEDEIROS: Sculpture. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MEAG MEDEIROS: And what was the idea?

KAREN LAMONTE: Sculpture.

MEAG MEDEIROS: Sculpture. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm a sculptor.

MEAG MEDEIROS: Yes. Yes. I'm a sculptor.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MEAG MEDEIROS: Yes. Yes. Yes.

SARDA GAMEPLAY: I have extra. Bite off. Vaper is talking about what the Vaper is talking about. Vaper is talking about what the Vaper is talking about. Vaper is talking about what the Vaper is talking about

SARDIS CONTESTANT: Yes, still never be home.

MEAN PERSON: How do you know you're doing good, you've carried that [illegible]? Maybe you're doing good, you're doing good. Maybe you're doing good, you wouldn't necessarily choose?

SARDIS CONTESTANT: Well, I think, I, I, I think that I'm, My husband and I, whenever we have, we have, we have,

SARIYA GARCIA: [00:00:00] [00:00:00] [00:00:00]

MIA MOSS: And so that's why I wanted to talk about doing this large-scale series. Did you consider other ways of presenting this large-scale work, or was this always the way you knew it would be?

KAREN GRISTA: Yes, definitely.

MIA MOSS: Was it a kind of shame to do it here.

KAREN GRISTA: Definitely.

MIA MOSS: Why?

KAREN GRISTA: And breathtaking. I mean, you walk in the factory and you see these cranes that are outside of the roofs of anything and it is so breathtaking and it's so, it's so, it's so,

MLA PROG: [illegible]

GARFIELD: [illegible] the stomach an everything. And the smallest an [illegible] and the [illegible] and the [illegible] and the

MUA. REDIG: Okay.

SARDIS CAMPBELL: The Judge, the two in 1959 there was Judge, and then under the rule that that that about two years, that that it was the Judge, and then it was Judge Ellis, and then it was Judge Ellis, and then it was Judge Ellis. Yeah, that's right. Yeah, Judge Ellis. There's, I guess, a lot of things that happened in that time period. I don't remember, I don't remember. There's, I guess, only one, Judge Ellis, I guess, I guess, I guess.

MUA. REDIG: Yes.

SARDIS CAMPBELL: Because from all the revolving when I couldn't remember, I couldn't remember. I don't remember, I don't remember. I guess, I guess, I guess. Yeah, I guess, I guess. I'm not from that group. I'm not from that group. I'm not from that group

And at this point I was trying to interpreting, you've been the same, and I was willing, and then you have huge given attention. And I say, I'm, I'm, I'm

the conversation.

SARDI ANSWERS: Right!

MIA REGIS: Yes.

SARDI ANSWERS: So that's it, Kowalski.

MIA REGIS: Yes, definitely.

SARDI ANSWERS: Is there any other place that you want to travel to Sheer?

MIA REGIS: Yes, definitely.

SARDI ANSWERS: Does Sheer feel secure to you?

MIA REGIS: Yes, definitely.

SARDI ANSWERS: Is there any other place that you want to travel to Sheer?

MIA REGIS: No. Basically, they've been in Sheer's relationship for always seems to lead to several options.

SARDI ANSWERS: Yeah.

SARDI ANSWERS: And I always try to mind their. I do and all of a sudden, I'm, I'm, I'm

SARDA QUESTIONS – I wish good looking romantic guy honest? That

SARDA QUESTIONS – Do you think I look like a good person?

MUA RESPO: – Yeah

SARDA QUESTIONS – It can be dark like Ebba Kalkoka –

MUA RESPO: – Yeah

SARDA QUESTIONS – I feel beautiful.

MUA RESPO: – Yeah

SARDA QUESTIONS – You know?

MUA RESPO: – Yeah

SARDA QUESTIONS – And so I'm strong been a cosmetologist for Figueroa and having

MUA RESPO: – Okay

SARDA QUESTIONS – And everything – when I was in college, Figueroa and everything –

MUA RESPO: – Yeah, that's true too.

SARDA QUESTIONS – It was all phenomenaugh-ohmen, you know –

MUA RESPO: – Yeah. Okay.

SARDA QUESTIONS – I wish conceptual artist –

MUA RESPO: – Right.

SARDA QUESTIONS – I all of this stuff. Are you know if you wish didn't – I wish conceptual artist, I wish – I wish I – I wish I – I wish I

MEA-ROSS: ... I think this program.

GARFIELD-WEBSTER: Yes.

MEA-ROSS: Okay.

GARFIELD-WEBSTER: I'm fascinated by technology. You know, I can't wait for the next piece of stuff to come in. I'm trying to, I'm, I'm, I'm

KAREN LAMONTE: Even stronger. [Laughs.] I love people—when industry has a sense of humor, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, isn't that so refreshing.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, I think because it's a material that's constantly growing, a lot of things—a lot of things land in the lap of artists, technically come from science, industry, space program. A lot of our mold materials actually that we use in the studios, various studios—bronze and glass—come from space exploration.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know? So there is—we are kind of the happy, poor cousins of industrial—large-scale industrial invention. And I think because glass is a part of that, there will always be new possibilities. For example, somebody was telling me about this—and I don't know if Godzilla Glass is just one of those urban myths or not, but they were like, "Yes, you'll be able to fold it." And I was like, "Great, because I want to make giant origami animals from plate glass. I want to be able to fold glass up and make, you know, paper animals," and all this stuff. So I think as possibilities grow, you know, I'll always be interested in using it in a new way. [00:22:12]

MIJA RIEDEL: The way you described it is fascinating too. It sounds as if the material itself contains an inherent tension that appeals to you.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely. Tension—contradictions. So what was I supposed to do? I was supposed to compare that to ceramic?

