

# frieze

March 23, 2016

## An Invisible Thread

By Gemma Sieff



A visit to Liza Lou's studio in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

A few weeks ago, early in the morning, I left breezy Cape Town and flew Mango – one of South Africa's local low-cost airlines – to Durban, a city in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Capetonians are snobby about Durban; they call it Dirtbin. It is dirtier than Cape Town, greener and wetter. Sugarcane and a Toyota plant are the mainstays of its economy. Philip Oberholzer – a South African Police Service (SAPS) paramilitary in the bad old days turned private bodyguard – met me at the airport and we drove through low, lush hills to the centre of the city. We parked in the cool inner recesses of what used to be a clothing factory and is now the lively, light-filled studio of the American artist Liza Lou.

Lou makes huge installations composed of millions of tiny beads. *Color Field* and *Solid Grey* (2013), which was recently installed at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Westchester, New York, is a Technicolor quilt of quill-like spikes of beads, a nod to the grasslands of KwaZulu-Natal and a wilder version of *Back Yard* (1996–99), for which Lou conscripted volunteers to help her construct 250,000 green-glass-beaded blades of grass. That was before she could afford to set up shop in a place where beadwork is indigenous and honed as a fine art. For the past decade, Lou has employed a team of 27 Zulu women – among them, Buhle Gumede, S'philile Bhengu, Zanele Gwala and Philile Thango – to execute her powerful works. She knows them intimately and pays them properly. 'You can do this dirty,' she says, meaning she could do it on the cheap: funnel money to any old sweatshop, be it in Bangladesh or Bolivia, send blueprints, collect on the finished product, and steer clear of really understanding how the work takes shape. But that, of course, would be both unethical and a shortcut, two things Lou's work refutes.



Photograph: Mick Haggerty

The studio hums with purpose. When I get there, the women are clustered around Lou's laptop laughing and exclaiming over photographs of themselves in the studio taken the day before by a young photographer, Byron du Bois, who has returned to see their reaction. They are pictured in a conga line. They tease a woman who has turned her back to the camera, striking a sassy posterior pose. Then they return to their stations. They plug headphones into their mobile phones and listen to talk radio or gospel songs as they stitch lines of dark beads into bigger patches, signing their work with strips of masking tape marked with their names. These patches will be knitted together into the massive mosaics that sprawl across a table in the middle of the room. The beads in this room are blue and black glass, 3-cut from the Czech Republic, sparkly and uneven. The moody hues and subtle variegations look like the ruffled surface of the ocean, the darkest sections resembling the stain of an oil spill.

In the next room, small squares of white beads hang on the wall like drying dishcloths. They are uniform in size and shape and the tiny matte beads, machine-made in Japan, are uniform too. What Lou loves is how the hand renders each piece unique. She points out Fikile's 'mountain' – one of the best beader's accidental signature – wherein her stitches purl in places. 'I've asked her how she does that,' Lou says, 'because I find it so beautiful. She doesn't know how it happens.' This tension – machine-made versus the tremor of the human hand, a grid structure filled with the dense evidence of manual labour – is what interests Lou and what gives these panels such intensity and depth; they seem to vibrate. 'We are engaged in a zen-like practice that's juicy,' Lou says. 'It's steeped in life.' The beads are no longer pure untrammelled white. They have soaked up oil from the pads of fingers and traces of soft red dust. The lines are not typed but handwritten, bearing peaks and valleys, streaks of pink and brown. The work in these two rooms is titled *The Waves* after Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel of the same name. In a month, it will be shipped to Salzburg and displayed over all of the floors at Villa Kast, the palace that houses the gallery Thaddaeus Ropac. 'You can imagine Mozart hammering away,' Lou says. 'The space has a correctness' that seems right for the organized chaos of *The Waves*.



Liza Lou, *The Waves*, 2016, installation view. Photograph: Byron DuBois

The Durban studio has an eye-of-the-storm feeling. Lou tells me that moving to South Africa from Los Angeles in 2005 made her grow up. Her role, she realized, was to show up on time, to unlock the studio doors so the team could get on with the work. ‘My job is to hold the space,’ she says, a safe space in an unsafe city. ‘What I love most about art is that it is silent,’ she says, referring to completed works. Since arriving in South Africa, Lou has practiced another kind of silence, circumspection, that allows her notice what is urgent. With Costas Criticos, the COO of KRITH (the largest HIV and TB research institute in South Africa) and her the studio manager, she implemented free, confidential HIV testing. ‘The team was 31 people when we started,’ she says. ‘Everyone who started with us is still working, except the people we lost, who died. You learn that people aren’t replaceable.’

South Africa’s stark juxtapositions – the white-robed people gathering in the hot rubbish-strewn scrap of park across the road to sing Shembe hymns; the addicts hooked on whoonga, a heroin-like street drug made of ARVs mixed with tuberculosis meds, soap powder, and rat poison; the jubilant singing and dancing of the women as we say our goodbyes – make it a painfully beautiful country. We drive to visit the homes of a few of the women on the team. They live in Tshelimnyama, a township on the outskirts of Durban, in modest houses that they have built themselves. Lou brushes off a drunk, older man who demands a tithe for passing his property, saying she is free to visit her friends. One of her senior beaders, Gumede, serves us thick slices of amadumbe (yam) and ubhatata (sweet potato) dipped in shavings of onion and heavy salt. We repair to a restaurant situated in the midst of lovely gardens for the second course of a vegan lunch and talk about Karl Ove Knausgård’s eye for detail. Then we go for a walk, passing ponds and purple jacaranda, and nearly collide with a clear string that hangs vertically from a tall gum tree. Lou stops and plucks it free. It looks like the nylon thread she uses to bind her beads. ‘There is an invisible thread inside the work,’ she tells me and, I think, an invisible thread that connects the people who enter the artist’s orbit – those who look at her work and those who make it.