



### **Splendor in the Grass: Liza Lou and the Cultivation of Beauty by Peter Schjeldahl**

"I hate the word 'obsessive,'" Liza Lou remarked to me matter-of-factly. I was surprised. We had just met. Standing beside her, I was having my first look at the great KITCHEN, my gaze awash in glistening tides of reflected and refracted aureate light. I was entranced, "all eyes." You never see anything more acutely, while with less understanding, than the first time. Had I said something annoying to Lou? Or did she read my thoughts? My mind was indeed summoning memories and associations that, were they a computer file, should be tagged "obsessiveness." Chastened by her words, I stumbled inwardly. The KITCHEN blazed at me with a new, alienated glory.

I saw what she meant.

The KITCHEN is a sum of choices. It bristles with deliberation. Most of the decisions are clever, many are lyrically inspired, some are just goofy, and few are abstruse, calling for explanations that, when provided, may not help much. Don't seek internal consistency, except of material, those multitudinous beads, tiny glass cylinders from the Czech Republic (long the world's bead-making superpower, a Czech friend assures me) glued in flabbergasting variegated motifs and patterns. Procedures vary, forms vary wildly, and there is nothing like a governing style, let alone evidence of pathological predictability -- the automatic pilot, the tic -- which signals obsession. (Obsession is one damned thing over and over, the KITCHEN is one damned thing after another.) For unity, there is only meltdown of sheer visual BLISS.

We are so eager to regard artists, often with well-meaning condescension, as nuts. We need them to be nuts, in a way. Otherwise we would envy and fear them too much. To appear at least neurotic

(obsessive, fetishistic, regressive) can make an artist beloved if combined with enough intelligence and charm to relieve the ghastly tedium of neurosis. (Being dead, like that unendurable man Vincent van Gogh, used to help, but today, what with protective screens of curators and journalists, it is not essential.) We smile at each other over the heads of artists as at the play of children. We employ another conventional image of the artist, too: the self-possessed professional whose dignity rests on proven earning power, among other hallowed American values. What we lack is a STORY between the two extremes -- where the truth is and where Lou operates, navigating the art-cultural fog bank of the late 1990s.



The 1990s have seen the collapse of nearly all traditional rationales of art-making. Pity today's aspiring young artist, who confronts impossibly inflated and conflicting demands for effect -- to resist and to rival popular culture, to advance political causes and to please crowds, to illustrate academic theory and to sell -- while disoriented by the advanced decay of art's roots in craft disciplines. Our time gives the artist nowhere to start and nothing to master, then wants miracles. Lou's KITCHEN seems to me an anti-miracle, spectacularly refusing to fill any bill not its own. It is fundamentally hermetic, an armored refuge of personal initiative, though affected by such art-world pressures as the early-nineties fashion for social criticism. Somewhat hesitantly, meanwhile, the KITCHEN engages the one richly promising intuition that has been stirring in art of our time. I mean the intuition of beauty, which Lou will develop fully in her BACK YARD.

Beauty names the physiological standoff of attraction and reverence, appetite and awe, which stops us dead in our tracks before some object. With melting pleasure and intense satisfaction, we feel ourselves altered, or reorganized, in conformance to the object -- thinking and feeling on the object's terms. The object can be almost anything, art or not art, and perhaps immaterial: even an idea, given only that it appear momentarily more powerful and valuable than oneself. Art used to court beauty as a lightning rod invites lightning. Then, in modern times, artists ever more readily sacrificed beauty to the pursuit of



other aims and ambitions, opportunities and afflictions. It is a long story, ending in entropy -- all the ingenious modern ideas of and for art piling up and spreading out, becoming interchangeable. Picking through the residue, artists try to recall a fundamental, difficult joy that art used to be about. There is nothing neat or clean in this transition.

"I hate the word 'obsessive'," and yet Lou's work can seem practically determined to be misunderstood as something friskily nutty, in one way, and righteously satirical, in another -- exploiting an old, easy disdain for suburban ideals of domestic happiness, for instance. And nuttiness and satire really are present. Lou tacitly accepts a current role of the artist -- the installation artist, in particular -- as public entertainer. Call it the theme-park imperative: art as pocket Disneyland animating concepts unsuitable for prime time. If only in self-defense, Lou will play the clown. "I'm just a little gal from the avocado grove," she is apt to say, excusing herself from ponderous questions. Take it or leave it.

