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

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Karen LaMonte on 2012 November 2 and 3. The interview took place at LaMonte's studio in Prague, Czech Republic, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Karen LaMonte reviewed the transcript in 2020 and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Karen LaMonte in the artist's studio in Prague, in the Czech Republic, on November 2, 2012, for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number one. It's a pleasure to be here. We just had a fabulous tour of your downstairs dungeon, as you call it, filled with artwork. It was great to see all that new, recent art in the studio too. Before we get to the work, I thought we'd take care of some of the early biographical questions. So you were born in New York in—were you born in New York?

KAREN LAMONTE: In New York City.

MIJA RIEDEL: In New York City, 1967?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was the date?

KAREN LAMONTE: December 14.

MIJA RIEDEL: December 14, okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm a Sagittarius.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, good to know. [They laugh.] Alrighty. That sounds more like California than New York. [They laugh.] So you would you talk first about your parents, your mother, your father, if you have any siblings, what your parents did?

KAREN LAMONTE: Sure. My mother was the head nurse at the emergency room at Bellevue Hospital in the '60s and '70s in New York City. So that was quite a job. And my father is a doctor. He was actually a research scientist for cancer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where did he work?

KAREN LAMONTE: Sloan-Kettering, also in New York City. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh. Yes, absolutely. My sister and brother-in-law work there.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, really?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I think sort of—that's important because they're real New Yorkers. And when things got uncomfortable in New York City in the '70s, everybody took off to the

suburbs. But my parents were—my mother was, first of all, running the emergency room. Second of all, she couldn't drive. So we couldn't move to the—

MIJA RIEDEL: A real New Yorker!

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] A real New Yorker. So we could not move to the suburbs. And nobody wanted to. I mean, I was not a decision-maker at that point in our family, but nobody wanted to leave. Everybody wanted to stay in the city. So they are real New Yorkers. And you know, all of our weekends were spent going to museums, you know, not as a group, but you know, my mother would take us to museums, to the South Street Seaport to hear Pete Seeger sing, you know, so these really kind of community local events, you know? [00:02:24]

MIJA RIEDEL: And now, what are their—what were—are their names, your parents?

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, my mom is Josephine Wardman LaMonte and my dad is Charles Southwick LaMonte.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. It's interesting because clearly, your mother, being an emergency nurse at Bellevue, is not frightened, probably, of much. It sounds like she's probably a very tough character, pretty unflappable.

KAREN LAMONTE: She is not frightened of anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: And your father, being a—coming from a research background, is used to, I'm sure, just incredible research and experimentation, and looking for new ways of doing things, new ways to solve problems. It's so interesting to hear about your parents in the context of what you do because those seem like skills that you use on a regular basis.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely. Definitely. And I think my approach to everything is scientific. My dad always says, you know—he says about me that when I take on a new topic, I research it encyclopedically. And that's—I just look at everything I can find. If it's, you know, related to my work—for example, the kimono. I look at everything, from how to make it to how to wear it, history, then the history as it appears in art, and then from that sort of broad spectrum, I draw down my personal view of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And the process seems to me too—as I've looked at the work over time, the process seems—many of the pieces evolve in series, which seems like a very research-experimental way of working, just sort of an exhaustive way to examine material and the way it can be used, ideas. It seems like there's a—that sense of series feels very related to that research way of working too. [00:04:03]

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely. Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Do you have siblings?

KAREN LAMONTE: I do. I have an older sister. And she is—I'm not a hundred percent sure what my sister does. [Laughs.] But this is my take on it. She is investigating how to use Internet technology, computer resources, to organize disparate groups in online communities. And all of her work, her practical work and her research, is on education. So for example, for a while she was working with the public school system how teachers—and this is in states that wanted to participate—could share their best practices, things that they had come up with that worked for them, online with, you know—you know, Maine with California in an online community. So that—and now she's working in—just started working in the private school system doing the same thing, helping people organize and share information in online formats.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: She's the most technologically capable person in our family, and she's the only one who can drive. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You don't drive either?

KAREN LAMONTE: No!

MIJA RIEDEL: That's amazing.

KAREN LAMONTE: I know. I really don't drive. I mean, technically, I have my license, but I just tried to get my Czech driving license, and the instructor looked at me, and he said, "Do you really need this license?" And I said, "No, not really." And he goes, "It's probably best if we don't continue." [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Your husband drives?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. That's funny.

KAREN LAMONTE: Isn't that funny?

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to talk a little bit about growing up in New York. Where exactly did you grow up, and what that—what school you went to, what—if there was an early emphasis in art education, either in your school or through your family, what just that type of experience was like. [00:06:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, well, we grew up initially in Stuyvesant Town, which is Lower East Side, 14th, near the power plant. And—that just exploded, actually, in the storm.

MIJA RIEDEL: It is underwater now, right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I went to—you know, everything was quite liberal back then. So I went to Jack & Jill Nursery School, which I still remember vividly. And things I remember about growing up is I was actually always allowed to choose my own clothing. When I see school pictures of, you know, all of the kids lined up, there's—you know, you could tell everybody was dressed up really prissy by their parents, and then there was me. And I always had my own outfits on, and my mother would always say, "Oh, I can see you're wearing your favorite things today." And it would be, like, a—brown and white cow-patched pants, bell-bottoms with a giant belt and some crazy pink spotted thing with fur bits dangling—I mean, really wild stuff together, you know? And—but my mom always thought, you know, let the kids do their own thing. She was not one of these controlling people.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And where—did you see anyone dressing like this, this interest in clothes, from a young age? Where does that come from? Do you know?

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it must have been my mom's. Another just vivid, vivid early character is her friend named Mixie, Mixie and Mixie's dog, Federico, and her Spanish boyfriend. And Mixie was obviously a hippie, and so we would go to Mixie's house for brunches and quiche, and wine, and things. And I remember her, like, huge beaded necklaces, and you know, she kind of dressed in these long, flowing gowns and macramé shirts, and stuff like that. And I—you know, maybe—and, oh, scarves, and giant earrings like a Gypsy, you know. And so, I just remember vivid characters and just thinking, you know, that that was being dressed. [00:08:04]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And your parents—how did they—were they dressing—not at all?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, no, no, my mom—my mom was fashionable but understated, and my dad just wore a suit always to work, but ties—but he loved his ties, like, colorful ties. Like, that was his specialty. And anybody who sees my dad would say, "Oh, he's such a dapper dresser." You know, but the way a doctor would dress.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Oh, but so you had that sensibility of clothing and personality from a young age.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. And what about in school? Did you do much drawing? Did you do any painting, any ceramics, any 3-D?

KAREN LAMONTE: I did everything in school. I loved—you know, I love making things. You know, as my studio assistant calls it, he says "It's like a twitch." [They laugh.] It's like—sort of just twitching along until I get to make something, you know? And so, working with ceramic—I remember working with ceramic in kindergarten. And I remember home projects too. My mother was great with home projects. We made all of our own Christmas tree ornaments. You know, we made Russian Easter eggs and decoupage, and we dipped fabric in flour and water, and draped it over things, and made angels that we stuck on Christmas trees. You know, so we were constantly—we had projects going as kids all the time, and usually seasonal projects, you know, Christmas, pumpkins, and all that. And so I've always just loved that. We had knitting stuff that we would do during the summer or crochet or macramé rug hook. You know, it was the '70s. So—[laughs]—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. I was thinking of that, but I was also thinking, she also had a full-time high-powered position, and yet she still made time for this. So clearly, she thought it was important, or it was interesting to you and therefore it was important. [00:10:02]

KAREN LAMONTE: I think she was just trying to distract us. [They laugh.] She was, like, keep those kids busy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Busy. That's right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Keep the kids busy, and keep them out of trouble. And so—I mean, we were always, always, always doing stuff. And we—my mom grew up in Rhode Island, and so all of her family and friends were there. And my parents had a very small beach cottage right on the waterfront. And so we went there every summer. My dad had to stay in New York and work. But there, also, we did tons of stuff. First of all, we fixed the house ourselves, which was great for us as kids. We loved it. Every year we would get there, we would fix all of the screens that fit in the window. So we'd take off the little wooden slats. We would nail down the—that mesh, the metal mesh, put back the wooden slats, paint them. We would repaint the shutters, you know, fix furniture. All this—you know, these were all little projects, you know. And as kids, we loved doing that. And then once all that type of stuff was done, I started my small businesses of rock painting and selling it on the side of the road, lemonade—but I made a bundle on rock painting every summer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: What did you paint?

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] Anything. But, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Little scenes on the rock? Or did they become film figures?

KAREN LAMONTE: Just like little faces, and, you know—and, you know, anything I could think of. But, you know, we were out there. But this was, like, we were active kids, and this gave us something to do. So—and then I made furniture for all of my dolls. I made furniture and clothing. And we collected shells. And, you know, so there was always this doing stuff. We never sat around. We were always outside, doing stuff, collecting things, transforming it into something else. I started a zoo. [00:12:00] I remember—my husband always makes fun of me for this, but—I collected all of these animals from the back pond. And I would keep them in little buckets of water on the back porch, but of course, not thinking that actually, the sun comes and boils all of the water and all the zoo is dead, you know, or dehydrated. [Laughs.] So—but I was constantly collecting—and my parents—and they're not wrong to think that—they thought I was going to be a scientist because I was collecting types of seaweeds and keeping specimens books, and notes, and everything like—I still have some of these books, constant, constant note keeper—little pictures, little drawings, you know, observations of character. And then I started—you know, it must have gone onto spy books, you know. It must have been *Harriet the Spy* or something. So then I was looking for evidence, evidence of the great mystery. So I started, you know, documenting suspicious footprints in the sand and making up stories about, you know, things that had happened that, you know, I was going to uncover the truth, you know. So—[laughs]—

MIJA RIEDEL: So a huge imagination along with the scientific sensibility. Interesting. What an interesting combination. What was school like? Was it something that you enjoyed? Was it difficult?

KAREN LAMONTE: School was extraordinarily boring and usually a total disaster. The school—so after Jack & Jill then I think—I don't know if I went to Grace Church as well or only my sister went to—did she go to Grace—there was some—I had some little, like, blip memory of—after Jack & Jill before—because I went to Spence, which is an all-girls high school on the Upper East Side. I have a memory of being dropped off on 86th Street at some kind of much more liberal school and doing some—it was, like—you know, we were, like, "Now we're going to dance the pattern of the sun around the moon," or something. [00:14:05] I remember something—and I remember—I remember my mom thinking that that was not a good school. So then what—I was put in Spence where my sister already was. And my sister is much more a straight learner. You know, she excels in the academic environment. And basically I was just too weird for school, you know. And so kindergarten went relatively well—[laughs]—compared to the rest of it. But kindergarten, I was learning to play the piano, which I loved, and there were still lots of projects going on, which

was great, and things to collect—stamps, stickers, and then—and reading. And I didn't even know I had done this. But then it really became obvious to me. I didn't actually learn how to read. I found somebody who could read already in kindergarten, and they told me what was on the page, and I memorized everything, and repeated it by looking at the pictures as my clues. And the reason why didn't learn how to read was because it turns out that I was a dyslexic person. So that was a mess. And then I needed glasses, which they didn't figure out until the first grade. And it was my first grade teacher, Miss Wallace, who put the whole picture together. And she was pretty amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: So she—the dyslexia was figured out earlier on, in first grade.

KAREN LAMONTE: First grade.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because actually, a fair number of the artists that I've interviewed have had dyslexia.

KAREN LAMONTE: I bet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. They—I think it's a very creative mind, so a dyslexic can often then go into the arts.

KAREN LAMONTE: And do you know that dyslexic people actually have a wider peripheral view?

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't know that.

KAREN LAMONTE: And now they're trying to look at it evolutionarily, why some people would be what we call dyslexic—who knows it is, it's just a different kind of brain—and, like, people who can see things moving in their field of vision like this and would be very visually attuned, better hunters. [00:16:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Oh, that's fascinating. That's the first time I've certainly spoken with a number of dyslexic artists, but that's the first time I've heard that. That's—

KAREN LAMONTE: And that—I just—

MIJA RIEDEL: —that profound visual sensibility often comes along—

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but that makes sense now.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I—something that my husband and studio assistant are having fun with is I have a mental map of where everything is, and I actually know where everything is. So if somebody is, like, "Karen, where is the bottle of alcohol," I'm, like, "Oh, it's on the small table by the ta, ta, ta, ta," and I can be on the other side of the room. Like, I don't even need to look. And, you know, in my drawers, like, I know—I know exactly where everything is. So I have these very precise mental visual maps. But I can't remember a date or a proper name to save my life. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So then was school frustrating—

KAREN LAMONTE: Very.

MIJA RIEDEL: —or did you figure out how—was there a way to compensate for that at that point? Because this is still fairly early. It's the early '70s, right?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, it's really early, right. And it's early for this kind of stuff, you know, because at first they were—and my mom said she noticed something when I was growing up, which was when I learned the colors, I never said, "Yellow." I said, "Oh, look at the lemon-colored car" or "Look at the sky-colored this."

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: I wouldn't use the proper names. And at first, they were, like, "Oh my God, she's retarded. [They laugh.] And then she was, like, "Wait a minute, she's messing with me." [They laugh.] "She's just being difficult." And so, I have—I don't have—there was no logic at my mind in that point, but it was just maybe I was having fun, or maybe that's how I saw the color of

yellow. I never really thought of it as yellow, I thought of it as a lemon.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Because you never saw the word yellow and thought of yellow. It was associated more with the lemon than that word.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: That's interesting. So then—so thank God for Miss Wallace because she was very strict—all of my teachers were always very strict. And my parents chose a really strict school because they were very focused on an education, like a solid, rock-solid education. [00:18:12] And it was New York in '70s, so public school was a little too scary for them. So Miss Wallace figured out I was learning disabled. And fortunately, at that school there was a woman named Dr. Hirst. And Dr. Hirst was an educational researcher. And she was just researching people who were not fitting into the norms. She wasn't saying dyslexia for a certain—you know, she wasn't looking for anything, but—so instead of going to a lot of, like, the regular classes with the students, I would go to her office. And there were tons of books, games, devices, and things there. And it was Dr. Hirst and Mr. Red Pencil. And so everybody, like, "Oh Karen, what are you up to?" "Oh, I'm going to see Dr.. Hirst or Mr. Red Pencil." And—[laughs]—so funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mr. Red Pencil is a red pencil?

KAREN LAMONTE: Correcting pencil.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah. I see.

KAREN LAMONTE: Her correcting pencil.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I see.

KAREN LAMONTE: And you know those wax pencils that you pull down the string?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then you unwind the paper? So I used to collect all of that stuff in a plastic bag. And somebody said, "Oh Karen, what is that?" And I was, like, "that's Mr. Red Pencil's curly hair."

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh. How extraordinary. So you had—there was no sort of stigma or anything attached with this—

KAREN LAMONTE: No. No, no, no.

MIJA RIEDEL: —it was just a different way of learning.

KAREN LAMONTE: A totally different way. And, you know, I still have—I have books—first of all, then I started my early desktop publishing career, which was writing books about things. So I wrote a book about Miss Wallace. [Laughs] Oh, what was it? Ms. Wallace and this giraffe that I had made up or something. So funny. And so I wrote that book and, you know, all these little books that I made. And um—[00:20:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: And they were actual objects that you made. They were little books.

KAREN LAMONTE: Little books that I bound, with, like, little bows and everything. And—but I showed somebody recently because I made a book on Japan, actually, in third grade. I have it downstairs. I have to show you.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'd love to see it.

KAREN LAMONTE: But they looked and they said, "My God, look at the penmanship," you know, because every—I was so focused on every little thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Exactly. And that's fascinating too, because I remember reading that you love going back and looking at journals from high school—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and there's all sorts of things about dresses and very detailed dresses. And it sounds like the scenes of a lot of what you've done really could be traced back, clearly.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes, and an extreme sense of discipline.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

KAREN LAMONTE: Like, I'm actually the most self-disciplined person I know. And that's not—like, I'm not proud of it or anything. It's, like, I'm just really self-disciplined. And methods. Like I had to, you know—or they had to come up with a very strict method by which I could learn, because I wasn't doing it the other way. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: So was it difficult to read and write?

KAREN LAMONTE: Very difficult. Reading, very, very difficult. And still now if I'm tired, like—[makes a snoring sound]—everything is, you know, crazy. And if my glasses prescription gets out of date or something like that, my eyes just get so tired.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: So it's wild.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. But how fortunate that it was figured out early on it seems like they immediately moved you into a whole—just another learning situation.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly. And they got me back into the regular program, my God, by third grade maybe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

KAREN LAMONTE: By third grade.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so you were able to read and move along in a regular class.

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely. I mean, you know—and at Spence, they kind of—they segmented it into fast learning, the middle learners, and then the slow learners, which they disguised with the group numbers A, B and C. [Laughs.] [00:22:11]

MIJA RIEDEL: Very effective.

KAREN LAMONTE: So of course—[laughs]—

MIJA RIEDEL: In a grade-oriented school.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I was always in the C group. But I was in a group, at least, you know. But the C group always had the most fun anyways, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine. I would imagine.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that was—so, high school. And I have to say, like, I was very—so I was back in with everybody else by third grade, having a ball, and always still, like, the things that are most vivid in my memory are exactly the location of where the craft room—or the art room was in the building on every floor, and all of my art teachers and the projects.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So you really excelled there.

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, I felt happy there. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And were you—do you have a sense of being inclined towards two-dimensional sensibilities, three-dimensional sensibilities? Was there anything that specific at that point?

KAREN LAMONTE: Initially three-dimensional, and then in high school, you know, I discovered the Lower East Side gallery scene in high school. And my parents let me take drawing classes at the Art Students League on 57th Street. I mean, my parents were pretty great, and they let me do my own thing on the weekends. You know, of course, sometimes I got into trouble, but—so I discovered the gallery scene, and then I was, like, "Obviously I'm a painter." And that decision was made at, like, 15, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so then I started my painting career. So it was the drawing—the Art Students League and a lot of painting at home. And inside of the high school there was a teacher, Diane Martin, and she had actually gone to RISD. [00:24:02]

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah!

KAREN LAMONTE: So she—and, you know, she was, like, "Karen is just always in this art room." And she was the person who recommended to me—she said, "You might want to think about going to art school." And that's how I ended up making my application. But before that, there was an interesting thing. Something happened, and I don't know exactly what it was—nobody knows—something happened around ninth grade. You know, I was doing—like, strange things would happen, like I would be really great at something and then really horrible at something else. Like chemistry, it's as if somebody was telling me something I knew already.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And the teacher—when I did chemistry, I think it was in eighth grade, the teacher never made a key for correcting the tests. She would just correct my test first and then use that as the key because I got—I literally got a 102 on very single test. Every single one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And it was zero effort. Like I would—I read the book. You know, you would do chapter by chapter in the—you know, as the week went by—and I would read the chapter in the classroom and do all the homework in the classroom because it was just like [snapping her fingers]. It's as if somebody was telling me something I already knew a hundred percent, which is really weird.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you have any sort of photographic memory?

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't think so. I don't think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And it didn't work in everything, but only in certain things.

KAREN LAMONTE: Then physics, total disaster. Total disaster. In physics, they were, like, "Karen must be taking drugs." And I was, like, "No, I just don't understand physics." You know. And my parents—

MIJA RIEDEL: I understand. [They laugh.] It doesn't sound so unreasonable.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, it was very—I don't want to say high-powered, because that makes it sound bad, but it was a school—it was an all-girls school where people were just allowed to excel. So if—you know, if you finished all of the regular high school stuff by ninth grade, then you would get put into these advanced placement classes. And so, you know, there was a lot of kind of discussion—I think mostly between my parents and the—at the PTA meetings, you know, like what to do with me. [00:26:15]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because nobody knew, like, should we, like, excel me because I was good at some stuff and not that bad in other stuff? Oh, but wait, there was something that happened—was it earlier—ninth grade or eighth grade or something, where I just started failing everything. And it was like some sort of total—and so then they sent me in for some analysis at that point, and again it was like—and somewhere my parents have the file. I've never seen it. But it was, you know, a kind of complete IQ and intelligence test to make sure—actually they were like, maybe she really is mental [laughs], like retarded or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I managed to pass that test. But then they also realized that it's, like, whatever the standard way of everything was didn't appeal to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so at that point I said, "Well, couldn't I do AP art?" And I don't think

anybody at the school had ever done it before. And they said, "Okay." So they put—they gave me a little—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there such a thing?

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't think there was. But I think they, like, made it up. So they gave me a little space in the art room that was my own, like a little room. And Diane Martin, who was my art teacher, she sort of oversaw my progress over a year. You know, I learned a much more complex art history. I was going to gallery shows. I was going to museum shows, reading books about artists. You know, studying their lives and everything. So in a way, I was able to take all of that in my own direction very early on.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was in eighth or ninth grade?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, by that time—[00:28:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: No, but ninth grade everything fell apart.

KAREN LAMONTE: Eighth or ninth fell apart, and then 11th and 12th grade, things kind of came back together, and I got to do things my own way. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, which apparently has worked for you very successfully ever since, and you've gone on to reinvent multiple processes. Yeah. Was there anything that stands out from that time in particular that felt like it really resonated, any particular books, any artists' work, any shows in particular?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, my sister tells a story that is for me just a really vague memory. Well, there's two stories. One is from when I was really young. I must have been—I don't know, we can look up and see when this exhibition was at the Guggenheim. But Joseph Beuys had a retrospective at the Guggenheim, and there were piles of tar and crazy materials, like, sprinkled all over the Guggenheim. And my sister says that we walked through—and this is credit to my mother for taking us there—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes!

KAREN LAMONTE: —but she's, like, all I kept on talking about was the smell. I was, like—[singing] "This smelly stuff, da-da-da-da-da," you know, And we didn't know what we were seeing. You know, we're kids, but we're just—but that was my impression, was the smell, the smell, the smell. But the thing I do remember for myself clearly, it was—I must have been a senior in high school, and my mom's best friend—my mom was working in real estate at this point, she had stopped the emergency room—was a painter, this woman named Nora Howard, and a—a fabulous painter and printmaker. And Nora knew all of the cutting-edge stuff in New York, you know. So PS1 out in Long Island City had just happened, so the school building had just been given to be an art center, and at that point mostly the residencies. And they had the *Arte Povera* opening there. And what I remember was seeing a frozen flute and drinking orange juice and amaretto. [They laugh.] That was the cocktail that they served at the opening. And then I just remember—it was, like, the first time I had really been inside of that opening environment, with the people and the funk, and everything. And I was just like, "I love this." Like, that—I was like, "This is what I want to be as part of." [00:30:25]

MIJA RIEDEL: So—and that was your junior or senior year—

KAREN LAMONTE: That must have been—that must have been junior year, junior or senior year. It was '85 or '86.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there a sense in high school also of you having a sense of being one of the artists or a class artist? Was there anything like that or—

KAREN LAMONTE: There were a lot of other people who used the refuge of the art room [laughs] the same way I did. And I don't know if anybody really went on full-time to do art, but just—I've seen nobody from high school since I graduated—I saw my best friend until ninth grade—she left and then—you know, I didn't—I've seen her since, but she went to Trinity, which was a coed school. And then one girl came—she married a Czech man, so she was here visiting his family. Shoot—I can't remember her name. She's—Lee Lawton—her last name is Lawton. But she's a scientist, actually. And she was here, and she goes, "Yeah, I remember you were just always in that art room." [Laughs.] She goes, "And obviously, you still are." [They laugh.] I was like, "Yeah,

it works pretty well for me," you know. [Laughs.] So that was—I mean, so focused from so early on, you know? I mean, that's the weird thing. And I always say to Steve, "Steve, don't worry"—you know, Steve is so great at so many things that—but I'm like, "You're going to find your magic talent." And I was like "Don't worry, just relax. It's going to come to you. You know, someday you're going to know your special thing." And he goes, "Karen, some people don't have a special thing. You know, you've known forever," you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Well, it seems like his special thing may be augmenting to or enabling

you to actually do—because it seems like he's incredibly organized—[00:32:25]

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, my God.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and he's very detail-oriented, very thorough. So—and—

KAREN LAMONTE: He can drive, talk on the phone [they laugh] and use the computer. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And without somebody like that, it's almost impossible to do what you do.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, absolutely. You know, I mean, I'm so thankful every time—you know, I—the note—he comes to me—he's like, "This is the schedule—the drying schedule of the thing, you just need to fill in the blanks, what you're doing," you know? [They laugh.] And I'm like, "Oh, I can't believe this." You know, he's constantly encouraging me to take notes, you know, and other than my crazy notebooks, you know, but actually kind of take more usable notes. And—but then, you know, something will happen or we can't repeat something, and I'll go back and I'll find one of my little charts, and I'm like, "Here it is, the golden paper," you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So when did these, quote-unquote, crazy notebooks—when did they start? How did they come about, and how have they evolved?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, I tried to find—you know, my parents got infested with bedbugs, so

everything was put in plastic bags. But I found this red—this red binder that I had kept, and it's so funny because it's a vacation—a car vacation we took in the '70s, I think 1977.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were 10, little.

KAREN LAMONTE: I was tiny. And we went on the Freedom Trail, and we traced the Revolutionary War. You know, these are my parents' idea of, like, vacations, you know, but—[laughs]—most people go skiing or something, right? Exactly. They're like, "No, children, now you will relive the Civil War." We're like, "Oh, God." [00:34:00] So—but I keep all my notebooks with all of the little postcards clipped out. And then my favorite page—I just—I was just looking through it, and I was like, looking at it—it was like, "My God"—with my drawings and, you know, puffy letters outlined and everything. My favorite thing was like—one page was like, "This is everything we could have seen." [They laugh.] Pages and pages of everything, obviously, I thought would have been more interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Did you—it sounds a little *Harriet the Spy*-ish too, this whole concept of notebooks, fitting perfectly with this whole sense of art, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right? God, "This is everything we could have seen"—it was like my way of officially registering my complaint. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you share the notebooks, or were they top secret?

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, they were—you know, I mean, they weren't top secret because it was like, this big, and I was carrying it around with me all the time, you know, with my, you know, arsenal of pencils and crayons and stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] I really—I really wanted to—I'll—I have the Japanese book here, but I was looking all over for that red book because I thought that would be funny to look at.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. It sounds as if your parents were very supportive of what you were interested in doing regardless.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. Well, I mean, I think they realized that I was not a standard-issue child and that things were not totally easy for me, like all of the normal stuff, you know, learning to read and write and all of that. And I think I was just funny. You know, I think I was just a funny kind of weird, quirky little kid, and they were like, "What's she going to come up with this time," you know? And they—but they were not, like, free rein. They were very, very strict. And if my grades dropped below a certain point, you know, batten down the hatches, and you know, homework was done before—and you know, we were not watching TV or anything like that in our family house. [00:36:05]

MIJA RIEDEL: Ever?

