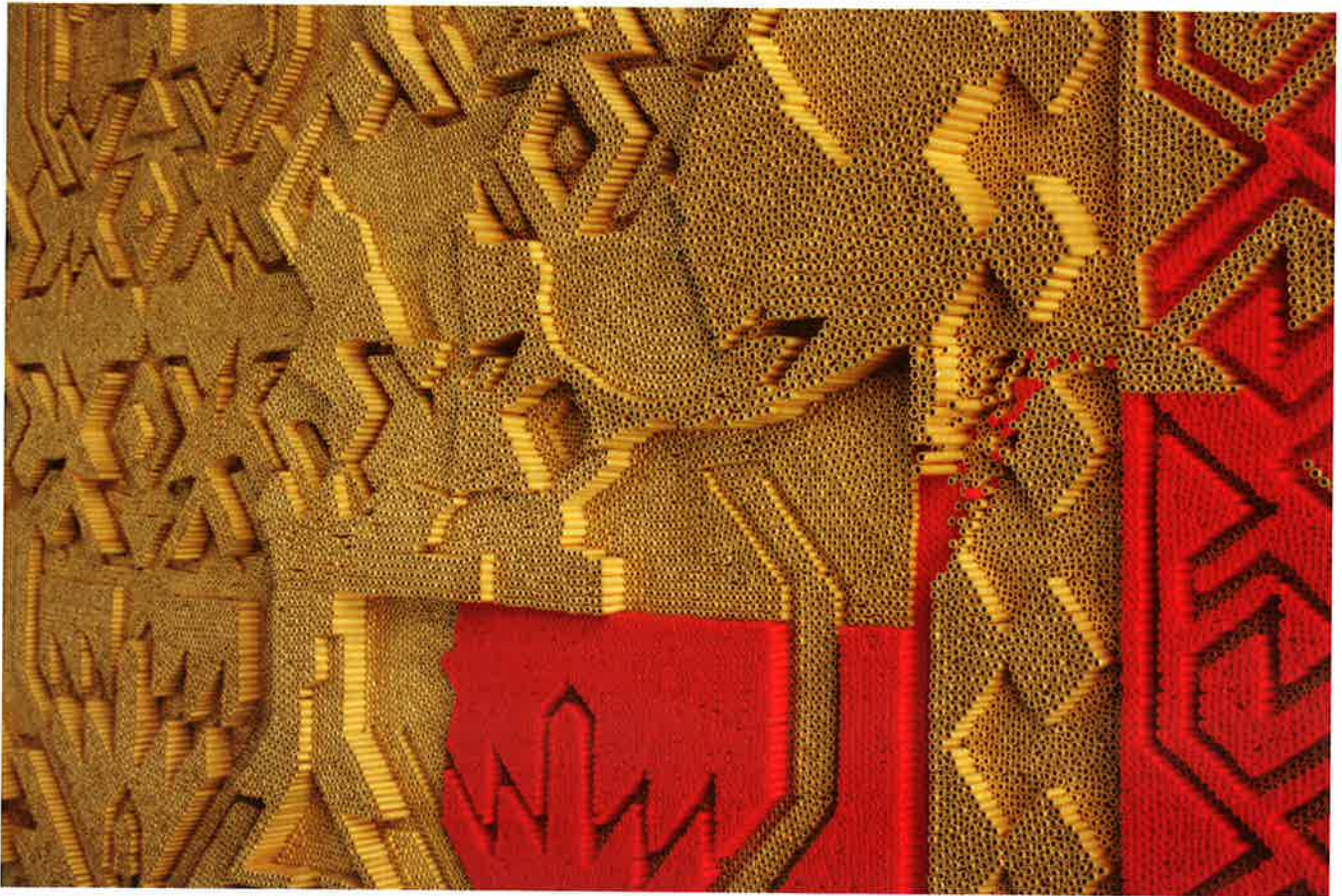


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# LIZA LOU *Beads The World*

BY ELIZABETH SOBIESKI

The adjective that seems most often applied to Liza Lou's dazzling beaded artwork is "beautiful." It is unquestionably that, but it also is powerful, unforgettable, witty, heart-breaking and full of socio-political commentary. While that 'b' word is a compliment for most people, it can elicit a certain resistance in the contemporary art scene, where an anti-beauty aesthetic sometimes prevails. Liza Lou notes with a sigh, "Only in the art world could beauty be a pejorative term."

