

Points of Light

Jeanette Winterson

It's a creative moment in itself, bringing Liza Lou to White Cube in Hoxton. In 1875, a young orphanage lad, a road sweeper and rat catcher turned barrow boy, noticed how London's East End Costermongers, in old Spitalfields Market, decorated the seams of their jackets and trousers with pearly buttons. These flash boys, in their 'flash boy suits', as they called them, wanted to stand out from their pyramids of fruit and veg. The young boy got excited by these self-made peacocks, and he took a whole suit and hat and sewed the lot with buttons, sequins and beads. Every surface inch was beaded. The Pearly King was born.

Pearly gates were Liza Lou's own entrance to a shining world. She was raised by Pentecostal parents in Minnesota, and she tells this story in her extraordinary straight-to-camera short film, *Born Again*.

Born Again is a strange, beguiling, provocative narrative that does exactly the opposite of Liza Lou's finished pieces; the pieces are built-up layers of structure, colour, and beads. The beads themselves are uncountable. The pieces add and multiply from their beginnings. The film strips back. What it offers is the raw material of Liza Lou herself. This is what she works with – this pain, this struggle, the lost lights of New York, the tortured dog named Ezekiel in honour of the prophet. The prayer meetings, the rage, the ecstasy, the self-confidence (she is a child of King Jesus), the self-doubt (everything is wrong).

An artist's work cannot be understood in a reductive sense by a reading of his or her life. The work is not a crossword puzzle and the life is not a series of cryptic clues. Rather, the life revealed tells us something about creativity – the process itself, but not the finished work.

The finished works are held moments, pieces of caught energy. When they are finished and shown, they exist in their own right, completely separate from the person who made them. Our celebrity culture, coupled with an obsession with reality TV shows and True Life confessionals, makes it difficult for an artist to reveal him or herself without seeming like a publicity junkie, or without exposing the work itself to the banality of autobiographical meaning.

Liza Lou's personal story is neither a commentary on her work, nor an explanation for it. Above all, it is not a substitute. Knowing something about her is an interesting privilege, but it is a question and not an answer. What happened to her, what goes on happening to her, does not account for her work. The work comes out of the place of transformation. Autobiography becomes creativity, the past becomes a door that is open rather than closed.

What artists show us, through their lives, is the power of creativity to defy the claims of history – not deny but defy. Creativity can't alter what happened – either personally or outside the personal, but it can loosen the grip of the past, both personal and collective, so that we are not trapped in the Medusa stare of experience. The horrors of a particular childhood, or of a violent father or lover, the horrors of war, and the

human failure that war advertises, turn us to stone. That is, we are unmoved, as most people are nowadays, even by scenes of revulsion, and we are unable to move, we are stuck, fixed, inert. The weight of our lives, the weight of history is too much to shift. Set against this feeling of powerlessness are the artificial compensations of tranquilizers or rage. Some people hit back, some people cave in. Either way, nothing changes.

Whatever the private struggles of the artist, and history is happy to witness them, because they make good stories, and they paint a picture of the tormented, out of control, hopeless figure that the public enjoys, the truth is that creativity wrestles something valuable out of the struggle. The weight, however crushing, is lifted, however temporarily. History is there, all right – the suicides, the drink, the drugs, the recklessness, the world building it's own furnace, and climbing in. History is always there. The surprise is art.

You could say that whatever is not mechanical is a miracle. That is, whatever is not predictable, statistical, habitual, programmed, planned, running to time, quantifiable, cogged, chipped, causal, will be the thing that we long for and dread in equal measure.

Miracles always happen at the wrong moment, (as far as we are concerned), and there are dark miracles too, where the unexpected explosion turns a life or a people inside out. A miracle is a moment of change in a situation that is locked. Miracles that most of us have experienced are falling in love or having a child. Everything is changed in ways we never predicted. Liza Lou was raised in a believer's world predicated on miracles, but the miracle in their midst was completely overlooked. Here was a kid who was going to take the violence and cruelty of her believer's world, and lift it, through her own creativity, into freedom and possibility. Her father, locked in by his life, used to yell, 'I can't stand it'; the silent yell of so much of the human race. Liza Lou, as an artist, can't stand it either, so she transforms it.

What art does is to coax us away from the mechanical and towards the miraculous. The so-called uselessness of art is a clue to its transforming power. Art is not part of the machine. Art asks us to think differently, see differently, hear differently, and ultimately to act differently, which is why art has moral force. Ruskin was right, though for the wrong reasons, when he talked about art as a moral force. Art is not about good behaviour, when did you last see a miracle behave well? Art makes us better people because it asks for our full humanity, and humanity is, or should be, the polar opposite of the merely mechanical. We are not part of the machine either, but we have forgotten that. Art is memory – which is quite different to history. Art asks that we remember who we are, and usually that asking has to come as provocation – which is why art breaks the rules and the taboos, and at the same time is a moral force.