KAREN LAMONTE: Um—I think we got a TV—we had this black and white—the—it was like a snow machine, you know [laughs] with an antenna stuck in the top. And then—well, okay, for example, on the weekends we would go to the movies. So the movie house was on the Upper West Side on 96th Street. It was called the Thalia. Have you ever heard of this?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

KAREN LAMONTE: Check the name, but I think that's it, the Thalia. And they showed these, like, European existential films. So for example, at age seven or eight, having just mastered the art of reading extremely slowly on paper, my parents would take me to German and Japanese films with running subtitles. You know, okay, so it's like—but they're real—like, they're heavy intellectuals, my parents, you know, and not like heavy, but they like to think, you know, and they like to have their minds stimulated. So one double feature was *Woman in the Dunes*. Have you seen that film?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's a Japanese film. I forget who did it. It's about a man who—it's a form of imprisonment in Japan where they dig a giant hole in the sand and they throw the man down there, and there's no way of getting out. And you know, it's—all of these films are existential. It's about the meaning of life. So finally, the man's life changed when this woman comes to take care of him, and it's about the intensity of their evolving relationship. Another film—so that one was coupled with *The Ascent*, which was a German film, I think from the '40s, about soldiers fleeing during World War II. You know, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: Pretty heavy stuff for a 10-year-old.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] And popcorn—you know, popcorn, the great relief, was a white paper bag with—of like, you know, those really white kernels, not the yellow ones from a regular movie theater, but the really white kernels with no butter, and salt if you put it on yourself, but it all fell to the bottom of the bag. [They laugh.] So it's just—so that was—that was a really great weekend when you got to go to the double feature. [00:38:18] They showed *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. That's probably a more known one. But these were—this was, like, our kids' films. Then somebody had their 13th birthday party, and we saw *Singing in the Rain*. I didn't know that film came in color.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like [gasps]. I'll never forget it. I was just like, "Oh, my God! What a happy movie!" [They laugh.] "In color!" [Laughs.] It's hilarious. I mean, it's really hilarious. We—if you—my sister and I, when I get together and we talk about our childhood, I mean, it's really, really funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. But it is so full of ideas and exposures to such a broad range not only of ideas but cultures and visuals, all those films.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that's actually really—it turned out to sort of be very visual—very helpful and informative in ways that probably were not apparent at the time.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] Definitely not. But yeah, I mean, if I—oh, then one of the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Your parents sound pretty fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, they're amazing. They're totally amazing. All of our friends from New York

who used to hang out with us and our—my parents now hang out with my parents.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, I mean, they're fascinating. Anybody who meets them is like, "Wow, who are they?" But another thing my—so we moved Uptown sometime in the '70s, I don't know when.

MIJA RIEDEL: To the Upper West Side?

KAREN LAMONTE: To Upper East Side.

MIJA RIEDEL: Upper East Side. Oh, Sloan-Kettering, of course.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. So we were in this museum area, and my mom—I don't know where she found this, but she found a hide-and-seek book from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. [00:40:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so on the weekends—and there were some summers where, you know, whenever, like, financially things were going well, so they would rent their beach house and we would stay in the city, and we would spend all day at the museum, the Met, 84th—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, 82nd , yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —82nd, yeah, and we had this book. And I remember the thing was, like, "Find this seal on the suit of armor in the armor room." So you would look at the seal, and then you would look at everything in the armor room in such detail, hunting for it, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So it was really—you know, she did things like that. Again, I'm sure she was thinking, "It's like a nickel to get into the Met, because you give what you want. It's air-conditioned. It's a heat wave."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: "And this'll keep those kids busy for hours," you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Brilliant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But what we're also learning is how to look at things in detail, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative], absolutely.

KAREN LAMONTE: I remember all of that stuff so vividly.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's fascinating that your parents have such an intense medical background but they had such an evolved cultural sensibility as well.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. That was, I think, very helpful and really insightful, especially given where we're going to go. So how did you decide on RISD, or was it pretty much a done deal ever since the art teacher in high school?

KAREN LAMONTE: Ah, well, the art teacher—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mrs. Martin?

KAREN LAMONTE: Ms. Martin, yes, Diane Martin. You know, she—when she talked about—she goes—she goes, "I loved RISD so much." And she goes, "I think you would really like it too." And I was like, "Whoopee!" And then there was a hubbub at the school because they were like, "Oh,

you know, you can't waste that child's mind by sending her to an art school," you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

KAREN LAMONTE: The college adviser said that. And then you have to love my parents, because—so I applied to RISD, and then there were a bunch of—I also liked creative writing, story writing, at that time—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. That makes sense.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and so there were a bunch of joint programs.

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes a lot of sense, actually. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: There was the Museum of—School of Fine Arts at Boston, and maybe Tufts had a joint program of creative writing and art-making. And then Oberlin had a joint program. And so I was looking at a few joint programs. I think I only applied to three schools, and then there was RISD. [00:42:25] And when I wanted—so I think I got into—I had the choice of the three or whatever, and I decided—I was like, alright, if you're going to do it, do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, go to art school. And so then came the big discussion with the college adviser and my parents, and they were like, "Karen is too intelligent to send to art school," you know, "it's a waste—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: —it's a waste of a brilliant mind." I remember her name still—Mrs. Sweeney Kaufman . And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. Fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: I know. And my mom said, "Karen is going to go to school exactly where Karen wants to go." Boom. They said—

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

KAREN LAMONTE: They're like, "She makes her own decisions." And I was like, "Thank you."

MIJA RIEDEL: And with complete and total confidence in what you were going to decide.

KAREN LAMONTE: Total confidence.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's, I think—

KAREN LAMONTE: Isn't that amazing?

MIJA RIEDEL: —that's not a story one hears all that often, especially when it comes to choosing art school—

KAREN LAMONTE: I know.

MIJA RIEDEL: —as a senior in high school. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: It was also in Providence, Rhode Island, and her whole family was in Rhode Island. So I've always thought—I was like, "I wonder if—"

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: If it had been located in New Orleans or something like—

KAREN LAMONTE: Right. No. But I mean, they were very supportive and very respectful of, you know, our—like our family—there are not a lot of commonalities between my sister and I, but we get along fantastically. And I'm very different from—in some ways from my mother and father, and in other ways I'm just sort of the exact hybrid of both of them. But—we're all sort of unique, but everybody has their own space and is comfortable in it, and nobody's trying to convince the other person to be more like them, you know—[00:44:18]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which I think is great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And actually, I think, if that's working successfully, so much can be added to one's perspective from that completely different perspective. But that's a very fine distinction, is that there's no attempt to bring another around to your opinion. That sense of narrative and—I thought—when I've been looking at your work, I've been just struck again and again by that profoundly intense sense of narrative that's very subtle, but very present and varying. And so hearing about your interest in creative writing, I think it makes a lot of sense. So how did you come to decide on RISD?

KAREN LAMONTE: Um, I think it was visiting the school. Also, you know, my mom's best friend lived in Providence, Rhode Island—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —so we had been going to Rhode Island a couple times a year ever since I was born and going to Providence. And her office was in the top story of the Biltmore Hotel and, you know. So it was known, and I think it felt very comfortable and homey to me, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And the other places looked adventuresome too, but—excuse me—somehow it was the trust I had in my art teacher's opinion, the—sort of the familiarity of Providence. And then I went and I saw everything and what people were doing—excuse me—and I thought, "I want to do that."

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Yeah. So you graduated from high school probably in 1980—

KAREN LAMONTE: '86.

MIJA RIEDEL: —1986, yeah—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, 1986.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and then started right at RISD. Let's talk about what the experience was like for you, what you found as the strengths and the weaknesses of that particular program. [00:46:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: I loved the whole program. The only—I pleaded not to be graduated.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: I just didn't want to leave, you know. You know, I loved my freshman foundation. I loved it. So freshman foundation is you try a little bit of everything and you develop your skills, really.

MIJA RIEDEL: Perfect.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, some people had—came to RISD with a much stronger skill background than I did. I was not great at figurative drawing. And you know—you know, the stuff I was great in was all the straight learning stuff, like the art history—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —the English, you know, because you have to do some liberal arts stuff. So I was really focused on getting better at drawing. I was kind of more naturally skilled in three-dimensional—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but I really—I had—because I had identified myself as a painter, I was planning to go to the painting department.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I thought I have to get better at drawing because drawing is the foundation of painting, and so I was really, really focused on drawing and really not very good at it, and—[they laugh]—I remember our teacher was Joanne Stryker —

MIJA RIEDEL: I think [Joanne] Stryker—

KAREN LAMONTE: —but we called her "Sergeant Stryker" because she was—she was critical and openly critical. But I've come to really appreciate that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because, you know, everybody always says something nice to encourage you—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and that's not going to make you better at what you're trying to get better at.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So she was my first really kind of super critical teacher, and I thought more of that because—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, that's really how you get through all of the flaws, you know, whatever your flaws are. And she was one of my drawing teachers, and then Brice Hobbs was my other drawing teacher. And he was fantastic. You know, she was very practical and linear, and he was mystical. He had a way of—I'll never forget—he did something for us once in class. There was a figure standing—you know, we were doing figure drawing—and he took a piece of—like bright pink-red construction board, and he walked around the figure, and all of a sudden, as he was walking with the colored side pointing in, and the light was bouncing off and transforming the color of the person—[00:48:27]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and he's like, "Isn't light amazing? We're going to draw light." And I was like, "Light is totally amazing. No one's ever showed me that before," you know. And he was an amazing drawer because, you know, Sergeant Stryker could make the perfect figure, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but he, from nothing, would—he would say—you know, he would draw from his imagination. So he would use sort of blotches of charcoal and the eraser, and he would bring space forward and back. And you could see him manipulating space—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —with just these simple movements. And I was so impressed with that. I never mastered it myself, but—[laughs]—

MIJA RIEDEL: But that interest in light clearly you took forward and played with that, to great success, for well over a decade, probably at least two now. Anybody else that was particularly significant or helpful, or parts of the program that you felt weren't helpful? That's another [ph] question.

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, that was freshman foundation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Then I went to the painting department and you're supposed to—in winter

session your first year you're supposed to identify your major. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Of your first year?

KAREN LAMONTE: —of your first year in there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —so winter session is a six-week class, and so I went to a painting class.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I didn't like it at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: I didn't like the teacher. I didn't like the department. I didn't like the vibe. I didn't like anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting

KAREN LAMONTE: And somebody else who was in my dorm took glassblowing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Huh. [00:50:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: And he brought me this glass object, and I was like, "You made that?" I'd—I had never even thought it was possible to manipulate glass, you know? I had always sort of taken it as this—you know, this vernacular all around you, you know, windows, cups, you know, everything practical. And then he came with this object he had made. And then we went and we saw the glass studio. And then it's all over. I mean, have you walked into a glassblowing shop?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Fire!

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. [They laugh.]

KAREN LAMONTE: It's like, holy mackerel, this is the studio? That's the place I wanted to be.

MIJA RIEDEL: What about it? What about it drew you?

KAREN LAMONTE: The sound, the light, the heat, and then this material. You know, I loved the fact that the material moved. And the material moved all on its own, and then—and then, you know, he showed me—my friend who had taken that freshman—that winter session class during freshman year said, you know, "You blow into it and the heat and the expansion of it," and I was like, wow, these are, like, forces of nature. You're working with forces of nature to create something, not this sort of illustrative or self-designated pencil on paper. You know, that seems so fake or insincere, you know, compared to this natural force.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. And growing up in New York City, one wouldn't think that

you would necessarily be so struck by that or—but that's interesting that that concept of force of nature was powerful and compelling to you.

KAREN LAMONTE: So powerful, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So was there an immediate switch of major or—

KAREN LAMONTE: I called the head of the department. I called Bruce Chao, and I was like, "I'm supposed to be a painting major, but I really, really, really want to be a glass major. Is there any room left in the department?" And he said, "Yes, there is," he said, "but just keep your painter's attitude," or something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. What an interesting comment.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, great. I had never even met him. I had no—I was terrified to make that phone call. I thought, oh, my God, ugh, you know, call—first of all, calling anybody on the phone—that's terrifying to begin with [they laugh]. [00:52:05]

MIJA RIEDEL: And on the basis of just walking in there and seeing the shop, and seeing what your friend had made, you wanted to switch majors to that definitively.

KAREN LAMONTE: Gut reaction.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: Isn't that wild?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and that you acted on it.

KAREN LAMONTE: And one thing—so then my adventures in glass began, and I was so happy. I loved my classmates. I loved how the program worked. The first year was completely skills development.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who was teaching at the time?

KAREN LAMONTE: So Bruce Chao was the head of the department, and our first year, my teachers were Tina Aufiero, who is now out on the West Coast, and she was a fantastic teacher because—well, she was combining researching artists—like, her assignments to us were technical—we were learning everything about glass casting—but then she was also helping us with this intellectual development. You know, we would pull the names of artists out of a hat, and everybody would have to go find some books from the library, read them, and come back and give a small presentation about that artist. And it was a way of, I think, keeping sort of both sides of the brain working, you know, this—I don't want to say intellectual, but this conceptual side, and this technical side.

MIJA RIEDEL: Technical, right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then for the other semester, we had James Harmon, who is now in Pennsylvania, an incredibly skilled glassblower and brilliant scientific thinker, really about—things he taught us about that were very basic were things like annealing glass, you know, how to relieve the tension inside of the material, and these things that basically seem like miracles, you know, the first time you hear them. And he was great. He was very—like, he was not the kind, fuzzy teacher. Like, he was a very intense teacher. But the information he gave us was

fantastic, and the glassblowing skills that he gave to us. [00:54:11] And then the next year was Bruce Chao, who is the head of the department, we had for one semester. And I have to say he is sort of my favorite of all of the teachers. And I also admire the way he ran the program because every Wednesday we would go on a department adventure, a department trip, and to crazy things, like a topiary. And he would say, "We're going to—" he's like, "They trim plants into the shapes of elephants, and we're going to go see how they do that." You know, he was so enthusiastic about everything. So of course, we caught on. You know, we all became enthusiastic about everything, you know? So then we saw—we—you know, we went to a topiary, we went to see somebody who made a glass harmonica, you know, one of those old—I think Ben Franklin invented it, where you wet your fingers and you play a rotating glass disk, and it makes this humming sound. You know, he would just find out about these wild, kind of obscure things and then take us to go see it—you know, the glass planet at the Harvard—the glass Earth dome that you walk through in Harvard in one of the libraries, small glass flowers made by these brothers, who actually live not that far—or their studio is up in Dresden originally. So, you know—and it was just this kind of expansive exploration, coupled with this just endless enthusiasm and curiosity.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, I'm struck by that, the way you're describing it, this emphasis on technical skill from the one, the other on the conceptual sensibility, and then this exposure to such a broad and eccentric-seeming range of things—that's not the right word, but I can't think of it right now—but just that breadth of exposure and enthusiasm for these unusual topics or techniques or ways of working, or ways of thinking that would give you such a broad palette from which to pull. [00:56:17]

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely. And you know, I mean, he took us to crazy things. Some things were disgusting, like he took us to the Mütter Museum in Philadelphia. You know, of course, we were going down there to see a museum exhibition or a former graduate's exhibition or something like that. But then he's like, "I've read about this place. It's the Mütter Museum, and it's filled with biological oddities." And so, you go in there, and it's like, you know, Siamese twins in a jar of formaldehyde and all of this, like, weird medical stuff, you know? And we would—we

would see stuff like this all the time, all these little side stops, you know? And isn't he amazing that he would kind of herd the entire glass department [laughs] in there? You know, and he goes—he's like, "I'm not sure if this is relevant, but it's in glass jars," you know? [They laugh.] And then sure enough, you know, someone, in their senior project, starts making, you know, all of this stuff preserved in jars, you know? And his—the semester that he taught us, he had a great program of, you know, he would give us a topic that we would work on for three or four weeks, and it was like, glass as a material of nature. And that would just be the thing. So inside of that, all of us would research. You know, and we would find these things like where lightning strikes sand, it actually makes glass—

MIJA RIEDEL: Glass right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —I think it's called fulgurites or something. And then there's lava, and then there's meteor rock. And you know, so it was our job to research, come find information and then do a project inspired by what we had—what we had learned from that topic. Then it was a glass vessel, you know, the ability of glass to contain something, you know—so glass material of nature, a glass vessel—[00:58:00] I forget what the other ones were. But you know, I mean, these were great ways to kind of get people thinking in different directions. And that idea of, like, topic, broad research, and then distilling that into a project, that is his absolute sort of key thing that he gives to the students.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You know, it's interesting, when I read that someplace in preparation for this conversation, and I was struck by how much that struck me as almost a working process you still use to this day.

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: I looked at the kimono pieces, and I thought, "Okay, well, you've got the celadon. We've got a terra cotta. We've got the terra sigillata. We've got the glaze. We've got the—" And I just thought, this feels like an exhaustive examination of ceramic possibility—

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: —using your content. And so, I thought that was fascinating that that way of working has clearly been successful enough that you've carried it forward.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. And I think it's also what I love about that way of doing is you're constantly educating yourself, because, you know, when I—when you—when you're inside of the glass department—and this is not to say anything critical about other artists that work with glass—but you see people doing the same thing over and over again. And you think, they must be getting bored. There's no way—like, even if it's getting more and more perfect or whatever, they must be getting bored on some level. And what I liked about the way he taught us was you're sort of teaching yourself in a way, or you're working with your mind in a way that it's constantly expanding.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that's—yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You will never be bored.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And is there some way that you've carried that exploration forward to go out and see completely odd things that you wouldn't necessarily choose?

KAREN LAMONTE: All the time. All the time. My husband and I, whenever we travel—I'm like, "If Bruce was going here, he would go see blank, and then he would eat at every weird restaurant he could find." [They laugh.] [01:00:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. That's fantastic.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes! [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Were there any parts of the RISD program that you felt didn't work as well, or were—it sounds like you were really enamored with it [inaudible].

KAREN LAMONTE: No, totally enamored. Totally enamored. And so then—so—oh, and Bruce had sabbatical the second semester of my junior year, so we had Robin Winters as our teacher. And he was great because he was from that funky downtown sphere, you know? I was like, [gasps] oh, my God, a real one, teaching us, you know? [They laugh.] And so that was great, just to

absorb his personality. And he was actually, he was a twitchy maker. You know, he drew every day. He did everything. You know, and he was always kind of hanging around and doing crazy experiments and everything. And so he was a great example of, like, what your life could possibly look like if you kept making art all the time, you know? And then senior year is just individual development towards your senior exhibition. And so, my personal adviser for that was Michael Scheiner, who's a great artist. You know, and he was—I mean, at that point he was, you know, living in the United States. Now he lives in Japan. But he was actively exhibiting. He was building exhibitions, all of this stuff for himself. So, he was also a great example to have. You know, and he was working on a very large scale, and planning long-distance projects and, you know, putting together materials, you know, using plate glass and plastiline and—you know, I mean, he was really—he was using—he as an incredibly skilled glassblower, but he wasn't enslaved to those skills. He was thinking sculpturally, you know? And that's another thing. Bruce actually—I've never seen Bruce Chao blow glass. Rumor has it that he can. But everybody in the department is—skilled or unskilled, they're thinking about glass and using glass conceptually, for conceptual—

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KAREN LAMONTE: —purposes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Huge distinction from—

KAREN LAMONTE: Huge.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, especially at that point in time.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, man.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, I mean, that was '89, '90, you know? So this is just like—Lino [Tagliapietra] was starting to come over. And that was the other thing—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —oh, then every summer I was going to Pilchuck.

MIJA RIEDEL: Pilchuck. Yeah, even as a college student?

KAREN LAMONTE: Even as a college student. I got my first work-study program—I did work-study in—was it junior year? I TA-ed drawing sophomore year so that I could get enough money to go to Penland. And I did work study at Penland, and I was able to do two summer sessions at Penland. One was color chemistry with two artists who are still active now, great couple but I can't remember their names. And the second was glassblowing with Ben Moore and Dante Marioni—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —when Dante was so young.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: But you could already—

MIJA RIEDEL: That would have been what—'90?

KAREN LAMONTE: That was '90—no, '88.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's really young.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it was '88.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, he was just—

KAREN LAMONTE: He was just flourishing.

MIJA RIEDEL: —just, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But you could tell—his skills were off the charts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And he has this hardcore personality.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And he and Ben Moore came and they taught this class. And I was such a bad glassblower. Like, I can't even believe—but I was like—I really wanted to be right in the middle of everything all the time, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Were there many girls there at the time?

KAREN LAMONTE: I think there were.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: But, I mean, people were coming from Japan to take this class. Like, you know, and I didn't even really know what I was getting into but I was like—I had heard these names floating around and I was like, "I'm going to go and be in that class." So I was by far the worst student. But I remember something was like, "Yeah, that Dante Marioni. He sells a goblet for a C note." And I was like—[hums a note]—what's a C note?" I'm thinking music.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, I'm such a nerd. And someone's like, "That's $100." And I was like, "Wow!" I have no idea what Dante sells a goblet for now—[00:02:08]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but I'm sure it's like 20 times—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —thirty, 40 times that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: But that's how budding everything was.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. And then Lino had just started to come over.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean, Pilchuck was really just—it was still just up and running, right?

KAREN LAMONTE: Right, everything was nascent.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so that was sophomore year summer. And then junior year summer I got work-study. So I was washing dishes and—

MIJA RIEDEL: At Pilchuck.

KAREN LAMONTE: —at Pilchuck. And it was—I don't remember what—was it the—it was something called a graduate—it was the first time Pilchuck ever did it. It was like a graduate—or graduate session or something, but not necessarily for graduates. It was a bunch of teachers who all taught at the same time but you didn't have to affiliate yourself with one of the teachers in particular.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, shoot, I can't remember the woman—there was a woman there who really impressed me as a teacher—blonde-haired woman. She did a lot of wrapping of glass around, like, basket forms. Not Susan Stinsmeuhlen-Amend but somebody—I can look it up—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —I'll figure it out.

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll figure it out.

KAREN LAMONTE: But she was incredible. Amy [Roberts]—her first name was Amy. But I remember—and that was like seeing, like, a successful woman working in the hot shop.

MIJA RIEDEL: Anne Wilson was much later than that.

KAREN LAMONTE: Anne Wilson?

MIJA RIEDEL: Anne Wilson?

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: She does wound glass. I think that was probably later, though. She's primarily a fiber artist.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, okay. No, I don't think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think her first name was Amy. So, that was that session, where it wasn't as focused as the Penland experience. It was also the first time I'd seen Pilchuck. I was like, "I want to be part of that." And so then—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And completely different sensibility, I would think, than—[00:04:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: From the East Coast education—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

KAREN LAMONTE: —yes. And, you know, I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: And how wonderful to see both at such a formative time.

KAREN LAMONTE: It was great. And then I made the decision that I was going to become the best female glassblower in the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: You did?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. I really—

MIJA RIEDEL: The best female glassblower.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: That's exactly what I wanted to be. That decision came a little bit later. So then senior year I got a scholarship—no, I think I've jumped it all forward one year. I think senior year I went to the graduate session and junior year I must have been washing the dishes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So then, when I graduated from college, I went straight back to New York and I lived with my mom until I had enough money to rent a place, and found friends to do it with. But I was working at what was then the Experimental Glass Workshop in downtown—in Little Italy—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which was a great, funky place.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fantastic.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that place was great because all the local New York artists were using it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So Kiki Smith was realizing work there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was, like, gun for hire, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: I mean, my skill level wasn't fantastic but I was willing to work for food.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I just wanted to work for everybody and anybody. So I'll never forget. We were still at New York Experimental, and my friend, Jim—James—not Jim Harmon. He was my teacher. James—I have to remember his name.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: James—he was someone I knew from RISD who was a graduate who was still hanging around. He had a job creating work for this guy who used to—he was, like, a young artist, graduated from Yale. Oh, Pike Powers. Pike Powers was—now, what was her—she was just an artist at that time. [00:06:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: It was before she was running Pilchuck.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think—was Billy Morris the artistic director out at Pilchuck? I can't remember. But Pike was in New York and she had just finished teaching the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it Benny Moore, maybe?

KAREN LAMONTE: —it might have been Benny Moore. But Pike was in New York and she was teaching at Yale. She had just had this young graduate. And my friend James was like, "You should come help because this guy is really good-looking." And I was like, "Totally. I'm there." And he goes, "Alright, he wants to do this casting. And he goes, I don't know, it's something weird, you know. It's like barbells or dumbbells or something." And I was like, "Okay, whatever. As long as he's good-looking, that's fine." And so we were working in the sandbox—and this is what I loved about Experimental. The sandbox had written in—like burnt inside of it "Benglis," because Lynda Benglis had been doing some sand castings there that she had picked up and manipulated, you know. Everybody was messing around with glass, you know, because you could. It was the first time there was a public-access studio. You know, even though it was crappy and downtown or whatever, it was super funky. So this guy comes in, and he's insanely handsome. And, you know, we're mixing sand. And we did some things pressing this weight into sand. And then sometimes we were doing casting. And he didn't know how to mix plaster and so I was telling him all the tricks about mixing plaster to get it without any lumps. And that artist was Matthew Barney.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay. There you go.

KAREN LAMONTE: So these are the type of people—

KAREN LAMONTE: Wow.

MIJA RIEDEL: —that you're meeting—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and watching them work with the material.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, I continued—like, we were never friends per se, but I continued to realize projects for him until we left New York in '97, you know. And so, you know, I mean, that exposure is incredible. So that was the one side during the winter—[00:08:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and then every summer I managed to get a position as the assistant technician in the cold shop at Pilchuck.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, when it was August and, you know, Experimental was shut down or it was too hot in New York to work, I would go, by any way possible—sometimes it was a $70 bus ticket—cross country on the bus to Pilchuck. And I would work in the cold shop two or three sessions. And that was enough, and you got paid. I mean, I was actually paid, you know, minimal, but housing, food and this minimal thing. You got access to the hot shop on the weekends, and you go to watch all of these teachers from all over the world. It was totally amazing. So, it was Pilchuck—it was '91 when—was it '90 or '91 when Libenský-Brychtová came there?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm. Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: They came and they did a double session.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was there, and I saw them working. And they were doing figure drawing during the day. But it wasn't—they were there and they were—you know, I was like, "Wow, those are the oldest glass people I've ever seen." [They laugh.] You know, I'm used to seeing Dante Marionis and Billy Morrises.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I'm thinking, "I want to be in this field

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then Libenský/Brychtová arrive and I was like, "Oh my god, what is that?"

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Those are European glassmakers," you know? And I had no idea—there's so much that I have learned since then, but—so, you know, it had just opened up here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I remember the big deal was that they were casting this piece in the oven there. And I was more observing the people that they brought with them, their team. They had a small group of two men that were realizing a piece—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —while they were teaching. And the thing that I remember watching—obviously because—well, they came to the cold shop to get materials for the cold working. Excuse me. And they were doing everything by hand—rubbing the grit on the piece by hand. [00:10:07]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I just remembered the scale of the work, and the starkness of the work. And I was like, "Wow, that's casting," you know? And it was such a contrast to the—like, now the word is "bling." Like the blinginess of what was coming out of the hot shop.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: But, you know, everything was so bright and shiny—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that came out of the hot shop. And somehow I didn't quite like the way that looked. Like, it was too shiny. It was too rash-looking. And I remember seeing the castings and thinking, "Ooh, it's a little bit ominous," you know, this dark cast thing. And they were mysterious, you know, and they had come from Czechoslovakia, you know, and everybody was smoking and, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: —and I just remember that had a huge impression on me. And I didn't even have a vague notion of coming here at that time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: But I just remember that part vividly.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fantastic, because I didn't know that you'd met them in a cold shop.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, I mean, really, like you would have to imagine, we didn't exchange two words.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Like, I was a fly on the wallpaper.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And nobody even knew I existed. I was just, you know, looking through my microscope at everything that was going on and just absorbing, absorbing, absorbing.