Liza Lou enters L&M Arts in Los Angeles just a day after a grueling thirty hours spent flying in from Durban via Johannesburg and London. She is as beautiful as her art, a fine-boned blonde of forty-one, with an allure similar to that of actress, Naomi Watts; Lou's own expressive face has held the screen in her riveting film, an autobiographical monologue titled *Born Again*. She is waiting for her large pieces to clear customs at LAX, anxious to install the work, which is on display until May 7. It is her first hometown show since 1998. Here, in a back office, a roll of toilet paper descends from the wall. On closer inspection, it turns out to be one of her smaller pieces, woven from thousands of pale beads and with a gold-beaded core.

Lou says, "There's interest in taking something that's normally a reject, not something you would normally sit and look at and have any sense of wonder about. But also, with this work, it gets interesting with the rips and tears and dirt streaks. I just see the kind of tenderness in labor." Themes of imperfection and human endeavor resonate in the new work.

Repetitive labor has been a constant in Lou's oeuvre, from the original *Kitchen*, a life-size, entirely beaded kitchen that put her on the art radar. In that work, each effervescent drop of water dribbling from a twinkling faucet is a network of brilliant glass beading, commercial brands of detergent and breakfast cereal are luminous with promise, appliances glitter and a spangled newspaper declares, "Housewife Beads the World!" *Kitchen* took five years (1991-1996)

for Lou to complete, and despite the toil, the installation projects a great deal of humor. Some have described it as feminist Pop art, others as an act of endurance. And while subsequent works over the last decade and a half display the same intensive labor, much has changed for Liza Lou.

For the last six years, she has maintained a studio in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where she now employs some thirty Zulu artisans, twenty-six women and four men, "Quite macho men, I might add," she says. "I didn't have a plan to move there permanently. I had a project, but got really taken with the place and the people."

The project was *Security Fence*, an 11-foot-high barbed wire cube depicted as a most refined and chilling silver diamante web. "I realized really quickly that the people I was working with were just so special that I was going to have to stick around." The artisans, born under apartheid, were not excited when the barbed-wire structure was presented. "But I didn't realize that security fences are as ubiquitous there as they are. So when I shipped it there in these crates, when they first saw it, they were pretty underwhelmed by what I was doing. But once the women I was working with started to see what was happening, they were touched by it, in a way amazed by their own work."

Liza Lou's techniques of beading differ from the traditional Zulu mode. She taught them her process, "One stitch at a time. It took about five seconds for them to figure it out. It was, 'Move over sister, let me show you how it's done.'" Lou and the artisans usually sing as they work.

She describes Durban as living in a first-world country with third-world aspects. The steady work she supplies supports more people than her actual employees and their immediate families. She says, "Each person in my studio team is responsible for upwards of ten people. It's very hard to get ahead financially in an environment that has 70 percent unemployment. Once one person has a job, family and friends move in. In South Africa, it's called *Ubuntu*,

Opposite page top:  
**Liza Lou, *Kitchen* (detail), 1991-96**, Room made of glass beads, wood, wire, plaster and artist's used appliances, 168 sq. ft., (15 sq m), Photo: Tom Powell, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.

Opposite page bottom:  
**Liza Lou, *Quick, Cheap, Overwhelming Victory* (detail), 2008**, Gold plated beads on aluminum, 72 x 36 in., (182.8 x 91.4 cm), Photo: Tom Powell, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.

This page top:  
**Liza Lou, *Born Again* (film stills), 2004**, DVD; Single take solo monologue written and performed by Liza Lou, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.



Liza Lou, *Kitchen*, 1991-96, Room made of glass beads, wood, wire, plaster and artist's used appliances, 168 sq. ft., (15 sq m), Photo: Tom Powell, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.

which means 'I am because we are.' It is a culture of sharing. I've never heard anyone complain about it, it's just how it is. Unlike in the West, where we are so much more self-involved, it's just me, me, me, the people I know in South Africa will give the shirts off their back to someone in need."