The immorality of Liza Lou's newly born-again parents burning all their books and pictures in the stove of their New York loft is redeemed by the work of Liza Lou herself. What they destroyed, she has had to make anew. This is a true transformation of the violent anger and ignorance of so many religious people and their perversions of faith. A work of art does not simply expose violence and hypocrisy; it overcomes it by offering an alternative. In the place of destruction, creation. In the place of blind fury, sight and recognition.

That the Christian right and the Taliban, to name but two of the multiplying extremist religions, are both anti-art, is a measure of art's power to unleash and transform. Anyone who thinks that art is a luxury or a plaything is not looking at the facts – if art were those things it would not command the fury that it does. You don't destroy what is of no account.

The extremists are right when they recognise the power of art, and ban it or burn it. Its provocations are always against the dead hand of intellectual and spiritual slavery. When someone like Liza Lou breaks free, the life is relevant as a testimony against false authority. It is the work though, that should go on speaking to us long after the circumstances of the life have become irrelevant. It doesn't really matter what happened to Caravaggio on that mosquito-infested stretch of coast where he died. It matters that we can sit in silent contemplation in front of *The Killing of St Matthew*. The work outlasts the life.

A cell on death row, fully covered in tiny beads, makes a monument to all those who have died for their crimes, actual or supposed, not just in Texas, but in death row cells wherever they are found.

The death penalty divides people like nothing else, except for death itself, but while the arguments continue, and prisoners continue to die, Liza Lou's installation responds to the question differently, by avoiding confrontation and asking for contemplation. 'Look at it,' she says. 'Look at what this is.'

Bizarrely, because you couldn't guess it until you look at it, the beads make the thing much more painful. Ripped out of context, the cell-sculpture is provocative enough – much of what is bearable is so by force of habit – we don't really have to look, and so we don't look at the carcasses in an abattoir, say, or corpses on a battlefield. In context, everything is softened or dulled, rendered harmless. Out of context, the thing has to be seen as it is. Wind up the tension further – in this case by beading the structure, and the conflict is unbearable. Beads are pretty and shiny; this is a condemned cell. Beads are frivolous and decorative; this is a matter of life and death. The clash is uncomfortable, very, but it is also contemplative, as the surface holds our gaze, then draws us in, past the surface, so that the beads act as a kind of conducting material, both for the viewer and for the artist's thought.

I would like to see this piece bought by the State of Texas and put outside the Governor's residence. Alternatively it could go straight to the White House and live on the lawn.

Liza Lou's earlier work was a transformation of the domestic. *Kitchen* is a life-size fully beaded kitchen, complete with spills and breakfast cereal. *Back Yard* is a beaded lawn with beaded flowers. *Trailer*, took a deadbeat trailer-trash life – old socks and crumpled fag packets, and beaded it all. The result is a William Blake-like, metaphysical wonder at the overlooked and missed marvellousness of ordinary things. You laugh with pleasure, and then you feel humbled, that somebody could be bothered to go to all this effort to make us look at things we should see every day and never do.

The work has begun to grow darker. The huddled human shapes simply called *Blanket* are poignant in their vulnerability. Yet the tiny tiny beads that cover the blanket that

covers the figure, seem like a dusting of hope. The figures can have no knowledge of the quiet shining that lies over them, but the suggestion is one of protection. Liza Lou has taken the angels of traditional religious painting and re-made them as beads.

She is not a Catholic, but sometimes, when I look at her work, I think of it as the longest rosary in the universe –every bead is a reminder that there is more to life than meets the eye, and paradoxically, it is art, the world of surfaces, that acts as this reminder.

The beading of the barbed wire in *Security Fence* has the strange quality of making you want to touch it – which is not what barbed wire is designed to do. This alchemical insolence, the shifting of substance and meaning into quite different substance and meaning breaks the world of fixity into the world of possibility. The dead, skin-slashing wire, becomes a modern-day, non-religious Crown of Thorns, a symbol of aggression re-made as an offering. *Security Fence* is an open structure. What it offers is not imprisonment or humiliation, but empty space and points of light.

The darkness of Liza Lou's recent work still points towards hope and light. In that respect, I suppose, she has kept her faith, or at least an artist's faith in miracles, where even the least promising moment, and the most reluctant or unlikely material can be transformed. Her 2003 works *Untitled Miracles*, suggest that this is so.

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