MIJA RIEDEL: How many summers did you actually go to Pilchuck then, as an assistant?

KAREN LAMONTE: Every single summer, so '90 through—'90 through '96 at least.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And there's a woman, Dorothy Bocian, who now actually works at RISD—in such a fun, small world that we live in, she and I are friends on Facebook. But there was a core of us who were out there every summer working on staff, and all of us were artists—Sabrina Knowles and Jenny Pohlman. Zesty Meyers. You know, I mean, wild characters—Jeff Zimmerman, Suzanne Charbonnet. Who else was out there—on staff? Great, great, great people. And Dorothy Bocian. And she now works at RISD helping the young graduating students get things like Fulbrights and everything. [00:12:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So the students and the other techs were as—or assistants were as significant or as essential as the teachers?

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely. Absolutely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, you know, it was a great balance. And the skill set on the West Coast already far excelled the one on the East Coast. And I was always aware of that. I was like, hmm, especially the blowers. I mean, that's Dale's influence.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Dale Chihuly's influence.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: I mean, the blowers, you could just see everything was going fast, fast, fast. [Snaps fingers.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And Italians were coming in—people drank it up. And there was always a

resistance to it on the West Coast, which fascinated me. The East Coast was like, "We make fine art." You know, and the West Coast was very much—they're like, "We make the best-made objects."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then little bit by little bit these two worlds have woven together, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: But I just always remember thinking, why—and even for an East Coaster, even my humble glassblowing skills were kind of—I wasn't top-notch by any means but, you know, I was working with people like Deborah Czeresko and Joe Pagano, a great glassblower from—and he was working at what's called UrbanGlass now, once it moved to Brooklyn.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: But there were a few really quite—quite skilled glass workers on the East Coast. But those are the people I was working with. I was good enough to be an assistant. I would probably never say I matched their skills, but I was good enough to be their assistant, you know, so. [00:14:08]

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that striking to you to have that sense of those different sensibilities on East and West Coast? And was there anybody else who was noticing that or that you could have that conversation with?

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't think anybody was traveling back and forth. Now that I think about it, I don't think anybody was traveling back and forth every single year. Then Zesty set himself up with his B-team at UrbanGlass. And Jeff Zimmerman—Jeff Zimmerman actually—so Jeff Zimmerman was West Coast, you know, and he was incredibly skilled but, you know, midlevel for a West Coast skill set.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And he came to UrbanGlass and he was like, "Wow, it's kind of nice to be a big fish in a small pond for a change," you know? [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But, I mean, that was basically the situation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But it was so interesting. So um—

MIJA RIEDEL: So you wanted to be the world's best female glassblower.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: How and when did that begin to shift, or where—you were in experimental glass for how long?

KAREN LAMONTE: Until '97, I think. And I had—you know, I had almost every job. Like I literally—I started trying to arrange Terry Davidson's—who was the then-artistic director at the very beginning—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —trying to arrange his slide library, which was a wreck. That was such a job.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I did my best but it was—it was out of control. And actually I saw him not five

years ago. He's great. So he got me started there just doing, you know, office help. And then when they moved to Brooklyn I helped build the equipment. And that was actually Jim Harmon, my former teacher from RISD—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —was in charge of building the equipment at Experimental. [00:16:01]

MIJA RIEDEL: You had a fellowship briefly in New Jersey at Creative Glass Center—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —is that worth mentioning?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, that is, definitely, because that was—I think that was just as Urban was moving.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: It was moving from Experimental to—you know, from Chinatown to Brooklyn. And it was 1991?

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh, I don't know the date.

KAREN LAMONTE: I remember I applied just when I got out of college.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, you know, obviously, you know, I was working for, you know, subway tokens and food. So I was like, "Man, things have got to change," you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I love my mom and everything—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but you can't, like, graduate from college and move back home.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then I got the fellowship from Urban—I mean from Wheaton Village.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Oh my god." You know, that was the ray of light. And I was like, Okay—

MIJA RIEDEL: But what did that involve?

KAREN LAMONTE: It was a four-month residency.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: There were four other artists. There were three other artists, four of us in total. We lived in this funky little house in the suburbs, which was shocking for me. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

KAREN LAMONTE: Still not driving. And we had—you know, it was walking distance to the factory. And we were—the factory—you know, Wheaton Village is a historic village.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then they have a glass studio in there. And they do demonstrations for a visiting public, but then they also host these fellowships.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So actually I am getting ready now to submit some work for consideration for their 30-year anniversary of the program—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which is great. And it's an amazing program—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because you go there, your costs are completely covered in the hot shop. And they even give you a stipend for food, and they put you up in this house. And you just get to hammer it out in the workshop, you know. You work collaboratively with other artists there and you just get to develop your ideas. [00:18:03] And, you know, for people who are more advanced, they could make a body of work for exhibition, you know. I mean, I was still really stumbling around with a bunch of different ideas at that point. So you just get to work. And it was so much fun. And you get to, you know, be a part of this troop of four artists, you know. So we had a great time. And I was there with Karen Naylor from Minneapolis, Minnesota; Fred Kahl, who was also from UrbanGlass. Kirsten [Nichols]—Karen, Fred and Kirsten. Kirsten's last name is —I can't remember [Nichols]. She's also a New Yorker. Her mom taught at NYU, but she lived up in Vermont. She was the calmest of us. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were in New York roughly 10 years, from '90 to 2000?

KAREN LAMONTE: To '97.

MIJA RIEDEL: To '97.

KAREN LAMONTE: And in '97 Steve and I started dating.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And we saved money for a year and then we left and traveled the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, that was great.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So Steve is an outstanding planner and he could actually use the Internet at this time. And he was doing temp work at AIG.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: They were paying him crazy money to organize computer files—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which you could do at a time where almost nobody could do it. And AIG was trying to figure out—it was a hilarious thing—they were trying to figure out which one of their departments was making the most money, or exactly how much money this department was making, because they were making so much money they just were trying to track it all down, where it was flying in from. So it was a pretty cushy job.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, they kept buying him food and he would bring home all these great pens from work.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: He spent most of his time on the phone with, like, the student travel agency for our trip around the world, and researching. [00:20:05]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, so we were researching. So we would meet after work and I was, you know, blowing glass and, you know, I was teaching. At this point I was director of education at UrbanGlass—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and so I had a bunch of different jobs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: But then at night we would plan our big adventure. And so our decisions were to travel west always, to stay in a warm season, because we were backpacking. That way we wouldn't have to carry a lot of stuff. And so we started—we went out to San Francisco, stayed with a bunch of friends—or his friends. And then we went to—we started—and we got these super-cheap tickets. So, you know, they had layovers in funny places. So our first ticket was to New Zealand, and it had a layover in Rarotonga.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah, okay. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] So, you know—I mean, and then we just started going. We traveled all—and we also decided to start with less challenging travel—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —English-speaking countries, not so many diseases—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —we didn't have to start with malaria medicine right away. And our idea was that this was going to be a nine-month to one-year trip.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so we went to New Zealand and then to Australia. And we visited a lot of people in the glass community there in both places—

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting. Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which was really fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then—

MIJA RIEDEL: Had you met a lot of the people through Pilchuck?

KAREN LAMONTE: Pilchuck. Yeah, mostly Pilchuck. And so then we hit Indonesia. And we had stayed to our travel schedule. And that was the first time I had ever been in a completely different culture—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —where I didn't speak any of the language. And it was just, in every sensory experience, totally different. Like, I will never forget stepping off the plane and the smell of Indonesia. They burn all of their garbage there, you know, in these poor areas. [00:22:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you arrive in Jakarta, or where did you arrive?

KAREN LAMONTE: Jakarta.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: In Jakarta. And just the smell—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and everything—you know, these small little temples, you know, to the gods and little daily offerings—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and, you know, how flowers were used, and how people dressed, and what we ate, just every, every, everything. It was so eye-opening. So we were supposed to stay something—I forget how many weeks in Indonesia. Immediately we fell off our schedule.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And the maximum stay we could stay in Indonesia was three months.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: We left the border—we left the Indonesian side of Kalimantan, which is Borneo, and we went to the Malaysian side on the day our three-month visa expired.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And it went from, like, youth hostels—[music]—oh, sorry that's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Should we pause that?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

[Audio Break.]

KAREN LAMONTE: We went from staying in youth hostels—I called it, like, the banana pancake trail. Like, every youth hostel served banana pancakes.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: I have no idea why. But I was like, "Steve, we've got to get off this banana pancake trail and get into the real Indonesia." And so [laughs] this is where boldness, you know, always plays a part in everything. So we were in—wait, were we in—we landed in Bali.

I'm sorry.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: We started in Bali. We were in Jakarta.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And somewhere I picked up shingles and we got waylaid in Jakarta. But

they caught it right at the beginning, so I was fine within five days or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic. You were really lucky.

KAREN LAMONTE: I know. It could turn into a big thing. [00:24:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But—so that was super lucky. And we were walking down the street, and we had been planning—we were going to—I was like, "We really need to dig in. We're going to go to Borneo."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. [00:24:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: And we're like, "Yeah, we're going to go to the rainforest. We're going to see everything." We read about how in Borneo they used waterways instead of roadways and thought, this is going to be amazing. And so we went to the local, you know, travel agency. And we had read in the guidebooks, which we had left at home—and I remember the name of the town we had to get to, to the start of this waterway to the interior of the island began with a "B." And so we get there and everybody is like, "Oh, don't you know it's, you know, full moon, water buffalo festival," blah, blah blah. Everything is about to shut for five days. It's a Buddhist holiday.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Oh, god, we're not spending five more days here with these banana pancakes." So I was like, the town started with a "B." I looked up on the chalkboard, boom, there it was. It was in Kalimantan. It had to be the right town. We bought two tickets. We went and got our bags, went to the airport. We're sitting on the plane—[laughs]—we're sitting on the plane next to a guy, and I'm like, "Do do do do do do." I'm like, oh, "Okay, here we are. We're going to Balikpapan." And the guidebooks says, you know, there's no reason to go to Balikpapan unless you're going to—you're bidding on the oil caches in the offshore drilling rigs. And I was like, "That's weird. The last time I read this book it was all about, you know, the orangutans and the garden markets on the waterways, and everything. What the hell happened?" And then I looked on the other town, which was Banjarmasin, also begins with a "B," which was actually the town we had planned to go to. And they're like, "The only reason to go to Balikpapan," where we were going, "is if you're interested in the oil rigs or the whorehouses." And I was like [gasps].

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Steve, I've made a terrible mistake." [Laughs.] "We've bought plane tickets to the wrong town." [00:26:00] And he was like, "What?" And he was sitting next to this man, and we were like, "Um, is this the place where you get—you know, you start the boat trips up into the old-growth rainforest?" He's like, "No, this is the oil town." And we were like, holy mackerel. And then as the plane is coming in, we look out our little window and we see the spitting flames from the off-site drilling rigs. And then we get there [laughs] and it's, like, 11:30.

MIJA RIEDEL: At night.

KAREN LAMONTE: At night. And we get there and there's one taxi driver. And, you know, we were living in Indonesia and it was like, you know, three bucks a day, you know. And the taxi driver is there and he's like, "I'll take you to the whorehouse for $15." We were like, "Ha! We're not stupid travelers. We know how much things cost in Indonesia. We're not getting in your $15 taxi." And he goes, "Okay, I'll be waiting over there." And we looked behind him and there's just an empty parking lot, and the last employee from the airport is putting down the locking metal gate, you know. And we're like, "Or we'll take the $15 ride to the whorehouse," you know? [They laugh.] So we literally ended up spending the night in a whorehouse in Indonesia because of my stupid "B's." And um—

MIJA RIEDEL: You've just gone from one extraordinary story after another since we began conversation, even off the disc, but they just keep getting better.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] It's hilarious. Like, adventure—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —somehow just—

MIJA RIEDEL: It goes with the boldness.

KAREN LAMONTE: —oh, my god.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so we get there and then we're recouping. We're like, "Oh my god." And then we start reading, well, if you really want to take an authentic trip into the interior of Borneo, you should really start from this other town. And the only way to get to that town is in this bumpy bus ride, a five-hour bus ride from Balikpapan. I was like, "Steve, we're saved. This is going to be great. We're going to take the bus and we're going to go to this place, and then we're going to start an authentic trip, right?" So this is great. So we get on the bus the next day and we get in there—[00:28:14]

MIJA RIEDEL: He wasn't wary at this point? [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: No, he's totally fine with all of it. He's becoming suspicious.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But, you know, he's still very good-natured. So we get to the next town and then we get to—and we're like, "Well, how do you do this?" You know, travelers disappear all the

time. People are knuckleheads. You know, they get themselves killed, headhunters—there's all this stuff still going on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I said, "We're going to go to the biggest hotel and we're going to get a guided trip." And that was Steve's decision because he is actually more practical than I am.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "We'll just go ourselves." And he was like, "No, no, no. We're going to do this right. And we're going to call our parents, and we're going to tell them we're going on this extreme phase of our adventure."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So we go to the biggest hotel and I'm flipping through the guide's book. His name was Ruston. And I see there's—you know, there's the four-day trip, the five-day trip. And then I go to the back of his book and it's all, you know, these nice notes written by British people. And then there's one called the "Trans-Borneo Trek." And I was like, "Crossing the entire thing?" I was like, "That sounds great." And it's like some—the comment was, you know, "Next time we should bring something more than rice and onions for food," or whatever. And I was like, "This sounds like a real adventure," right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So we set out on a 21-day trans-Borneo adventure.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it a canoe trip kind of thing?

KAREN LAMONTE: So we started in this boat that looked exactly like Noah's Ark. So we went—so basically we went up as far as we could go on public transportation, which were these little ark boats, that had all the animals that you would eat on the first ground—first level, and the crew, and then the people slept in this little thing above—[00:30:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —just on the ground or on, like, fabric strung between posts. And we had Ruston, who was our Indonesian and English-speaking guide.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so then we get to smaller and smaller and smaller, and smaller, and finally at one point we're going in, like, this dug-out canoe that has three barrels of 55-gallon drums of gasoline and two outboard engines off the back of it with just tubes going into it to suck the gasoline. And there's these, like, super-cool Indonesia guys with giant mirrored sunglasses, baseball caps, smoking cigarettes next to the oil barrels, the things—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and we were going up the rapids in these dug-out canoes. And Ruston goes, "Well, this is the place where the Canadians died last year." And I was like, "What?" And I was like, "Steve, are we going to die?" He said, "Karen, they always say stuff like that. You know, it's going to be fine." So we get all the way—then we get to the point where the rivers run out. We survive that. I mean, everything is getting wilder and wilder.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so then we get to the point where we have to walk over the hump of the island.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Carrying the canoe?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, no, no, no. The canoe was just for that segment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so at this point we had to hire local Dayaks—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —Dayak people because Ruston only spoke Indonesian and the Dayaks people spoke Indonesian and two of the local languages that we were going to be passing through. And now we're into the area where also the year before, like, Ruston had seen somebody carrying a human head by the hair. You know, so he was like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —he wanted to be really safe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, which is another reason for hiring the Dayaks probably.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes. And so we had these three Dayaks people. And we made it—I mean, it was just wild. But we finally—we got down the other side and we saw just incredible things. [00:32:10]

MIJA RIEDEL: I can imagine.

KAREN LAMONTE: And Ruston said, "Steve, I finally figured out what it is." Because I grew up in Manhattan, I've never actually even been hiking in my life, you know, and I really didn't understand exactly what we were getting into—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which is probably a good thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I would think.

KAREN LAMONTE: Steve went to national outdoor leadership school.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: I mean, first of all he grew up in New Jersey, so he's already more natural than I am.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And he's had all this outdoor stuff. And he said to Steve, "Steve"—and I kept falling down. The rainforest is wet, obviously—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —so it's very slippery and everything's covered with moss. So it's like I kept falling all the time. And he goes, "I figured out what it is." And Steve's like, "What?" He's like, "Karen is blind." And he goes, "That's why she falls down so much and you have to guide her when we're in the towns." Because we would walk arm in arm when we were in town. He's like, "I figured it out. She's blind." [Laughs.] So funny. Anyways, so we adventured on like that. And the longer we traveled, sort of the further into these unusual environments we went. And we left Indonesia. We went into Malaysia, then up into Thailand. Then we entered into—oh, we went to Hong Kong for the handover of Hong Kong back to the Chinese, which was amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: That would have been interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: That was amazing. And then we traveled through China up into Mongolia and then across Mongolia into Russia. [00:34:05]

MIJA RIEDEL: What year was this?

KAREN LAMONTE: '97.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: '97. So we made it all the way into Russia and St. Petersburg, and then I had a small summer teaching gig. It was the second year I had done it in Denmark, at something called a højskole.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And it was—what was the name of our højskole? It was—I forget, but it was a summer arts program and they had a small glassblowing studio. So I was teaching two or three students there. It was great fun. And then from there we actually had a friend who—a son of a colleague mate of my father's who was living in Prague, and that's how we came to Prague. And we actually never left. From that point we never left.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

KAREN LAMONTE: Really. We never went back to America officially, you know. We didn't commit to living here. And, you know, at that point, like, one of my big interests—so as my work was so now more about the work, like, the glass work I was doing—between Pilchuck and Urban was I started making these puppets.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: The clotheslines—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and then the puppets.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was having fun—I was really—like, the clothesline, I wanted to make things that were non-glass objects. You know, I didn't want to be a goblet maker or a bowl maker or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So one day I was walking to work and I saw this clothesline and I was like, "I'll make a pair of stockings," or, you know, "I'll make a little shirt." And at that point I had watched Ruth King when I was at RISD. She was a graduate student while I was undergraduate. And I always admired the way she would start with a bubble and then she would tear it and cut it open and manipulate it into these torsos. She was making these beautiful torso forms at that time. And so I really sort of took that cue, like, for making a shirt—[00:36:07]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —transforming a bubble into a shirt.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then the stockings. And then there was one—so I was working on this clothing and I was always going to the public library—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —for collecting books and images, and stuff. And I picked up this book on puppet making. Oh, I had made the marionettes already, I think, so I was collecting images of marionettes. And then there was this book on, like, for kids, for making cloth puppets. And it showed this round sort of oval shape, and then how you would cut it and where you would sew and everything. And I thought, well, wouldn't it be funny, like, to take that book into the hot shop and just follow those instructions—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —to my best ability but with the glass bubble. So I started making the puppets that way. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Were the puppets and the marionettes, were they part of a narrative sensibility? Were they always associated with stories?

KAREN LAMONTE: I think so, you know, because I was always looking for a context to put these hot-shopped objects in, you know what I mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I wanted them to be a part of something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So the marionettes were of the seven deadly sins. You know, this idea—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —of like, morality. And then the puppets—you know, one of the first ones were, like, these characters from the Commedia dell'Arte.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Like, I wanted them to go out to—connect to something historical.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Interesting. Had you see that in somebody else's work that struck you, or you just had that innate sensibility that you wanted them to be part of a larger narrative?

KAREN LAMONTE: I wanted them to be part of a later narrative, you know? And I think that's definitely, like, the kind of New Yorker, UrbanGlass, Experimental part of my education where it's like I wanted there to be a conceptual layer—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that tied it together. And so the puppets and the marionettes—oh, and that's when I started thinking, I'm going to really advance my skills, because with the fabric of the puppets I started doing this filigree work—[00:38:06]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that classical Italian—and it was stuff I had seen on the West Coast. Everybody was doing it. I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: Reticello?

KAREN LAMONTE: The Reticello. I can't do Reticello but I can do the, like, ballerina cane.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And Jim Mongrain at this point was on the scene and all of these guys were mastering the Italian skills, and they were spectacular to watch—you know, spinning the cane and, you know, everything. And so, I'd watch that all summer and then I would go back and try and do it during the winter. And there was this guy, Joe Pagano, who I mentioned before—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —who was an Italian-style glassblower—I don't know where he got his skills from but he was a great Italian-style glassblower and he could do the cane spinning. So I started working with—and Deborah [Czeresko] was a great glassblower but not so good with the Italian-style stuff. And so he and I worked really intensely together, and I started learning how to do those cane pickups. And I started looking at the spun cane as fabric.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that's—so, the first time I started making this kind of connection. And I was so interested in the articulation of the body of the puppet. And then I was like, well, then why are —and I liked making the heads, these little portraits and sticking them on, but what I was really focused on was that body of the puppet—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and making it look like fabric. And so then I was like, well, why don't you just make clothing? Make some fabric cloth piece? So I started—the very first endeavors were waxing a small dress, a child's dress, taking a plaster mold off of that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and then blowing a hot bubble into that and trying to make these blown dresses. [00:40:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, into the mold.

KAREN LAMONTE: Into the mold.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And as Brett Littman, who is now actually the director of The Drawing Center, he's like, "Yeah, that looks like kind of like candle-drip art." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Ouch.

KAREN LAMONTE: But he was totally right because that method didn't take any detail at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And he was really, really right. And then I was like, okay. So then I started focusing on casting. And then everything started clicking together. Like, I remembered—

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was it? Were you were in Prague?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, I was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Still back east.

KAREN LAMONTE: That was before traveling.

MIJA RIEDEL: At UrbanGlass.

KAREN LAMONTE: That was still—before traveling, at UrbanGlass. So then I was sort of left with my final thing, which was the blowing the dresses into the molds. And then I left for traveling.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So then when we got here, the first thing I did was get a little dress from a second-hand store and dip it in wax. And I was like, "Well, what about casting," you know?

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

KAREN LAMONTE: Would casting get me the detail I wanted? Was it possible to do? I had never seen anybody casting like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, took that idea up to one of the factories.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were very aware of being here, and the history of cast glass and thinking—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —let me just—and so you just went up and introduced yourself to a factory?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, what happened was, I guess—when I was working—so Tina Aufiero, who was one of my teachers—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —from college, she worked with a guy named Chris Cosma. And Chris Cosma was a very skilled caster and he had worked for a year somewhere in then-Czechoslovakia. And it turns out he was actually at the factory where I'm working now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. What's the name of that factory?

KAREN LAMONTE: It doesn't have a name. It's owned by Lhotsky.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. That's right.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's Pelechov. Pelechov is the name of the town.

MIJA RIEDEL: Pelechov, that was—okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes, the Pelechov factory. So he had worked there. [00:42:00] And I remember when I was working in his studio, he drank every day a glass of this bitter liquid. And it turns out that it's this Fernet. It's a bitters that everybody drinks here. And he was like, "Yeah, the Czech guys used to always drink this. It's very healthy. I got really into it when I was there." I remember tasting it and thinking blech, it's awful. I still think it's awful. We'll try it maybe. [They laugh.] It's awful.

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds awful. Good, I can't wait. [They laugh.]

KAREN LAMONTE: So, then pieces started falling together, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Then I remembered that, and then I remembered the time in 1990—because I saw the moldmaker at that factory who was with Libenský/Brychtová—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, right. Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —in Pilchuck.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So it was seven years later but I recognized him very clearly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So you saw him at the glass factory.

KAREN LAMONTE: At the glass factory here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so we were introduced to the glass factory by—there was a woman here named Pavla Niklová. And her husband was an artist named Petr Nikl. And Pavla Niklová I actually think runs the Czech Center now in New York City. But she was an arts administrator, really nice. She ran—there was something here back in those days called, like, the Open Center or the—I don't know. There was a center where—it was like a resource center for artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Just magazines, you know, foreign language magazines and books and stuff like that. So she was running that. And so I went and introduced myself and said, "You know, this is what I'm trying to do." She said, "Well, my husband is part of this group called the Stubborn, the Hard-Headed, and one of the guys in this group owns a glass factory. And my husband has always wanted to do a project in glass. Why don't we all go up there together?" And so at this point we were renting [laughs]—we were renting the apartment—subletting the apartment of this woman who ran a Jewish tour group here. [00:44:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And her name was Sylvia Wittman. And so we asked her if we could borrow one of her cars and drive—because Pavla and Petr did not have a car. You know, everybody's so poor—so we borrowed one of her cars. It was this ancient van, giant, with Hebrew writing all over the side of it, you know, which is really unusual in Prague—in Europe period at that time but we were in Prague. So we drive up in this big, you know, Hebrew van. [Laughs.] We met the owner of the factory, and we got on immediately. And I brought some of my old slides and I was like, "I want to do this, I want to do that, I want to try this, I want to try this, blah, blah." He was, like, "Great. Everything is possible." And so then I realized later—I've always wondered what this came from but I just answered my own question. Every time we would spend the night at the factory after this, he had kosher wine. And it's the worst wine in the world. And I couldn't figure out why he had kosher wine. It's because we drove up in that hilarious van the first time. That's why. And I was like, "Why is Zdeněk always serving us kosher wine?" That is so funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is funny.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that was the first introduction.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But then of course, you know, I realized, well, whatever is possible is possible, but I need some format, some grand format—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —to pursue this under.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because there was no way I could do all the experimentation myself. And I already had the idea. Like, I thought, you know, small dress, nice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Big dress, great, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I really wanted to make a full-scale dress. Like, even from the time that I was talking to him about the small dress, that was just the ploy to get in the door and make the big dress.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so that was—must have been '98. And so then I applied for the Fulbright and got the grant here for '99, 2000. [00:46:01]

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, one quick question. You mentioned that when you'd seen Libenský and Brychtová at Pilchuck that you'd been struck by the scale and starkness—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and you've talked now about doing this large-scale dress. Did you associate doing—associate doing large-scale castings with what happened here in Prague—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes, definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: —so it made a lot of sense to do it here.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And immediately—I mean, you walk in the factory and you see these ovens that are outside of the scale of anything you'll see in the United States, you know. I mean, there are some fairly large ovens. I could work in the in the United States, you know. There are some fairly large ovens at UrbanGlass, at Pilchuck. You know, somebody at Pilchuck, they're like, "You should come and teach here because we could fire up the Libenský/Brychtová kiln."

MIJA RIEDEL: There you go.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] Because I think nobody is working on this large scale, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I think it's just something that you get used to, you know? If an object—if I don't stand next to an object and it's not somewhere near my size, I don't feel comfortable, you know. Like, you just get—I don't work tabletop anymore, you know, in that scale. And I think it's kind of like—you know how people get addicted to sports or something, or adventure or—you know, there is—it's extremely challenging, but working on that scale is so—when it works it's so

rewarding. [Sound of chimes.] Time for church. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I won't get into the wine conversation.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Any just final thoughts you've having right now about scale, because we'll switch the disc but we've got a couple more minutes—or about the Fulbright, that's just right on your mind? Otherwise we're going to stop.

KAREN LAMONTE: No, no, we can go ahead and switch.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

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MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Karen LaMonte in the artist's studio in Prague in the Czech Republic on November 3, 2012 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, card number two. When we finished last evening we were talking about Prague and your arrival here in '97. So let's just finish up that thought and the Fulbright, and then we'll move into the work.