Of the Zulu people, Lou says, "They certainly have a relationship to craft and beauty, but it isn't necessarily like painting. They traditionally make beaded work for jewelry and ritual type things. Beadwork has resonance culturally and it's just very significant to people. It's lifeblood, not just decorative. It will be used for weddings, funerals; it has ceremonial purposes. African beadwork has tremendous meaning. While in the West, beadwork has this other connotation: tacky!" She laughs, and then notes that beads are not so regarded when used in high fashion. "So it's either tacky or couture or baubles."

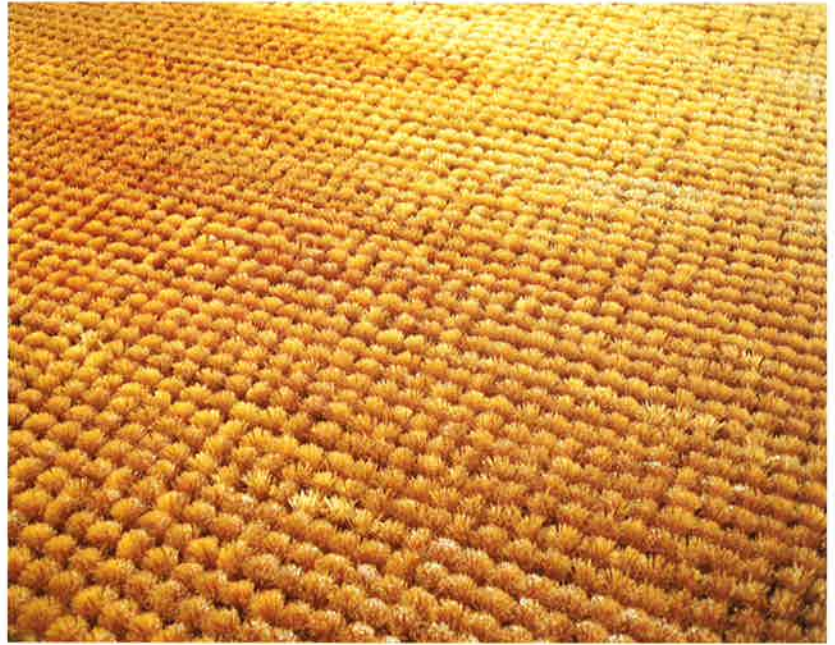
Liza Lou was born in Manhattan to artistic parents who renounced their cosmopolitanism after a Billy Graham Crusade meeting, overnight becoming Evangelical Christians, and eventually moving to Minnesota to teach the Bible. But before departing, they lighted a fire in their downtown loft and burned books and art, including Ben-Day dotted paintings from their neighbor, Roy Lichtenstein. (He was a friend of Lou's mother, a musical theatre actress.) Would she consider Lichtenstein an influence? "The Ben-Day dots are engraved in my DNA," she answers. "I grew up poring over Lichtenstein's work in books. I was miles from the art world, literally and figuratively, but

my very own mother had known him, and told me stories about him. It made a huge difference to me in terms of what I thought was possible—even though we were living a churchy life in the suburbs, being an artist didn't seem that remote. My childhood seemed to sparkle around the edges because of the stories about Roy." Other influences include the mosaic work she witnessed in some European cathedrals and "Seurat, sure, and for obvious reasons."

She portrayed her harrowing early childhood in Minnesota in *Born Again*, which is being shown at MOCA LA in conjunction with her show at L&M. Liza Lou's purportedly religious father was abusive, and one of her escapes was drawing for hours in the confines of her room. By age ten, her mother moved her and her sister to California. She attended a now-defunct Bible college in San Diego, but abandoned that for the San Francisco Art Institute. One day she entered a bead store and found the tiny, brilliant-hued glass beads to be "the most amazing paint" she had ever seen.

