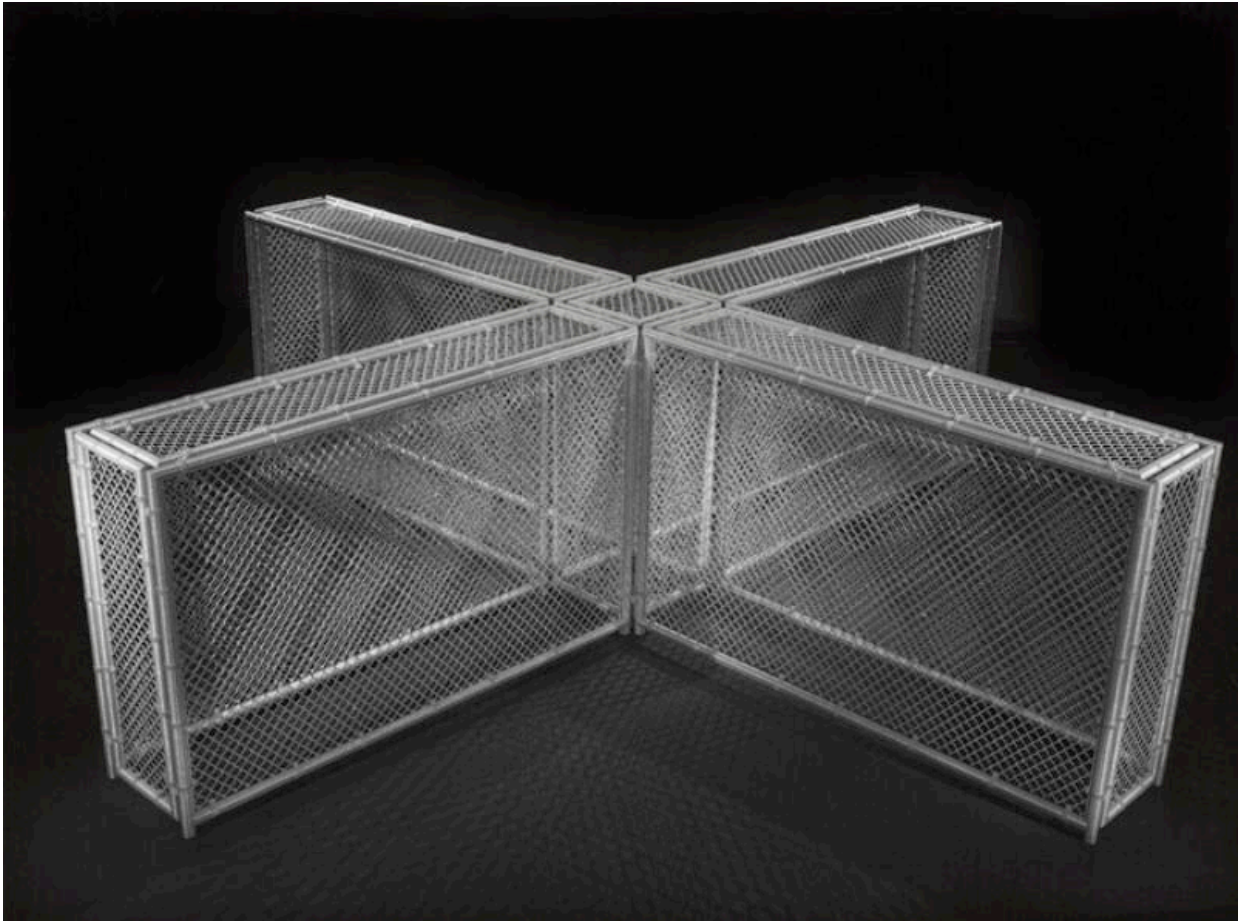


**whitehot | October 2008, Interview with Liza Lou**

*Liza Lou Maximum Security 2007-2008 Steel, glass beads 23.5' square x 80" h Image Credit: Dean Elliott, Studio24 courtesy the artist*

**Liza Lou – In Conversation with Charles Schultz**

Imagine what it would be like to cover every inch of your kitchen table with beads no thicker than the girth of the tip of your shoelace. Imagine balancing each bead on its tip, one bead at a time, over and again, with tweezers. Now imagine repeating that process for every surface in your entire kitchen. It would take years. Such is the grandeur and working practice of Liza Lou.

Liza Lou exploded onto the contemporary art scene in 1996 when the late Marcia Tucker invited Lou to exhibit her ornately beaded tableau, *Kitchen*, at the New Museum in New York City. The

exhibition was a break through for Lou, who'd worked for five years, largely without any recognition, to complete the piece.