KAREN LAMONTE: Sure. Okay. One of the things that I didn't mention yesterday that also attracted me to Prague, in addition to the people working with glass that I had seen in the United States, was the puppet tradition. And there's a very, like—I don't want to say dark, but sort of more adult version of children's entertainment in these puppets and marionettes, and the illustrated stories, and fairy tales that came from Czech Republic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Sort of like the Brothers Grimm—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —in Germany.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so that was a second thing. I was really interested in how the puppets were made, the marionettes were made, the stories that were told, because they don't always have happy endings. [Laughs.] And um—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that important?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, I just liked that it was a little—it wasn't Disney.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: It was a little bit more realistic than Disney, where everything goes well, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so when I came here I was also looking at what was left of the puppet tradition.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that was another sort of source of inspiration here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And how did it—you said that you came here in '97 and you never

really left. How did the Fulbright come about then?

KAREN LAMONTE: So in '97 I realized that the glasswork that I wanted to do, even though the U.S. dollar was strong at that point, was going to be extraordinarily expensive and I needed some type of granting format. And also I thought that it could be helpful to have some sort of—not official status, because that sounds too pre-thought-out, but some type of network here to work with. So I applied for the Fulbright to be a student at the academy, the Applied Arts

Academy, and to work in the factories. So I was really doing those—that was my proposal. And I got that for the academic year in '99, 2000. [00:02:35]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, that was the first time I was able really to start finding out if I

could cast on this scale, and if the articulation that I was looking for from glass casting was possible.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Sort of the thing that I realized when I walked through the door—and it took me until I actually came with my wax piece—was that the history of Czech glass casting was basically architectural. And the Communist government had funded a lot of experimentation inside of these factories to make works on a very large scale for architectural installation—facades, public works, monuments—all of these incredible pieces that went to the World Fairs, and it became a real badge of honor for the Eastern bloc and for the Russian government really, the Soviet socialist government. And so I was coming from—you know, I had done some bronze casting at RISD. I had done some bronze casting in New York. I was coming from a point where—and working with Tina Aufiero, we always built wax positives.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, I was thinking of the lost wax process, and when I walked into the factory and I saw the fabrication of Libenský/Brychtová's work—at that point they were working on the giant black angels—so beautiful, right, but completely rigid architectonic forms. [00:04:05] Even, they're sculpture—they're definitely sculpture. They're architectonic in their surface and form, and absolutely no surface detail directly out of the mold. Everything was cold-worked afterwards. And I saw how they were making them. And, you know, Mr.—Professor Libenský would do the drawing; Mrs. Brychtová would translate it into three-dimensional form with clay. Then they would make a plaster positive—a series of plaster negative molds. Wait, they would make a series of, you know, molds around that clay form.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that's in many, many parts—sometimes six or seven parts. Then they shellac the inside of those molds and they pour something called gelatin in there. Then they take off the mold one piece by one piece and remake that shellacked plaster mold in the refractory mold for casting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So their refractory molds for casting are in seven or eight pieces. And then they cast something around that called a muffle. Think of it like a muffler, a scarf. And that sort of band container, it's like a wrap around the entire outside that holds all of those pieces together during the casting process. It's really complicated, complex moldmaking. And, you know, I was completely impressed by it, but I thought to myself, why aren't they just using lost wax process, you know, because that's what I grew up with and that's how I had been educated. And so when I came with my wax positive to the factory, they looked at it and they said—you know, there were tons of undercuts, and they said, "You know, we have no idea how you intend for us to take a mold off of this, because once you cast the mold you'll never be able to get this out." [00:06:09]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I said, "You melt it." Duh. [They laugh.] You know, and they had done lost wax casting on a very small scale.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: It wasn't that it was totally unknown, but they hadn't conceived of it in the way that I was conceiving of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I'm really curious how you got from interest in Prague and puppets—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and smaller-scale things—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —to the idea for *Vestige* in this enormous life-sized cast—

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it was really the idea that that was always the goal and all of those other things leading up to it were kind of bridges and transitions.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was the goal for how long? From—at what point did that become a goal?

KAREN LAMONTE: From working at UrbanGlass when I was still, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Somehow I just had a very clear image of my mind, even when I was making those small dresses blown into the plaster molds.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I was like, "Wow, what I really want to make is a life-size dress, cast in glass."

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So it was always a very clear end point that I was aiming for.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was trying to figure out, you know, the way to get there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I definitely figured out very quickly it wasn't blowing into molds. Then—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it always clear that it was a body and a dress—

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: —was that in the mind—

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so just the dress.

KAREN LAMONTE: Just the dress. You know, it was, like, a glass dress. I want to make a glass dress. So when I first came here and sort of—when we were getting to know each other at the factory—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —those were with the small pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And Professor Libenský was still alive then, and he and Mrs. Brychtová were working at the factory quite actively as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And sort of—before he died, at some point—I don't know the exact politics but there was definitely a falling out between the owner of the factory and those two.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. [00:08:10]

KAREN LAMONTE: And they stopped working there completely. I don't know exactly what year,

but they had two different factories that they were working at. And, you know, everybody has an intense personality. And so, you know, when all of this stuff is happening—and they are such icons here in the Czech Republic, and I think the owner—you know, there was definitely a power struggle between the owner of the factory, who was a former student, and Libenský/Brychtová. And they argued quite actively a lot when they were in the factory. And I don't know what about. At that point my Czech wasn't good enough. But, you know, I mean, what it comes down to is Libenský/Brychtová were pushing the techniques to a far, far extreme—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and there were failures. And there were costs associated with those failures once all of this is not run by the Communist government.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so who's going to absorb that cost, you know? And that's a really big deal with these factory relationships. And, you know, it's something that the kind of artists here had to work out once they weren't government sponsored. Everybody complained about being government sponsored because they couldn't make what they wanted, but they were actually able to make it for free, basically. And so that's how all these technologic advances got made here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: So it's kind of the one—I would say it's the one good thing that came out of communism. But then how everybody sorted the power relationships out afterward, you know, ended up being quite messy. So I was watching that work being made all of the time. [00:10:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there any—did you have any exchanges with them?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, a little bit. You know, Mrs. Brychtová—I think they loved the intensity with which I pursued things. And I think, you know, Mrs. Brychtová is not quite as celebrated as Professor Libenský but she was actually on the ground a lot more than he was. And so, you know, she was constantly watching my work being made, and my beginning negotiations with the factory. And she, as a woman, had had—she had been working in these factories and had really had to negotiate with men at a time in the Czech Republic when that was definitely not easy, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I think she sort of—not like took me under her wing, but she was looking out for me a little bit, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and encouraging me to carry on and, you know, stick to my guns. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there any exchange in terms of artistic thoughts or technical advice or—

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Nothing like that. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: No. She just kept on patting me on the shoulder and saying, "Good. Keep going." [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's great. That's great.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know? She's an amazing woman. And she keeps on saying—and then this is where I started to feel bad. You know, I'm so obsessive with my work that she kept on saying, "Next time you're up in town, stop by. Stop by," you know? And we really should do that but we never do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. I want to talk about the evolution of *Vestige*. It's been talked about quite a bit and you have described it, but I think it's interesting to talk about it especially in the context of all your different series. I'm thinking of the *Sartoriotypes* and then the kimonos, going from the 3-D glass to the 2-D prints, back to the 3-D clay. Trial and experimentation, learning by experimentation, seems to be a very regular part of your process, your way of working. And also not mentors per se but you do seem to oftentimes study or work—not study—work with experts, technical experts in the field that you're now exploring. [00:12:07]

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That seems to be a theme, both of those, that run repeatedly through your work.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Does it feel that way to you too?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, that's interesting. I've never thought about it, but that's exactly what

I do. I try to find—I always say to Steve, "The thing is to always be working with people who are better than you." That's how you—

MIJA RIEDEL: Technically at least, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —yeah. That's how you guarantee that you'll always be learning the most that you can, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And pressing them to do things that they say can't be done. I mean, we had that conversation about both the glass and about the clay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't know if it's true with the printing, but it sounds like the experience there was pretty unusual as well.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, I think so. I mean, we were actually just left alone with that printing press, so—[laughs]—in a giant factory at night.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that was really trial and error.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: But at the glass factory—it's interesting. When I came with that wax, the mold makers, you know, really felt they had no way of getting the wax out of there.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was their response when you said, "Melt it"?

KAREN LAMONTE: "Melt it." And they were like—well, I think they might have thought I was a little bit of an upstart. And they were like, "Well, we'll make the molds and, you know, you get the wax out."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Easy. Done." [They laugh.] And I think that that point they realized that I was actually willing—you know, I wasn't like a snobby artist—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because there is here—also that's something that's interesting, this divide between an academically-trained artist, someone who is a graduate of the academy, and the craftsmen who inhabit and work in these factories.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I think a lot of the academically-trained artists can behave quite snobbily towards—what they consider the factory workers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: But in the United States we're pretty much trained to be both.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: To make as well as design.

KAREN LAMONTE: To make, design—you know, to envision and realize. [00:14:05] And I think that that ended up being a saving grace, because I was absolutely happy to be on the factory floor and working, and getting in there, and helping lift, and everything. But of course all the guys are so polite they don't want me to pick up anything because I'm a woman. I remember one time I was carrying this piece of wood to go work on some bas relief or something, and one of the cold workers, Robert, said to Steve, "I just can't stand here and watch that." And he ran over to help me. [They laugh.] And that's just being a gentleman, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I mean, it wasn't that he thought I was incapable or anything, but just their cultural training is, is that, you know, a woman should not be burdened with that level of physical labor, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: So it was a really interesting thing as I started integrating myself, you know, into their world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And we had a lot of barbecues and parties and stuff, so they got to know us as people. And then as we could speak more and more Czech, then we became just a source of endless entertainment, you know? [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: All of the language mishaps and all of that type of stuff, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that still goes on today. You know, I mean, every year—now—initially we were sleeping at the factory. You know, we were really working there, you know, five days of the week—four or five days of the week. And now the relationship is such that they understand exactly my methods, what I'm looking for, and I don't need to be there for every step. But we still go up a couple times a week and we still have a big Christmas party one time per year, you know. And so the relationships are very, very solid.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So is the glasswork continuing on and off in tandem with the ceramic work?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, it's interesting. So when I went to Japan—[00:16:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: In 2006?

KAREN LAMONTE: —yeah in—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —2006, I took a break from the glass work. And my professor, Bruce Chao, he was the one who actually recommended that I apply for the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission, that research period.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And he said—but he said, "The most important thing is if you preconceive what you're going to make because of the experience in Japan, then there's actually no point in going."

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Okay, my mind is blank," you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: —because my mind is actually never blank.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm always like, I'll make this, I'll make that—you know, all my little notebooks, you know? And I had a thousand ideas of things that I was going to make and how I was going to make them, and all of that stuff. But then when I got back from Japan it was such a sort of mind-blowing experience—

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that a little bit, that experience there.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. So it was seven months. The structure of the program is basically you land in Tokyo. My proposal was to study the kimono and everything about the kimono—how it's made, how it's worn. And at that point I was not so attuned to the fact that I was really kind of looking at cultural expressions though clothing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, I wasn't that—it wasn't that clear to me. It didn't become that clear to me until maybe the last year or the year before.

MIJA RIEDEL: How had you settled on kimono?

KAREN LAMONTE: I had settled on kimono—right, like, why not some other object—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —of clothing?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, my best friend from third grade really through—for a long period of time was Kumi Tucker, and her mother—this is back in New York—her mother, Kyoko Tucker [ph] is Japanese. And so she taught us how to sew kimonos, and we sewed kimonos for our little dolls and everything. [00:18:01]

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness. Wow.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. I have that—the book I made, a book about Japan when I was a kid. So I think I've always been—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —fascinated. She took us to tea ceremony. You know, these are all things I saw when I was a kid.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. Extraordinary.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, you know, sometimes things just get stuck in your mind.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I always thought the kimono was so beautiful.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I loved the fabric and the shininess and, you know, all these little tiny things about it just really stuck in my head. And so then when I was working on the dresses, this

very Baroque, sort of voluptuous drapery, I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to sort of force my mind to look at something that's aesthetically completely different? And immediately I thought of the kimono—you know, this elegant cylinder, so understated, you know—where on one hand I was looking at this flamboyant Baroque, I thought, you know, this Japan modesty—you know, it would be really interesting to look and figure out how that value system works.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I thought, well, for me always my lens through which I see things is clothing, so I'll go study kimono. And so, you land in Tokyo and basically they give you the equivalent of something like $40,000 in cash, or $30,000 in cash in yen, big pile of cash on the table, and you're on your own.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Amazing.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, you know, they offer to help you with anything. And if I had stayed in Tokyo, you know, there the program has a network of people but, you know, they don't have official housing for you. There's no—you get a letter that you're an artist who has been invited by the Bunka-chō, which is the Japan, like, NEA or sort of arts association—to come here and do cultural studies in Japan. And then you're off and running, and you just sort of slug it out on your own. So literally no contacts. And so they helped us set up a bank account. That was important because I didn't want to be walking around, like, you know, a gangster with all this money. And so then with my little bank book we went to Kyoto. And my thought was that really what I was interested—although Japan modern culture is interesting to me, what I wanted to study was historic culture. [00:20:29]

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so we moved to—we lived in Kyoto. We found on the Internet an old house. And I said to Steve, like, "Let's always try to live in old houses. Let's not, like, live in these modern apartment buildings or anything. Let's try and do everything the old-fashioned way."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So we always found machiya, which are old houses, to live in. And initially we just found one from—I don't know how this—it was an American guy who either owned one or had a, you know, long-term rental of one, and he would rent it out for a week at a time to tourists. So that was our first perch. And then from there on some pegboard we found some guy who wanted to share—or maybe in, like, an English-language paper, a guy who wanted to share—he had a big machiya house and he was looking for roommates. And so then we moved to another machiya. And then we basically—then we moved to a third one with that guy. We all found another one that was less expensive. But we managed to live in old housing the entire time. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: When you say "old," how old?

KAREN LAMONTE: Probably a hundred years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So relatively—and everything with the traditional materials: the tatami mat on the floor, the burnt cedar walls, you know, the structure of how the rooms were was intact with the shoji, the paper doors. It's so funny, our friends here were like, "Oh, you're living in a paper house?" And they're like, "How do you lock the door, with a paper clip?" [They laugh.] And I was like, "Well, they don't really have crime that way in Japan," you know? [00:22:08]

And so, fortunately the one area of Kyoto where there were the most of these old, you know, houses was Nishijin, which was also the traditional kimono-making neighborhoods.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And from our house you could hear all of the looms clicking and clacking.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. I mean, it was amazing. It was really—and so I was like, "Okay, if I throw myself right into the middle of it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm bound to meet people." You know, we're big, giant white people wandering around, you know, living in our paper house. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So you had no contacts, no introductions.

KAREN LAMONTE: No contacts, no introductions.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so then we started going to the flea markets. And there were all these people who sold old kimonos. And there was this one woman—her name is Akiko [ph]—and she spoke English, you know, very broken but—and she was outgoing. She was like, "What are you doing here?" And I was like, "I'm studying kimono." And she's like, "I studied how to make kimono. My family has been doing that for, you know, three generations." And she was like, "I'll take you to visit my friends from school in their workshops."

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic.

KAREN LAMONTE: So she literally spent days and days and days. She was—and this is the amazing thing about Japanese people. They are so incredibly proud of their culture, its history, even as it's getting destroyed and faded, you know. They're really, really, really proud of it. And so she took us day by day—you know, one or two days a week—she worked the flea markets on two days of the week. And then two days a week she would take us to see the guy who lay the threads to make the—I don't even know what the technical terms are, but the network through which all the fibers were woven.

MIJA RIEDEL: The warp or the weft?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it's the warp.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. [00:24:08]

KAREN LAMONTE: And so he would—you know, he had these huge, like, lines of string all around his studio that were getting wound by hand—like, threaded through and then wound onto bolts. And they would unwind in the machines. And then, you know, the shuttlecocks would go back and forth. So that's where we started. So we saw everything from the absolute ground up. She took us to visit one man who simply dyed thread.

MIJA RIEDEL: And these were all still woven by hand?

KAREN LAMONTE: And we looked at everything. We looked at handwoven, partially mechanized, and then fully mechanized.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And she showed us everything. And she introduced us to, you know, as many of the old traditional practitioners as she could, and then also showed us, you know, where things were actually being made at this point, you know? So she was an amazing educator. Then other people we ran into literally at the bottom of our street, around the corner—one day we were walking and I looked through the slats, the wooden slats of the house, and there were a group of men sitting around a table drinking sake, and talking, and chatting. And I was just looking through and they waved and I waved. And they motioned, come on in, you know? And I was like, okay. And so Steve and I went it, and it was this group of people who were totally incredible. Professor Morikawa is—I don't know what he was a professor of, but he was obsessed with traditional—he was a teacher at the university and obsessed with traditional Japan culture. He collected ceramic—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, you know. [00:26:03] He was a calligrapher, studying calligraphy. His wife was a calligrapher and she practiced a lot of the old court entertainment games. There's something called the incense game where you smell—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —have you heard about this?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: You smell something and then you know—it's given A, B, C and then you try to match. Then you shuffle them and you don't know which one is which and you smell them again—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —these small, tiny pieces of incense. It's a whole game and a ceremony. And so every Friday night he would say, "If you see the lantern out on Friday night, please stop by. We're doing our thing." One guy, Minami-san, was a kimono maker. Mrs. Matsubara—who Minami-san was in love with but Mrs. Matsubara was not in love with Minami-san—she was a dresser, a traditional geisha dresser. And I don't know how they all knew each other but every Friday night the calligraphy teacher would come for a couple of hours. We would work with him. And of course this all happens—I mean, it was basically a party every night—every Friday night, you know, drinking sake and shochu, which is, like, their potato vodka. And we would do calligraphy. There was one young man who was—he wanted to—I guess there are competitions now for these ancient cultural stuff, so he was prepping to do—perform incense ceremony. We all did calligraphy. He did incense ceremony. There was a gardener who was a Zen gardener who was part of the group.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you come to meet the master kimono-maker, because that was the primary—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —emphasis of your trip, correct?

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: He was one of the guys sitting at that table.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that was Minami-san. [00:28:00] And he did not speak any English, but Professor Morikawa spoke English perfectly, Chinese perfectly, Japanese of course. And so, you know, any time—and they knew I was studying kimono. So then I showed them all of my work. And that was another thing that was a great door-opener. I would show them the work I had done in glass here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I said, "You know, I'm here to study kimono to make, you know, works about Japanese history." So they felt that was great, you know, the fact that I had made something and, you know, I had a catalogue from the show in Tacoma, Washington. And so it helped to show that I was very serious about my endeavor.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you had made such substantial pieces by then. I mean, I think of 2005 almost as being a really extraordinary year in terms of—

KAREN LAMONTE: That was a huge year.

MIJA RIEDEL: —the work that came out of that year.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you had extraordinary examples of pieces to show them.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems like things had really been refined and explored—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —in such a broad spectrum.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, and there was an exhibition catalogue from the museum show.

MIJA RIEDEL: In Tacoma, Washington.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. And that made it easy for me to show people things, something printed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, it was really interesting. Something that had a huge impact on people was being able to put a catalogue on a table and say, "This is what I do"—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —"and this is why I'm here."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: "I'm here to be inspired by Japan." And they were like, "Great!" [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And I don't think of Japan as having a huge glass history, certainly an enormous ceramics tradition.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, there's not—

MIJA RIEDEL: And so was that fascinating to them—

KAREN LAMONTE: —it was fascinating to them, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —because it was sort of unusual?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes. And everybody knew Czechoslovakia and Prague.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Everybody knew it and loved it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't know why, but I think it was even better than living in America. They were like, "Oh, you're from Czechonoprague [ph]." [00:30:00] And they were really excited by that, I think because of the deep history here, you know. And it must have been talked about in Japan as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. So it kind of—it was like a fairy tale city for them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, it's like saying, "I came from this fairy tale city and I made these glass objects." And that was just fascinating, you know? So I think that really—and I recognized every time we went there with, like, Akiko, she would say, "Bring the catalogue and bring a small postcard or something to give to the people—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —so they know what you're doing," you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, you know, she was great as an advisor that way, you know, teaching us how to ingratiate ourselves really, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And the gifts were a very important way of introduction.

KAREN LAMONTE: Really important, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: So when you think back on that time, in retrospect now, six years after the fact,

what seemed significant at the time, or what was an important part of what you were doing there? And in retrospect, is that any different? Do you see it any differently in terms of influence in the work?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, a much broader spectrum of things. I was expecting to get influenced by simply the kimono, but actually how all materials are handled by craftspeople in Japan is the thing that has blown my mind continually.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Now as I'm working—for example, even this morning I'm getting ready to make boxes for the ceramic kimonos, and I was like, "I want to make them out of cedar." I don't know why I want to make them out of cedar. I just thought to myself, I want to make them out of cedar. And I was like, "And I want to burn little drawings into them," you know, so that the boxes—because I like it when the boxes have a story too. And then I was like, "I'll go on the Internet and I'll look around." And I had completely forgotten that all of the exterior walls of Japanese houses, traditional houses, are from burnt cedar. [00:32:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So all of these things must have crept into my visual vocabulary, and I'm calling on them constantly, without consciously thinking, I'm going to make boxes that are like—that refer to the walls of the houses of the ancient Japanese—you know, these traditional houses, but it's all there, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think—and we talked yesterday about putting gold leaf on the ceramic, on the dark ceramic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I can't stand gold leaf, you know? When I think of, like, an Italian Baroque mirror that's decorated with gold leaf, that's so gaudy to me. But then when I saw the small gold elements, you know, on the dark walls of the backs of the temples, that was so beautiful and radiant, you know? So, I think this approach to materials, how they're handled, you know, and a kind of feeling of what is beautiful—like, I don't think a Japanese person would like the way the gold is on an Italian mirror at all, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: But it's just a material, you know, and they use it in a completely different way.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it is fascinating how often you'll see the gold as an emphasis where there's been a repair or there's some sort of imperfection. So it is different culturally and, I imagine, philosophically, the whole different—well, the whole way of thinking about gold, and where it's used, how it's used—yeah, how it's applied—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —in great moderation.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you use it primarily on the black clay places, yes?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, primarily on the raw black clay and the terra cotta. For the first time I put—I used some small gold elements in combination with the celadon glaze as an experiment. That was something I wanted to try this time.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems like materiality is a very important part of your work and your way of thinking. [00:34:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely. When we were in the Netherlands, one of the other artists who was working there said to me, "You're the most materialistic person I know, and I mean that in the best way." [They laugh.] But everything is—like, every material has its character.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know what I mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And they're almost—it's almost like they're all characters or personalities in this play, you know, and that when I want something from a finished piece, I start by its material.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, if I want a quality or an effect—not an effect but, like, it's sort of like the message finds the material.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know what I mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. So a quick related question: How then was there the transition from something like the cast glass pieces to the *Sartoriotypes*—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —what inspired that dramatic shift, very quickly—a year and then done, but—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, it was—sometimes I give myself, like, little challenges or assignments. I realized—I was like, "Karen, why do you use glass?" And it was after *Vestige*. When I saw that piece come out of the molds I saw that interior form, and I was like, well, actually the most interesting thing to me is this layering—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —the exterior form with the interior—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —of a hollow casting. So then I started working with the body impressions on the inside and the dress on the outside. And so I was like, "Okay, so you're using the transparency of this material." And I said, "But could you create transparency with another nontransparent material?" So that was my idea, was to work and get the effective transparency, this idea of layered imagery, but with something like ink—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —ink and paper, totally not transparent. And so that's what started the *Sartoriotypes*. And so what I did was I inked—[00:36:00] I used the dresses as a printing plate and inked them—and not exactly premeditated. You know, it's not like I had an absolutely clear technical vision. You know, things sort of evolved, like an inspiration goes to a little research, goes to something looks right, and then you keep pushing in that direction. So it was the pressure—it was the various layers of the dress. I never cut the dress apart or anything, and it was the pressure of the printing press on the different layers of material that where the material was thicker it became darker. It was just higher pressure. And I knew that from printing. I knew when you wanted something darker you crank up the pressure on the press. But I didn't think it through—I didn't premeditate everything exactly perfectly, you know. When I saw it happening I was like, "Of course that's what happens."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then I was like, "Great, that's what happens," you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Then I started working with that aspect of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's interesting because I can see how that then would link up to the drapery studies.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes, exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that makes perfect sense in this context.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: They might seem completely opposed without that link.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yep.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So then in the printing I also started printing on translucent paper. And I was like, "Oh, wouldn't it be interesting to, you know, start layering and stacking papers?" And I never really—I had sort of one shot at the printing press, you know, one—we were there for two weeks—

MIJA RIEDEL: Where was there? Where was—

KAREN LAMONTE: It was in North Adams, Massachusetts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: There's a very eccentric man there whose name I cannot remember, but I can find it. And he had bought a factory, a giant, giant mill factory for peanuts, and had started an art residency program there, because by having it as an artist residency he got to take everything as a tax write-off or something, any repairs to the building. And so in the summer there were troops of people there, but then in the winter he used it himself. [00:38:01] And if he were, you know, willing to pay to live there and everything, and pay for the use of the press, you could go in and do your own thing. So I found that on the Internet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: I've taken us way off track from Japan, but I thought that was an interesting thread to follow.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So moving back to Japan—

KAREN LAMONTE: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and just thinking about what was significant then and what is significant in retrospect—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, so just sort of thinking about translucency, transparency, drapery—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —sometimes what we used to always call at school like the "ooh-ah" experience—you know, sometimes you have those experiences where you're just struck by something. And it's like being struck by lightning. The only glass-related thing I did—I didn't even tell anybody I was going to the country, not that I was so well-known or anything, but I didn't even really connect with any glass people, and—because I wanted it to be a content experience, not like material experience—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, I really wanted to stay focused on kimono, Japan culture. I didn't want it to be about me and what I knew.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, but one time I did give a talk at a glass school, and we were—we had, like, a couple of hours to kill after the talk and before meeting the students for dinner. And so Steve and I just drove down a parking lot by the coast. And there were all of the fishermen laying out their fishnets for repair and cleaning and whatnot. And all of a sudden I saw vast quantities of semi-translucent drapery just wrinkled up in the parking lot. And it was the first—and then there was the ocean, and then there was a mountainous landscape behind, and some clouds and everything. And I was like, "Wait a minute." [00:40:00] I had a complete sort of—like, everything flowed together at once. It was like a transfer of all of the ideas to different areas. I was like, "Ah, transparency"—you know, here it was this material—because it was, you know, an open net fish line—and then where it was more bunched together it became darker. It started acting like glass. And it was the drapery, and it was the landscape, and it was, you know, the vapor of the clouds. Like, it was everything material and immaterial, and that kind of border that I love to explore between solid and not solid, opaque and transparent—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Light and shadow.

KAREN LAMONTE: —light and shadow and, you know, this fabric and flesh and natural landscape and everything. And I was like, bam, everything all together in one split second, you know. And still, I think that experience—like, I made some small drapery studies inspired by that experience, but I still think that experience will lead to maybe some non-glass works, maybe just works with fabric. You know, I have no idea, but that experience was one of those things where I was like, "Watch everything that's happening so closely because there's tons of information in that one split moment," you know? So, you know, I started manipulating the nets a little bit and photographing, and stuff like that, so we'll see what happens. I have no idea where that will go.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: But that was one of those moments. That was a totally unexpected thing from Japan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Does that happen from time to time, or was that a very rare experience?