MIJA RIEDEL: Ceramic—contrast it with clay, which doesn't really—

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: —have that inherent contradiction at all.

KAREN LAMONTE: Not at all. I think clay is just—I think of it as being like—it is the basic earthly element. You know, nothing could be more human than clay. So, in some ways I think of this kind of physical—there's this physical aspect of human and then there's the more abstract. And in a way, kind of clay and glass inhabit those realms respectively.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, with glass being the more abstract—

KAREN LAMONTE: More abstract.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and clay being the more—

KAREN LAMONTE: The more physical.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see. And, yeah, I can see that. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so there's something about it that then is inherently suited to the figure.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely, both—each aspects of the figure. But I will definitely continue to work—what I actually really want to make—and I have some—oh, we have to go to the apartment and look at the glass space—

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

KAREN LAMONTE: —I made some little—just as daily exercises—clay figurines, and that was so much fun. I was like, "Wow, is this what all those people are doing who work on a small scale? I've got to do more of that," you know? I love this idea of, like, miniatures or figurines.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I would love to make some more small pieces. [00:24:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: But that would be together as a series, or the individual pieces?

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't know. I have no idea, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: I'd like to see those because I have a hard time even envisioning—

KAREN LAMONTE: I know.

MIJA RIEDEL: —you doing something that small.

KAREN LAMONTE: Me too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But it's good. Actually working small is hard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yeah. I'm sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think particularly for my disposition I think it would be really hard. And I'm completely not trained for it, you know, or unpracticed in it. I remember I was doing something and I realized—I was like, "Wow, this is going so badly, what's wrong?" And all of my tools were too big.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I was trying to—and I ended up using a manicure set to sculpt the clay, you know, when I was making these little figurines because all of my tools were for making large-scale work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Of course.

KAREN LAMONTE: I was like, "Oh, I'll just use this cuticle thing—you know, stick." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Perfect. Do the hairspray. It's actually ideally suited. So, just a couple of big questions. We've addressed these a little bit, but just in case you have any final summary thoughts. Do you see your career in terms of episodes and periods that are distinct? Do you see particular threads of continuity going through the work? And what about the work in particular matters to you?

KAREN LAMONTE: I definitely see it as a continuity but with, like, big signposts, you know? Like, it's always this female exploration of beauty but then the signpost is like, going to Japan—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, coming to the Czech Republic, going to Japan, discovering clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, so there's these great bright points that mark that continuous path.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then the second part of the question was?

MIJA RIEDEL: What about the work matters to you?

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, everything [laughs].

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I mean, really everything. I'm particular in the realization but I'm also extremely rigorous in the conceptualization. [00:26:05]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And before I start on a body of work, I really—the ideas have to be bulletproof.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I take it apart, I put it together, I look at it from all different ways. I read material that I think will support my thinking and then I read material that will contradict my thinking. You know, so I have to be really sure because I know once I start making things it's going to be so hard and it's going to be expensive. So I have to be sure before I go.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so this is all in a conceptual, intellectual, pre-actual working period. So you're not figuring it out in the studio as you're working. You're really analyzing it—

KAREN LAMONTE: Before I go.

MIJA RIEDEL: —yeah. Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then the details of realization, that's always the sort of integration of the idea and the material language, the material vocabulary. And those two things weave themselves together—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —in a unique way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that happens in the studio. But when it's kind of, you know, like, it took me a year-and-a-half for the kimono work, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: But it wasn't like, I'm going to put a botanical element in the lower corner of the obi on that, you know. It was the broad sweeps of the conceptual, and then the details of the realization came in the studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So that explains why, when you were in Japan, you were purely researching and not doing any work—collecting kimonos—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and not doing any physical work—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —for seven months—

KAREN LAMONTE: I know.

MIJA RIEDEL: —nothing was made.

KAREN LAMONTE: I know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And then you come back here and it still took quite a period—how long did it take before the first kimono pieces actually began?

KAREN LAMONTE: It was about a year-and-a-half.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Were you working on anything else at the time?

KAREN LAMONTE: I did. I worked on the drapery work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Okay, yeah. Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: I worked on the small drapery pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I worked—that was pretty much it, the small drapery pieces during that time. And then just processing—you know, processing, collecting information. A couple of false starts in directions that I ended up not liking, and stuff like that. [00:28:15]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Okay, final thoughts on how or where do you see yourself and your work fitting into contemporary art?

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, that's interesting, since I have been roundly disregarding—[laughs]—everything that's happening in contemporary art. I don't know. Like, I would love—I mean, if I were to think, like, what would be best possible case scenario, I would love to be associated with people like Antony Gormley. You know, he's figurative. You know, Louise Bourgeois. I don't know. You know, I mean, those are giant icons for me. You know, I don't know if I will ever make it to that realm of existence, but something like that. You know, people who are conceptually-driven, material-capable, you know, and who are, you know, working on an intimate scale, on a large public scale, you know, that would be great. I think I have a long way to go to get to that level, but that's kind of—you know, when I see the party that's going on that I want to be a part of, it's like, "I want to go with those guys—[laughs]—and gals."

MIJA RIEDEL: Anything other than that? Final thoughts?

KAREN LAMONTE: I can't think of anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: No? I think it's been fairly thorough. So, thank you very much.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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