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LIZA LOU

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Where in the World Is Liza Lou?

The author caught up with Lou in South Africa, where Zulu craftspeople are helping her realize ambitious new beaded sculptures.

BY STEVEN C. DUBIN

Liza Lou has a name that may sound like a storybook character or a country singer, but her work ethic as an artist would put a Calvinist to shame. So her seven-year absence from the New York exhibition scene led us to ask: where in the world has Liza Lou been, and what has she been doing? Evidence lies in her recent creations, presently on view at two New York venues. They will startle anyone who associates her exclusively with the eye-popping Technicolor domestic interiors for which she became known.

Lou (b. 1969) has long produced true-to-scale beadwork sculptures of everyday places, from a cluttered closet to a suburban kitchen, which have been widely exhibited throughout the U.S. and Europe. Three years ago, Lou—who was the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” fellowship in 2002—acted on impulse and relocated from Los Angeles to Durban, South Africa. The move began with a dream: “I wanted to make a wire cage,” she states matter-of-factly, though at that time she was “thinking about the Middle East.”¹ True to her signature style, the dream cage, if created, would have been completely festooned with beads. The idea gnawed at her. But Lou’s workshop in California was operating at full tilt on other projects, which would require that she set up shop elsewhere to realize her intentions. That led her to contact Aid to Artisans, an international group (with home offices in Hartford, Conn.) that facilitates crafts projects throughout the world.

People there put her in touch with Marisa Fick-Jordaan, the dynamic founder/director of Durban’s renowned BAT Shop (named for the Bartle Arts Trust, which developed a multipurpose arts center at Durban’s harbor).² A one-hour meeting in New York between Lou and Jordaan proved to be fateful: having made this lone contact, and with no sponsorship or formal invitation, the artist decided to visit South Africa for two weeks and possibly establish a satellite operation there.

That was July 2005. She has stayed on to develop and supervise a team of 30 Zulu men and women, aged 19 to 52, beading artworks of massive dimensions and intricate detail. The core members of the group had registered for work with the municipality, and others were recruited through word of mouth; Lou pays them with her own funds, including money she received from the MacArthur fellowship. Lou admits that Africa simply had not been



View of Liza Lou's exhibition, showing (center) Continuous Mile, 2007-08; (wall) Condition of Capture, 2008; (rear) Security Fence, 2005-07; at L&M Arts, New York. Photo Tom Powel Imaging, Inc.



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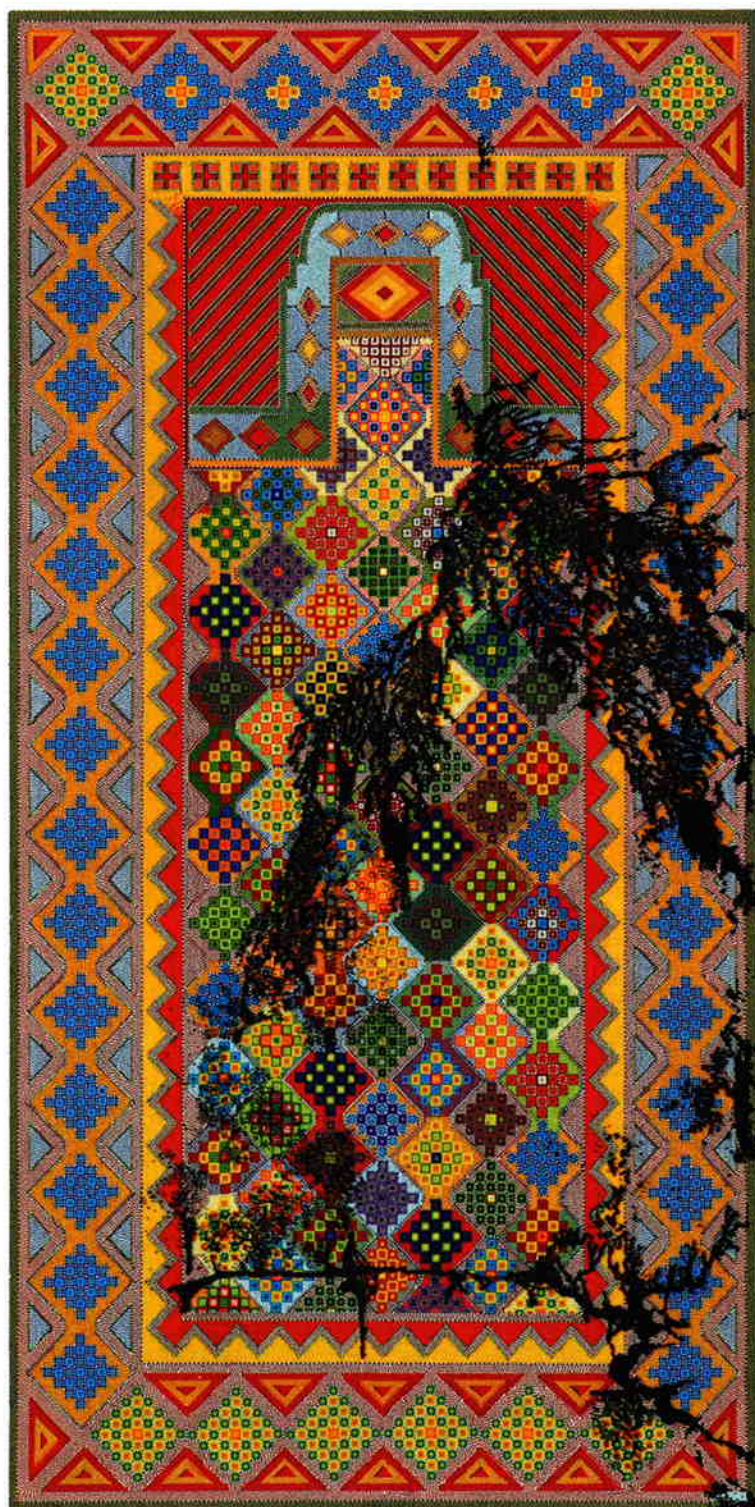
on her radar previously. Now it has become her home. And while she acknowledges that it sometimes seems like sheer folly to have relocated halfway around the world as she's done, Lou is guileless and courageous in equal measure, a shrewd manager and a creative risk-taker. Looking back, she reflects, "Part of my art real estate is craft; it is part of the landscape that I own. So why not go there, truly go there to the heart of it, in Africa?" Lou is referring, of course, to a long history of beading among the Zulu, who are renowned for producing superb and distinctive objects with intricate patterns and elaborate color codes.