Thirteen years later Lou is back in New York, simultaneously exhibiting her new work in a solo exhibition at L&M Gallery and at the Lever House. Now an internationally renowned artist with a McArthur Genius Award on her resume, Lou doesn't have anything to prove, but she still has a lot to say. Whitehot writer, Charles Schultz sat down with Lou after the opening of her exhibition, Liza Lou, to discuss her studio practice in South Africa, how singing and faith play an instrumental role in her working process, art as a form of forgiveness, and what it was like for her to edit the memoirs of the woman who gave Liza her first big break.

**Charles Schultz:** *You've been working on this body of work in a South African studio for the last three years. You've said you didn't intend to spend so much time there, what happened?*

**Liza Lou:** I wouldn't say that I went there with any kind of agenda. I'm an artist, I wanted to make an art piece, but I wanted to do it in a socially responsible way. So I hooked up with a non-profit, and they set me up with some people who desperately needed work in South Africa. On the first day these Zulu people started to sing, and I knew immediately I was in the right place.

**CS:** *Can you describe the circumstances?*

**LL:** We were sitting around, I think I had like 20 people, some had never used beads before, and there was just a kind of quietness. Then all of a sudden one person just started singing a riff, an old folk song that everybody knows, and across the room another person started, and the hair on the back of my neck just went stiff and I thought, "Oh my God, this is way too good."

For my work which is super labor intensive and time consuming, I listen to music constantly. And I play music too. But this kind of singing is harmonic singing. It's all a cappella. You see, in South Africa people sing when there is a birth, they sing where there is a death, they sing when they're happy, when they're down. They sing all the time. They sing into their work. In African American culture, it's the same thing. You could even go back to slave labor when people sang into what they did, and there are some cultures that believe that if you don't sing as you work you don't give the thing you are doing life.

**CS:** *What is it like for you working in South Africa with the Zulus? Has it had an impact on your work?*

**LL:** Well these people have been through a lot—and you know most of us have—but people in South Africa maybe have a tougher time, all the time. You see whole families die. I mean most of the people I work with have lost their parents, lost their children, many of themselves are very sick, and yet they are the most joyous powerful people I've ever been around in my life. And that has huge impact for me. I've been with people when they find out they're HIV positive. These are people with children and they learn their children are also positive, and within ten minutes of learning this horrible fact they are making jokes. They find a way to rise above. They dress up like you can't believe; they look gorgeous! They rise up to what life brings them with tremendous dignity. And it makes everything that I've ever experienced in my life just pale in comparison. So I am very honored to be around these guys. They teach me so much just by virtue of their strength

**CS:** *They are free to find the positive in the horrible. It reminds me of the prisoner who contented himself with the knowledge that only he had the power to forgive his torturers. And that was enough to keep the prisoner alive through untold amounts of suffering.*

**LL:** Yeah, that's really true. And you know South Africa is the place where Mandela really set an example about forgiveness once he came into power. The Truth and Reconciliation hearings were about saying "the way we're going to deal with this injustice isn't with revenge against the white government, we're actually going to have people who were affected come forward and tell their stories and the people who perpetrated this crime are going to sit and listen." It's just incredible. Can you imagine if George Bush had done that? Can you imagine if instead of bombing and causing war and declaring part of the world an axis of evil. If there had been a chance for forgiveness can you imagine what would have happened instead?

**CS:** *Your piece at the Lever House, it's called Maximum Security Fence, and it's shaped like a cross. You've said that you felt the work gave you an impression of forgiveness. Can you talk about that?*

**LL:** I didn't actually get that impression of forgiveness until I was looking at the completed work. I was thinking about all the effort that went into it, and thinking about the reasons I thought I'd made it—my political anger—and then there it was, an open symbol. It exists in the world. It embraces anyone who wants to come and see it. It's there to give you a sense of pleasure or wonder. It doesn't keep anyone out. It's available to everyone, and isn't that the most forgiving thing? It grants access to anyone who wants it, and by the very virtue of its silence, it's an act of forgiveness. I can think of some people I wouldn't really want to give that to, but there it is.

**CS:** *Can you walk us through the process of a work like "Offensive/Defensive"?*

**LL:** My starting point was middle eastern prayer rugs, that's where the patterns come from. First I draw the patterns onto sheets of aluminum. Then, because I work with other people, I will paint in the colors that I want them to bead. Then of course we glue on the beads, and they all have to be balanced on their tip. It is really incredibly slow and monotonous work. A section the size of your palm takes one person about a day [note: these pieces tend to be upwards of six feet by three feet]. After we finished the entire pattern I stepped back and realized that what it needed was a sort of marching army, but abstract. I couldn't explain it, so I had to do it myself, and that's how this organic shape took form. It's actually a layer of beads sitting right on top of another layer. For me I see it as a sort of mold or growth, some kind of corrosive element that's marching in and disrupting the order, disrupting the pattern. All of this body of work is about break down and control, so you have this tremendous amount of control and order and then chaos, as the patterns break down.