KAREN LAMONTE: I think that was a very rare experience.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think that was a very rare experience. And actually I was pretty bored at the moment, you know, and I was like, "This is one of those days in Japan where, like, everything is scheduled and," you know—because there were days like that. Japan was, like, an amazing experience interspersed with a lot of logistics and getting around and trying to figure out where I was supposed to be and, you know. And whenever you're not in the traditional culture, you're basically in a mall. [00:42:04]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Japan is so modern and it's everything that I hate—bright lights, commercialism—like, consumerism, plastic everywhere, you know. And I was just, like, "Oh god, it's one of those Japanese days," you know? Not the traditional ones that I like in the temples, you know. It's one of those practical days. And so then to have that experience, like, right in the middle of that day, I was like, "Hoo-hoo!" [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It's interesting because it seems like that's when those experiences often do happen, isn't it?

KAREN LAMONTE: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you're not expecting them. I do want to jump back a little bit because we ended up—we got to Japan a little bit before the glasswork I want to talk about. And if there's anything in particular in any of the glass pieces you'd like to talk about, I'd love to do that. I'm thinking in particular of one piece in 2004, the *Remnant [Suit]* relief—

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: —because it's so different than anything else—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: and I wondered how that came about. And it seemed like something you explored and then maybe that was the end of that continuum and you went back—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but it's the only thing I can think of that's sort of suit-related—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and so there's been a very conscious decision to stay particularly with female—

KAREN LAMONTE: Female.

MIJA RIEDEL: —clothing, yep.

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely. Well, you know, the thing was I realized I was doing it, and I was like, "Well, you know, Karen, why are you doing this?" Because I'm a female and that's my entire world of reference is that. You know, so are these basically—you know, is this some kind of extended exploration of self-portraiture or, you know, an exploration of feminine femininity? So I was like, "Okay, let's do a suit," you know. So I made one suit. And I was like, "The suit is such a thing. Like, poor men. All they get to wear are suits," you know? It's kind of it. And I was like, "It's almost like being a robot," you know? [00:44:05] And there's no real need to make more than one suit because they all look the same, you know. And it is such an iconic male image. Like, I did it and I was like, "Well, there's the man." And, you know, maybe if a man were to take on the subject matter, he could explore more subtlety. But, you know, here I am as a female looking at men and I was kind of like, "That's that." [Laughs.] So, you know, maybe it's just a simple exploration but I did want to touch on it just to see what it was like to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: The mirrors also happened that year—

KAREN LAMONTE: Interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and now did they come about?

KAREN LAMONTE: So I had been collecting hand mirrors. It's interesting to hear what things happened to the—what actual piece, like, kind of hit the ground, because mirrors I had been collecting for maybe four or five years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting, and always hand mirrors.

KAREN LAMONTE: Always hand mirrors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because I liked this idea—I liked the gesture, first of all, of—you know, it's almost like, you know, looking at yourself but that you're not catching a glimpse in a mirror as you pass by, that it's your own gesture that you're picking up a mirror to look at yourself. It's this idea of self-examination. And vanity, that was another thing that I was concerned about at that time, this idea of, like, "Oh, do I look good today, do I look bad today? How are other people seeing how I look," you know? "Do I look the way I want to look?" You know, "Am I putting out the right image today?" And I thought, it's that funny? You know, here are these people, or here we are as people—like, not other people. Everybody does it. You know, here we are as people. We put ourselves together. But meanwhile most people, underneath all of that self-presentation there's a completely different story happening. And I liked that tension—again, this interior/exterior, and these layers, you know? [00:46:15] You know, it's a little bit parallel to the idea of the dress on the inside and then the physical body on the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —sorry, the dress on the outside and the physical body on the inside. And so it was the idea of, you know, you look for your perfect face but inside you might be—you know, you're smiling outside but on the inside you might be, like, freaking out. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And something that was fascinating to me when we looked at those last night is that because they are etched in—is it sandblasting?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah—that there are times when the image is apparent and times when it completely disappears.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. And that was—there's something—and we must have even talked about it when I was a student at RISD. You know, it was probably one of those Bruce Chao obsessions. I could just see him doing it, breathing on a window and then drawing it or something, and then the drawing disappears. But I love that phenomena of when you're inside and it's really cold outside—I used to do it all the time when I was a kid. You stick your nose right up to the glass and breathe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then there's either the print of your face or, you know, like steam—like dragon nostrils coming out—you know, steam coming out of your nostrils.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then you have, like, this little minute to draw on it and then it disappears, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I liked that idea of just—it's like a glimpse and then it's gone. So it was this sort of attempt to glimpse an interior but that it would disappear very quickly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are there particular places where that idea came to you? Were there any writers that talked about ephemeral qualities or transcendence or impermanence or any artworks, any other place—[00:48:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: —than that experience as a kid—

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: —where that was interesting to you?

KAREN LAMONTE: Um, I can't think of anything right now, but one thing that I look at over and over and over again is the phenomena of seeing objects in fog. That's one of my absolutely favorite things. And the first time it really, really struck me was actually in '97 when we were in Hong Kong.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: There is the—there is an outdoor Buddha on the top of a hill. And I can look up where it was, but the day I went there it was completely foggy. And so I was going up this giant staircase and I was like, "Where is this Buddha?" You know, "Where's the Buddha, where's the Buddha?" And then as I got towards the top I looked up at one point and I realized, you know, that you read a description. It's like a 1,600-foot Buddha, or whatever. And I was like, sounds big, but I have no concept of numbers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I was like, how big is that? And then I looked up and I saw, like, the hand of the Buddha all of a sudden came through the fog. And it was, like, the size of a pick-up truck. And I was like, "Holy mackerel, it's huge." And all of a sudden then you know, the fog changed just slightly and the entire Buddha came into definition. But then the fog changed again and it was all gone. And I was like—I like that way of seeing things—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —where it's not quite clear and then it comes through as clear and then it goes again, you know. And I think that's why I pursued so strongly, for such a long time, that transparency in glass, like, working with that one image through another appearing and disappearing. And it must have a name. I was asking somebody who was an art historian and

they came up with sfumato, but that's an Italian term where one thing blends seamlessly into another. But I think there is a specific term for that phenomena. But what I like about it is that your eyes are actually working; like you're processing—and you can feel them doing it. [00:50:04]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You can be like, "Is that the branch of a tree or is that the side of a house?" You know, you really—you feel your brain working as you're looking, you know, and I like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, it makes me think of Rilke, who talks about glimpsing things. You know, it was just out of the corner of your eye. It makes me think about what we were talking about yesterday about your peripheral vision.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I wonder—that is kind of an interesting thing to think about.

KAREN LAMONTE: Interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll give that a little bit more thought. He said some really interesting things about the gaze and the glimpse. I'll try to find out where that is for you.

KAREN LAMONTE: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Um—we should talk about 2005—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —because I think that is a year of such extraordinary work. I think about the evolution of the drapery becoming more and more developed, and detailed, and alive, more animated—the train on certain pieces, the *Dress Impression with Drapery* feeling very much like a precursor to *Landscape*—same *Reclining Drapery Impression*. And then the *Reclining Dress Impression*, one of them, had a much more tailored top. So it seems like there was a real range in work that you were hitting that year. In sum, the pieces seem—the body forms seem much more apparent. There are some pieces where I felt the garment was incredibly elegant, but then the stance of the person, the model, was very modern, very confident, not a stance you would associate with sort of antique refined elegant dress. So it seems like—and also the body form in some cases really seemed just almost to hover, floating really, seemed to evolve. Did that year feel especially substantial and significant for you as well?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, the funny—so 2005 is when everybody else saw the work, but I started all—there were about five pieces—five or six pieces from that year—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that I started almost two-and-a-half years earlier. [00:52:02]

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that makes sense because they take so long—

KAREN LAMONTE: It takes so long.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So it was really—and that's probably—all of those explorations and that evolution happened over a period of a couple of years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So maybe, like, two to—2001 there was *Vestige*, and then came the next five. And that took about two years. And then it was that outgrowth—you know, that was the real—from the moment I saw *Vestige*, then I was like, "Okay," you know, "there's a bunch of things that I need to explore here," you know. And it was *Body on the Inside*. Then it was, you know,

Body Language, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because from all of the traveling when I couldn't understand what people were saying, I was constantly reading body language. I was like, "Do I trust that guy or do I not trust that guy?" So then I was like, "Okay, well, how much can you get into static body language," you know? And so I was exploring that. And then just looking at clothing—you know, everything—but another thing that occurred to me was living here the architectural elements on the building, you know, some are Baroque, some are Renaissance, some are more contemporary. So I think I was getting this daily input from a—you know, wide period of history. And so then I think, you know, I would just sort of monkey see, monkey do, you know? I would go to my studio and I was like, "Can I drape like a Baroque person today," you know? [Laughs.] And I would explore that in one piece, you know, and then I would look at something, you know, from a different period of history at a different time. But I was definitely kind of working—and all of my resource books from that time are books that were looking at how drapery is used in art over time. [00:54:11]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: There is one particular book called *The Fabric of Vision* that accompanied an exhibition either at the Tate or the VNA in London. I didn't see the exhibition but I found the book. And then actually a friend of mine gave me—a British friend gave me the tape—a video of the exhibition that I still have never looked at, I should look at that. So I was looking at other scholarship on drapery in art at the time and just thinking about, you know, what is this, you know, drapery? It's like a visual element. It's a compositional element. But then it's also always a conceptual part. You know, how is it used conceptually? And I started really seeing it then as—it was like there's, like, something about the fleshy human body. You know, if you think about the paintings of Jenny Saville, it's like so human, you know, this wrinkling up of fat and flesh, and it's perfect, and it's imperfect. And somehow I wanted to sort of take that out of the body and put it into the fabric.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, it was kind of leaving the absent figure but putting all of the fleshiness from this absent body to the surface of the drapery. So that's when I got really into the folding, wrinkling and, you know—and it was also something about the material of glass. I constantly think of glass when it's warm, even though everybody sees it when it's cold. Like, I think of glass in the hot shop, like when you're ladling a casting or working—that it's very alive. And I always think of it as moving.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That's interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, I always think of glass as moving. And that's not because of this myth that, you know, it's moving, because it's not. It is actually a stable substance, but I constantly think of it in liquid motion. [00:56:15]

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think about the work at all in terms of any kind of social or political commentary?

KAREN LAMONTE: Not so much actually.

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't think so—

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: —it doesn't have that feeling to it.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, a lot of people ask me questions about, like, feminism and stuff like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: And technically I was probably raised—you know, I went to an all-girls' school. I never went to—I was never in a classroom with a male until I was in college. So that was a shocker.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'll bet. [They laugh.]

KAREN LAMONTE: As my assistant said—he was like, "How do you—how are you going to describe your—if you were—say, your biography?" I was like, "It would go something like: Went to an all-girls' school, messed me up for life." [They laugh.] But also made me for life, you know, because—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, what impact do you think that had? Have you thought about it?

KAREN LAMONTE: I've thought about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it's partially what makes me so kind of absolutely bold.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I would think.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because I don't even realize how bold I am, and other people are like, "You're so bold." And I'm like, "I am?" You know, I just thought this is how people are.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, you know, that's just funny to me. And then I think, well, that must have been something about the way I was raised or educated, you know. But, yeah, you know, I don't—I would say, you know, I don't disregard feminism because probably—you know, if people like Judy Chicago hadn't made the work that she made, and all of these women hadn't really fought, I probably wouldn't be able to do what I do right now. But I would say that I'm much more focused on femininity—[00:58:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —than feminism. You know, that's what intrigues me.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you think about the feminine archetype at all?

KAREN LAMONTE: I do, I think particularly—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, or archetypes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, particularly in the early work when I was looking at the Greek and Roman ideal sculpture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: I was like, "What's the perfect female," you know? Like, what is the perfect female? And then that sort of became interesting. And I've realized recently that, like, what's idealized in Western culture. Then when I started looking at the kimono in Japan culture, and even what's idealized there, then you start getting into a cultural exploration.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, because what people consider beautiful, it's basically saying—if you say, "I think that's beautiful," it represents something that your culture values.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's not just the point of attraction. It's the point of value. And then things start to get more complex and interesting, you know. And why is it that one culture values something one way—why did the Italians want their gold leaf mirror—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and the Japanese want the subtlety?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, what is it in those two cultures that make them so different? What are their histories, their society—the structures of their society, you know? And that's the stuff I

like looking at now, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Very much in that vein, is the cultural construct of beauty or aesthetics the primary—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —focus of exploration?

KAREN LAMONTE: And that's what I realized. I transitioned from dresses, you know, absent female figures, to a look at beauty and now aesthetics. And now—what I'm preparing for right now—I have to finish this group of ceramic pieces, but I'm starting work on a completely new body of work called *Nocturnes*. [01:00:03] And the idea is it's probably—you know, first of all, I am growing up. So—but I was thinking—I don't know, it might much, but I was thinking, you know, it's for—I was invited for a solo exhibition in 2015 in Venice for the Biennale.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, the curator is the curator of the fashion museum and the glass museum. And so we met and she was originally thinking that I would inhabit the fashion museum. But then we looked at the venue and it's right next to the Ca' d'oro, and so it's a great location. But actually the interior is too oppressive for the work, and the lighting is not good enough, so they are building a new wing, a contemporary wing of the glass museum on Murano. And so that's where the exhibition will be. And it will be their inaugural exhibition. And at first I was like—you know, because I'm still like, "Well, you know, glass is considered a craft material and I really shouldn't—I should be in the fashion museum not the craft museum." And I was like, no, no, no, no, actually the way to do it is go right down into the mouth of the dragon and make my work there, right, because I think—I first of all think the *Muranesi*, the glassmakers, will love it. And I think everything is evolving so quickly in this way people are thinking about glass as a material and craftsmanship, and object-making, and sculpture. You know, it's all sort of flowing together so quickly. So I think it would be really great to actually put a strong statement down right there in the middle of tradition. [01:02:00] But, oh, so the title of the show will be *Nocturne*, and then I'm thinking about, like, the little subtitle is *The Femme Fatale*, because it's all about this darker side of femininity.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, everything has been—

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KAREN LAMONTE: —very—um, clean, let's say. Not clean, but celebratory, and in a way, the work has been not erotic but—central, but with always a lightness. And then there is also another side to—

MIJA RIEDEL: Physically and metaphorically.

KAREN LAMONTE: —yeah. There is another side to femininity, and I was like, "Wow, am I old enough to finally take that on?" So, we'll see. So I've started working with the—building the interior forms. And right now—you'll see upstairs, I cast one of my older pieces in dark glass just to see what it looks like, because I want it to be all these—like, the idea of the falling of night.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, it's this sort of—right the cusp of day to night, it's like this magic, mysterious time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ink and water, a little [inaudible]—

KAREN LAMONTE: Ink and water—exactly. So it's all of this sort of quieting and deepening of everything. And so—now I'm working—picking the colors.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what are the garments like? Are they dresses again?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, this is the thing. Now I have—and I choose the poses—they are much more—there's three standing ones, and they're—they're much more physically dramatic. And there's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Which also may relate to the time in Japan, and the theater and—

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yes. And there's—right now, there's three standing, and then three semi-reclining or reclining. But I'm also looking at everything, like—the figuration of the night—first of all, how it's been expressed in sculpture before. But then also, when the night falls, the stars become apparent, and in all of this mythology, you know, the mortal—the God falls in love with the mortal, and then the mortal gets exiled and becomes a constellation. [00:02:02] So, it's also this idea of, you know, the human figure in the night, and that's mostly in the stars. So—I mean, this is everything I'm looking at. Now I'm still in this research phase. So how all of that gets woven together, I actually don't know. But as things start evolving in the studio, I'm sure, you know—and, you know, maybe some ideas remain—just a subtle thought for myself, and maybe it won't be apparent to other people, but I'm very excited about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And have you settled on glass as the new form [ph] for the pieces?

KAREN LAMONTE: I have settled on glass. And I don't know if I'll work with metal. I had thought about metal, because of course, I would love the pieces to be outside at night.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So maybe I'll do some work in metal, but right now, I really want the pieces to be in glass, and this dark glass. You know, and that's, again, probably an influence from Lubinski/Brychtova works—those black angels, but in a very different way, you know. And I think that's how, for me—I see all of this stuff, and I'm exposed to it, and I take it in. But it becomes something completely different than when it enters my vocabulary. So, I can't wait. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't either.

KAREN LAMONTE: You'll have to come to the opening. And I love the Italians, because the woman said, "I think we will make it an '*evento*'." And I'm like, "Yes, let's have an '*evento*' in Murano." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That does sound good. Let me—that sounds like a great reason to go. A quick question about titles.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: All the titles are fairly similar, just very descriptive and fairly straightforward. There have been some—*The Pianist's Dress* and *Undine*. What gives? [Laughs.] What's up with the titles?

KAREN LAMONTE: Okay. So, at first, I was like, you know, I don't like it when I see an art work, and I'm like, "What is that?" And then I walk over to the wall, and it's completely described to me in words. [00:04:08] I am a huge believer in material language, and it's something—I rarely ever talk to students, or really anybody, for that matter, but I always say, you know, you have your concept, and then you choose your materials, and then you develop your skills, and how you handle your materials. And that's actually your vocabulary. It should not be re-described on the wall because you failed in the making of the object. And so, I made a little—I made a little equation for myself. And it's like, visual art communicates visually, right? And that happens by aesthetics, right? Your aesthetic choices—aesthetics build visual meaning, and then craftsmanship is what defines aesthetics. It's the basis for it—how you handle the materials builds meaning in the end, right? So craftsmanship builds meaning. And if you need to describe everything again on the wall, then you've failed. In my mind, you've failed. Visual art is visual. If you want to write about something, be a poet or a storyteller, you know. So that's—I'm a little bit strict that way and probably extreme. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. Do you have, you bounced—because that seems very contrary to what popular opinion has been for [inaudible], right? In theory and criticism for quite some time, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I know—I know—I know. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you find that the attitude towards that is different in Prague than what you've found in the States? Has that affected your thinking in any way, do you think?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, no. I just think, probably because I'm not a great fan of language—and that might come from my personal background of, like—[00:06:02]

MIJA RIEDEL: But you were interested in writing at one point, weren't you?

KAREN LAMONTE: I know. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: But left that behind, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. And, you know, I kind of think, if you're making—if you're devoting your life to making visual art and expressing ideas visually, you should just really stick to that, you know? And—I don't know. You know, I don't read that much that's written about art. You know, I'd rather read about philosophy or, you know, anything—history. I don't read criticism at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's interesting, too. I was just talking with Dante Marioni—and I mean, the work is extraordinarily different than yours, but he also was very clear and really pretty eloquent and direct about the fact that he makes objects, and that's what he does and that—there's a whole kind of visual thinking, and aesthetic thinking that goes along with that, but it is very much about visual object-making, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes. And I think that if you really devote yourself to it and you take—you just say, "I'm not going to back this up with a lot of written work," then you force yourself to develop a really strong visual vocabulary. And it was actually Chris Blasdel who runs the Japanese program—he's the on-ground person there—he comes to Prague every year for a shakuhachi flute festival, because he plays the flute. He said, "When I see your work, I think of—its minimal—it's like minimalism—like a minimalism of materials for a maximum impact."

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then I thought, "Yes, that's exactly it." To be as concise and direct as you with your material vocabulary.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, that is perfectly put. Very eloquent.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know. So I completely agree with that. And—there was something else—something about Dante or—I can't remember. [00:08:08]

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you go back to your equation?

KAREN LAMONTE: Maybe—just let me look at my equation again. Hmm. I don't know. It'll come back to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yep. Oh, well, in that essay I talked about—"The Redemption"—Libby Lumpkin—"The Redemption of Practice," she starts out—she is very outspoken. Oh, I know what you were saying. You were saying about the—you know, critical thinking and the—you know, how there's this movement towards conceptual art, and she starts out that essay with a scathing commentary on artwork made from the '80s forward. You know, she talks about this—you know, the demise of practice, the making of objects in favor for conceptualism, and how it's actually not the place of visual art. And you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's the *Nine Little Art Histories*—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, it's *Nine Little Art Histories*, and the essay—it's my favorite essay from that is "The Redemption of Practice." And—you know, I mean, she starts out by saying, "Artists are making things again." You know? [Laughs.] Right? Finally. I mean, we would—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Absolutely. I do hear a lot of conversation about that.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right? And I think it's kind of this happy moment for people who love to make things—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because finally, it's not a dirty practice, you know? And I think there are natural-born makers. Like, I am a natural born-maker. I constantly am doing stuff. I love knitting,

I love cooking, I love—I love doing things with my hands. It's a twitch, it's a nervous habit, you know? And I think Dante is very much the same way. You know—I mean, he can barely sit still. [00:10:01]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. [They laugh.]

KAREN LAMONTE: Because he'd rather be making something. And I agree, you know? And our practices are totally different, but I think the instinct is absolutely the same. And finally, there's starting to be—you know, I think—are you ready? I think that in the '80s, big people—big investors—you know, this is when Deutsche started doing the investment for Chase or whoever he was doing it for—CitiBank—building an art collection as investment. And I think, all of a sudden, art started and—artwork started being discussed in board rooms, and there had to be evidence that it was an intelligent investment. And that was backed up by being able to talk about it. And so, a clever description, a sentence on the wall, a conceptual construct of something that was badly-made and going to fall apart in 10 years, or—you know—I don't know. But somehow, that talking about art became more important than the making of it. How it was made, what it looked like, you know. And so that's the phenomena of the '80s. And then these insane values started getting attributed to, you know, objects that could be justified. And I think we're finally coming out of that. And that I think that—I don't know. I don't know what will happen. I do not think there will ever be the corporate collectorship of art as investment the way it was in the past, and I think that's a good thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what do you think—why do you think that's shifting?

KAREN LAMONTE: Probably—maybe partially the economic crisis, which I think could be a godsend for real art, you know? Not art as investment. And there are some great, incredible works. [00:12:02] But I think everything got out of control. I think things got too out of control too quickly. And then I also think people started going to art school for the wrong reasons, you know? And I think that a lot of people started getting involved with the arts thinking that, you know, it was a really lucrative thing or they were going to be make it big, and it's like, that just doesn't happen, you know? It just doesn't happen. And so if you're making art, you better be doing it because you absolutely love it, you know, and because you have a twitch. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's interesting coming from you, too, because your work was recognized really quite early on, and there have been, you know, extraordinary exhibitions—museum exhibitions, solo exhibitions all over the world, in multiple countries. So it's interesting that you are, in many ways, in an enviable position, but clearly, with the rate of pieces lost in the process and the amount of time it takes to make a piece, you're in it for a very different reason than—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, definitely, definitely. You know—and also, something weird has happened where—I'll never forget—like, those pieces you were talking about from 2005—when we had images of those pieces—this is when I was working in the attic next to our old apartment down in—you know, downtown Prague, and our friend Charlie Parriott came to visit, and I showed him—I was like, "look." And I made this, and I made this, and he was like, "well,"—he was like, "Now it's going to start happening." And I had no idea what he was talking about. And he's been—he's been my kind of guru or like—I always—everybody's like, "Who's Charlie?" I'm like, "I think he's either my guru or my spiritual advisor. I'm not sure." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: But he's somebody—I think he's watched the career arc of so many artists, and he's been involved in so much. [00:14:04] And I live very much in isolation over here, and, you know, this initial success of the work—it might sound stupid or like I'm trying to be coy or something, to say that I was partially aware of it, but really only partially aware of it, and not fully understanding everything that was happening in the United States, which I think—and I still think it's a little bit that way—I think that's great, actually. I think—you know, I think that a scene or all of this stuff can get—people can get too distracted by that and not be focused enough on the studio practice and really pushing the materials and their ideas and all of that. And I don't have any of that. Most of our friends here don't even know what I really do.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: They're like, "What are you doing down there in the garage?" [They laugh.] "What is—is this your little workshop," they say? You know—and they're actors and actresses and, you know, musicians and graphic designers, English teachers, you know. It's really funny. And I think it's great, you know. And so every once in a while, someone will come down there

like, "Oh my God! Is this what you do?" [Laughs.] Like, just yesterday, I was working on that piece, and our friend Nancy, who is a filmmaker—a casting director here, she came in, she was like, "I've never seen you actually working." And we've known each other for I don't know how many years. And I was like, "Well, if you ever need to cast an artist working on a sculpture, this is what it looks like." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: No, it's interesting for you to mention Charlie Perreault because I read something that you wrote about your work a long time ago—

KAREN LAMONTE: That's John Perreault and Charlie Parriott. John Perreault was the director of UrbanGlass. He is also another great character, though.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, because I was going to say, he—and—okay. Then, I was—yeah, I was confusing the two, because I was think he was—[00:16:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: And Charlie Parriott he really—he kind of held down the fort in Chihuly's studio for maybe about 13 years—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —he's Seattle. And he's also a great artist himself. And he's somebody—and still, he came [laughs]—he came here just a couple of weeks ago, and of course, we always drink a little wine. And he was talking with Steve, and he was like, "Steve, are you really ready? Because things are going to start happening on a new level now, and you guys really need to get ready, and you need to look out for Karen," and you know—I mean, he really gives us this kind of personal advice, which, there's nobody else in our landscape who was offering that, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you have a certain perspective on the international glass scene and where American glass sort of fits in that?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, I don't, you know. I have no idea what's going on, to be totally honest. And I don't even really know what's happening so much here in the Czech Republic, because on the one hand it's like, I love the guys I work with at the factory, but I'm kind of more into the guys at the factory. Like, I'm not so intrigued by the academically-trained artists. I mean, I hate to say it that way, but I kind—that's pretty honest, you know. I find that there's a lot of snobbism here, and, you know, a lot of ego attached to things, that I'm just like, "Good grief," you know? And I don't—it doesn't interest me. You know, there are few artists who I know and love, and those people I see socially, but other than that, I'm really—and I don't want to be a part of any scene. That's the other thing. You know, I don't want this—part of any group or anything like that, you know. If I was a part of any group, I would go with the ceramics. [Laughs.] I would be a part of the Dutch ceramic group, whoever they are. [00:18:01]

MIJA RIEDEL: Why is that?

KAREN LAMONTE: Because they were the coolest people. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Interesting—interesting. So you see a difference in the sorts of artists that are working in those different materials?

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, definitely—definitely, yeah. And I also liked how they problem-solved, you know. They were fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: How is it different?

KAREN LAMONTE: Um—I think because there's—well, it's not really true, though, is it? I was going to say, I think because ceramics is more hands-on, but it's really only because it's not glasscasting. I was going to say that problem-solving is much more of a group activity, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: In ceramic?

KAREN LAMONTE: In ceramic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Huh.

KAREN LAMONTE: It seemed to me—but it could also be just because I was at that one research institute where there were so many experts, and when something went wrong, everybody would

come and we would solve the problem altogether. And I just liked that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that. That happened—what year did you go there?