After an initial stint renting part of the BAT center's space, Lou moved her project to the Diakonia Centre in Durban's hectic business district. Diakonia was once a significant hub of anti-apartheid activity and still houses NGOs and nonprofits such as Black Sash,³ Lawyers for Human Rights and the Mennonite Central Committee. Lou's studio is an anomaly there, but she was welcomed because of its outreach component: none of her workers had previously held a regular job (she does not refer to them as "beaders" but considers them artisans whose visual thinking she is helping to expand). Her objective has been to develop an economically sustainable project and provide much-needed training, while creating her own original artworks.

Lou unveiled the new work—one of the best-kept secrets in Durban—on July 10. For three hours only, the artisans and their families saw two monumental pieces fully displayed for the first time, as did people from the Diakonia Centre's many offices and a few additional individuals who had somehow gotten wind of the event. On view was *Maximum Security*, a 23½-by-23½-foot construction made up of a steel frame and chain-link fencing; two narrow cage-like structures intersect to form a gigantic "X." (The work resembles a 2005-07 project, *Security Fence*, a square chain-link enclosure topped with barbed wire and covered with beads.) Every surface glistens with silvery beads. Lou also showed *Coil (Black 1)*, which has now been retitled *Continuous Mile*, a mile-long cord approximately an inch thick and weighing nearly 800 pounds, woven from cotton and beads. (There are two versions of *Continuous Mile*, one in black and one in white.) To display it, Lou painstakingly loops and stacks the rope inside a wooden mold; once the mold is taken away, a free-standing cylinder remains, almost 3 feet high. When the black version was first shown in Durban, imaginative lighting made it appear to be finely dusted with confectioner's sugar, a halo of luminosity hugging the perimeter.

People were admitted to the studio in small groups to view, as well, a series of beaded panels then referred to as the "Reliefs," measuring up to 10 by 4½ feet, which were in various stages of completion. They are based on the designs of Islamic prayer rugs, although none of them adheres entirely to the form. One is executed predominantly in black with only a vestige of patterning; others, mostly in gold or white. Most intriguing of all are instances where a typical Islamic multicolored pattern is intact at the top but unexpectedly dissolves as the eye traces downward through erratic lines and irregularly shaped blobs of color. In one it seems as if ink has obliterated much of the design, but the blot, of course, is actually a vast expanse of black beads.

There was also a celebration, Zulu-style. Guitarist and local celebrity Madala Kunene furnished the entertainment, a type of trance music based on ancient divination rhythms. He played recurring sound loops representing a dream journey, a fitting analogue to the meditative working style Lou has established in her studio. It proved to be quite



*Offensive/Defensive, 2008,
glass beads on aluminum panel,
72 by 36 inches.*



Quick, Cheap, Overwhelming Victory, 2008,
24-karat gold-plated beads on aluminum panel,
72 by 36 inches.



