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Art review: Liza Lou at L&M

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Back in the '90s, when Liza Lou encrusted a full-scale kitchen and suburban backyard in glistening beads, it was hard to imagine where she would go from there. Dazzling, monumental efforts, the installations were Lou's first mature works, but they seemed more like consummations than beginnings. They were extreme in nearly every way, optical extravaganzas born of wry humor, social intelligence and an inordinate application of manual labor.

But beginnings they were, and Lou has since gone on to bead, among other subjects, a prison cell, a closet, an infant, portraits of the American presidents, prayer rugs, Adam and Eve, a security fence rimmed in concertina wire, a mile of coiled rope, a toilet and a

noose. Beading the world might have proven a gimmicky endeavor with a short shelf life, but Lou took the medium seriously from the start and the visual, visceral power of her work (and, paradoxically, its novelty) have endured.

Lou's first Los Angeles show since 1998, at L&M, features more than 30 works, all but one made since 2008: sculptures on pedestals and on the floor, mounted on the wall and hanging from it in the manner of paintings, a small selection of drawings, and one large installation. In terms of both palette and form, Lou has shifted from maximal to minimal. Many of the pieces here assume basic geometric forms and keep to a relatively quiet color scheme of white, dirty white, ivory, silver, platinum, yellow, gold and the occasional touch of red or blue.

As subtle as they are stunning, the works echo the radical explorations of Eva Hesse and her postminimal, process-driven peers of the late '60s. They nod to seriality but fully embrace deviation, striking a piquant balance between geometric clarity and human-driven disorder. Many of the beaded panels read as grids. Some are striped or sectioned like a brick wall. "Unclean" conjures soiled white tiles, sutured together. "Solid" suggests a ceremonial garment, its horizontal strips of beaded gold joined by crimson thread.



In the searingly poignant “Zulu love letter” (Lou maintains studios in L.A. and in South Africa, where she employs a crew of Zulu workers), small patches of 24-karat gold beads are pieced together by red thread into a stationery-size sheet. The beaded fragments have irregular, crooked edges and their rows head in multiple directions. An intimate gem, the broken, beaded letter attests to both loss and restoration, fragility and endurance. Like much of Lou’s recent work, it yanks the mind back and forth between abjection and opulence.

Lou also weaves beads into nets and hangs them over stretcher bars, in delicious disregard for the conventional functions of surface and support. One net of white squares encloses its wooden frame like a shroud. Another, of silvery diamonds, drapes over one side of the bare bars like a slinky, tossed-off cocktail dress. “Hold” is a simple netted sack in beads the tone of tarnished metal, hanging from two nails. It has numerous rips and gaps, as if well-worn, and the aura of something from a fairy tale, the unassuming bag whose contents multiply or turn into riches.

Transformation — both the possibility and its actualization — lies at the heart of Lou’s wide-ranging enterprise. At her most literal, she covers a spinning wheel in gold beads, a heavy-handed prop alluding to the Rumpelstiltskin story. There are only a few such weak spots in the show, and they do little to diminish its overall impact, the marvel of Lou’s transformation of beads into paint and her turning of the small, ordinary and humble into something grand through accretion and patterning, akin to the gorgeous surprises of Tara Donovan and El Anatsui. “Gather (one million)” does this with breathtaking elegance. The 12-by-12-foot field of little twined and tagged sheaves (totaling 1 million beaded strands) gleams like a luminous harvest, a sun-soaked plot of copper, bronze, gold, white and rust.



Over the years, Lou has made both oblique and direct reference to her upbringing in an evangelical Christian family. Religious symbols and objects appear regularly in her work. “Book of Days,” a stack of shimmering, platinum-beaded pages and “Devotional,” among others, conflate the regularity and repetition inherent to religious practice with the methodical, meditative, manual yet mindful process of the sculptures’ own creation. The extraordinary materiality of Lou’s work could probably stand on its own, if that’s all there was. But beneath its brilliant, ever-changing public sheen, the work also tracks the difficult, nuanced evolution of a spiritual self, a political self, a socially conscious self. That rich interiority makes the exterior gleam all the brighter.

-- Leah Ollman

L&M Arts, 660 Venice Blvd., Venice, (310) 821-6400, through May 7. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.lmgallery.com/

Images, from top: Liza Lou, "Block"; "Zulu love letter"; "Gather (one million)"; credit: Joshua White, L&M Arts