KAREN LAMONTE: So that was—

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was the exact name and location?

KAREN LAMONTE: —it was the European Ceramic Workcentre, and it was in Den Bosch in the Netherlands. And they subsequently changed their name to , which sounds like a religious cult.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are you kidding? [They laugh.]

KAREN LAMONTE: It sounds like a religious cult, but it's—but they said no one could remember their name, and so someone—I guess the new director taped the lyrics of the song "Sunday Morning" on all of the doors, and they'd take a vote, and I guess now it's called . But I think of it as EKWC. And so that is—I was there—well, it was exactly—the first residency—I left here the morning after Obama's inauguration.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay, so 2008—

KAREN LAMONTE: So almost exactly four years ago. Isn't that amazing?

MIJA RIEDEL: That is.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I went down there—

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was the beginning of the transition from glass to clay, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, to clay.

MIJA RIEDEL: What inspired that?

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it was Professor—I think it was the time in Japan, and I think it was a sensibility for materials. [00:20:09] And when I was thinking about—the thing that really uniformly impressed me in Japan was humility. And, you know, it was none of this sort of—what I do appreciate about Americans, but this bombastic American, like, huge personalities—you know, everybody was, like, literally physically smaller. And it seemed like, you know, these egos, there were none of these tremendous egos and huge personalities. And I was thinking, you know, it was probably from being an island culture that, you know, you—that everybody kind of lives within the modest limits of one—the space one person should be allowed, you know. And then I saw it kind of came through in how all materials were handled.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you say a little bit more about that? You see, that's interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. Well, the—you know, and it's something I—basically, I think I only glimpsed an understanding of—but this attitude of wabi sabi, which comes right out of Buddhism, you know. I mean, these are all cultural attitudes. And it's something about something that is humble, not necessarily brand new, not necessarily perfect, an extreme appreciation for the natural state of things. And even as a potter makes a piece, you know, a tea bowl or teapot, if the material takes off in a certain direction, if a—what we would think of as a flaw starts happening, that is actually not seen as a flaw. It's actually seen as a part of that material. So it's—in a way, it's sort of a broader material vocabulary than the tightly-controlled approach of a Western mind. [00:22:05]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a great description of that, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I think I was very aware of that. And other things I started seeing—and I just adored because the attitude was so different. I can't stand disposable culture. And in Japan, when I saw these objects that had been broken and repaired, I just thought, "That's so perfect," because first of all, they're resuscitating everything. And the object, once it's repaired, becomes more valued because it has the story of how it survived a mishap, you know. And that becomes the story of the object. And it becomes richer with time and with all of these repairs. And it's kind of like, you know—you know, they see it as a like a more human experience, you know, that as every human being travels along and gathers all their experiences, they become more interesting. You know, older people are valued. You know, they're not—[laughs]—right—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —they're not stuck in an old folks' home, you know. Older people are very, very revered because of all of their experiences. And so these objects, in the same way, sort of, you know, the more worn with time, the more valuable they become. And so, I think that—and then also, you know, just how—for example, in the old houses and in the temples, you know, every material was left in its natural state. You know, the walls were cedar and they were burnt. The tatami mat was grass that was woven. And then it wasn't painted pink or anything, you know. It was just—it was the color that it was. And I just really—I really liked the honesty. It seemed like a very honest way of dealing with materials. And then it meant that the craftspeople were making choices because of the qualities naturally attributed or possessed by a material. [00:24:10] You know, so it seemed very logical, actually. It seemed very pure and very logical.

And so when I came back here and I wanted to—I tried to take on that way of thinking, you know. And I already did, in a way. I mean, that's very much—you know, RISD is modeled after the Bauhaus, which is sort of looking at materialism—material as having meaning and content.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I was already predisposed to think that way. But it seems like—that the Japanese were just doing it with such a finesse that I really admired that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You know, I—this seems like a perfect time to just touch briefly on those three kimono that exploded—

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yes. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and how we're looking at them now. You have reconstructed them from shards, which seems like such a perfect example of that Japanese aesthetic in action.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly. Yep. So those were pieces that exploded actually at a ceramic facility in Denmark.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. This was a couple years ago?

KAREN LAMONTE: It was—it was about a year ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so 2011.

KAREN LAMONTE: I probably made—I made the pieces in August, and then I drove up there some time probably in November. And I walked through the door, and the owner said, "I didn't want to tell you on the phone because I thought you might be mad." And meanwhile, I'm thinking, "I'm about to get to really bad news." And he doesn't realize that driving here nine hours, because I hate driving, it's going to make me actually madder. Like, he should have just really told me on the phone. So I'm thinking all that. And I'm, like, "Yes? Please tell me what happened." And he's, like, "Well, there was a malfunction in the kiln, and the kiln spiked in temperature,"—after the firing had been completed and, you know, something got stuck on and the—there were three white pieces and three red pieces in the oven, and for some reason, the red pieces exploded. [00:26:17]

MIJA RIEDEL: And these were full-scale kimono pieces.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes. And I was, like, "Holy cow." And I immediately thought, "Repair!" you know, immediately. And I said, "Where are they?" And he said it was amazing that when he opened the door of the kiln, everything was perfectly stacked and perfectly in place but just fractured. And I said, "Oh, did you take a picture?" He's, like, "No, we were so angry we just shoveled it all into a box." And I was, like—and he—and he said, "But we saved all the pieces." But they didn't. I found out there were pieces missing, but that's now part of the story, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. It is.

KAREN LAMONTE: So—it is, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I said, "Oh my God. Well, show me the boxes of the pieces." So we went way into the back of the factory, and there were these two giant wooden boxes. They had

mixed everything all together. And I was, like, "Great. Can we take those back to Prague?"

And at this point I was working in a temporary space down the street, and it was winter, and there were these huge glass windows. And I was, like, "Now I have a project." I was thrilled. And so I just laid all of the fragments out. And I started, and I was, like, "Well, now you have to think like an archeologist." There are going to be—you have to look at the material and see—like, where it was thicker, there was a different color in the center of the core than the outside. And I was, like, "So you're going to put all of those type of pieces together?" And then there were slight little variations, like, where I could see, like, my fingermarks on the inside. Like—so I started almost like an investigative, like, C-I—what is it called? The—oh, I can't remember.

MIJA RIEDEL: More like a forensics specialist.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, exactly, like a forensics specialist figuring out—

MIJA RIEDEL: Reconstructing.

KAREN LAMONTE: —exactly. And reconstructing these fragments back into their—into their whole kimonos. And that took probably six weeks, which I thought is pretty fast. [00:28:10]

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that's extraordinary given the fact that we're looking at three—pretty much—two or three—three fairly full-sized kimono pieces.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. And they were blown to bits.

MIJA RIEDEL: And also the fact that there were such significant pieces of some of the missing could only make it more difficult.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, it was, actually. The missing pieces were a huge stumbling block.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would think so.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then when I got to the—there were a few pieces at the end that were the hardest to put together, which was really interesting. I just couldn't get it. But now everything—every piece that I have, I've fit together. And so, now I will do the golden repairs.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. I think that's an extraordinary example of the Japanese, the influence of that Japanese aesthetic and experience on the work.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right. I can't wait to see them finished now.

MIJA RIEDEL: I can't either.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And the white ones were completely fine.

KAREN LAMONTE: They were fine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Isn't that interesting?

KAREN LAMONTE: It's—and it must have been something in the—I know that the white clay—I chose the white clay because it's a particularly—I liked the creamy, sort of bony color of the white, and it was much more expensive than any of the other clays. Like, I had to a pay a special extra fee for that white clay. So it must have been something in the physical structure of that clay that made it able to withstand thermal shock.

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe some sort of—but wouldn't it be a porcelain—I can't think what that would be.

KAREN LAMONTE: I have no idea. Maybe there were some fine grog in it or—I have no idea what it was, but the—I was impressed. I was, like, "Wow." Whatever that white clay was, you know—but those pieces are fine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Let's talk about the kimono pieces and your exploration of clay and—we need to start about that, and I bounce into this, but you were talking about studying in the Netherlands.

KAREN LAMONTE: In the Netherlands, yeah. So—oh, right, because—so when I—when I was—[00:30:00] I was saying that the thing that universally impressed me was this humility. And even how materials were used in a very understated way, pure and understated. And when I was thinking of how to realize or how to choose a material that would sort of emphasize that aspect of Japanese character, I immediately thought of clay because I think of clay as, like, the most, like, almost, like, first human material. Every culture picked up a piece of earth and squeezed it into a shape and, you know, probably left it next to a fire, and it got hard. And so I see it as being so basic. And it's the earth, literally. Like, I've always used—you know, at these clay centers, the clay always comes from bags, but I would actually have loved to go dig it out of the ground, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because that's really it. That is—that is the most honest material you could ask for. And so I thought, Ah, the kimono should really be in clay, or at least some of the kimono should really be in clay. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was the glass—did—just didn't seem suited to the content?

KAREN LAMONTE: Initially—well, the glass—but I thought, you know, I couldn't in my mind—so one of the things—when you put on the kimono, you completely pad your body. Like, if you have a tight waist, you know, and big boobs or something, you pad your body into being a cylinder because the thing is that's important in how you wear the kimono is that the exterior image, the embroidered image or the dyed imagery, can be read clearly because that's where the beauty lies, in the choice that the woman has made. And she demonstrates in that choice her sensitivity to the seasons, to the occasion that she's going to and all of that. It's actually not her personal physical beauty. It's not her personal physicality that's emphasized by the kimono. It's all of her sensitivity, okay? [00:32:15]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, you know, I think of—when I think of glass, I think primarily of its transparency and seeing that interior form. And I thought, It's not about that in Japan, it's really not about that layer of beauty. So in the end I did—in the end I did make glass kimonos, but I made them without the interior body because I did not want—you know, it wasn't appropriate. It didn't fit conceptually. And so what I—what I used—sort of when I was using glass, I was thinking much more about that experience of mist or fog. You know, I was using it hopefully more subtly than I had in the past with the dresses. And also, there's sort of—I always think about glass as—it's like the nonmaterial material, you know what I mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's this very evanescent, very—it's perfect for this allusion to the spiritual realm, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because it's everything about a human being. Like, I think of the spiritual—and I'm not particularly religious, but I do believe that there is something more to human beings than just bones, flesh, you know. And so—but it's so subtle—like, I even—like, I even think—like, spirituality—like, I think of—who was that writer—the female writer who—it's like—a lot of the self—not Ann Landers—I'll think of her name. But, you know, you can't really use even the word spirituality with, like, everybody going, "Oh, God," you know, "Here we go." But when you actually really talk to almost any person, they also have a sensibility of it, you know? [00:34:05] Like, even—I'm—there's this one friend of my husband's parents who is like—you know, he's got like a heavy New Jersey accent, and he's like, "I don't know—there's just something about when you're out in nature by yourself, you feel different." [Laughs.] And I was like, "Exactly." [Laughs.] Like, he knew. That's how he put it. He's talking about spirituality, you know. But, you now, everybody talks about it in their own way. And so glass seems to be that perfect material. It's sort of this—it's the material that kind of can trail off into nothing—you know, that can be as present or absent as you want it to be, and it's kind of—it's always slightly mysterious—always slightly mysterious. So that kind of—I was hoping to sort of build toward those allusions with the glass pieces, but then, for the humility, I really thought clay—you know, this humble clay was perfect.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And the kimonos—I was struck by just looking at the range

of them, that we were looking at downstairs yesterday. It just—it seemed, in many ways, a very methodical exploration of clay and what it could do, from color and texture, and form, and what it could hold, and what it couldn't hold. It seemed there was a very scientific exploration of what the medium itself could do and how far you could take it.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I forgot to tell you—so—it's so funny—this is another—when I realized I really am just a nerd—the Ceramic [Work]centre compiled a book called *The Ceramic Process*. It's a 500-page book. There's a chapter about clay body. There's a chapter about firing. There's a chapter about molding. There's a chapter about surface treatment. So before we went to the clay center, I got the clay book, and I read it. [00:36:02]

MIJA RIEDEL: Ouch. [They laugh.] Wow.

KAREN LAMONTE: I know—I know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Research.

KAREN LAMONTE: I read the entire book. I tag-noted all of the things that I wanted to try or I wanted to understand better.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who wrote that? Do you remember?

KAREN LAMONTE: I have it upstairs, actually, with all of my notes in it and all of my little yellow stickies and everything. It's hilarious, but I really—and then I came back, and, you know, we met the main technician, and I was—and he goes, "Okay, now, what do you want to do here?" And I was like, "Well, this is what I want to understand better. I want to understand exactly what deflocculants do, and I want to—I want to try terra sigillata, and I want to—" and I start flipping through the book, and "I want to know how this was made, and I want to know that,: and he was like, "Did you read the whole book?" And I was like, "Yes. Doesn't everybody read the whole book before they come?" And he was like, "No, nobody reads the book."

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Oh. Well, I read the book." [They laugh.] But then, I think, you know, it was a way I could prepare myself, you know, because I had absolutely no experience. Everybody else who went there had experience, you know. So, in a way, I was probably also thinking, "Uh oh, I better get up to par." Like, the first time I was there, I was there with people who were heads of university programs in ceramic, you know. And I was like, "Oh boy." You know, but then I thought, well, that's actually a great thing, because I literally am the

person who knows the least. So all around me were all of these teachers, right? Any time I stumbled up against something, I would ask, you know, "How do—how do you do that," or—and I would watch all of them working and how they handled the materials.

MIJA RIEDEL: It must have been interesting to be in that position, too, because it strikes me as a similar connection to what you had at UrbanGlass, and maybe at Pilchuck where you were the assistant helping somebody else who was completely unfamiliar with the medium actualize their vision. [00:38:09]

KAREN LAMONTE: Interesting—exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: So now you're in the exact other position—in reverse—

KAREN LAMONTE: But I was the unfamiliar person now, yeah. That's really interesting. So—but I will never forget. So you know, I just blundered along in my particular way, and—but you know, I was not completely unskilled. Like, I knew rubber moldmaking and all of this stuff. So when it came to sort of solve how to make my piece—and this is the magic of the head technician there, Mr. Peter Oldhattan [ph]—he saw my skill set, you know, and the experience of, you know, working with glass and all the studio stuff. And so he gave me instructions that he knew I could pull off, because I had a range of skills and experiences from working with other materials. And I'll never forget—I forget—I think it was the second time we were there—so that's how this rubber mold—forming of these pieces was developed, was under his guidance, and him really knowing what to tell me to do and not do, you know? And when—

MIJA RIEDEL: But it should be stated, too, I think that they were also completely convinced that what you wanted to do was pretty much impossible, with the exception, perhaps, of Peter but

most the staff was convinced that it could not be done.

KAREN LAMONTE: They were—right, they were.

MIJA RIEDEL: And of course—this was again, what had happened in the glass factory, too.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly. And they—and the thing is that I had no idea that even what I was asking for was unusual. I think this is the perfect time where actually knowing nothing is fantastic, because then you approach things with a—without any preconceptions. So I was like, "Of course this is going to work." And you know, all of those people who say, "You have to believe, and then it happens," and it's like, "I think you just have to be dumb enough not to know that it's not going to work." [Laughs.] [00:40:04]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And you have to believe when everybody tells you it's not going to work, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right. But—so that's—that's the rubber moldmaking, and I'll never forget—finally, it was the second time we were there—

MIJA RIEDEL: Which was also in 2008, 2009?

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it was 2009. And by then, it was summer or spring—I remember it was much better weather.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this was a three-month stay as opposed to a two-week stay?

KAREN LAMONTE: This was a three month—it was a six-week stay the first time. And the six-week stay was just to see if it was possible, and then they said—they saw, okay, it's possible, and they said, "Okay, come back for those three months." And what was great about that was, you know, rubber moldmaking was something we could do here in the studio working with moldmakers that we know. So we kind of fine-tuned the rubber moldmaking, and made the mother molds of a bunch—out of different materials that were much lighter and easier to work with—easier to manipulate once they were filled with clay, and they were really heavy. And so we were able to appear ready to go, and that was great. Like, anything that I could do on my own, I had done, and then I was able to move through my encyclopedic investigation of every different kind of clay they had, all the different kinds of things you could add to the clay, then all of the different surface treatments, and I really—it's like, I literally had—it—to me, it was like a matrix, you know, and every branch went down to two branches of two different things I wanted to try, and I was able to do that relatively quickly, you know. And of course, there's still tons more to learn.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, because the glazing didn't start early on, though. At first they were just raw clay—

KAREN LAMONTE: Just raw, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: You know, just the white, the terra cotta, and the black, which, again—I'm still in awe of that deep black, almost mechanical-looking glass. [00:42:03]

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes. I love the black clay. And none of those things were anticipated. You know, my sort of instinct or my drive was simply just to work with clay, because it conceptually fit, you know. And then how I worked with clay—I figured that was going to be an investigation. But—what was I going to say? Something—oh, so during the second residency, when we showed up with all of these molds, I knew—and I'm still—you know, I'm sort of always the last person to figure out what's going on. The board members started appearing in the studio. He would be, like, knock, knock, knock, and I'd be like, "Hello?" And they're like, "Yes, we're here to see the molds." And these kind of like official-looking Dutch people would come, and everybody was coming to look at the molds and everything, and I'd be like, "Hmm." And at a certain point, you know—not that I'm territorial per se, but it's like, when I'm focusing and working and stuff like that, it seemed to me weird that so many people were walking in and out of the studio, like—and inside of the workshop, you get your own little personal space. And everybody was going in and out of my personal space. And maybe I was kind of missing the introductory part or whatever, but it was—they were members of the board who had heard about the pieces coming out of the rubber molds, and everybody—some of them had a background in ceramics or whatever, and they just wanted to see what was actually happening in the studio.

And then, finally, this very funny Canadian artist came, and he walked into the studio, and so he was like, "I'm here to see the molds." And I was like, "Oh, God, what is it with these people and the molds?" And he was like, "You've done it. You've solved the problem of undercuts in ceramic." And I was like, "Okay," you know? But even—but I think, for all these other people, it was a really big deal.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But for me, it was really not a big deal, which is so funny. And then—and even until today, you know—I just think—I think, really, it takes somebody—a glass caster to, you know, introduce a new way of working or something. But I think it just takes somebody who is not trained in ceramics, really is what it is. [00:44:14]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because, when we went to Denmark—then, after—you know, I would—I would still be working at the Netherlands if I was allowed to, but you know, it's a structure—it's a foundation, so they'd provide these three-month fellowships, and then the artists move on. So, we found another studio up in Denmark that specializes in giant works. You know, eight-foot-tall vases and stuff like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's the name of it? Do you remember?

KAREN LAMONTE: It's called Tommerup Keramiske Vaersted, and I think that was a place, also, that had, like, its heyday in the '70s. And so, we showed up with all our molds. First we went there—we introduced ourselves, and I said, "You know, this is what we did in the past in the Netherlands, and I want to keep going." And they were like, "Great, we've never seen anything like that before, but," you know, "we're happy to host you here." So we went up there with all of the molds, and then, at that point—like, it's really fun and funny to see people get excited. You know, the owner/head guy of that workshop—at a certain point, he was like skipping around in the studio. And he was like, "I've been working with ceramics for 40 years. I've never seen anything like this. I've never seen anything like this. I mean, never anything like *this*." [They laugh.] And I was like, "Okay." [They laugh.] But you know, it's just funny. I mean, that's funny. So yeah. And then they blew up all the red pieces. [Laughs.]

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MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Karen LaMonte at the artist's studio in Prague in the Czech Republic on November 3, 2012 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number three. We haven't discussed influences much more than travel that you've done and residencies or—you know, I think that's pretty much it. So are there influences that have been significant at different parts of your life other than the different teachers and people that we've mentioned? Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think I'm always looking to history—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and I would say some of the strongest influences are other artists, for example.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And even from the time I was a little kid I've always loved intense figurative art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: There's one story that my mom tells about—she was taking art history classes at Hunter College. And I was a tiny little kid. I don't know how old I was, but I would go with her because they didn't have daycare or anything like that. And so, we were in the class and the professor showed two slides. He showed Edvard Munch *The Scream* and maybe some Degas ballerina or something. And he said, "Karen, which one do you like better?" And I was like, "I like that one!" Of course *The Scream*. [Laughs.] And my mother was like, "Uh." [They laugh.] But, you know—so, I mean, I've always, because of my—basically my mother is dragging me around to museums all the time. I've always been looking at art and I've always related strongly

to figurative art, and those artists. So—and when I started sculpting I thought—you know, very similar to what I was saying about writing on the wall—I thought, I really want my work to be universal, and universal in a way of, like, common to all people. [00:02:15]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I think that—you know, everybody has a body, and therefore I think figurative art speaks to people on a very personal level. And so, you know, that's always been my objective so I've always looked at work that I thought was effective, like Rodin. I adore Rodin's work. I think it is some of the most power figurative sculpture across time. You know, he was so intense—and such a jerk, you know, to be totally honest. Like, he was really not the greatest guy in the world, but he was extremely devoted to getting his vision across perfectly. And that work is timeless, you know. When you see people looking at one of Rodin's sculptures, you know, you really think, he did it. You know, like he's captivating you, you know, still, and he worked a hundred years ago and everything has changed, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Everything has changed but his work is still relevant. You know, Munch's work, Francis Bacon—you know, a lot of the people I look at are more painters than sculptors. I think there are very few outstanding sculptors. And I think there are more outstanding painters, for whatever reason.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Maybe sculpture was more difficult to make in the past, you know? But Picasso's early work—I don't like the later work at all. And he was another jerk. [They laugh.] You know? I mean, the truth comes out about these people, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So his early paintings.

KAREN LAMONTE: His early paintings. I think his early painting is beautiful. Käthe Kollwitz, all of those etchings. You know, I like these works that are about nothing other than, kind of, the range of human emotions and how people feel, you know. [00:04:12]

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I know you've mentioned Madame Grés.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, fashion designer?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes. So then in the world of fashion, really Madame Grés, I mean, because of her gorgeous use of drapery.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And who else, who else? I don't really—I mean, I love Chanel clothing but I don't think it's really—I don't feel any artistic kindred towards it, or draw.

MIJA RIEDEL: You mentioned the Beuys exhibition from when you were a child—

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —was that somebody that you appreciated or spoke to you, or you were just so struck by how different it was other than—

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, I really appreciated it, I really appreciated it. I really wanted to like it viscerally more than I ever have—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which is really interesting. And when Tina Aufiero was teaching at RISD, Beuys was one of the artists that as a student—that I researched exhaustively. And I really tried to understand what it was about his work that was fascinating but then also almost impossible to understand. And I've kind of revisited his work three or four different times because I've always wanted to like it more than I've been able to—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which is really interesting. The thing that I did like was his use of unusual materials, and for very specific ends, which was—you know, he believed that materials held energy—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that, you know, honey held, via the pollen in the bees, the energy of the sun that was taken by the flowers, you know, and then the wax and—you know, so I liked this kind of very abstract thinking when it came to materials, but I just don't like the objects that much—[00:06:10]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —unfortunately.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So the ideas behind them—

KAREN LAMONTE: The ideas.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but not the objects—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, exactly, the ideas behind them.

MIJA RIEDEL: —more about the conversation, right?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. What other artists? Just trying to think.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, it sounds like there was nobody that at this stage in your career this person was very significant, at that stage in your career you were really struck by—

KAREN LAMONTE: Well—

MIJA RIEDEL: —it sounds like there are more objects, like being kimono—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —or being struck by different materials and their potential.

KAREN LAMONTE: I would say the people who I am indebted to who gave me sort of my ability to do what I want to do are, you know, first and foremost Bruce Chao, my teacher from school. You know, I mean, he really taught all of us how to use our brains—research and then distill research—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —into work, you know? And then, all of the teachers who taught me how to use materials—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know? But I can't—I really—you know, there are artists that intrigue me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Any particular art movements, any technological developments or nature itself that you feel has been influential? We talked about the nets and the tiny [ph]—

KAREN LAMONTE: The nets and the fog. Something that I'm just sort of digging around the corners of right now is this computer-aided forming—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because I am really not technologic at all. But I see and hear of people using it and it's kind of like I just want to understand and know what it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I went to a place called the Johnson—or now it's called the Digital Atelier. And it used to be Seward Johnson's studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where is that?

KAREN LAMONTE: It's in New Jersey and—I know their address is, like, Sculptor's Row, but I forgot what town in New Jersey. But it's a really interesting man who runs what is now called the Digital Atelier, and he was describing the way you can scan an object, you know. [00:08:09] And I've known about this but I've just never seen it happening. You can scan any three-dimensional object and then a map is kept in the computer, and then you can manipulate that and then have a machine print it out in a variety of materials. That's all evolving very rapidly now, what you can print, and he said something interesting that is probably going to become the basis of a project that I'm working on now, and he said, "There is some decimation of the information." And I said, "What do you mean by that?" And he said, "Information gets lost in the computer." And I said, "Oh, could you intentionally decimate the information? Once the object is scanned and it's in the computer, would it be possible to intentionally destroy information?" And he said, "Yes." So something that's always—what I love—a phenomena, another phenomena—a lot of things are phenomenologically-driven—is like when the church bell rings at the base of our street and then the final ring goes and you have this, like, "Wa wa wa wa wa," and then it goes to silence. It's that deterioration of sound to silence. And so my idea is I have these chairs that—just a project I've kind of been thinking about, and I've done some sketches, I've done some material studies, but my idea is to take these chairs that have been draped in fabric and scan them digitally and then intentionally decimate that information, and then print it out maybe in 10 stages. And so, hopefully my idea is to create a visual equivalent of the phenomena of a sound disappearing, like something that you could hear clearly becoming a vibration and then nothing, but an object that you could identify clearly becoming increasingly abstract and then, you know, maybe becoming a pure shape. I don't know what will happen in the very end. But just this idea of abstraction, but that it's not me as an—picking favorite parts or making a decision about a curve, that it's actually a computer function—[00:10:26]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that it's sort of an unaesthetic inclusion of information.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. That's interesting that you say that because I do think that there is an interesting range in your work back and forth from figurative work to abstraction that's been established quite some time ago, so it's interesting to hear about you potentially going in that direction again at the same time you're talking about the *Nocturnes*.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. So that's an interesting range.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, the chairs—how I came to the chairs initially—and they're hanging all around the studio—

MIJA RIEDEL: I have been noticing that. And that, in that back—

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] You're like, "What is she doing with these chairs?" But do you know, every time I give a slide lecture I'll give the whole talk—you know, and I don't do it that often, but I've noticed three times it's happened—I'll have a bunch of shots of working in the studio. I'll describe something that's happening or a certain experiment, and at the end always a man will raise his hand and he'll say, "I noticed some interesting chairs hanging from the wall in the studio." Then, just for no reason at all—I don't know why—you know, I had these studies of draping the chairs with huge pieces of canvas dipped in plaster. I photographed them down in the basement just to see what they look like. You know, sometimes it's interesting. And then I put it up on the website, you know, of just like, you know, an area of studies and experiments. I got contacted by an architect in New York who was like, "What's the story with those chairs?" And then just now there's an amazing Armenian-American man named Gerard Cafesjian, and he has a huge collection in Yerevan. [00:12:06] And then he's, right now, working on a memorial in Washington D.C. for the Armenian genocide. And his museum director visited the studio on Monday, and he was like, "And Mr. Cafesjian took note of the chairs and he would like to know if you're ever going to do anything with that." And I just thought there's something magnetic about certain objects—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that people get attracted to, you know? So I can't wait to start working on the chairs. I want to do it after *Nocturnes*—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, but with this idea—you know, I think of it—when I think of the phenomena of the bell—I just call it, like, sonorous decay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yeah, that's lovely.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, it's a way of decay but to nothing. You know, to silence.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That is interesting, because when I think about—I think about different ways to frame your work, and one of course is a very scientific and detailed exploration of material, but there is something also about thresholds and borders, and continuums—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —that seem very essential to your way of thinking and working.