Plan, Prepare, Execute, 2007-08,
glass beads on aluminum panel,
120 by 60 inches.



Lou was horrified when viewers thought that her earlier glistening but dystopic works were happy and goofy.



danceable as well: the men and women performed a joyous line dance in which individuals came forward to execute high kicks, low bends and all sorts of improvisational steps. And moving alongside them, Lou found her own distinctive groove.

Lou considers the monumental works and the panels to be separate but linked endeavors. The common denominator is her artistic reaction to strife throughout the Middle East, the treatment of prisoners at Guantánamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, and the idea of confinement in general. To Lou, allowing the carpet patterns to dissolve relates to the destruction of the colossal Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban in 2001, when the world was shocked to see that centuries of art, tradition and meaning could be wiped away in moments. She also characterizes the eruption of solid patches of beads across the multicolored surfaces as “new armies” heading out on maneuvers. The titles of the panels—*Offensive/Defensive* and *Atlas Defeat* for instance—invoke military terms. And the orange that predominates in *Conditions of Capture* signifies prison garb.

While all this might appear to be a huge leap for Lou, the recent pieces share with her earlier work the idea of “doing time.” She reflects, “I use time as part of the material; it is implicit. You use cotton, thread, beads and time.” She thought about time a great deal during the tedium of making *Kitchen* (mixed-medium installation, 1991-95), the break-out piece that put her on the map. She recalls, “I was living downtown in San Diego, and my phone number was one digit off the state prison’s. So when I would answer the phone they would say, ‘Is this the prison?’ And sometimes I would pause and go, ‘Yes.’” She continues, “I empathized with the prisoners: I have a roomful of material and I’m in this place until I use it all up.”

The leitmotifs of Lou’s work, be it a kitchen or a cage, are pleasure and pain. “*Kitchen* is pain, pain, pain, pain, pain,” says Lou. “I spent five years working on that baby. And it’s all about drudgery. But the feeling you get when you look at it is one of pleasure. It’s the ultimate luxury object.” And about the 250,000 individually beaded blades of grass that make up the surface of *Back Yard* (1995-97), she notes, “It’s all about labor, making the garden, hard work, the American Dream. There’s a lot of pain in that. So all the way through it’s been this kind of teeter-tottering.” She was horrified when viewers believed these glistening but dystopic works were happy and goofy, or discounted them as “not serious.”

Lou’s current innovations extend beyond subject matter; she is revolutionizing the very techniques she developed over the past 18 years. To create the “Reliefs,” workers must use tweezers to precisely place tens of thousands of beads; they are attached with glue at their tips to sometimes mammoth supports. A practicing Buddhist, Lou explains, “It’s like the Buddhist idea of focusing on ‘the burning tip of the moment’ by making the work with a focus on the actual tip of the bead itself.”⁴ She special-orders tubular glass beads from Japan in sizes and hues that have never been manufactured before (for the shape, think of the plastic sheath at the end of a shoelace or a section taken from the shaft of a feather).

Lou thrives on new challenges. “I’m always interested in possibility,” she remarks, “in making it as difficult as possible to make work. So let’s make it really difficult by moving to a foreign country, trying to slow down the process, where it actually isn’t about accomplishment. For me it’s always about slightly shifting things.” To watch her labor alongside her coworkers calls to mind Tibetan monks painstakingly creating mandalas from colored

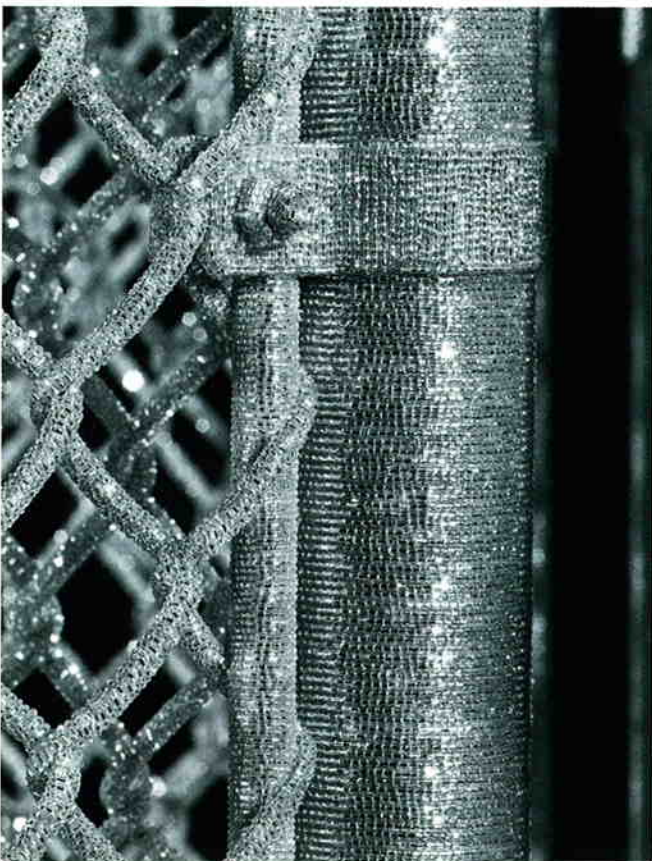
Continuous Mile, 2007-08, cotton, glass beads, 31 inches by 77 inches in diameter. Photo Tom Powel Imaging, Inc.