Has she any desire to explore other types of "paint?" "The fundamental interest has never been beads or even in laying down color," she says. "I'm interested in repetition, accrual, pattern and the slow build-up of process over time. My material offers an entrance into a very slow, methodical way of working and thinking that I deeply resonate with." She left school after her professors judged her bead pieces too decorative, too feminine, too crafts oriented.

"I referenced art critics in the *Kitchen* in the newspaper headline, 'Housewife Beads the World, Plus Frogman Reveals the Secrets



Clockwise from top left:

**Liza Lou, *The Damned*, 2003-4**, Glass beads on polyester resin, Adam: 86 x 42 x 31 in. (218.4 x 106.7 x 78.7 cm), Eve: 89 x 27 x 37 in. (226.1 x 68.6 x 94 cm), Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.

**Liza Lou, *Gather (one million)*, 2008-10**, Glass beads, stainless steel wire, hemp twine, 7 x 150 x 150 in. (17.78 x 381 x 381 cm), Photo: Dean Elliot, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.

**Liza Lou, *Security Fence*, 2005**, Glass beads on steel and razor wire, 132 x 156 x 156 in. (335.3 x 396.2 x 396.24 cm), Photo: Joshua White, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.



of Tough Love,' basically acknowledging the fact that no matter what you do, there will always be someone who hates it. When I was younger, this type of thing hurt, but now that I'm like, a million years old, it's water off a duck's back."

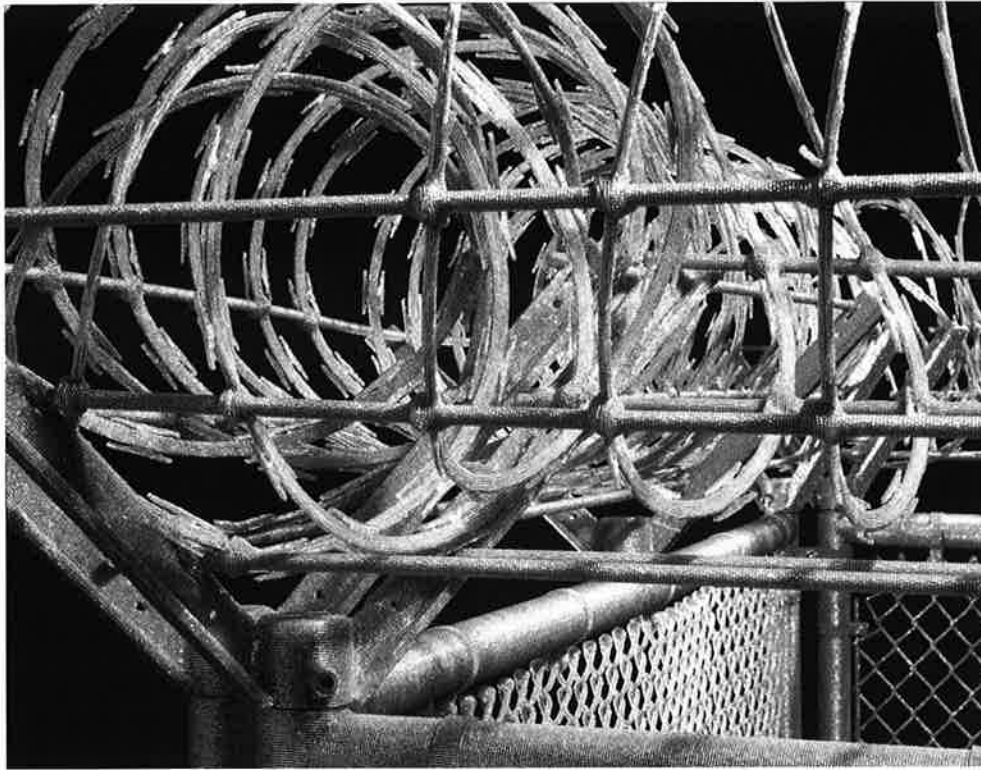
During the five years it took to create *Kitchen*, Lou was indomitable, working alone, affixing millions of beads with toothpicks and tweezers, thread and glue over 168 square feet, and supporting herself as a waitress and a formalwear salesperson. "I lived in a loft in downtown LA. I would ride the bus to the Broadway department store on 7th Avenue. This was around 1992. I must have been quite a sight: bleach-blonde hair, red lipstick. I loved that job. I worked in Special Occasion Dresses, and the women who came in were working class, mostly Hispanic and African-American. I loved helping to find the right dress and giving over-the-top service. I'd fly down the escalator to find a girdle for someone, and then fly back up to the dressing rooms and help squeeze her into a black velvet number with gold lamé trim. The women didn't have much money, and I wanted to make sure that they were treated like a queen. I made \$6.00 an hour, no commission, but I totally loved it. At night, I'd go home and work on the *Kitchen*."

