

A photograph of Erik Muijsenberg, a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a black tuxedo and a bow tie. He is smiling and holding a microphone in his right hand and a piece of paper in his left. A name tag on his lapel reads "Erik Muijsenberg". The background shows a stage with a floral patterned backdrop and stage lights.

The Phoenix Committee Chairman for 2024, Erik Muijsenberg, discusses this year's event in Prague and why glass sculptor Karen LaMonte is a worthy winner of the Glass Person of the Year award.

▲ Erik Muijsenberg speaking as Vice Chairperson at last year's Phoenix Committee banquet.

Phoenix Chairman discusses 2024 award winner

1. How flattered do you feel to be PAC Chairman this year?

I am not sure flattered is the right word, but I feel enormously honoured, privileged, and humbled to fulfill this position, leading a group of suppliers that are shaping the future of the glass industry.

It is a unique position to be in, and I am still sometimes surprised when I wake up and remember that I was asked to do this after just three years of being active—though we added two years due to the Covid pause. So, technically, I was Vice Chairperson for three years, with many discussions about when we could move forward. Of course, during Covid, it was not possible to organise an award banquet.

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2. How long have you been associated with the PAC?

I was first asked to become a new member in 2017. The first award banquet I attended was for Glass Person of the Year 2017, James O'Callaghan, held in London. This event made a great impression on me. It was perfectly organised, including a boat tour on the River Thames. The banquet was in the County Hall Westminster with a view of Big Ben. Later, James talked about all the beautiful glass structures he was involved in and even about how he met Steve Jobs and discussed designing Apple (Glass) Shops.

The PAC has one purpose: “The Phoenix Award Committee is comprised of individual members who are employed by supplier companies to the glass industry. It is their duty to select, each year, the recipient of The Phoenix Award. The recipient is a living person who has been active in and has made significant and major contributions to any phase of the glass industry.”

We all take pride in this duty. We invest time and resources to find a Glass Person who deserves recognition for their hard work. I feel proud of those we have selected over the years, starting with Oliver Wiegand, Alicia Durán, Li Shenhua, and most recently Ahmet Kirman. Meeting them in person, they all have shown to be great individuals with hearts made of glass. As I was the banquet chair for Alicia in Madrid, which was a great success, I believe this led to my opportunity to become the chairperson.

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3. When did you first hear about PAC and what benefits has it brought to you personally and the overall glass industry?

I first heard about PAC from my colleague and friend Glenn Neff. Combustion Tec had been active in the USA for a long time, and PAC started out in 1971 as a US member-based organisation. Glenn was the chairperson in 2009 when Javier Gutierrez received the Phoenix Award, so he has remained a member since, which is a right after you have been a chairperson.

Glenn motivated me for several years to become a member, and you can only be asked by the committee to join. I have to say I am very glad to be part of this committee. Most of the active members and past chairs have become good friends. You can discuss the future of the glass industry and all its aspects with them. Members are from all areas, such as furnace, refractory, forming and inspection machine suppliers. I have been more active in the hot end, so it also opened my eyes more to the cold end of glass production.

Personally, I have grown a lot with the opportunity to speak with those leading the glass industry. It gives you new insights into what drives the industry. The other suppliers and recipients have become close friends and family. I remember well how Alicia became a real personal friend, how I was chatting with Surasak Decharin on the Thames about the glass industry in Thailand, how I had the honour to dine with Ahmet Kirman and his closest business friends from Turkey, and when I visit the Wiegand factory, I cannot forget the nice time we had at Lake Constance. These are experiences I will never forget.

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5. As someone who is employed by a company based in the Czech Republic, were you particularly pleased that the winner was located in Prague?

Yes, this was a surprise to me. I was thinking about how I would organise and manage a banquet in Australia or somewhere far away. Then it turns out we unanimously elected an American-born citizen from New York who has lived and worked in Prague since 1998, and she agreed to have the award banquet in Prague. This makes my life a little easier, organising it together with my banquet chair Aleksander Pinda, who is based in Dresden, fairly close to Prague.

It is indeed special. I am originally from the Netherlands and started my work at TNO Glass (now CelSian) in 1990, but I began working with Glass Service Czechia in 1998 by opening the Glass Service office in Maastricht, the Netherlands.

Karen and I both made significant steps in our lives. Later in 2010, I moved to Czechia and have never regretted it. Compared to New York and the Netherlands, Czechia feels less populated, with more nature and hills that give you lots of space to breathe and think.

Karen, as an artist working with glass, feels at home in what is still called Bohemia. For me, she is more Bohemian than some locals are. She found in Czechia the glass expertise she was looking for.

4. Tell us about this year’s winner. What was it about her work that stood out?

The committee tries to find a balance between continents, industry and art. We felt it was time for an artist who can create miracles from glass. That is exactly what we found with Karen. The life-size figures she creates are impressive to see up close. Also, her deep study into clothing and her recent topics like clouds show the depth of a real artist. For her, it is not just an art object; there is so much more in what she makes.

I also asked her why she sometimes uses other materials besides glass, and she replied that it is so difficult to work with glass. Sometimes it takes her a year to make a successful new object. So, you can imagine the time and effort that goes into her work. During the visit to her studio in Prague, I learned that recently she has primarily been working with opal cast glass, which is not the easiest type of glass to manipulate.

Additionally, Karen is a female artist, and considering that in 51 years PAC had only found two female glass persons before, I felt extra happy we elected Karen. When I shared the news with Alicia Durán and Alev Yaraman, they were immediately confirmed their attendance at the next banquet in Prague.

▼ Karen LaMonte, the 2024 Phoenix glass person of the year, is a sculptor based in Prague, Czech Republic.

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6. Is it unusual for a glass artist to win the award?

I would say a little yes to this question. We published a fantastic book showing 50 years of the Phoenix Award organisation with all past winners and chairs documented.

Over the 50 years, there have only been three glass artists before, but they were, like Karen, truly great artists: Lino Tagliapietra (2012) Dale Chihuly (1998) Dominick Labino (1977).

So even in this respect Karen is the first female Artist to receive this recognition.

7. What were your impressions of Karen's studio in Prague?

Working in Czechia, I have been in Prague many times, and as you may know, there are many glass stores to buy souvenirs in Prague centre. I was surprised to learn that Karen's studio is just a few footsteps away from the city centre. I was not sure what to expect exactly; I can only say that her studio looks like an artist's studio and more. Being in a busy, growing capital city like Prague, it was much larger than I envisioned. Everywhere you could see objects and articles she is or was working on. After a hospitable welcome by Karen and her partner and husband, Steve Polaner, we walked around to see some of her latest work. Finally, we went into her basement, which seems like an underground art/wine cellar, and I felt like I was walking in a museum. She had several of her life-size glass sculptures standing, including several from her Japanese series, which was so impressive to see. Karen is such a pleasant, open person to chat with, and I was astonished by her deep investigations when preparing to make something, such as her more recent work on cloud structures.

Phoenix Award Committee,

<https://www.phoenixawardcommittee.org/>

8. Are you able to give an indication of what lies in store for the banquet event on Friday, October 11?

Aleksander has visited several hotels and venues and selected a beautiful hotel with a fantastic banquet room that fits well with the artistic input Karen will provide. I do not want to disclose too much, but we expect many past recipients to attend, as the last few years were more complicated due to Covid. Prague, being a Bohemian glass city, will attract more attendees, making it a memorable event.