



ONCE OSTRACIZED BECAUSE SHE DARED TO USE BEADS INSTEAD OF PAINT, ARTIST **LIZA LOU** IS NOW  
BY CHRISTOPHER BAGLEY PHOTO

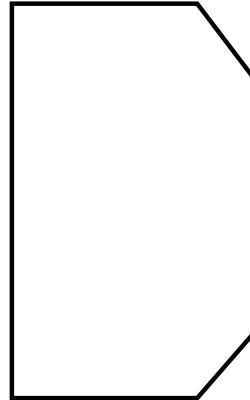


A FAVORITE OF COLLECTORS AND CURATORS. HERE, A VISIT TO HER SOUTH AFRICAN STUDIO  
GRAPHED BY JACKIE NICKERSON

CELL: © LIZA LOU; PHOTO BY JOSHUA WHITE, COURTESY OF JAY JOPLING/WHITE CUBE (LONDON)

This page: *Cell*, 2006, wood, fiberglass and glass beads. Opposite: Liza Lou in her Durban studio.





During the five years that Liza Lou spent making her first major artwork—a life-size replica of a suburban kitchen, in which she hand-glued millions of glittering glass beads onto every surface, from the appliances to the dirty dishes in the sink—she got used to being dismissed, and at times despised, by people in the art world. Many wrote her off as a kooky craftsperson or a second-rate jeweler. “Obsessive” was one recurring label that particularly irked her, and still does. True, Lou became antisocial and undernourished while finishing *Kitchen* (1995) and developed acute tendinitis in her hands (she applied each bead individually, using tweezers), but she thinks it’s all too easy to attribute her efforts to some bizarre compulsion.

“It’s summing up someone’s lifework as a mental oddity,” says Lou, 39, during lunch in Durban, South Africa, where she’s preparing for a September gallery show at L&M Arts in New York. With a sunny smile, she adds, “What’s far more frightening for people is to consider the possibility that I’m completely aware of what I’m doing.”

That possibility looks increasingly likely. Lou, who in 2002 won a \$500,000 “genius” grant from the MacArthur Foundation, hasn’t yet entirely shed the nutty reputation, but her sculptures, installations and beaded tableaux are now highly prized by the world’s top curators and collectors. By putting a pretty, sparkly material to use in challenging ways, Lou makes works that mesmerize young children as well as art critics; reactions generally start with “Oh, my God” and get more complex from there.

Certainly Lou’s working process is unique among contemporary artists, judging by a recent visit to her studio in Durban, where she’s been based, on and off, for the past three years. At 8:30 a.m., in one of the two rooms Lou rents in a downtown complex, about 25 Zulu women and men, clad in print dresses or jeans and T-shirts, are gathered in a large circle, dancing and singing. Among them is an attractive and pixieish blond, Lou, who looks a bit like Sharon Stone’s kid sister. Lou claps along as each person takes turns stepping into the center of the circle, kicking and stomping one leg. Amid loud cheers, Lou gleefully does her own dance, before the session ends and everyone goes off to their seats around the studio, where the singing will continue

IN ART SCHOOL, LOU RECALLS, “I WAS REALLY, REALLY HATED FOR

This page, from top: A detail from *Kitchen*, 1995; *Blanket 1*, 2006, fiberglass and glass beads. Opposite: Lou at work on a piece from her new “Reliefs” series.



in spurts as they spend the day gluing beads onto things, one by one.

Durban, the largest city in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, is a gritty tropical port with a few gorgeous beaches, lots of run-down buildings encircled by barbed wire and, in the center of town, clusters of homeless people sleeping on the sidewalks. It’s also a place where the traditional craft of beadwork still thrives. Lou first came here with the idea of attempting some politically responsible outsourcing: Her plan was to recruit unemployed artisans to help her with beadwork, pay them good wages and return to California, where she lives in Topanga Canyon with her husband, graphic designer Mick Haggerty. “But then the singing happened,” Lou says, recalling the rounds of song that broke out as the team worked. Before long they were starting each day with an hour of song and dance, and Lou found herself repeatedly extending her stays. (Haggerty came down to join her.)

The beadworkers hail from local townships, where conditions have hardly improved since the end of apartheid in 1994. Most have never eaten in a restaurant, let alone visited an art museum, and initially, when Lou showed them photographs of her sculptures and installations, they were underwhelmed. Lou says that when they first saw the chain-link fence that they would be covering in tiny silver beads, for one of her “Security Fence” pieces (it is now owned by Pinault-Printemps-Redoute honcho and megacollector François Pinault), they said, “What is this ugly thing we’re doing?”