Meanwhile, Lou comes by her ambivalence toward suburbia honestly, from early experience in Minnesota and California. She is forthrightly feminist in familiar ways of valorizing "women's work" (the dainty, lumpen handicraft of decorative beading) and, at least in the KITCHEN, of calling attention to female stereotypes (note the girlie images in the oven). And she certainly does evoke obsession: the compulsive repetitions and horror vacui of outsider art and the slavery to signs that merges people with their social description as, say, homemakers (never mind that the homemaker, like home itself, is a decrepit category today).

Then there is the collective labor that went into the BACK YARD. Many afternoon parties of volunteers gathered to produce blades of virtual grass for the piece's tousled lawn. (As the creator myself of twenty-one of the finest blades, I can tell you how it's done: With tiny pliers, crimp an end of a four-inch wire, slip on one round bead -- a drop of dew, dig--and enough cylindrical beads to fill the wire, then crimp the other end. Presorted by Lou, your beads' colors occupy some part of a grassy spectrum from lush green to withered yellow.) This aspect of the work suggests a participation mystique or communitarian agenda like that of Christo's public-art circuses.

But all such apparent features of Lou's art--antic comedy, indignant satire, populist ceremony-- seem to me mirages of her actual intention, which is simpler, more mysterious, and much less reassuring. The fearsomeness of the true artist's ruthless drive, to which we nervously apply patronizing epithets like "obsessive," rampages chez Lou. It does not spare the artist. In person she is serious, apolitical, and shy. Yet she makes art that is zany, polemical, and extroverted, against her own grain, with grueling techniques that have given her painful tendonitis in her hands. Is she confused? No. What would be contradiction in logic is only complexity in successful art.

Admittedly, the complexities of the KITCHEN (unlike the radiantly integrated BACK YARD) can seem only too numerous, getting in each other's way. But this should not stop it from being a classic of our time. Nor is it at all surprising. Here is an artwork that consumed five formative years of a young artist's career. Developments and changes that might have been worked out over scores or hundreds of separate pieces accumulated within one piece. Lou made the KITCHEN up as she went along, she has said, and it stands to reason that the artist who began it and the artist who completed it were not the same person. It survives as a palimpsest of ideas, events, and states of mind lost to present time -- growing in importance as, in her subsequent work, Lou applies the lessons she learned from it.



Consider the KITCHEN's most enigmatic element, the newspaper that bears, besides the buoyant headline "Housewife Beads the Word!," the teaser "Plus! Frogman Reveals the Secrets of Tough Love!" The Frogman, Lou has told me without naming a name, was a teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute who denigrated the KITCHEN in its early stages. The assault hurt, and to even sarcastically term it "tough love," suggesting a benign motive, seems pretty mild revenge. At any rate, it seems that to go on with the work. Lou had to assimilate that moment of anguish. So in went the Frogman, despite his puzzling disruption of a viewer's reverie.

Besides incorporating different faces of Lou, the KITCHEN plays host to guest subjectivities. These range from the collective frozen attitudes of project packaging and vernacular design and decor through intervening symbolism (black wallpaper roses for death) to heartfelt stylistic allusions (van Gogh's STARRY NIGHT in swirling dishwater) and haunting sentiments of Emily Dickinson. Here is the Dickinson poem that the KITCHEN quotes:

**She rose to his requirements, dropped  
The playthings of her life  
To take the honorable work  
Of woman and of wife.**

**If aught she missed in her new day  
Of amplitude, or awe,  
Or first prospective, or the gold  
In using wore away,**

**It lay unmentioned, as the sea  
Develops pearl and weed,  
But only to himself is known  
The fathoms they abide.**



This beautiful poem envisions the self as a sea. The married woman who is the poem's subject presents on her surface "the honorable work" (note the poet's choice of flat, officious language) "of woman and of wife," to which she "rose" from her depths. What goes on in those depths now? The never-married poet wonders but, with transcendent moral grace, declines to speculate or judge. Only the sea itself can locate the precious "pearl" and noxious "weed" that it nurtures. A viewer of the KITCHEN is accordingly alerted to mysteries beneath its cheeky, jazzy scintillation. If you think you can make out the artist's opinion of housewifery, in other words, you are projecting. Stop it.

