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The secret life of beads

Iconoclastic artist shares her process in person

By Jessica Leigh Lebos | jll@connectsavannah.com

At first glance, it just looks like a field of wheat in miniature. Or maybe a bunch of tiny brooms.

Get a little closer, and you'll see the shimmer. The amber-hued square in the back gallery of SCAD's new Museum of Art is more than it appears: Each of the hundreds of symmetrically-arranged clusters is made up of individual stalks, comprised themselves of hundreds of tiny gold-plated beads. Yes, that multiplies into the millions.

When you look around and realize every work in the gallery, from the large stack of paper to the prayer rugs on the walls, can be broken down into eensy-beensy beads, your head might feel like it's going to unravel. You're not alone: Artist Liza Lou is world-renowned for blowing people's minds.

Her 1996 breakout work, "The Kitchen" was a life-sized sculpture complete with swirling water, cups and saucers and a can of Comet cleanser that took five years to complete, using an estimated 30 million beads and leaving Lou with a wicked case of tendonitis. Though the artist was initially branded as "obsessive" and maybe a little off her rocker, "The Kitchen" was lauded as a powerful statement on the role of domestic work and shot Lou, who quit art school after falling in love with the "lesser" art form of beadwork, into the fine art spotlight.

Her next project, "Backyard," was three times as big and required a million blades of grass, a daunting prospect that led the previously-solo Lou to incorporate community participation into her more ambitious projects. She invited patrons and friends to help her construct her ersatz lawn at her

Santa Monica home one beaded blade at a time, evolving what began as an isolated artistic process into a dynamic group effort. Beaded portraits of American presidents followed, along with burning fires, chain-link fences and carefully balanced bodies that evoke both the polemic and the political.

Along the way Lou has transmuted her difficult childhood into her art and has had the last laugh on those closed-minded snobs who told her beads belonged in the kindergarten craft room: In 2009, the art-school dropout received a \$500K MacArthur Foundation “genius grant.” Today, she splits her time between Southern California and KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where she employs, sings and dances with several dozen artisans who help her complete her spangled visions.

If you haven't yet visited SCADMOA, you'd better hurry: Lou's exhibition “Let the Light In” is only on display until Jan. 22. Along with the golden floor clusters of “Gather Forty” and the “The Continuous Mile” (a meticulously-stacked, braided rope of white seed beads the size of a pin head that had its last stop at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art), visitors must not miss “The Trailer,” a 1949 Spartan Mobile Mansion outside on the back lawn of the museum that houses Lou's jaw-dropping exploration to the dark side.

Lou will be in Savannah this Tuesday, Jan. 17 to deliver a talk, “Process + Possibility,” in the auditorium at the SCAD Museum of Art. Earlier this week, she called from South Africa to chat about her own process and its endless possibilities.

You've been working with beads now for almost 20 years. Do you ever get sick of dealing with these teeny, tiny pieces?

Liza Lou: Cheat on beads?! Never! [laughs] I do draw, which is a big part of my practice. It's not even that I like beads so much; I think it's more about the process. It's hard to explain the relationship. I was never craft-oriented as a child, though I always wanted to be an artist. I majored in painting. I never thought I'd work with beads.

I wish the name of the name of the material wasn't “beads” because of the connotation is all about jewelry and craftwork, things I'm not necessarily all that interested in. To me, it's just a small piece of material that really has something that can happen if you spend a lot of time with it.

So what is it about the process continues to appeal to you?

Liza Lou: I think art-making is about bringing something to the situation. There's the feeling that you can contribute something as an artist, that something can be said through the medium. For some people that would be paint or video. For me, it's these.

I've done projects where I cleaned out my entire studio and took out every last bead and said, "OK, what do you do without material?" I found myself making these very tiny marks on the page, so I think working with small pieces are about the accrual of time, about what can happen if you build and build and build the same shape over and over again. I'm very into repetition; my drawings involve a lot of concentric circles and building on them over time. It's the process of layering that I'm most interested in.

You suffered some physical issues after five years of creating "The Kitchen." Does the tendonitis still affect you?

Liza Lou: I did "The Kitchen" by myself, and when I finished the project, I had a lot of problems with my hands. It brought up the challenge of what it meant to keep making work, especially in terms of large-scale projects. But then again, everything I consider worth doing requires some kind of aching. It's OK for it to hurt a little. It's still something I have to watch because of the physicality of what I do.

How has the notion of community affected your work?

Liza Lou: Here in South Africa, I have an ongoing team of about 30 people that I've worked with for the past seven years. It sounds overwhelming; I remember hearing about an artist once who had 30 assistants and that just sounded like "Oh my god, that's a factory!"

It's not like that here at all. We are a family, a really tight-knit group. It's a very special situation and a tremendously creative environment. There's a lot of singing and dancing and prayer.

When we're working on a large project, everyone's extended family comes to help, and the project becomes important to many, many people in the township. For every woman who works for us, there's another ten that depend on her for their daily survival. I find it really inspiring to see a lot of people impacted by the art-making process. It brings my project out of the ivory tower into the real world.

What can we expect at your SCAD talk?

Liza Lou: First, it's great that the art is already there, so people can go look at it, which has more impact than a slide lecture. Because Savannah is a college town, I want to address the students about process and inspiration in ways that apply to their work.

When I was an art student, I hated school. I felt completely alone and completely alienated. Anyone who feels that way should come to the talk. I hope I can give encouragement on how to have a big idea, whatever it is, and make it happen.

Lecture by Liza Lou: "Process + Possibility"

When: Tues. Jan. 17, 7 p.m.

Where: SCAD Museum of Art, 601 Turner Blvd.

Cost: Free with museum admission

Info: scad.edu