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Intuition of Beauty



LIZA LOU's grueling transformation of mundane objects by adorning them with thousands upon thousands of glass beads is **ANTIC COMEDY**, **INDIGNANT SATIRE**, **POPULIST CEREMONY**, and **ULTIMATELY THE PRODUCT OF A HIGHLY PERSONAL ARTISTIC VISION**. BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



PREVIOUS SPREAD: *Kitchen*, 1991–96. Glass beads, wood, wire, plaster, artist’s used appliances. Area: 168 sq. ft. THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE): *Kitchen* (detail), 1991–96. Glass beads, wood, wire, plaster, artist’s used appliances. Area: 168 sq. ft.; *Kitchen* (detail), 1991–96. Glass beads, wood, wire, plaster, artist’s used appliances. Area: 168 sq. ft.; *Closet*, 1997–98. New York couple’s empty bottles and unwanted household objects, glass beads, wood, wire, plaster, found objects, electrical parts.

The 90s have seen the collapse of nearly all traditional rationales of art-making. Pity today’s aspiring young artist, who confronts impossible inflated and conflicting demands for effect—to resist and to rival pop culture, to advance political causes and to please crowds, to illustrate academic theory and to sell—while disoriented by the advanced decay of art’s roots in craft disciplines. Our time gives the artist nowhere to start and nothing to master, then wants miracles. Lou’s *Kitchen* seems to me an antimiracle, spectacularly refusing to fill any bill not its own. It is fundamentally hermetic, an armored refuge of personal initiative, though affected by such art-world pressures as the early 90s fashion for social criticism. Somewhat hesitantly, meanwhile, the *Kitchen* engages the one richly promising intuition of beauty, which Lou will develop fully in her *Back Yard*.

Beauty names the physiological standoff of attraction and reverence, appetite and awe, which stops us dead in our tracks before some object. With melting pleasure and intense satisfaction, we feel ourselves altered, or reorganized, in conformance to the object—thinking and feeling on the object’s terms. The object can be almost anything, art or not art, and perhaps immaterial: even an idea, given only that it appear momentarily more powerful and valuable than oneself. Art used to court beauty as a lightning rod invited lightning. Then, in modern times, artists ever more readily sacrificed beauty to the pursuit of other aims and ambitions, opportunities and afflictions. It is a long story, ending in entropy—all the ingenious modern ideas of and for art piling up and spreading out, becoming interchangeable. Picking through the residue, artists try to recall a fundamental, difficult joy that art used to be about. There is nothing neat or clean in this transition.

“I hate the word *obsessive*,” and yet Lou’s work can seem practically determined to be misunderstood as something friskily nutty, in one way, and righteously satirical, in another—exploiting an old, easy disdain for suburban ideals of domestic happiness, for instance. And nuttiness and

satire really are present. Lou tacitly accepts a current role of the artist—the installation artist, in particular—as public entertainer. Call it the theme-park imperative: art as pocket Disneyland animating concepts unsuitable for prime time. If only in self-defense, Lou will play the clown. “I’m just a little gal from the avocado grove,” she is apt to say, excusing herself from ponderous questions. Take it or leave it.

Meanwhile, Lou comes by her ambivalence toward suburbia honestly, from early experience in Minnesota and California. She is forthrightly feminist in familiar ways of valorizing “women’s work” (the dainty, lumpen handicraft of decorative beading) and, at least in the *Kitchen*, of calling attention to female stereotypes (note the girly images on the oven). And she certainly does evoke obsession: the compulsive repetitions and horror vacui of outsider art and the slavery of signs that merges people with their social description as, say, homemakers (never mind that the homemaker, like the home itself, is a decrepit category today).

Then there is the collective labor that went into the backyard. Many afternoon parties of volunteers gathered to produce blades of virtual grass for the piece’s tousled lawn. (As the creator myself of 21 of the finest blades, I can tell you how it’s done: with tiny pliers, crimp an end of a four-inch wire, slip on a round bead—a drop of dew, dig—and enough cylindrical beads to fill the wire, then crimp the other end. Presorted by Lou, your beads’ colors occupy some part of a grassy spectrum, from lush green to withered yellow.) This aspect of the work suggests a participation mystique or communitarian agenda like that of Christo’s public-art circuses.