Indeed, it’s hard for anyone to appreciate the impact of Lou’s creations by looking at photographs of them. Her second large-scale piece, after *Kitchen*, was *Back Yard* (1999), a full-size suburban lawn composed of

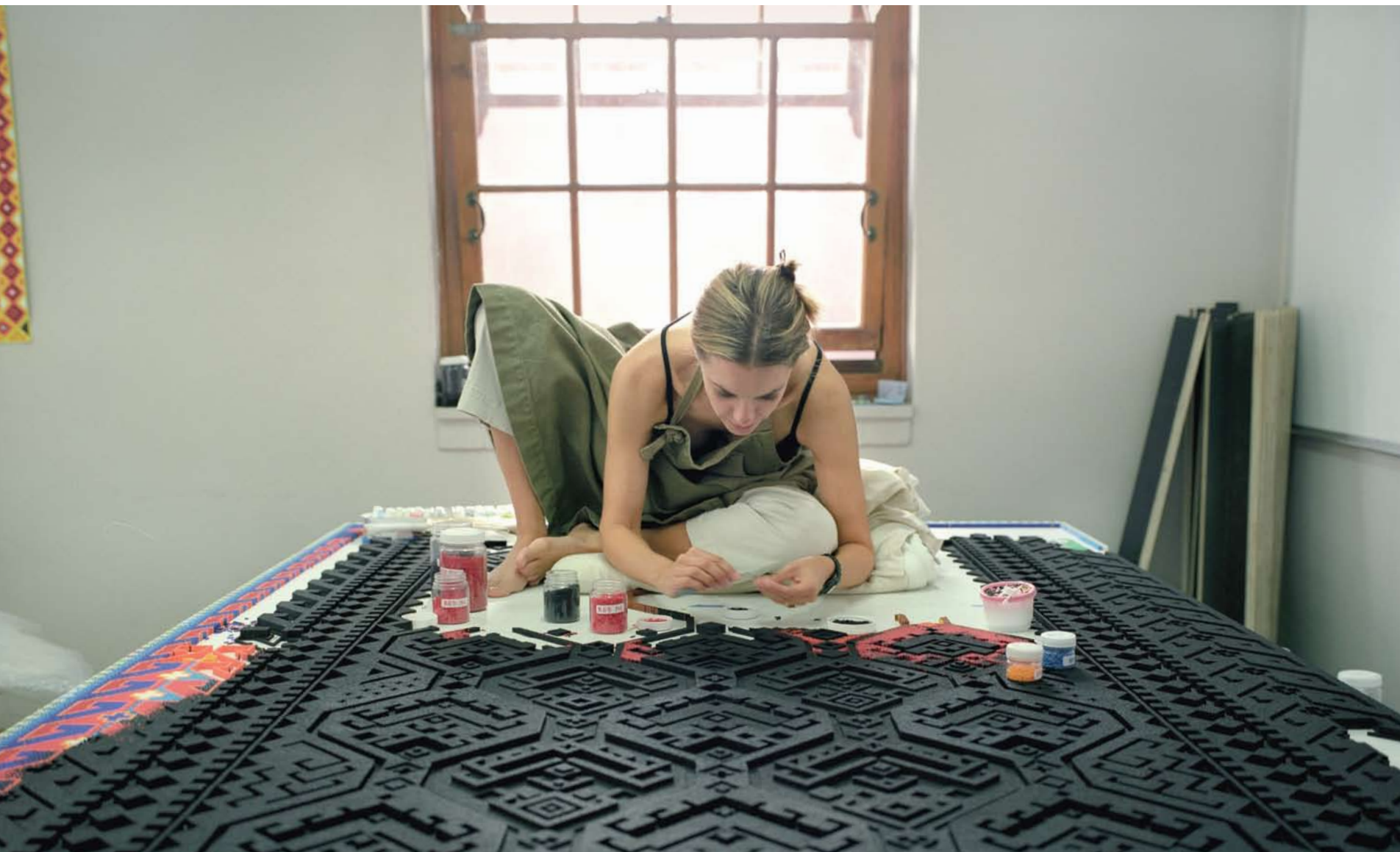
250,000 individually beaded blades of grass. Thematically, too, the subtleties of the piece aren’t apparent on the page. While her zany colorful early work dealt with feminism and mass culture, later pieces—such as *Cell* (2006), an unsettlingly luminous re-creation of a death-row holding pen—are darker explorations of violence and confinement. Lou often seems intent on glorifying something humble or beautifying something awful.

