

# SURFACE

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## LIZA LOU'S INSTALLATIONS BRING FORWARD AN OVERLOOKED MATERIAL: BEADS

By MARINA CASHDAN



“I always wanted to be an artist,” Liza Lou says. “I thought it would magically happen, kind of like enlightenment.”

The 46-year-old artist, whose room-size installations comprising glass beads have earned her solo shows at major museums and prestigious galleries like London’s White Cube, had a less streamlined, though certainly magical, path to prominence. “I went to art school, but after two months I dropped out and set up an art studio,” she says. “My first major piece, ‘Kitchen,’ took my five years to make. During that time, I had day jobs to support myself. Eventually ‘Kitchen’ sold to a collector, and I was able to quit my job selling prom dresses!”

This month, Lou—who divides her time between studios in Los Angeles and KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where she founded a collective with Zulu artisans—opens a show at the Neuberger Museum of Art at Purchase College in upstate New York (through Feb. 21, 2016). The exhibition features a 1,800-square-foot floor sculpture, “Color Field,” made up of Lou’s characteristic “blades” of grass in a variety of striking colors shimmering across the floor like a Tetris board. Similar to many of Lou’s works, the piece will engage the local community. “It’s a way of extending my studio to the public,” Lou says. The show will also include 20 monochromatic canvases woven out of glass beads, part of her “Solid Gray” series. “They appear to be paintings, but on closer examination, there are streaks and burn marks,” she says of the series. “Sweat, dirt, and fire smoke are embedded into the work, creating singular meditations on process and the impossibility of perfection.”



Lou's rise began in 1996, when she completed "Kitchen." The piece, a life-size replica of a kitchen, includes everything from a box of Frosted Flakes on the table, to a six-pack of Budweiser on the counter, to dirty dishes in the sink, all meticulously covered with millions of glass beads hand applied with tweezers. The work was shown at New York's New Museum and then acquired by the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1999, Lou applied glass beads to another life-size work, "Back Yard," in which the artist constructed a backyard scene, including one million blades of grass, a picnic table, and a barbecue.

"The earliest known bead is dated 100,000 years ago, and they are among the earliest objects ever produced. Beads carry the history of mankind, and yet they have zero history as a formal art material," says Lou of her interest in the tiny pieces that have become her signature. "I was, and still am, excited to work with something that carries so much weight and yet is weightless."

Lou's installations continue to win the attention of the art world. It was when Lou won the \$500,000 MacArthur Foundation "genius" prize in 2002, however, that her work was truly validated as fine art and not "craft." "The art world can be very provincial, this idea of one thing versus another, fine art versus craft, either/or," Lou says. "I subscribe to the Zen saying, 'You can't get over the fence, because there are no fences.'"