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely. And the word "threshold"—do you know that the name of Prague is *Praha* in Czech?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And *prah* means threshold.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

KAREN LAMONTE: And when they built—when Rudolf II, when he was laying out some of the very important structures of Prague—this is sort of mystical city-planning—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —he wanted to design a threshold between, you know, a standard city and another dimension. So according to this, like, mystical numerology—I mean, he also hired alchemists to turn, you know, dross into gold. So, you know, this is a time when this thinking—[00:14:02]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —was completely normal.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: That there are certain—there are even books about it called, like, *Magic Prague* or something, where the geometric layout of certain chapels and churches, and municipal buildings in Prague build a geometry that is theoretically a threshold between our reality and something else.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

KAREN LAMONTE: It's insane.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's sort of—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that Rudolf II?

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it's Rudolf II who did that. He was the big—he had the—he was a Holy Roman emperor. He had the largest Cabinet of Wonders in Europe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: And he was really one of these early adventurous thinkers, you know, and he really—he funded—craftspeople came to Prague and early scientists, and alchemists came to Prague like crazy under his rule. He paid them to come here—

MIJA RIEDEL: Fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and make it a premier city in Europe.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is fascinating. Yeah, that adds a whole other layer to the conversation.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that's it, threshold.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It seems that your work—the ideas for your work, one series often leads to another.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Does that feel accurate to you?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes, definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there any other place that you tend to trawl for ideas?

KAREN LAMONTE: No. Basically I figure how—because everything I do always seems to lead to several options.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I always try to—and then I also do sort of an exercise with myself when I find myself focusing on something too heavily, like I was too heavily reliant on the figure, so I took that away and moved to the chairs as implied—a means of implying human presence. And so it seems like it's like every decision begets two decisions. And so I figure, like, even with the storyboards I have now, like, I probably have mapped out enough work, like, with all of my side trips and experimentations until I kick the bucket, you know? [Laughs.] I'm pretty much busy until I'm dead. [They laugh.] As morbid as that might sound, you know, but—[00:16:30]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that's great, you know? And I'm trying to both be measured in how much I work but also keep the pace brisk enough that I get to work through all of these ideas, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting too because thinking about the chairs just makes me think also another aspect of the work that's been constant throughout, no matter what medium or even what content, it seems like absence has been a huge part of the work.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then there's always a tension between interior and exterior presence, and absence, light and shadow. And we've talked about all of that—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but it seems that absence does have a huge presence.

KAREN LAMONTE: Absolutely. Absolutely. And I—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that something you think about consciously?

KAREN LAMONTE: No. But, you know, I think—I did grow up in a medical family where the fact of dying and human biology and, you know, just like these are facts of human life. My mother worked in the emergency room. People died there, you know? And a lot of times you'll—I don't

know if you've noticed it, but a lot of times if, like, people get sick or something, you know, terminally ill, a lot of people get nervous around them and stop calling or stop visiting. And, you know, my parents always have—because they, it's in their professional sphere, you know, they've always had friends who are ill, who are dying, you know, and haven't been afraid to look at that aspect of life, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, I think it's maybe been more a part of my vocabulary than an average kid, you know. [00:18:12]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. And from seeing the films that you saw at the Thalia.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, my god, all the existentialism.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, my god.

MIJA RIEDEL: We talked about political and social commentary, religion or spirituality in the work. Do you think about it at all?

KAREN LAMONTE: Not so much.

MIJA RIEDEL: No. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Not so much. No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you done any commissions?

KAREN LAMONTE: I have done one—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and it was terrifying.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I probably will never do it again.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] Do you know Jack and Benny—Becky Benaroya?

MIJA RIEDEL: No. I know the name but—

KAREN LAMONTE: They are amazing collectors and supporters of the arts. They live in Seattle. And Jack Benaroya was ill with—I believe it was Parkinson's. And I think it was their—it was their 70th wedding anniversary or their 65th wedding anniversary. He commissioned me to cast her wedding dress. And she had actually sewn her own wedding dress.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

KAREN LAMONTE: But everybody was like, "Jack is ill. He's about to die," you know. So I start out on this project and they're like, "Karen, do you think you can get it done before he's dead?" And I'm like, "Well, I think so." And I forget exactly what the number is but these are massive years. You know, it's like—it was either their 65th—I think it was their 65th we started it. So I started the commission. And her wedding dress was magnificent but it was very, very complex—huge cascading—it was like four or five tiers of huge cascading drapery—beautiful, beautiful—massive train, but so complex technically for the casting that it kept breaking. [00:20:09] And literally years and years and years went into this. And, you know, Jack is in the hospital and I'm thinking, "Oh, holy crap, you know, I'm not going to make it on time." And then I started working on the project at two different factories, one in lead glass, one in the glass I usually use. Like, I was doing everything to get this done on time. And then finally it was—I think for their 70th wedding anniversary.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was five years in the making?

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] It was five years in the—something like that. And, you know, one time—I think it was last March I gave a slide talk out at the Palm Desert Museum—Palm Springs Museum, and they were in the audience, and I was like—

MIJA RIEDEL: They were in the audience—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —both of them?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, how fantastic.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "I think we were all surprised when a 65th wedding anniversary gift turned into a 70th wedding anniversary gift." [They laugh.] And, you know, thank God he stayed alive. You know, and then everybody started surmising that maybe he was staying alive—

MIJA RIEDEL: To see the dress.

KAREN LAMONTE: —to see the dress, you know. And he actually passed away last year after the —I don't know when it was—after the talk in Palm Desert—in Palm Springs sometime.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were you happy with the final piece?

KAREN LAMONTE: I was happy with the final piece, but the pressure was so tremendous, you know, I just couldn't manage it. And I would have been mortified if I had failed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, I would have been mortified. So I said to myself, "You know what? Don't do that again."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah. So that was once—a one-time thing.

KAREN LAMONTE: That was a one-time thing, you know? And it's a beautiful piece. I'm so happy with the piece. It's in their home now.

MIJA RIEDEL: You know, I'd love to see a visual of that at some point.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, I think—you know, of course I didn't photograph it before I sent it because I was so worried.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, I was like, "Just get that thing in the mail! Get it over there!" [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: No photos of it?

KAREN LAMONTE: They sent some photos.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Subsequently they sent some photos. [00:22:04]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: But, man—and that was—and at one point—you know, here you have to love a former communist country. There is a bureau of glass technologies, or something. And so anybody official here has a round stamp, you know, so if you have some kind of document they'll be, "Well, does that have a round stamp on it?" So this—there were so many technical troubles. We were trying to identify if it was the annealing or something, you know. And so the people from the bureau came with their round stamp and they were like, "This is impossible." So it was deemed as "impossible," literally impossible as a casting. And then it was finally—it was the switch to lead glass, actually, that made it possible. That means the piece is incredibly heavy.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet.

KAREN LAMONTE: But it carries light beautifully. That's the other thing of lead glass. But it was a not possible to cast. And then we figured out finally borosilicate glass, you know, but the lead glass made it possible.

MIJA RIEDEL: Given the range of work that you're doing now, the ceramic work and then some of the drapery studies, it does seem conceivable that you might take glass in a more architectural direction or an installation format at some point.

KAREN LAMONTE: I would love to.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that might be a more appropriate commission. Do you think you would consider something in that context?

KAREN LAMONTE: I would consider something like that. I always wanted to do something architectural, like something in a public space—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —either an atrium of a big building where people are coming and going. I really believe that public work is the ultimate test for artwork.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why so?

KAREN LAMONTE: Because it's not in a museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Basically in a museum you're already preaching to the converted, and in common space, like in a transit space or something like that, that if you can catch people's eye, you know, as they're rushing to work or—you know, it's sort of—I love living in a city. Have you seen this film *Urbanized*? [00:24:10]

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's an amazing, amazing film. I forget who made it. But it talks about all of the forces that are in play in the urban environment. And I've always—I grew up in a city. I've always lived in cities. And I really think that's how human beings are now. You know, we used to live in caves or in nature and now we live in cities.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, what we construct, how we deal with our public spaces, all of that is kind of—that's where, as an evolving race, we're expressing ourselves right now, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I would really, really, really like to take on public space at some time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Like, I'm not ready right now, but it would be the biggest challenge, I would say. I think for me that would be the biggest challenge.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, I can certainly see some of those bas-relief-style pieces translating quite easily into something like that.

KAREN LAMONTE: Mm. A façade of a building or something. I don't know. Yeah, it would be really interesting. And of course I imagine I would work with an architect or something like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: But that would be fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have your sources of inspiration changed at all over time, the "ooh-ah" moments? Or what gets you excited?

KAREN LAMONTE: What gets me excited now?

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems like the work itself is one thing, and that seems like that's been consistent throughout—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but is there something I'm missing?

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't think so. You know, for me it seems like a chain reaction at this point almost, like one idea is begetting another so quickly. And the thing that keeps me focused I would say the most are the technical challenges, on a daily basis—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because there's the reality of your kind of overarching thinking process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that's going on all the time and I'm constantly modifying segments of my thinking. But, like, what keeps me on my toes are my daily activities—[00:26:14]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and problem-solving and also observing material behavior, because you constantly learn from your materials—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —how they act, how they interact, you know, when they're failing, you know, when they're performing perfectly. And I think that is—that sort of daily involvement is a constant source of information that I just tuck in my back pocket and I might use it sometime later, but a source of information and potential future inspiration.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: For example—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —I was like, "What am I talking about," and I was like, "I know what I'm talking about," [laughs] because that was a really abstract answer.

When I was working at the Kohler factory—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. We haven't talked about that yet so let's do that.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was 2009, I think.

KAREN LAMONTE: I think so.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So the idea there is that I had no slipcasting experience. Slipcasting—I was in the ceramic—

MIJA RIEDEL: Kohler in Wisconsin.

KAREN LAMONTE: —yeah, Wisconsin, in the ceramic factory. And so I had no slipcasting experience. I had my idea, which were those very complex fabric abstractions—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that I wanted to make in these giant multipart panel constructions—actually thinking a little bit towards public space.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was thinking ceramic, you know, toilet bowl. They put it in the airport. [They laugh.] If anything can survive, this is the stuff, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] So I started with these complex forms and crazy things started happening. You know, there was the articulated side and then it was basically sitting on a box. And so, you would pour the form, fill it with the slip. The surface absorbs some water. You pour out. [00:28:11]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then I would take off the back—it was all filled through the back. I would take off the back of the mold and then I would flip it over onto the board that it was fired on—you know, this ceramic firing thing—and then lift off the top. But the tops kept on collapsing, so then I started building these little bridges on the inside. And then they started—crazy things started happening, like as they were drying—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —they were shrinking a lot—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and tearing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then sometimes even I managed to get them dried in once piece and then they would tear when they were in the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Kiln?

KAREN LAMONTE: —kiln.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Inaudible.] Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: But that's a phenomena right there, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: A tension of the material.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And here I am dealing with these fabric forms and they're tearing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so now I started thinking about this idea of torn fabric. Is there a way to incite the tearing or—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: —or to manipulate the tearing? And then they became kind of the most interesting parts. When I started building the compositions on the wall, you know, there would be a tear going right through the middle of one of the segments—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —which kind of brought up the fact that it was an illusion, you know? And so, that added a whole other layer. So there it was. It was something very technical from the material but then became aesthetically part of the decision-making in the end, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then the question came to repair the tears or not repair the tears, you know, a la Japanese with the gold—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So some I repaired. Some I just left torn with these, like, giant gaping tears, you know? And then I realized at a certain point—I was looking at that work and I was looking at those.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, the fractured kimonos.

KAREN LAMONTE: The fractured kimonos with the missing parts. And I was thinking about, like, the aesthetics of disaster or, like, the iconography of disaster, you know? We live in a century where, like, so many incredibly bad things have happened, you know? [00:30:21]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: An image that comes to my mind all of the time—and actually when I'm looking at those pieces—is the remaining stanchions from the World Trade Centers—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and what destruction looks like. And, like, it's so horrible to say it, but there is—if you've seen an old temple—like, think about an old temple in Cambodia. There's something beautiful in the destroyed version of it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —in the deterioration, in how things come apart and in how failure happens, you know? There is a fascination with something that's failed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And what that exactly looks like in a way can become beautiful. And so I've been thinking about that a lot recently, is like, you know, these intentional fails—you know, the tears in the drapery, that was not intentional. The explosion of the kimonos. But, you know, couldn't it be interesting to work with intentional failures—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and explore the aesthetics of failure and destruction.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting too that that is coming up in the ceramic process, because I think of that as being such an intrinsic part of the ceramic process, that there is such a huge unknown in as things dry or as they're fired, that I think it's just part of that process, that it's almost expected that you're not quite sure what you're going to get when it's all done because that process is so inherently unpredictable.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so, it's interesting that that comes to you so profoundly from the experience with that material.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: And in some ways it's completely predictable—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but it is interesting that you picked up on that. [00:32:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: And the interesting thing is that I've had so many failures in glass as well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But I think the glass objects are so dangerous once they're cracked.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Like, I can't bring them back to the studio and manipulate and play with them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I think it's a little bit off limits in that material, but somehow, like, I'm able to manage the broken shards of ceramic. You know, I have to wear gloves and stuff like that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but, so it's a little less physically dangerous for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think that idea of the beauty of the destroyer, that—of what's been damaged, became more apparent to you after that time in Japan?

KAREN LAMONTE: Probably.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely. And we visited Hiroshima, the city, you know, and in there the preserved—that one preserved dome. And then actually up in Dresden I was visiting the Green Vault up in Dresden, and there, after—you know, we carpet bombed Dresden, the Americans did, and how they've repaired the buildings—they've left them repaired so you can see the repairs. It's either a different material that's been inserted to reinforce a domed ceiling, you know. And the same thing in Berlin. There is repaired and repaired-looking architecture, not just perfectly restored. And I very much like that, when, you know—and I guess here we see it in architecture but we don't see it so much in objects, which is interesting. But I think that's part of that World War II legacy in Europe.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And it's interesting that it is so obvious here and it's so obvious in Japan—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but of course growing up in the States we don't see that.

KAREN LAMONTE: We don't see it at all. We don't see it at all. The only thing that is —there are some of those—I visited the Trade Center memorial site. Have you seen that yet? [00:34:08]

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-uh. [Negative.]

KAREN LAMONTE: It's amazing. That young Israeli architect—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —so beautiful. But incorporated in there, there are just two small of those—I forget what—I've called them stanchions but they're not. The base of the buildings. There's two segments of that in one of the buildings. And then there's an amazing tree that survived.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: There's a tree that survived the collapse of the towers, and then it was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it a ginkgo tree?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: —I forget, what kind of tree is it? I think it's an oak or something. But it was transferred to a park in the Bronx where it was waiting to get back to the memorial site. And it was struck my lightening during a storm. I mean, this tree is amazing—struck by lightning during a storm, survived that, and is now back as part of the memorial site.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, that is extraordinary. I'll have to take a look at that, because I know in Japan

—I think in Hiroshima one of the few things that survived that blast was a ginkgo tree.

KAREN LAMONTE: Are you serious?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and it was within a temple compound, and I think they rebuilt the temple compound back around the tree.

KAREN LAMONTE: That's amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: That's amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Wow, two parallel trees.

MIJA RIEDEL: Isn't that fascinating? And I hadn't heard about the one in New York.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. So that kind of, sort of remnants always is intriguing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When you look at the work over time, what do you see as similarities and differences between the early work and the current work in the ideas that you're working on now?

KAREN LAMONTE: Always the human figure, even from the puppets, the marionettes, the small empty clotheslines, always working with the human figure. [00:36:04] And even—I looked at recently some paintings from high school and some just sketchbooks. You know, I was cleaning up at my mom's house and I was like, "Oh, look, one of my early sketchbooks." Clunk, clunk, clunk—you know, figurative, figurative, figurative, figurative. Always figurative. That and more over time—and I don't know if it's, you know, you can see things—you can see threads as you look back, but an investigation into what's beautiful, this idea of beauty and kind of looking at the cultural expressions of female beauty, and then looking at the expression of beauty in a single culture over time—you know, what was beautiful in the past versus what's beautiful now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I think definitely figurative work and the idea of beauty.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When did your thoughts about beauty and the sublime begin to evolve, and how has that evolved?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, I was noticing that—the things that I consider most beautiful are natural phenomena. And so somehow, you know, the fog, you know, an ocean, mountains, you know. I love going to the Dolomites, this Italian mountain range, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I just love being out inside of huge nature, because you feel so incredibly small and insignificant. And it's kind of like, "Ah, what a relief." [Laughs.] I don't really matter after all. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Whew.

MIJA RIEDEL: Big nature can do that, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, I think it was looking at, like, kind of the largest format of beauty—like, the most magnificent format of beauty, and somehow just the word "sublime" crossed my reading at some point. I must have been reading about Turner's paintings or something. And I was like, "Sublime." I hear people say, 'Oh, the dinner was sublime,' and I'm like, did they really mean that?" [00:38:28]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, people just throw words around willy-nilly. And I was like, "So what does 'sublime' really mean?" And sometimes I do that. Like, when I hear a word—every once in a

while a word will become, like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —a frequently used word, a trendy word or something, and I'm like, but what does it really mean? Like "amazing"—"Oh, that was amazing." But "amazing" actually means something quite different, you know. So I started looking at "sublime" in that way. And I was like, "sublime" is actually partially scary. It's partially overwhelming. And it's an uneasy feeling. "Sublime" is actually an uneasy feeling in the face of something that is much more vast than you yourself, you know? And so I kind of liked that concept, you know? And also I liked the fact that "sublime" seemed to always been associated with nature. And I thought, isn't that interesting that we have a particular word for the vastness and the intimidating qualities of natural beauty—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —that we've kind of made a word for that—you know, identified a word for that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It makes me think of going back to the idea of beauty and the fact that somehow—I don't know if you were out of the States when beauty became sort of something that people—it was absolutely out of the art lexicon for a while. People did not want to go there. And then I think about David Hickey's essays on beauty. [00:40:10]

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I'm just wondering if your thoughts about beauty have stayed fairly constant over time or if they've really—

KAREN LAMONTE: I think I—

MIJA RIEDEL: —if you had to be attentive to that sort of in the closet for a while?

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or is that something you always felt pretty adamant about?

KAREN LAMONTE: I've always been adamant about figurative work—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and good-looking artwork, you know? That something—it doesn't have to be bright and happy, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: It can be dark like Käthe Kollwitz—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but beautiful.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I've always been a campaigner for figurative and beauty.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And everybody—when I was in college, figurative was not—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, that's true too.

KAREN LAMONTE: It was all phenomenologic-driven, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and conceptual and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —all of this stuff. And, you know, if your work didn't reference Baudrillard or Lacan, you were dirt. [Laughs.] Right? You were toasted. And I was like, "Well, this is a face and these are hands." You know, and it's like all of my stuff was very, very figuratively-based.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that acceptable in RISD at that time?

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't think it really was.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you were—you didn't feel dissuaded from pursing that.

KAREN LAMONTE: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that because you weren't dissuaded or because you just are not easily

dissuaded? [They laugh.]

KAREN LAMONTE: I think it's just because I'm not easily dissuaded. I'm really stubborn. And actually it's so funny—my husband is like—he's like, "Your mother is so stubborn." And he's like, "And your father is so stubborn." And he's like, "And you, you're like times two. It's like a magnifying effect," you know? [They laugh.] I'm actually the most stubborn person I know. It's really bad. But it can be kind of good, you know? I mean, there's—[00:42:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Determined.

KAREN LAMONTE: Determined, right. It's determined.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And, like, I think a lot of people who might have a different type of character than I, would give up, like, if things didn't go well every day or if, you know, half their stuff at the factory broke, or if everybody felt they were a little bit of a nutter, you know. And it's like I actually just don't care, which is [laughs]—it might be a little bit antisocial, or whatever, to say, like, I really don't care what other people think about me—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but I really don't care. And, you know, like even in social ways—Steven is like, "You know, oh, we should have dinner with so and so," and I'm like, "Well, I really don't want to have dinner with so and so." And he's like, "Well, it's kind of rude." And I'm like, "Yeah, but I don't care." You know, so—and it's a little, not myopic or whatever. I think it's just honest.

MIJA RIEDEL: And focused.

KAREN LAMONTE: And focused.

MIJA RIEDEL: You are very focused on what you want to spend your time on and you work really hard and long hours, and so I think maybe it's also just practical.

KAREN LAMONTE: It is practical. It's very practical at a certain point. But, you know, I was thinking—like at one point I subscribed to *Art in America*, and I was like, "I'm going to educate myself." [They laugh.] "I am going to enter this conversation of contemporary art that everybody is having." And I remember reading the first edition and I was like, "Wow, I can't even read this. I don't even know what these people are talking about." Like, this has no relevance to anything I think, feel, observe, or understand.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, I still have the stack of books. Just recently I put them out on the street for other people to take. But I subscribed for a whole year, and I looked at the covers [laughs] and sort of flipped around in the books, but I could not relate to what was being written down. It was really hard for me. And I was like," Okay, I'm just not like other people, or I'm not a part of whatever conversation is happening," or—but then I think it's kind of good. You should not fake relating to something if you don't. [00:44:10] And if you're thinking in a different way,

then you should just think in your different way and be happy in your little sphere, you know? And I don't really, you know—at this point I don't really notice that much anymore.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are there any periodicals or any writers, any critics that you have paid attention to at different points in time that you found?

KAREN LAMONTE: I really like Libby Lumpkin.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Yeah, you mentioned her.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, I really like her because she's a rebellious thinker, and she's really analytic also. Like, one of the things in her first essay in the *Nine Little Art Histories* she found the origin of the yellow smiley face. And you can't believe it. You know, it's adopted by counterculture but it was actually commissioned by a bank in San Francisco whose banking—their neighborhood had gone to pot and ruin under counterculture and so people weren't coming in to the bank. So they commissioned an advertising firm to make a symbol that would make the customers feel better coming into the bank, and that's the yellow smiley.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

KAREN LAMONTE: And then it got subverted into counterculture, and the counterculture people didn't even know where it was coming from.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that's amazing, like, the irony of everything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I love people who can look at the world and take all of this information and break it down into these ironic—just showing how funny people are, you know? So I love writers like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then there's an inherent tension in that, the way you're describing it. And I always think of your work as having an inherent tension in it too, so that is interesting, and not surprising in certain ways.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. What other—I'm just trying to think if there's periodicals that I like to read. [00:46:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean, clearly probably not glass magazines or—yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't read anything like that. And, you know, maybe if I was in the States and they were, like, lying around—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, I might pick one up and flip through it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: But simply because it's just not available here—every once in a while I read the *New York Times* online and I read what Roberta Smith writes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: She's interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: She's quite interesting. She's opinionated. I like that. [Laughs.] I might not agree with everything she says, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So her—who else do I look at? Whose writing, whose writing? I do like Libby Lumpkin's husband Dave Hickey.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: He is quite brilliant, and I read his stuff over and over again—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because I'm never sure I'm getting all of the layers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm really never sure I'm getting all of the layers. Both he and she I re-read quite a bit. And I'm just trying to think. I must read something. I don't read any blogs or anything like that. That's disorienting. Nope.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: That's really—

MIJA RIEDEL: We talked about the similarities that you've seen in your work, the early and the recent. Do you see any differences?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, I actually think—at first I thought—but then, you know, side projects get forgotten about, you know? So when I think back, I think through what I can find as a continuous narrative. So I don't see—

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh [affirmative] that makes sense.

KAREN LAMONTE: —huge differences, you know what I mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm always looking for the roots of what I'm working on now in past projects. You know, so I don't really think so much about the ones that don't fit in. You know, the abstract drapery works were sort of the biggest departure in that they weren't figurative at all. [00:48:11]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that was really interesting. I liked that. That was fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the fact that you're looking now at chairs with drapery suggest that maybe they're actually the seed for something else that's going to be developing yet.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: There's a question here about working process—

KAREN LAMONTE: Ah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and how it's changed over time. And your working process has changed so frequently.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And maybe that's one of the constants in your working practice is that it's constantly evolving—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and changing and rotates around exploration of a new material.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yep.

MIJA RIEDEL: Does that seem accurate—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes, definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and also that you're constantly going—as we talked about earlier—to a studio or workshop where there are technical experts that can help you—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —realize your vision in that material.

KAREN LAMONTE: And one thing that I'm hoping is happening as I'm about to start making the *Nocturnes* is I learned a lot of things from both working at the ceramic workshops in Denmark and in the Netherlands, and—smart tricks—and I'm hoping that now—I'm actually about to go build a whole new body of wax positives for glass castings. I'm thinking that maybe some of the things I learned there might actually come into play.

MIJA RIEDEL: How interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I don't know what but, you know, you always get new tricks—

MIJA RIEDEL: Of course.

KAREN LAMONTE: —just stupid things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And that makes things work better. Like, I looked back—I looked at some slides of how I made some of the first dresses.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's a disaster. I mean, it's a real disaster.

MIJA RIEDEL: Catastrophe. [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: It's a catastrophe. You can't believe it. Like, are you ready for my number one favorite stupid thing that I did? They told me—the word in Czech for level is vodováha. It means water straight. [00:50:03]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right? So they said, "You know, your molds, when you load them into the oven, you have to make sure that the way these waxes are cut they are water level straight."

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Okay, fine." And I was like, "Well, how am I going to do that?" So I got back to the studio and I was like, "I'll do it literally." So I had my waxes in one piece and I built little moats with a flange of wax coming off of my wax positive. I poured water in there and then I took a little marker, and tried to draw a line. I couldn't draw a line so I took little pins and I stuck the pins in right at the top of the water level, and then tied a string around it, and then started my cut there, right, making everything water level straight, instead of just using a construction laser.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So dumb, right? So complicated. An entire day of work. You know, me with all my little pins and my string, and I'm thinking, this is working really well, you know?

And then one time we were at, you know, the equivalent of Home Depot, and I was walking down a lane for some construction materials or whatever. I was just wandering around. And I saw this thing, and I was like, "Steve, what is that?" And he's like, "Oh, it's a—you know, you point it at something and it's self-leveling."

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, a level.