“Liza’s work is an imitation of life, where nothing is real,” says her Paris gallerist, Thaddaeus Ropac. “At the same time, it’s so present that it can be very frightening.” According to art historian and critic Robert Pincus-Witten, it offers a unique synthesis of issues deriving from conceptualism, Pop art and feminism. “There’s that ambiguity between the extremely luxurious and the politically terrifying,” he says.

You don’t have to dig very deeply into Lou’s personal history to find the wellsprings for her works’ conflicting themes. Her parents lived determinedly bohemian lives in Manhattan until 1965, when they attended a revival meeting and became born-again Christians. After burning all of their books and artworks, including Roy Lichtenstein paintings that were gifts from the artist, they moved to Minnesota, where they worked for various fundamentalist churches. Lou and her sister grew up watching exorcisms and speaking in tongues.

At a certain point in her teens, Lou began to question some of the tales she’d been told: Did King David *really* speak to her mother in the hospital after Lou was born, to explain that the baby was a blessing unto this world? (Today, although not exactly an atheist, Lou says she isn’t a believer, either: “Certain things have to line up for me in terms of logic.”) In 1989 she took a summer trip to Europe, and in the cathedrals of

WHAT I WAS DOING. I WAS THIS STRANGE LITTLE PERSON, MAKING THINGS.”



BLANKET 1, KITCHEN: © LIZA LOU; PHOTOS BY JOSHUA WHITE, COURTESY OF JAY JORLING/WHITE CUBE (LONDON)



Installation view from White Cube in London of, from left: *Scaffold*, 2006, steel, fiberglass and glass beads; *The Vessel*, 2006, fiberglass and glass beads; *Security Fence I*, 2005, steel, razor wire and glass beads.



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This page: Lou working on *Maximum Security Fence*, 2008. Opposite, from left: A detail of a piece from "Reliefs" (in progress); Lou and team members in her studio.



Florence and Venice, she experienced revelations, though they had less to do with Jesus than with mosaics and Byzantine domes. "As an American kid who grew up in the suburbs—postmodern churches with plastic chairs and all that crap—it was totally transforming to be in a place that took hundreds of years to make," Lou says. "That blew me away." Back in California, where she was attending the San Francisco Art Institute, she had another epiphany when she walked into a bead store and discovered a material that was far more interesting to her than paint.

When Lou began incorporating beads into her abstract paintings, her teachers and classmates were mortified. "I was really, really hated for what I was doing. I was this strange little person, making things," Lou recalls. "People would actually say, 'I'm sorry, but that is *not allowed*.' But when I saw how much this material upset people, it was so obvious that it was a good thing."

Eventually Lou quit school, got a studio in Los Angeles and became determined to transform an ordinary kitchen—the ultimate symbol of domestic drudgery—into something as dazzling as Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice. To earn a living, Lou worked as a waitress and sold prom dresses. She also began selling off completed pieces of *Kitchen* as she was trying to finish it. "It wasn't the smartest thing," Lou acknowledges. "I would sell these cups and saucers for \$200. And it would take me four weeks to make them. But I needed the money. And I thought, Look, somebody wants to buy my work!" Her breakthrough museum show came in 1996, after Marcia Tucker, then director of the New Museum in New York, noticed a photo of *Kitchen* on a postcard that Lou had mailed to her. Prominent West Coast collectors Eileen and Peter Norton ended up buying the piece, which allowed Lou to get going on *Back Yard*.

In the decade since, even as her work has grown more overtly political, Lou has stuck with beads. The exception was a riveting performance piece, *Born Again*, in which she acted out moments from a fire-and-brimstone childhood. At one point she becomes a six-year-old whose father abuses her while she lies, blindfolded, on a table in the basement. Lou began working on the piece in 2001 and performed it at Les Deux Cafés in L.A. and later at Deitch Projects in New York. (A video version was included in her shows at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Paris and White Cube in London.) Her friend Michele Lamy, former owner of Les Deux Cafés, recalls that the piece was a surprise to many in Lou's circle. "I always felt there was this huge sense of chagrin in her work," says Lamy. "We didn't know where it was coming from. Now we know, a little bit."

Lou, in our interview, doesn't say too much about her father, whom she stopped talking to years ago. (Her surname, which she changed, is based on a childhood nickname.) When asked if her father is still alive, she nods and says, "Unfortunately." Then she laughs and shoots a look at the tape recorder, but she lets the comment stand. "He is not a good person," she says. (She remains close with her divorced mother.)

