

The suffering beneath all the glitter

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Here's a question to ponder: why would anyone cast a three-metre branch in fibreglass, hang the resultant form on a steel frame and then decorate it by hand with hundreds of thousands of tiny glass beads? While you consider that one, mull over this. Why would the same artist - a 36-year-old from Los Angeles called Liza Lou - have glued yet more beads to every square millimetre of a suburban kitchen in 1996, and then, in 2000, to portraits of all 42 presidents of the United States? And why, now, in her first London show, should she have done the same thing with razor wire, a prison cell and the statue of a headless man?

If these questions don't bother you as you walk around the White Cube, then you're missing Lou's point. Which is easy enough to do, given that the beads she uses are so small and densely packed that it's possible, perversely, not to notice they're there. All that labour, all that frowning, just to be overlooked: it makes your heart sink to think about it.

But back to Lou's branch. Cantilevered from the White Cube's wall, it seems oddly ominous - the branch feels Beckett-ish and dead. This may be to do with its leaflessness, or perhaps, with its context.

Dead branches in art galleries tend to remind us of unpleasant things: lynching photographs, maybe, or borrowings from Goya's Disasters of War by those other White Cube artists, the Chapmans.

That Lou's branch is called Scaffold suggests we're right to be worried, which takes us back to our original question: why the beads? And not just any beads, but these beads: tiny blobs of gold glass, applied with such meticulousness that Scaffold feels like a luxury object.

One solution to this might be satirical inappropriateness. Like Jeff Koons' gilded porcelain statue of Michael Jackson and his chimp, Lou's branch could be meant to strike us as funny in being made from a material that is obviously too good for it. I'd say, though, that Scaffold is a far more complex image than Bubbles. While Koons' work is intentionally easy, Lou has gone for an answer that is very, very hard: the Sisyphean task of glueing millions of tiny beads to large objects. It seems pretty much like slave labour, and my guess is that it's meant to. If Scaffold's echoes of lynching call to mind a shameful moment in America's past, then Lou's other pieces in this show - a razor-wire enclosure called Security Fence, an corch'd figure called Homeostasis - seem designed to evoke horrors in her present. The enclosure, three metres high and with its barbs immaculately worked

in silver beads, is a whittled-down version of Camp X-Ray. Homeostasis looks like the victim of an American beating at Abu Ghraib, while the self-describing Cell, its breeze blocks and shit stains all picked out in beading, could be anywhere in Bush's new world order.

What makes these images so powerful, though, isn't that Lou is trading on their political associations so much as that she herself has visibly suffered to make them. Built into our response to her work is a sense of the tedium that must lie behind it: the squinting, the back-ache, the boredom. Like the nasty historical episodes it hints at, Lou's sculpture seems the outcome of raw capitalism.

Her glittering gallows and twinkling torture victims don't just look like luxury objects, they are luxury objects' and luxe has always called for workers to suffer, for lace-makers to blind themselves or diamond miners to die in the dark. And so with Scaffold. In its wastefully meticulous way, Lou's branch both describes a capitalist process and is itself a product of that process. If Lou wasn't from LA, you might almost think she was a Marxist. Her work gives you a kind of hope, that things in Bush's America may not be as uniformly bad as they seem.

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