*Kitchen*, which mesmerized the art world when it was first shown at New York's New Museum in 1995, was followed by the equally witty *Back Yard*. But realizing that just doing the countless blades of grass—never mind the table, benches, flowers, food and barbeque grill—would carry her through her golden years, she began to hold

bead parties, somehow enticing volunteers, including critic Peter Schjeldahl (definitely not a Frogman!), to bead thousands of blades of grass. Liza Lou's talent and passion probably drew in the accomplices, although she jokingly attributes their commitment to "the beer." Even so, the 528-square-foot beaded picnic that is *Back Yard* took three years (1996-1999) to complete.

*Back Yard* complemented the seemingly safe suburban domesticity of *Kitchen*, but was followed by the 40-foot long *Trailer*, in black, white, gold and grey, with its ominous noir quality, and the forty-two beaded portraits of Presidents of the United States, which offered a subtle reference to the purchase of Manhattan from Native Americans for \$24.00 worth of beads. "*American Presidents* is a specific project that ended during the Bush-Gore debacle," she says, "during the two extraordinary months when the US had no elected President. I have since made an Obama portrait—I just had to—but he is not part of the earlier series from 1995-1999."

The art world was taking notice, as was the pedestrian one, as Lou had the opportunity to exhibit various pieces, including *Back Yard*, *American Presidents* and three sculpted and beaded giant Barbies in her 1999 *American Glamorama* show at New York's Grand Central Station. Although a California artist, "Arts for Transit contacted me. My main concern was safety—I was worried someone would tag the



Liza Lou, *Security Fence* (detail), 2005, Glass beads on steel and razor wire, 132 x 156 x 156 in. (335.3 x 396.2 x 396.24 cm), Photo: Joshua White, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.

work or blow spit wads, but they assured me there would be security. They got the NYPD—what could be better than having muscled dudes with guns protecting your work?”

In 2002, Liza Lou won a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, a so-called “Genius Award,” for \$500,000, which she has used for “work and more work.” She is now a veteran of numerous museum and gallery single artist shows.

Some of her later pieces grew somber, and while the glass beads still glowed, they featured themes of confinement and punishment: a sculpture of a sparkling beaded-excrement stained prison toilet (*Loo*, 2006), a bucket and noose (*Stairway to Heaven*, 2005), the life-sized *Prison Cell* (2004-2006) and *Security Fence*, the environment that brought Liza Lou to South Africa. Since then, beaded and patterned Persian carpets designed to hang from the wall (Lou calls them *Reliefs*) have emerged from her studio; shimmering, vivid, riveting pieces with titles that reflect current military crises—*Axis Defeat* (2007-2008) and the gold-plated *Quick, Cheap, Overwhelming Victory* (2008). These 21st century installations and “Reliefs” seem very different and certainly more international in scope than the almost tongue-in-cheek Americana presented in the early work. Lou insists that, “All of the work has been about America. *Prison Cell*, *Security Fence*, the prayer rugs; thinking about America in Iraq. It’s always from an American point of view, though not necessarily a popular one. More recent work has evolved into a deeper contemplation upon the process of work itself.”

Sipping tea, she speaks of one of the new pieces sitting in customs at LAX, bunches of luminous golden grass, a 150-square-foot field formed from “stainless steel wire and threading the stainless steel one at a time with the beads and gluing each end. It’s called *Gather (one million)*.” She laughs, feeling she is having difficulty explaining—“I

am so jet legged!”—yet she is totally coherent. Continuing, she says, “I wanted to make a million of these. I weighed and bundled them in bundles of 202 and set them in a row of 70 by 70 square. Each bundle I blended in different colors, kind of a landscape painting.” *Gather (one million)* is composed of nine million beads in various shades of gold, while another new piece, *Lost, Found*, employs debris-covered silver beads, originally rejected from other work and harvested from the studio floor, that have been woven into a glorious imperfect whole.