Back in the studio after lunch, Lou and her assistants, with beads and tweezers, crouch over works from Lou's new series of wall reliefs, whose intricate patterns were inspired by Islamic prayer carpets. People tell stories, joke around and fall into beautifully harmonious rounds of singing. For months they have been teaching one another gospel songs in Zulu and English. (The lyrics for one are written on the wall: "If I had the wings of a dove... I'd fly to the utmost/way out into space.") Sitting next to Lou is a young woman named Sphille, who mentions that Zulu men never cry, because it's considered an unforgivable sign of weakness. She explains that when a man hears that his lover has died, the correct response is, "Shame. When is the funeral?" Lou's studio

"RELIEFS": MICK HAGGERTY

manager, Buhle, a tall and striking woman in tight jeans, says that she once noticed her father in tears after his mother passed away. What did she do? "I laughed at him," Buhle says. Lou looks at her, amazed.

When Lou is in the studio with her team (and when she's not), she comes across as a beguiling combination of wry intelligence and earnest, by-gosh-by-golly enthusiasm. At one point, when Buhle mentions a killing that took place in her neighborhood, Lou turns to her and asks, "What's the worst thing that you've ever seen?" Buhle mentions several incidents: There was the time she watched her aunt being murdered, and the time a boy died in her yard after being beaten for stealing a watch. And she was once called to the scene after a friend's husband had shot himself in the head. As he lay dead, his cell phone kept ringing; finally Buhle reached into his pocket and answered it, to tell the caller the news.

Despite the seemingly hopeless degree of violence and illness in Durban, one thing that's kept Lou around, she says, is the fact that "you can make the smallest gesture and save someone's life. If I notice that someone's got a wound, I can take them to the doctor. And if the wound is septic, they get antibiotics and a life is saved." At the studio she has started medical and educational programs and organized museum trips. She emphasizes that the teaching goes both ways. "I'm not, like, the white lady with the answers," she says. "I'm a total student here."

Later in the afternoon, as Lou is showing me around, a social worker stops by with an update on the case of one of the beadworkers, a young woman with a five-year-old daughter. Both are HIV-positive, and the child was recently abducted by her father, apparently because obtaining guardianship would make him eligible for grant money. He neglected to feed his daughter properly, so she began to die, and the social worker managed to reunite her with her mother. But now the girl needs new medication. Lou lets out a long sigh. Sometimes, she says, "it just makes you put your head in your hands and weep." I ask if the woman was part of the group dancing cheerfully this morning, and Lou nods. "There's a real quickness to joy here," she says. "When your life is so close to the edge and people are dying all around you, if somebody's giving you an opportunity to have fun, you totally take it."

Much of Lou's art, of course, is about taking something horrific and making it transcendent. "I'm interested in rescuing things in some way," she says. She is just finishing another massive fenced enclosure, this one in the shape of a cross, to be exhibited at Lever House in New York this fall. The prayer carpet pieces, meanwhile, are based on ancient patterns that represent the pursuit of paradise. The technique she's using is absurdly labor-intensive, even by Lou's standards. After drawing the patterns, Lou paints them onto aluminum panels, some up to 10 feet long, so that she and her assistants can cover them with miniscule upright cylinders—bugle beads of varying lengths and colors, custom made in Japan. It's a bit like turning millions of pins on their heads, one by one, so that viewers can see only the tips. Looking around the room at the unfinished patterns and jars of beads, Lou says, "No one in their right mind would do this." Later, she adds, "I'm kind of an impossibility freak. I bet the farm every time."

In July, when I reach Lou by phone, she says that she's just seen the cross-shaped fence assembled for the first time and that she's thrilled. The next day she sends me an e-mail that reads, in part: "I've made work to take my revenge against injustice, both personal and political. But now, standing back, I wonder if art can become an act of forgiveness. The object stands gleaming, arms open wide, big enough to love anyone, forgive anything."

In Durban, Lou had stressed that no matter how the pieces turn out, her work is about the process as much as the results. "It's not like we get to the gallery opening and that's the moment," she'd said. "This, now, is the moment. And if I didn't believe that, I couldn't do this kind of work. Because I would truly go mad." ●

"NO ONE IN THEIR RIGHT MIND WOULD DO THIS," LOU SAYS OF HER NEWEST PIECES. "I'M KIND OF AN IMPOSSIBILITY FREAK."