KAREN LAMONTE: A level.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was like, "Oh." You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: And it's really embarrassing, like when I really—and so then I was like, "Wow, I wonder how many really dumb things I've been doing, "you know? And then more practical people come to the studio—like Charlie Parriott is great. He comes and he looks around, and he'll be like, "You should think about doing this and that." You know, I mean, he's just a—he's someone who has a ton of experience fabricating in different materials and is a great practical thinker. There's another guy who hopefully—this will be interesting. [00:52:04] There's a man named Peter Drobny who worked at Stueben for a long time, and the Corning Museum before that. He built the science center at the Corning Museum. He's brilliant. And he recently stopped working at Steuben, and I asked him if he would consider—and he's been over here a lot in the various factories. And I said, "Would you consider coming here and looking at, like, my in-studio process, how I'm using materials, as well as everything that's happening at the factory, and work with us to troubleshoot and, you know, make things go better?" And he said he would be happy to do it. So, I'm hoping by having totally fresh eyes of—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, eyes of a brilliant person with tons of experience—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —looking at how I'm doing everything, and how we're doing everything at the factory too.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I mean, there's a hundred components to mold materials, refractory mold materials. We're using two. Well, plaster, silicone, and water. I mean, that's so basic. And there could be things that we could be doing differently that would make the process run more smoothly, you know? And so, in this year he's probably going to come over three different times, observe, then do some experimentation, and then we'll hopefully implement some of his suggestions. So, that's something that I hope will hugely influence technique and process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. One thing that I realize we haven't talked about—and sitting here staring at this oxblood-red kimono almost makes me think is the evolution of color in your work—

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh.

MIJA RIEDEL: —and your thinking about that. How much of that has been material-driven? Has it been completely material-driven or is there something else that's driven that complete—well, it started with color and then it went completely transparent.

KAREN LAMONTE: Transparent, yeah. I am very aware of the—decorative kind of history and association of glass. [00:54:08] And for some reason, for me there's kind of an industrial—there's so many histories of glass. There's an industrial history of glass, like in what I call—like the glass vernacular—windows. They're in electric poles. There used to be glass insulators. And, you know, there's all of this in which color isn't taken into it, it's just the functionality and the qualities of the material. And then there's the design history, and that's, you know, cut facets and color additions, and all that kind of stuff. And I definitely do not want—I did not want to suggest any association to the decorative history of the material. I was much more interested in, like the pure qualities of the material, the transparency. And so I stayed away from color completely with the initial—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —especially the castings.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And now actually with the *Nocturnes* I am going to work with color. But gray is kind of like the most nondecorative color.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, it's very—I'm hopefully only going to, like, invoke some more somber—somber feeling, not a decorative feeling. And then the color—the ceramics it's simply the color of the clay itself, and then the glaze. And the glaze—the initial celadon I liked because of the cultural reference—

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, the Asian ceramics. And then the red is also the oxblood. I mean, technically that's not an oxblood—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —how it was made.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: But that's the color reference, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Close enough, yeah. Yeah. So it's more of a cultural reference than it is a specific color sensibility—[00:56:01]

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —or a desire for color. Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, that makes sense.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then, you know, the only other way I'm using sort of surfacing or color is there was—speaking of "sublime" in the sort of largeness of the natural world, in Denmark it was incredibly stormy when we were working there, incredibly stormy. Like, I actually think the studio might have even been struck by lightning once when we were there. I mean, it was terrifying. And if you've ever traveled up in the north, like Sweden, Demark, Norway, again nature is getting huge up there, and very imposing. And when those storms come in from the ocean, it is actually terrifying. And so there were a lot of days where there was so much water coming out of the sky that it was—you know, there were all of these trees around the workshop and it was blurring—like, you couldn't see. It looked like the trees were themselves melting and bleeding down. And it was that amazing, powerful—like, in Japan they would say, like, every storm has a kami, a spirit. And I was like, "Wow, the Japan would be so impressed by this storm." And so I tried to capture that sense of—the awesome sense, like awe-inspiring sense by working with—like, taking the botanical images and putting stains in them and then wiping them down so it looked like they were melting down.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: That's the erased piece in the front.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

KAREN LAMONTE: And sort of working—glazing and erasing. And it kind of—it looks like drawing but then it also looks like this sort of storm-beaten landscape at the same time. And that kind of dripping—the only time I used a glaze over the stains was to get that really—that dripping and running feeling of those storms.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that was kind of just experiencing an environmental thing and then trying to capture and re-present it. [00:58:08]

MIJA RIEDEL: What is the title of that piece where you've done that? Does it have a title?

KAREN LAMONTE: It doesn't have a title yet.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because that's the singular piece I can think of where you've actually—as you said, your hand is present.

KAREN LAMONTE: That is another one, hidden away over there. And that was the first one I did it on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And they're both black-and-white.

KAREN LAMONTE: Both black-and-white.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ceramic, yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. And that was a huge eye-opener for me in the time at the Danish facility. And I was like, "Ooh," you know. And I was thinking actually what I would really like to do is—I made a bunch of botanical tiles just to experiment with—

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure

KAREN LAMONTE: —I would like to actually make huge botanical tiles and line the entire inside of a room, but put that stain in there, and then sweep it down to get this, like, feeling of, like, that a storm is inside of the room, and melting the whole thing down. But that's a whole different project, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sounds like it would be a great public installation.

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, I was just thinking that. I was like, "That could be a great public installation."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Maybe I will pose that to somebody. But, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is there anything about your working process that has changed over time? I mean, clearly technical skills have changed.

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: But is there anything about the way of working that's changed?

KAREN LAMONTE: More methodical.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm more methodical. And actually Steve—we started working together in 2001. And he is really—he's a great documenter of things that are happening, and he makes a ton of, like, process papers that I fill in. You know, he breaks down—[01:00:01]

MIJA RIEDEL: How things are done.

KAREN LAMONTE: —he's really imaging how things—but he's really managing—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —like how things are doing, how long did I let something dry for, and he makes me all of these charts and I'm supposed to fill in as best I can. And he makes it so it's the least amount of effort for me—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —because he knows I hate it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So he breaks everything down. And so, that actually helps me be more methodical.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

KAREN LAMONTE: Then if there's a failure at a certain point in a piece—you know, I'm thinking particularly of the ceramics—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —then I can look back and I can say, "Okay," you know—and he worked in factories, you know, streamlining process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I think that sensibility really comes into play. And he also knows when not to get, like, too much into my process, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So he has an ability to kind of help but not hinder.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So that's very good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extremely helpful, I would think.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's really helpful. And I think that has helped identify what's working and what's not working more quickly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And make it easier to replicate as well.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly—repeatability.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so probably fewer losses.

KAREN LAMONTE: Fewer losses definitely. Like, I think when Peter Drobny comes to look at the casting process, I think Steve's sort of production management will be—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —I think he and Steve will work together quite closely on identifying, because things are going wrong but nobody knows why.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: But nobody is taking notes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, I love the factory guys but they do what they do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: One guy makes the mold. One guy loads the oven. Another guy programs it. And no one is tracking information over time—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —through all the various steps.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I think if we just do that for a while in a very pragmatic way, we're going to be able to find out where the Achilles tendons are. [01:02:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: It's like a kiln log.

KAREN LAMONTE: It is like a kiln log.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you're doing that for the glass process or—

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MIJA RIEDEL: —for the clay process—

KAREN LAMONTE: The glass process.

MIJA RIEDEL: —or in general? Okay. That's fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And we've tried to kind of go in before and do it, but there's a magic between—people got offended by the examination of the process.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I really realized I as the author can't do that. They take it as a criticism.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And Peter Drobny is a known and respected person for his technical brilliance.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So he is already in a position where he can come in and do it, and not offend anybody.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So I think that's going to be—I think that's going to be really interesting to see what happens.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. And it's interesting that now you're bringing the expert to where you're working as opposed to bringing your process to where there's technical expertise.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Exactly. Exactly. And actually you're totally right, because it occurred to me after working in the Netherlands with all of those experts, when I was like, "Wow, these experts sure know a lot." [They laugh.] They sure make things go better.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: I wonder if there's any of those for glass? [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's right. Has technology affected your work?

KAREN LAMONTE: Definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

KAREN LAMONTE: Well, the computer project that I want to do now—

MIJA RIEDEL: That you want to do, right—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but anything you've done to date?

KAREN LAMONTE: No, nothing I've done to date.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, but where you'd like to go in the future—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —with this program.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm fascinated by technology. You know, I am fascinated by it because, first of all, it's so foreign to me. My natural inclination is I'm really such a maker, a handicrafty person, so I will be very interested to work with technology and see. Maybe I'll hate it. Maybe I'll love it, you know? I have no idea how that's going to go.

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you have sort of an anticipated date when you'd like—when you'd like to begin that. Or it's somewhere in the future after the *Nocturnes*? [00:02:04]

KAREN LAMONTE: It's after the *Nocturnes*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I think the *Nocturnes*—I mean, we're going to have to work really avidly to get that body—to get the positives made and get them into the casting process to get them out in time. We're going to have to complete them by the end of this coming summer.

MIJA RIEDEL: And they for the—

KAREN LAMONTE: No, they're for—the *Nocturnes* are for the Biennale—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, for the Biennale, right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —in Venice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And which year?

KAREN LAMONTE: And that's not until 2015.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, 2015.

KAREN LAMONTE: Right, but they want photography by 2014, so that means I need to be done by 2013, which is next year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm. And are you thinking of them in a specific series as well?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, I think they'll probably be either five or seven.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

KAREN LAMONTE: It has to be an odd number.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why?

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.] Because odd numbers just always look so much better.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I assumed it was something as straightforward as that, but it begged the question.

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: We talked about arriving in the Czech Republic. We've talked about Japan. We've talked about Kohler. Do you think of yourself and your work as part of an international tradition or one that's particularly American, or Czech? It's actually an interesting question—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —especially for you.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or do you not think about it one way or the other?

KAREN LAMONTE: I don't think about it one way or another but I really realize that there are things about, like, my personality and my approach that are really American. Like, this sort of really irrational enthusiasm and belief that I can do anything. Like, that kind of exuberance is American.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And the Czechs—when we first came here Czechs were like, "You Americans are so funny. You think you can do anything." And it's like, "Yeah, we actually—we really do." [00:04:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

KAREN LAMONTE: And I really—you know, I really do think I can do anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I think that's typically American. But then, for example, the way I work now—okay, here's something interesting. When I left America I was totally a do-it-yourselfer. I wanted to do every, every, every single thing myself. Me. I wanted to make the positive. I wanted to make the mold. I wanted to load the kiln, you know. And I considered that the people at the factory were, like, getting in my way, you know—[laughs]—which is hilarious.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And this whole idea, this split between the academically-trained artist and the craftsperson, and these relationships that develop between fabricators—I mean, there are fabricators in the States but not to the degree that there are here, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And it's not—I mean, there are professionals. It is a profession in the States but there's not an educational basis for it really—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —the way there is here. Like, there's whole schools devoted to developing craftspeople who will simply be craftspeople. You know, they don't want to be academically-trained, you know, thinking artists. You know, they don't like that. They like making, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I think that sort of, I came from the combined education in the United States and I arrived on the ground thinking that I should really do everything myself.

And then very slowly over time I've started realizing that there's a lot of sense in working with fabricators, and it really—it's kind of insane to go through the expense and rigor of an American education, an art school education, and then be a fabricator, because—not in a good way or a bad way but it's very much a blue-collar job. And so, you know, I decided, okay, well, I have to look at the picture in terms of what are the things that only I can do? [00:06:13]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know? And where do I get my greatest pleasure? You know, I do get my greatest pleasure in the conceptualization of the work, in the research, in the distilling of all of these experiences, and information down into a body of work. For me that's really challenging.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: The fabrication and the making things is very satisfying. It's extremely

satisfying. And I love all the aspects of the studio work that I do do, but there is an absolute logic in giving up when it's not the kind of fingerprints of authorship, you know, that's in the building of the wax. It's not in how the plaster mold is made.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: It's not in how the oven is loaded.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And it's not in how the computer buttons are pressed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: That stuff is really fun. And, you know, whenever I am a part of it I love it, but I don't think those are—they're critical in that they have to be done well by experts, but they're not signature.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And the building of the wax that's here in this space is really—that's what is particular to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And the finishing of the ceramic works, and really all aspects of the ceramic. I love making the ceramic work, you know. Sometimes I have worked with—definitely working always with teams, pressing into the molds. But I think because ceramic is sort of my new love, my new great passion, just the handling of the material is so nice that it's like, I just look forward to that always. So I think that kind of is an area where I see myself as being American and then European, and then, you know—and then my exposure. I think I was definitely culturally influenced by Japan in my perceptions of materials and my desire to use them with a very refined finesse, like a very sensitive finesse. I don't want to—like, I would never—I don't know what I wouldn't do. I'm not going to say what I wouldn't do because then I'll probably end of doing it—[00:08:28]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and be embarrassed. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, there is such an involved sense of nuance I think in Japanese handling of clay in particular over thousands of years.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yep.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So—I am a citizen of the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yeah, more so than most people I've spoken with. I mean, I think that really comes through in your work and your experience, and in your working process.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And I was—actually I was talking to Katya Heller from Heller Gallery, and she said, "You know, it seems like you came to Europe for one particular experience of working in a glass factory but now you're really working in many factories in Europe." And that's actually true. I'm working in Denmark right now with ceramics, Czech Republic with glass, and in Italy with bronze, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh. Well, we haven't talked about that.

KAREN LAMONTE: We haven't talked about bronze at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about that.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, I'm glad you brought that up. That evolved after Japan as well.

KAREN LAMONTE: That—exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did it evolve in tandem with the ceramic, or how did that work?

KAREN LAMONTE: In tandem with the ceramic, slightly after.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

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MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Karen LaMonte in the artist's studio in Prague in Czech Republic on November 3, 2012 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number four. I think we had talked briefly about the bronze pieces, and we may not have had that on the last card. So let's talk about the evolution of those.

KAREN LAMONTE: Sure.

MIJA RIEDEL: It came out of the time in Japan. I think you were talking about observing the casting of a bell?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, yeah. I was invited to observe casting of a temple bell, which was actually a religious ceremony. So it was quite amazing to see. You know, I had done bronze casting in the States at school and at a regular foundry but I had never seen bronze cast in the format of a religious ceremony attended by priests. And so, that was definitely an eye-opener.

So then I did not anticipate wanting to use bronze at all, but I got back and I was thinking about that sonic dematerialization of sound, of a bell ringing, and I was thinking about, you know, the Japanese relationship to nature, and I had been incorporating the botanical elements in the ceramic pieces, and I thought about putting the work actually outside into nature.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, sort of those two strains of thought came together in the idea to make them in bronze. And so, I'm working now with a bronze foundry in Italy in the town of Pietrasanta. And it's called the—it's the Mariani Foundry. And so the two—I think it's three or four generations, but the people I know are Adolfo, the father, and Nicola, the son. And they cast both—well, I chose that foundry because they cast both bronze and iron. [00:02:07] And again, like, thinking about dematerialization and deterioration, one idea that I'm exploring right now is casting the pieces in iron with the intention—starting the rusting process intentionally and then just letting them deteriorate over time, you know. And I like the idea of sort of starting an artwork in my lifetime that will evolve into just sort of a remnant of itself. You know, I think that would be really interesting. I would never even see it completed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: But it could be amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's so fascinating, as we've talked about over the past couple days, especially today, of just the destruction slowly of different temples and ruins over time—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —so it was interesting to think about that in your own work intentionally done.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: We also started to talk about the potential for doing a more male-focused series perhaps in bronze or iron.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right?

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, yeah, in thinking about—I was thinking about the idea of female beauty, you know, and that I've been exploring female beauty for such a long time—or not really a long, long time, but I've been so focused on that. And I was thinking, well, what is the attribute in a male, you know, that is so sought after or regarded, you know? And it's heroism, the idea of the male hero. And particularly in thinking about bronze work, when you think about this public statuary it's Napoleon on his horse, it's these heroes. It's—if you want to make a statue to celebrate a male, you make a heroic bronze. And so, that's one thing, you know, off in the future, after the chairs, after—but I've started collecting some small figurines of, you know, cowboys and these sort of archetypes of hero, you know. And I guess that's another—that's a good word for it because, you know, I'm looking at archetypes of beauty, female archetypes, and then the archetype—the male really would be the hero or maybe the villain, you know? So, just—that's kind of a little tinge that—you know, a tickle on my brain that I'm thinking about for the future. [00:04:30]

MIJA RIEDEL: You know, I wanted just to ask this question again because it was such an interesting answer and I just want to make sure that we had it. If we had it on the last card we can take it off again. But the question was, out of all the different experiences you've had, which would you consider your most rewarding educational experience? And—yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. Definitely I think the residency in the Netherlands at the ceramic center because it was so fast-paced, self-driven in that you did all of your own work, but being guided by experts who had so much experience and this ability to draw on your existing capabilities. It was just the most rewarding and fascinating experience I've had making objects to date.

MIJA RIEDEL: And I think that's especially interesting because much as people have talked about you revolutionizing the potential for glass and glass sculpture today, what you did in ceramics had never been done in the studio before. The fellow who—I'll let you tell that story. So it's not only an educational experience for you, it was an educational experience for the brilliant technicians who worked there—

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —in really transforming what clay—what people thought clay was capable of doing. [00:06:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. And actually they told—they told—so we stopped by to visit and donate a piece to their collection, and they said they started a small area of the studio devoted to the materials that I was using for the mold making, for the rubber and this lightweight epopast exterior that they actually are trying to incorporate it into a method of practice.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, that's fascinating.

KAREN LAMONTE: And now the thing is it's a big question. It's like, is it a new technique that's transferable to other projects—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —or it is really one of those cases that necessity is the mother of invention?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And it's the perfect way to make this work—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but it's kind of not appropriate for anything else. I mean, time will tell, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the way that you described it is it made undercuts possible in molded ceramic, correct?

KAREN LAMONTE: In molded ceramic, yeah. It was a Canadian artist who came into the studio, and he's like, "Oh, my god, you've solved the problem of the undercut in ceramic." [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And you didn't even know it was a problem, right?

KAREN LAMONTE: I didn't even know it's a problem. I was like, "Okay, weirdo, go back to your own studio." [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about exhibitions—

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —because another thing we mentioned I think maybe when the tape had just—or the card had just run out was that you really have been able to support yourself exclusively with your work, that you don't have a regular teaching career, that you don't do regular workshops. That—that is the way you sustain yourself. And how significant and long-term have been your relationships with dealers?

KAREN LAMONTE: I have—let's see, I graduated—I started working with the Hellers maybe in—or then it was Doug, just Doug—in 1992 or '[9]3—very early on. [00:08:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: So, 20 years ago.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, 20 years ago. And just recently—you know, as I started working so much with ceramic and bronze I really had to look for a gallery that was representing multiple materials.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: So, unfortunately that relationship sort of naturally drew to a close.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: But we are all still great friends, you know, and I admire and respect the Hellers tremendously. And I think a large part of my ability to actually be able to live from the support of the galleries is the fact that I really believe in the work that the galleries do. You know, I know a lot of artists—and it's a combination of first—like, I believe in the role of the gallery in the whole equation, but also I live in Europe so, you know, people do—I think it's a natural instinct. People will visit the studio and they'll ask if they can buy from you directly. And I have the convenient excuse of, well, you know, I live here in Europe and someone has to import it to the States and all this stuff. And so that's kind of a convenient thing. But it's also more than that. And I always say this too, that I believe in the role that the galleries play, you know. I worked with Heller, and then for a while with Heller and Imago Gallery in California, and now just with Imago in California. And, for example, from the first show of kimonos, David placed pieces—11 pieces in institutions, in public collections. That takes—

MIJA RIEDEL: From the first exhibition, 11 pieces?

KAREN LAMONTE: [Laughs] yes. I mean, that is—he's as obsessive as I am.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Yes, it sounds like it, right. [They laugh.] That's a good description.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, but it's really—I'm like, "Wow, you are actually the perfect person for me to work with," because I like just doing my thing, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. [00:10:00]

KAREN LAMONTE: I'm so happy here in the studio. I just do the studio work. Steve does all of the coordination and the management stuff. And then, you know, now David does all the sales, but we really rely on the role of the gallery. And I believe in them a hundred percent. And I believe that there is a whole sphere in the equation, the art world equation, of curators, gallerists, museums. And I don't expect myself to play any of those roles.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: I would never curate a show. I'm not qualified to do that, you know. I really don't see myself as qualified to do that. [Laughs.] And, you know, I would never—I would never try to sell my own work. That's insane. I don't even try to write about my own work. Everybody goes, "A statement about your work." I'm like—[gasps]—"Somebody else write it," you know? I don't consider—you know, I'm really great at one thing and that's just working in the studio, you

know, and I don't really expect myself to do anything else or make believe that I can, because I think that other people have a different perspective that is related to the field that they're specialized in, you know? And so I let them be the experts.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. It seems as if the market for your work started off fairly strong, fairly quickly and has been consistent throughout. Is that true? Are there certain—in your experience—

KAREN LAMONTE: It seems like that's true.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: It seems like that's true. Knock on wood again, you know? I mean, I think—whenever people see my work they say the same thing: "I've never seen anything like it"—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —"and I didn't think anything like that was possible."

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so I think they're kind of slightly, like, objects of wonder or something. And I think people just like to look at them and wonder about everything—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: —where the ideas come from, how they're made. You know, what you were saying about the layers. I think they're kind of—there are so many ways to approach the objects that they are—they appeal to a broad number of people. [00:12:14]

MIJA RIEDEL: Which is interesting because that goes directly back to something you just said earlier, which is you wanted to make work that would appeal to a broad audience.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's interesting that you're right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Universal.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, and that it didn't need explanation from me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, that there's so many different levels on which it can be understood, appreciated, interpreted, and whatever experience somebody brings from whatever culture.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: So knock on wood. [Knocking sound.] Thank you, gallery dealers. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: That's actually a nice thing to be able to say because a lot of people have mixed reviews of their experiences with galleries.

KAREN LAMONTE: But, you know, I've always—I've always been completely honest with the gallery dealers.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems as if they have done that in return.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yep. Yeah, definitely.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, and that's wonderful because I don't always hear that story. What sort of changes have you seen in glass in your lifetime?

KAREN LAMONTE: It's interesting. I think we talked about it a little bit yesterday but the skill level, the native skills of somebody coming out of school right now are so far beyond what I had at my disposal. You know, I think Lino—you know, all of the guys from the West Coast going to Italy, first of all, going to Murano—Dale going to Murano, Ben Moore went to Murano—

MIJA RIEDEL: Dick Marquis.

KAREN LAMONTE: —Dick Marquis, Jamie Carpenter—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —you know, all of these adventurers who went over and embraced, and investigated, and adopted this tradition, and brought it back to the United States—[00:14:06]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —and then cultivated an entire culture around it in Seattle, that's amazing. And then they started teaching and then, you know, Italians started coming over and teaching in Pilchuck. I mean, we have all of those people and institutions to thank for the skill levels that are here today, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And then it was not only Italy, then people started going to Sweden and bringing back Graal technique, you know. These are all things that have come to us. And I think now we're starting to see this first generation where it's like, all of these skills are a given. You know, it's not miraculous and it's not one person has them. It's like, there's goblet makers, incredible goblet makers all over the States right now, you know? And their skill level is outrageous. So now—okay, now it's part of our making vocabulary. So now, kind of—I always see it as—oh, one time—like the phrase "standing on the shoulders of giants," you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm. Yes.

KAREN LAMONTE: We could not do—like, my generation, and especially the generation after me—I mean, they have everything now. We could not do what we do if it were not for the people who had gone before us, you know? And you can criticize it and say, "Oh, there's not enough content," or whatever, but actually the first thing you need is the technical vocabulary, and that's what all of these people focused on, and brought to the game board, you know? And now people are starting to, you know, integrate conceptual thinking and technical ability.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And now things are getting really quite amazing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: And so, that's the big change.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know? And it's ongoing. And I think it's a natural evolution but it is amazing to watch. [00:16:00]

MIJA RIEDEL: That is fascinating. You're right; so much has changed within a generation. And as we start to talk with artists of your generation—I just, as I said, spoke to Dante Marioni. You both did step into that glass world, that sculpting glass world, and at an extraordinary time when those skills were just in full development in Pilchuck, in particular. But you're right, it's a very interesting time to see—it will be fascinating to see what happens.

KAREN LAMONTE: What's going to happen now, now that it's all—now that it's really—I don't want to say common because not everybody can do it—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —but it is almost a common vocabulary—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: —this extraordinary skill set, you know? So, now we get to see what happens.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that does seem very much like a fusion of the Italian and the American, and the Swedish experience, I mean, to bring the incredible technical skills from Italy that they've had, and really closely guarded for so many hundreds of years—to bring that into full play and range of the American experimental sensibility—

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —has really created something completely unique.

KAREN LAMONTE: Completely unique.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm trying to think of a parallel and nothing is coming immediately to mind. Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: I can't think of anything, you know. It will be interesting, you know. And, you know, stories I've heard—you know, I never experienced these conversations first hand, but that a lot of the Italians felt that there was a dwindling interest in the traditions in Italy, and they felt that they were planting the seeds—you know, these seeds of skill in fertile ground in the United States. You know, there was a hunger for it and an enthusiasm for tradition that everybody—nobody was taking it on in Italy, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that's true. I think that's the motivation for why certain of the Italian—I think of Lino and a couple of others, why they were willing to come and share that here. And I've also heard that that was not very well-received in Italy at all, that that was taken as a betrayal, that sort of secret knowledge—[00:18:03]

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —but it will be interesting to see where—and it's spread so widely now across the entire globe. I mean, there's such interesting things going on in Australia.

KAREN LAMONTE: Oh, Australia is amazing. You know, I am not—I'm only in contact with Richard Whiteley, who runs the program in Canberra.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: But there's incredible work coming out of that program, incredible work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay, well, I think we have done a very good job of covering these. I have just a few summary questions and then we can wrap for the evening. This will actually be interesting: Would you discuss your view on the importance of glass as a means for expression, its strengths and its limitations, and what it does better than anything else, other than what we've already discussed of course—the essence of it that appeals to you and continues to appeal to you. And then maybe if you would compare and contrast that with clay.

KAREN LAMONTE: Wow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

KAREN LAMONTE: That's going to be hard. Okay, so—[they laugh]

MIJA RIEDEL: I know you—that's for [inaudible] you.

KAREN LAMONTE: Yeah, it's impossible.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Perfect [laughs].

KAREN LAMONTE: Okay, I'll try. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Good. I didn't want to let you down.

KAREN LAMONTE: So my attraction to glass is continually this kind of dual—it seems contradictory in so many ways. Like, it seems fragile and incredibly strong. It seems transparent and opaque. It is liquid and solid, like, not in that false technical way but, you know, it always seems quite liquid to me. And so, I think—and it also kind of inhabits a realm of subtlety that other materials just don't inhabit. And so, I think for that reason, for the ability to layer meaning,

I think it will always be of interest to me. [00:20:16]

MIJA RIEDEL: It sounds like—sorry, go ahead please.

KAREN LAMONTE: And also I think it's technically expanding, or at least I'm learning more and more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: Because it's a material of science, it's always being used in new ways.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

KAREN LAMONTE: You know, now they are looking at building cladding. And for these skyscrapers, because of 9/11, skyscrapers, the cladding has to be bomb-proof. So, you know, our iPhone screens, it's called Gorilla Glass. That's made by Corning. Now they're making a glass, it's called Godzilla Glass. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Love it.

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 come 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 came 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.]