The latest work appears more abstract than her prior pieces. “You can look at it in a literal way. You can say, ‘oh, that’s grass.’ That piece is more rooted in the real world. And most of the pieces are. But there are pieces where the story of the making is part of the work. What happens

when you try to achieve a certain perfection, and there’s a point where that just falls apart? I’m very interested in the story of the hand. When you weave, you use your hand and your sweat, your saliva to get the needle moist. There’s this kind of humanity that’s woven in. And I think I’ve become really interested in that as a subject and that’s what this body of work is about, the labor, or the process as the subject of the work. When you look at it, there’s a sense of beauty, but also maybe there’s something tender or slightly tragic that is there, inherent in the effort for perfection. I’m just interested in that, the thing where you try to make something perfect and it actually starts to fall apart...No matter how you try, the will to error will always happen. And I got interested in that error. And that error became what it was about.”

Another recent change has been in the actual beads. Originally, most came from the Czech Republic, but Liza Lou now has them made to order in Japan. She remembers those “early days, when I bought ready-made beads off the shelves. I would scour basements and dusty warehouses to find what I wanted. Now I have them made to my exact specifications, depending upon the project.”

She doesn’t bristle at comments that using craft in her art makes it so-called women’s work. “I think I’ve definitely made that point in earlier work where I was specifically talking about it, like in the *Kitchen*, and I really knew I was going to get criticized about women’s work and handcrafts. So I dug my heels in and made the piece even more feminist than it had to be. I think that anytime that anybody works with craft, inherent in that, it is feminism, whether or not that artist wants to embrace that. You are a dwarf standing on the shoulders of giants because feminist artists definitely paved the way.”

She has not picked up traces of a South African accent, despite the six years she’s been there. “I think both places are home. I don’t

want to lose my identity to the place. I really think of myself as a California gal. I'm not South African." She estimates that this year, she'll be nine months in Durban and three months in Los Angeles, where she draws and writes. Her husband, Mick Haggerty, also an artist (and the director of her film), has made the move with her. She says, "My man is going for sainthood. He lives with me and purports to be happy nigh on ten years." They live a five-minute-drive from the studio, which is housed in an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Center amongst various church groups. Although no longer an Evangelical Christian, Liza Lou has a rich spiritual life and has also created work with Biblical themes: beaded sculptures of Christ-like figures and Adam and Eve, and a yogic poser.

She is thankful for her life in Durban, "for the incredible education it has afforded me. I am very, very humbled, moved, by the people I have worked with. It's taught me a lot about community." Sometimes she misses certain conveniences in the United States. "Home Depot is an amazing thing!" But she's adapted—after all, she is the artist who spent five years on a single project. "Somebody said, 'Bad roads, good people. Good roads, anyone.'"

After the Los Angeles show, Liza Lou will return to South Africa and to the work, always the work, and to the singing. She and her artisans will produce something beautiful, to be sure, for her next exhibition at White Cube in London.