But all such apparent features of Lou’s art—antic comedy, indignant satire, populist ceremony—seem to me mirages of her actual intention, which is simpler, more mysterious, and much less reassuring. The fear-someness of the true artist’s ruthless drive, to which we nervously apply patronizing epithets like “obsessive,” rampages Chez Lou. It does not spare the artist. In person she is serious, apolitical, and shy. Yet she



THIS PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT): *Homeostasis* 2005–06. Glass beads on fiberglass. H 71 ¼, W 25 ½, D 15 in.; *Blanket* (one of a series of three), 2005. Glass beads on polyester resin. H 14, W 43, D 27 in. (each); *Man*, 2002. Glass beads on fiberglass. H 68, W 71, D 16 in.

makes art that is zany, polemical, and extroverted, against her own grain, with grueling techniques that give her painful tendonitis in her hands. Is she confused? No. What would be contradiction in logic is only complexity in successful art.

Admittedly, the complexities of the *Kitchen* (unlike the radiantly integrated *Back Yard*) can seem only too numerous, getting in each other's way. But this should not stop it from being a classic of our time. Nor is it at all surprising. Here is an artwork that consumed five formative years of a young artist's career. Developments and changes that might have been worked out over scores or hundreds of separate pieces accumulated within one piece. Lou made the *Kitchen* up as she went along, she has said, and it stands to reason that the artist who began it and the artist who completed it were not the same person. It survives as a palimpsest of ideas, events, and states of mind lost to present time—growing in importance as, in her subsequent work, Lou applies the lessons she learned from it.

Consider the *Kitchen's* most enigmatic element, the newspaper that bears, besides that buoyant headline "Housewife Beads the World!" the teaser "Plus! Frogman Reveals the Secrets of Tough Love!" The Frogman, Lou has told me without naming a name, was a teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute who denigrated the *Kitchen* in its early stages. The assault hurt, and to even sarcastically term it "tough love," suggesting a benign motive, seems pretty mild revenge. At any rate, it seems that to go on with the work, Lou had to assimilate that moment of anguish. So in went the Frogman, despite his puzzling disruption of a viewer's reverie.

Besides incorporating different faces of Lou, the *Kitchen* plays host to guest subjectives. These range from the collective frozen attitudes of product packaging and vernacular design and décor through intervening symbolism (black wallpaper roses for death) to heartfelt stylistic allusions (Van Gogh's *Starry Night* in swirling dishwater) and haunting sentiments of Emily Dickinson.

Here is the Dickinson poem that the *Kitchen* quotes:

**She rose to His Requirement – dropt
The Playthings of Her Life
To take the honorable Work
Of Woman, and of Wife –**

**If ought She missed in Her new Day,
Of Amplitude, or Awe –
Or first Prospective – Or the Gold
In using, wear away,**

**It lay unmentioned – as the Sea
Develop Pearl, and Weed,
But only to Himself – be known
The Fathoms they abide –**

This beautiful poem envisions the self as a sea. The married woman who is the poem's subject presents on her surface "the honorable work" (note the poet's choice of flat, officious language) "of woman and of wife," to which she "rose" from her depths. What goes on in those depths now? The never-married poet wonders but, with transcendent moral grace, declines to speculate or judge. Only the sea itself can locate the precious "pearl" and noxious "weed" that it nurtures. A viewer of the *Kitchen* is accordingly altered to mysteries beneath its cheeky, jazzy scintillation. If you think you can make out the artist's opinion of housewifery, in other words, you are projecting. Stop it. ■

Editor's Note: This essay was excerpted from "Splendor in the Grass: Liza Lou and the Cultivation of Beauty" by Peter Schjeldahl, one of four essays included in the monograph Liza Lou (Skira/Rizzoli, \$60). The other essays in this just-published book were written by Eleanor Heartney, Lawrence Weschler, and Arthur Lubow.