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Artist Liza Lou Drapes The Floor Of The Neuberger Museum In A Vibrant 'Color Field' Of Beads

By Adam Lehrer

Los Angeles-based artist Liza Lou couldn't grasp the importance of being an artist at first. That is, until an ancient material with no trace of scope in the canon of art history grabbed her. That material was beads. "Here was a craft material with no art historical background that carried connotations of beauty," says Lou in an e-mail. "To me that meant even if everything was meaningless, at least I would not be adding more ugliness to the world."

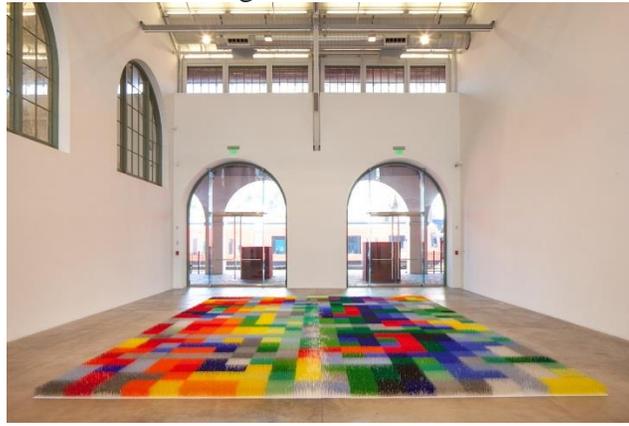


Liza Lou, image courtesy of the artist

While other artists have experimented with countless mediums, from the strictly analog to the high-concept digital, Lou remains one of the very few artists to use beads as her primary medium. That she has defined and revolutionized a form should be impressive enough, but that doesn't even begin to consider the jaw dropping work that has come out of her relationship to beads. Her first installation, entitled *Kitchen* (1991-1996), took five years to complete and displayed a fully-scaled kitchen covered in beads. The piece forces the viewer to consider a mundane space in a new way and set a precedent for the intriguing concepts that Lou would continue to explore through her bead work.

Lou has since exhibited at Deitch Projects in New York, the White Cube in London, Thaddeus Ropac in Paris, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, the Smithsonian, and more. On November 8, Lou presents her newest exhibition, ['Color Field and Solid Grey.'](#) at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, NY. The installation consists of two parts that Lou worked on during the same period. The first part will be a series of monochromatic woven bead works entitled *Solid Grey* and *Color White*. *Color Field* is Lou's largest work to date, measuring at 1,400 square feet and will cover the entirety of Neuberger's largest

gallery's floor, draping the floor in a bright field of various colors. The sculpture is made up of thousands of stainless steel wires sheathed in over two million glass beads.



'Color Field,' image courtesy of the Neuberger Museum

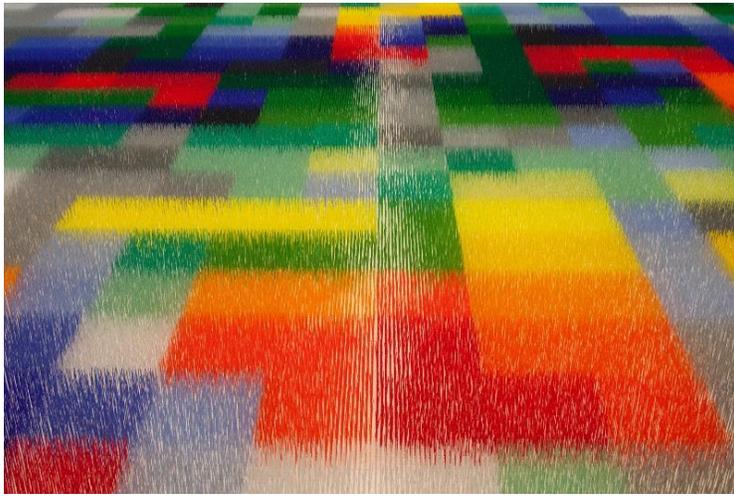
Lou originally created *Color Field* while living in Durban, South Africa, where she lived from 2005-2014, with a team of 30 Zulu artisans. At the Neuberger Museum, Lou will be re-creating the piece with members of the Purchase community. The piece exemplifies Lou's ability to create abstract work that maintain the ability to draw attention to political issues, as the Purchase community will now be sharing an experience with people living in Durban. In that experience, an empathy can be achieved. Lou and I corresponded over email to discuss her exhibition at the Neuberger Museum.

Forbes: I always like to start with a boring question like this one, but growing up at what point did you start to feel an inclination towards creativity and art and what were the circumstances surrounding it?

Liza Lou: I always wanted to be an artist – for me, my imagination has always been more tangible than real life.

Forbes: Many artists seem to start small as far as the scope of their work is considered in the early stages of their careers. But right from the get, you received attention for 'Kitchen,' a massive kitchen covered in your signature beads. Do you employ something of the attitude that to make art that isn't fully "going all out" isn't worth making art at all? I can clarify if that question is confusing, but basically I'm curious if you are drawn to large scale work for any specific reason.

Liza Lou: Ha, well the going-all-out aspect is definitely a big part of things. I don't like to do things that seem like they will be easy. It's the Calvinist in me.