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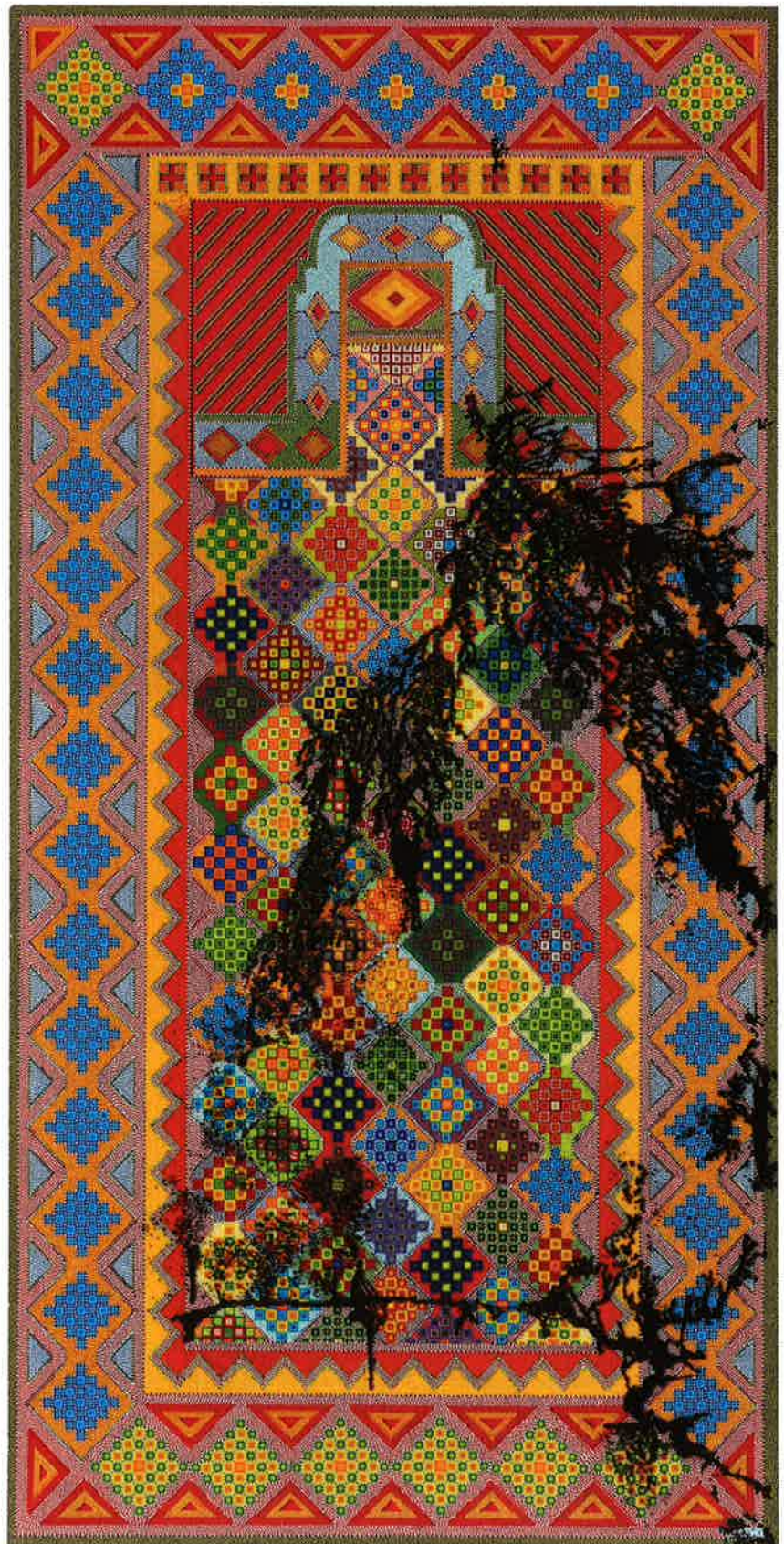
There is a page in an L&M Arts catalogue that quotes Liza Lou:

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*"I've made work to take my revenge  
against injustice  
both personal and political  
but now standing back,  
I wonder  
If art can be an act of forgiveness.  
The object stands gleaming  
Big enough to love anyone,  
Forgive anything."*

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NEW YORK AND LOS ANGELES-BASED CONTRIBUTING EDITOR, ELIZABETH SOBIESKI, IS A SCREENWRITER/PRODUCER WHO HAS WRITTEN ON ARTS-RELATED SUBJECTS FOR A VARIETY OF PUBLICATIONS, INCLUDING *NEW YORK MAGAZINE*, *AVENUE MAGAZINE*, *THE NEW YORK POST* AND *COSMOPOLITAN MAGAZINE*.



Liza Lou, *Offensive/Defensive*, 2008, Glass beads on aluminum panel, 72 x 36 in. (182.9 x 91.4 cm), Photo: Dean Elliott, Courtesy L&M Arts, NY.