The KITCHEN is ungraspable in its wholeness, like the Mississippi River delta. It ramifies the artist's mind into numberless byways that disgorge unevenly into a viewer's consciousness. Contemplating it, one picks up on this or that aspect or element, then drops it to pick up on another. In comparison, the BACK YARD is more like the mouth of the Amazon, draining a continent's maze of tributaries into one mighty surge. Though writing before the BACK YARD's final completion, I have seen enough to be confident that beholding it, one cannot isolate any detail from the torrential, overwhelming unity to which it belongs.



Of course, part of what's overwhelming about the BACK YARD is our simple awareness of the incredible toil that went into the thing. But this is only a temporary frisson, I think, because the toil proves so obviously indispensable to the work's success. To enjoy the BACK YARD, once its initial shock wears off, is to approve Lou's exertions as sensible. Obsession has nothing to do with it. Did the Sistine ceiling "obsess" Michelangelo? It absorbed him, certainly, in the way of any labor-intensive task. Most human

existences are largely given over to toil, but in motions that leave either no trace or discontinuous traces. Our working lives flow or tumble into forgetfulness. In the case of the BACK YARD, nearly every instant of Lou's recent working life happens to register at once, with a bang.

The BACK YARD is a work about work whose theme -- and here comes its lovely, transcending humor -- is the foremost American ideal of leisure. If the unfenced, uniform lawn of American front yards declares democratic discipline (here I draw on a great book of gardening philosophy, Michael Pollan's SECOND NATURE), the modular playpens of American backyards express democratic fulfillment. The BACK YARD endorses a nation whose citizens of widely differing incomes all sincerely deem themselves "middle class." The dispossessed poor and the estate rich (THE GRAPES OF WRATH, THE GREAT GATSBY) pose chronic problems for American identity. And those of us who inhabit apartments give rise even in our own souls, to chronic ambiguities. To be an honest-to-goodness American, have a backyard and get a kick out of it, end of story.

The kick of Lou's BACK YARD is over the top. Surreal excrement bursts forth everywhere. Mildly pleasurable things, inflecting an order dedicated to mild pleasure, breaks sweats of ecstasy. Get a load of those flowers! In a standard backyard, you know that they would be cheerful banalities of impatiens and anemones. Here some Alice in Wonderland compost has made them apparitions of no known species. At once quiveringly erect and open, they are hermaphroditic sex organs verging on orgasm. And yet we understand that they are only flowers in an American backyard. Pretty things, yes? Nice things.

To cook food on one's own grill and consume it with a few beers at one's own picnic table, surrounded by nature regimented according to a plan so unquestioned that it might as well be God-given: American bliss. Can you disdain it? I can't. It really is nice. Regrettable may be only the concerted lack of imagination intrinsic to a vision of happiness as absolute predictability: no surprises. But the adventure of art and the ritual of backyards are not in some zero-sum competition with each other. One life can accommodate both, just not in the same place and time--except where and when Lou takes a hand.



The BACK YARD is a steady-state hallucination. It is about peak consciousness, when awareness dilates to its maximum degree--in religious practice, in beauty, or with drugs, no matter. Lou's crystallized rapture doesn't recommend anything to us. It doesn't even recommend itself as necessarily a good thing. On a sheerly empirical plane beyond good and bad, the BACK YARD is mater-of-fact, like the artist. "This happens," it says, if it says anything. "Such splendor actually occurs--is actually occurring at this moment--and you should make what you want of it. Or not. Such splendor has made itself available to you, and it doesn't care."

Lou's inspired choice of a ubiquitous, humble subject for the magnificent, frozen hosanna of this work fulfills Charles Baudelaire's definition of beauty as a fusion of the eternal and the fleeting, the exalted and the everyday, heaven and hell, the sacred and the profane, reason and squalor. Its effect is the opposite of obsession: liberation from closed circuits of the self, prying us open to pure wonder. It brings about a high holy day of the mind, when things always obscurely true stand revealed, clothed only in the lucid radiance of the the self-evident. I have many feelings about Lou's achievement. The main one is gratitude.