Even the bolts are beaded in *Maximum Security*; the chain link looks magical, as if glazed with ice.



Above, detail of Plan, Prepare, Execute.

Opposite, view of Maximum Security, 2007-08, steel and glass beads, 80 inches high, 23 1/2 square feet; at Lever House, New York. Photo Jesse David Harris. Below, detail of Maximum Security.



particles of sand, but with a significant twist: in this case the participants come from some of the bleakest and toughest townships in KwaZulu-Natal province, where crime, poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS are rife. While the production of her works is meditative, it is “not a quilting bee,” she quips.⁵ She explains, “Africa says to me, ‘No way!’ This is how we’re going to do it. So there’s this letting go of that control, and you see it in those panels, you see a place where there’s order and then there’s just an allowance for total chaos.”

The clash of these disparate attitudes has produced exciting results. Lou’s “Reliefs” conjure up associations with both Op art and Minimalism, as well as pixelated images, computer motherboards, honeycombs, knitting patterns, LEGOs and ribbon candy. The more nearly mono-hued panels play out an exploration of color and depth perception à la Josef Albers. The predominantly black *Plan, Prepare, Execute*, for example, uses beads of graduated heights to achieve an amazingly sculptural effect; the piece looks like a wooden printing block with a deeply carved and highly rhythmic pattern. In panels where the structured designs break up, the surfaces can resemble aerial photographs of rivers and tributaries, delicate tracteries of capillaries, invasions of mold, ancient temples overrun by exotic vegetation, pools of blood. They are mesmerizing; you long to touch their surfaces. It will be the rare viewer who can resist the temptation.

In *Maximum Security*, presently installed at Lever House, the beading draws you in to finely scan the chain link, usually a banal and overlooked feature of the built environment. Even the bolts that connect the sections are fitted with beaded caps. It looks magical, as if the metal has been glazed with ice. But once your focus extends beyond the beautiful surfaces you realize that these are enclosed corridors; persons trapped inside would find no exit. The work is by turns dynamic and static, wondrous and terrifying.

Lou is keenly aware that she has carved out a distinctive niche for herself. She has earned recognition and praise, to be sure, but at the price of monastic dedication and a significant amount of misinterpretation. She recalls being cautioned while she was toiling over *Kitchen*, “You should stop. You’re going to be a joke. You should stop now.” But as she explains, “That was my incitement: ‘If a [beaded] cereal box is so upsetting to you, wait ‘til you see what I’m really gonna do!’” Lou displays both a singular vision and the dogged determination to realize it. “Wow, you hate this?” she rhetorically asks. “Great!” □

1. All quotes from Liza Lou come from an interview conducted by the author on July 11, 2008, and from remarks made during a studio visit August 1, 2008, both in Durban, South Africa.
2. The BAT Shop, best known for selling intricately patterned baskets woven from telephone wire by a large workforce of craftsmen, has since moved to another location.
3. Founded in 1955, and once quite visible as a white women’s anti-apartheid group, Black Sash’s now multiracial staff works on issues such as community empowerment and xenophobic violence. The building behind the Diakonia Centre was formerly an outpost for the secret police, who monitored the activities going on there—though activist groups were somewhat protected by the fact that many of them had religious affiliations.
4. Lou’s “aha” moment of recognizing her affinity with Eastern philosophy occurred when a friend, watching her at work on *Kitchen*, remarked, “This is meditation.” She likens counting breaths with counting the number of beads she’s put down.
5. The panels were worked upon horizontally, resting on tables. Lou did not see them hung vertically until their exhibition in New York. While beading, artisans leaned on pillows at the edges of the tables; many of them wore earphones and listened to music as they worked.

Liza Lou’s exhibition at L&M Arts, New York, is up through Nov. 15. Maximum Security is on view at Lever House through Nov. 29.

Author: Steven C. Dubin is professor of arts administration at Teachers College, Columbia University. His most recent book is Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa (Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006).