**CS:** *I think what you're saying about the tension between the order and the breakdown of that order really dovetails with a large part of the history of many religions, especially Christianity and Islam. Here are two religions that thrive on order, ritual, routine, and yet over and again they erupt the world into states of war and chaos. It's like, "here's one way to live; now try and live through this!"*

**LL:** I like that you can find those associations. I like that with art you start with an idea—the artist's idea—but it inevitably opens out into other people's ideas, other people's narratives. I really love that, so that art becomes a kind of mirror or reflection a place where you can contemplate and come up with your own feelings. There isn't one kind of polemic that you're trying to bash people over the head with. And hopefully, above all, it gives people pleasure. That pleasure of looking. That you are drawn in by the sheer volume of material and form and care and love. My work almost argues that the pleasure of looking is part of what it is to be alive. It gives our lives dignity. It separates us from just being work machines and money makers. It's the idea that you can just go into the MOMA or the Met and sit down on a bench and just look and look and look. It's one of the pleasures of being alive. And it's one of my motivating forces in my work: to make things people will sit down and look at, and make associations and hopefully it will have meaning, but hopefully also some pleasure.

**CS:** *For me as you approach these pieces, physically speaking, it's kind of like walking through time. From a distance you just see something beautiful, outside of time. But when you get in close you see that this huge colorful object is actually comprised of millions of tiny beads and you feel that. You feel the time and effort and like you said, love. It truly is a labor of love. Which makes me wonder, how do you prepare yourself to start something like this?*

**LL:** Starting is hard, finishing is even harder. I often think about marathon runners. There is a pacing to work on things that take a very long time, and you know it gives very little back because you are working with tiny tiny digits. So you know a painter can get a lot of joy after a short period of working by simply stepping back and seeing what they've done. For me I don't get that sense for a long time, sometimes it takes a year. So to prepare you have to have some kind of faith, a lot of faith.

**CS:** *How does your "faith" in what you do help you through your working process?*

**LL:** I have a Buddhist philosophy when it comes to working, that in the moment of the doing that's where the joy is. If I was really a Buddhist we would smash this up when it was finished. We joke in the studio because this is a panel that we work on flat on the ground and it's very much like a Buddhist sand painting—a mandala. But actually it's even slower than pouring sand, I mean we're

there with tweezers adding tiny beads one at a time—it makes the Buddhists look like slackers. But truly you have to believe in the process and it has to bring you joy, and really I think the singing helps a lot. If it was any other way, if we were all just thinking about finishing for an exhibition, it wouldn't work. It just wouldn't get done.

**CS:** Last question, Marcia Tucker was a great woman, mentor and friend to many artists. She brought your pivotal work *Kitchen to the New Museum* in '95, which in many ways jumpstarted your career. You recently edited her memoirs. What was that like for you? Why did you take on that task?

**LL:** Marcia was a dear friend. Over the years, as she wrote she would send me little sections, and I would send her things I was thinking about or working on and we just had this nice little postal relationship. She was somebody who didn't think conventionally. She was quite a bit older, but she was never motherly. She was a buddy. She was my friend. That's how cool she was. Students flipped out over her. She just loved young people.

As she was getting sick a publisher approached her about publishing her memoir, but it needed revision. It was a 600 page manuscript. She started getting really sick, 3rd stage lung cancer, and I just thought, well, how can I help. I'm not the kind of person that's good at just making soup and sitting by with a blanket and staring out of the window. And she's not either. She's very driven, and so I said, "why don't I work on this with you? We'll have fun!" and that's what we did. For three months I would drive up from my studio in LA and sit with her, and we'd just work on the book.

And Marcia was someone who believed in people, in the early stages of the New Museum (she was a founding director) she hired these kids, no formal training, and gave them all this trust and they would curate exhibitions. And it was the same with me. I'm not a writer, but she'd read my writing and she trusted me. It was totally characteristic of her.

When she passed away in October of 2006 the book wasn't finished. I had a choice, I could have walked away from it, let the publisher finish the book or not, but at that point I knew it had to happen. I was carrying it in my head. So I took another year and a half, just put my stuff on hold, and it was a total privilege. It drove me a bit crazy as well, because there were other things I should have been doing, people were getting a little mad at me. But I just had to finish it. And my main reason was for young people to be able to read what Marcia had to say about art.

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