'Color Field' detail, image courtesy of the Neuberger Museum

Forbes: Your art requires meticulous work that surely not everyone can relate to. Where does this diligence come from?

Liza Lou: I had a religious upbringing. Patience and long suffering are part of the tradition. I think it's ingrained.

Forbes: What exactly were the circumstances that lead to you start working with beads?

Liza Lou: I was one of those kids that really doubted and questioned everything. It was hard for me to feel the relevance of being an artist; was there anything new to say? When I wandered into a bead shop, I had an eureka moment. I ended up making 'Kitchen,' which is not necessarily beautiful, but certainly takes utilizes an aspect of the grotesque and an over-the-top experience. And then it had this surface layer of giddiness; all of it felt really right to me.

Forbes: I might be reaching here, but I know labor and labor exploitation sometimes figures as prominent themes in your work. Is the fact that your art takes such long hours to and excruciating attention to detail to make a comment on labor exploitation itself?

Liza Lou: My abhorrence of labor exploitation is central to my thinking, especially since the labor intensive aspect of my work is such a pleasure. I've made lots of community-based projects. I've worked in a traditional studio setting in Los Angeles with assistants, I've worked with the general public, and most recently with a collective of Zulu bead workers that I founded in South Africa. For me, it's been about tapping into the labor-intensive aspect as a way to become part of something that is larger than myself.



'Color Field' process, image courtesy of the Neuberger Museum

Forbes: I just read an interesting piece on the footwear designer behind the brand Brother Vellies that uses Kenyan textiles to manufacture shoes. In the piece, she argues that the free clothing provided by Americans to Africa is killing the textiles industry there. Was your decision to work with Zulu beadworkers in any way motivated by a hope that you could shed light on these too often ignored artisans? If not, were you just hoping to learn technique with some of the most amazing bead workers in the world?

Liza Lou: When I went to South Africa I had already been working with beads for over ten years, so I wasn't hoping to learn any new techniques. My reason for going was to make art with Zulu artisans and to provide income. I started my project there in 2005. At that time, KwaZulu-Natal was at the epicenter of the HIV epidemic. Unemployment was as high as 70% in the townships, and yet as you say, they are the most amazing bead workers in the world. I couldn't help but feel a sense of solidarity with the plight of the women there.

Forbes: For the upcoming exhibition, did you always plan on showing these two bodies of work together, or did that decision come during the process of creating the individual works?

Liza Lou: 'Color Field' and 'Solid Grey' were made in the studio around the same time, so it seems natural to show them both together. The idea of process and color as subjects is central to both projects. Both pieces were made with a series of restrictions and chance. In the case of 'Color Field,' the size and scale was determined by the amount of work that the women needed. As a result, the work now measures over 1,500 square feet. In the case of the canvases, I handed out bags of identically colored beads and asked that the team weave them into uniform strips. As the individual pieces returned to the studio, I was astonished by the variation: a cracked line or a grey that was smudged because of the time it took to weave. The pathos and life circumstances of the woman weaving the strip became imbedded in the work.



Liza Lou in her studio, photo by Joshua White

Forbes: What I love about your work is that by using these beautiful beading techniques you can make something commonly not considered beautiful, such as the grass in ‘Color Field and Solid Grey,’ and both alter the beauty of it while highlighting the innate beauty within it. Is this reaction of mine something that you at all conceptualize while making the work?

Liza Lou: I am interested in beauty as a by-product to process. In other words, if I care and hold to a certain activity and do it over and over again, maybe it will become something worthwhile and maybe not, but at the very least, I will have paid attention.

Forbes: I am going to assume that your work requires space (hence the move from New York to LA), do you worry that artists are less likely to throw themselves into large scale labor-intensive work by sheer fact that there isn’t enough space to do it in?

Liza Lou: Time and space, that’s the gold. I was born in New York, but I grew up in Southern California, so for me, LA was not a choice due to space it was just home. There are great alternatives to LA and New York where space is abundant and affordable. It may be less sexy, but it’s about doing the work. Even though I was in LA where space is more affordable, I struggled a lot. My first studio was in the living room of my crappy apartment – I lost my deposit because I got glue on the carpet. I eventually found a studio space, but it was condemned during the 1992 earthquake. I guess I’m saying that being an artist can be hard no matter where you are, the point is to find a way to keep working.

Forbes: By re-creating ‘Color Field’ at the museum, do you feel you at all have to sacrifice the energy of the piece that you developed working on it in South Africa? Or are you just as excited to work with a new set of volunteers in creating the piece?

Liza Lou: I made the components of Color Field with my studio team in South Africa where we threaded millions of pieces of wire with glass beads. The public is helping to install the pre-made pieces of wire into pre-drilled plates, so they are both totally different processes. It’s great working with different communities. I’m always interested in the way the work leads out into conversations that I might never have expected.

Forbes: I always like to ask this question, but feel free to skip it if it’s too vague, but what does the idea of beauty mean to you, personally?

Liza Lou: A chance to wax poetic, but there isn’t much to say. Nature offers everything we need to know!