

Art & Soul: Beaded beauty

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Photo by John McKinnon

In "Let the Light In," Liza Lou engages themes of containment, labor and repetition through the use of ordinary materials (glass, wire, tile) and millions of brilliant glass beads that illuminate the will and sensibility of human workmanship. In the foreground is "Continuous Mile" white glass beads, cotton. In the background is "Barricade," gold-plated beads on aluminum.

By [Allison Hersh](#)

Liza Lou crash-landed on New York's contemporary art scene in 1996 with the debut of "Kitchen," an obsessive, life-sized replica of a suburban American kitchen.

What made "Kitchen" unique was the fact that the artist adorned every conceivable surface of the 168-square-foot room with shimmering glass beads. The installation, which took Lou five years to create, included 30 million beads embellishing kitchen appliances, countertops, cereal boxes and even dirty dishes in the sink.

"Liza Lou: Let the Light In," a solo show on display at the newly

expanded SCAD Museum of Art, features recent paintings, sculptures and installations illustrating the innovative ways beads can be used to transform everyday objects.

"My work almost argues that the pleasure of looking is part of what it is to be alive," Lou observed in a recent interview. "It gives our lives dignity. It separates us from just being work machines and money makers."

Lou's work is defined by maniacal precision and heroic ambition. She uses tweezers to arrange thousands of bugle beads by hand in dazzling multi-colored and monochromatic patterns.

In recent years, she hired a team of Zulu women in South Africa to handcraft yards of hand-beaded rope and to help bring her complex designs to life. For the artist, creating a sense of community in her South Africa studio — where communal singing and dancing are an integral part of the beading process — serves as both a driving force and a rich reward.

"We're really excited to have Liza Lou's work here," said Isolde Brielmaier, chief curator of exhibitions at SCAD. "We have a huge range of work, from earlier compositions to more recent works."

In "Gather (one million)," a 12-by-12-foot installation sprawling across the wood floors of the SCAD Museum of Art, Lou showcases thousands of tiny bundles crafted from nine million golden glass beads, arranged like miniature sheaves of wheat. For "Ghost (white)," she drapes a loose lattice of white glass beads over a bare wooden frame, suggesting that beads have the power to envelop, enfold and inform the nature of art itself.

Lou excels at innovative, creative applications for beads, once relegated to bored-housewife craft.

She raises her material to the level of fine art, demonstrating how beads can be used for decorative, subversive and conceptual means.

In "Barricade," for example, she covers every square inch of an aluminum police barrier with glittering gold-plated beads. By gilding a barricade with glimmering decoration, she encourages the viewer to

question the nature of restriction, confinement and restraint.

The highlight of this solo exhibit is "Trailer" an intricate installation demonstrating Lou's superhuman attention to detail. Parked in the courtyard outside the SCAD Museum of Art is an unassuming vintage 1949 trailer.

Pass through the back velvet curtain hanging at the structure's entrance, however, and discover a beaded interior that will blow your mind.

Using a dark, dreamy palette of black, silver and white, Lou crafts a detailed crime scene complete with beaded armchairs, sofas, wallpaper and flooring. As an episode of "Dragnet" blasts in the background and beaded rifles hang on the walls, the spangled leg of a dead body can be glimpsed on the floor of the back bedroom.

This is a moody atmosphere of implied violence, a haunting place of narrative intrigue.

The artist's most recent compositions feature monochromatic, richly textured designs showcasing all-black or all-white beaded canvases, revealing a new interest in minimalist style that serves as a creative counterpoint to the rainbow-hued "Kitchen" installation that originally placed her on the radar of contemporary art experts. Inspired by Eastern prayer rugs, she creates exotic, austere patterns drained of color, shimmer and shine.

"She's just hit a huge transition point in her work, going from intricate patterns to minimalism," said Erin Dziedzic, a curator with SCAD's exhibitions department. "She uses beads as a way to influence the way we look at structure and to investigate the way everyday objects can become transformative."

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Originally from New York City, Liza Lou is best known for her intricately beaded paintings, sculptures and installations. She received a prestigious MacArthur Foundation Fellowship in 2002 and

has exhibited her work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. She divides her time between studios in Los Angeles and KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

IF YOU GO

What: "Liza Lou: Let the Light In"

When: Through Jan. 22

Where: SCAD Museum of Art, 601 Turner Blvd.

Museum hours: Noon-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday

Admission: \$10; \$8 senior and military; children 14 and younger free

Information: 525-7191 or www.scadmoa.org