



LIZA LOU Fragile Security

BY JAN GARDEN CASTRO

“I moved to South Africa in order to find another way of working, one which can make a substantial difference to other people’s lives,” Liza Lou says.¹ Her recent barbed-wire-topped cages and disintegrating prayer rug reliefs have glistening glass surfaces that draw attention to borders and skin. Among these stark yet stunning works is *Maximum Security*, a silver-beaded, human-sized cage for four in the shape of a cross. Standing alone in the all-glass Lever House gallery, it seemed to refer to literal and symbolic means of confinement. The cage metaphor may even suggest that we all dwell in proscribed spaces, whether created by ourselves or others.

At L&M Arts, human-sized, beaded sculptures and reliefs filled two floors of the gallery. *Tower*, a white tower of five stacked, beaded cages rising about 30 feet, suggested an infinity of imprisonment. Lou created these labor-intensive works over a three-year period in Durban, South Africa, a tropical port city whose population suffers from AIDS, economic hardship, and ubiquitous barbed-wire fences.² She says, “For the past several years, I have been making a series of work that explores issues around security and fragility. *Security Fence* and *Maximum Security* reference the architecture of confinement. *Security Fence* is similar in scale to my earlier work, *Kitchen*—it is a claustrophobic enclosure, as is *Maximum Security*, with its layers and layers of chain



Top left: *Maximum Security*, 2007–08. Steel and glass beads, 6.7 x 23.5 x 23.5 ft. Top right: *Tower*, 2008. Steel, razor wire, and glass beads, 355 x 30.5 x 30.5 in. Left: *Self-Portrait (Face Down)*, 2006. Cast resin and glass beads, 23 x 15.5 x 5.25 in.

link—a moiré effect, as if the pleasure and pain could go on forever.”

The most personal of these new works is *Self-Portrait (Face Down)*, an all-white, glass-beaded pillow dented with the artist’s facial features. Of its many possible meanings, one is surely that life and death rest in close proximity, in contact as intimate as one’s head pressed against a pillow. The other works shown at L&M Arts included an eight-foot-square security fence topped with barbed wire; a *Barricade* made of 24-karat gold-plated beads; white- and black-beaded versions of *Continuous Mile*, a three-quarter-inch-diameter coil resembling braided hair, installed, strand on strand, to form a circular enclosure; and *Roll*, a spiral roll of silver beads. These works, in editions of two to five, represent countless hours of hand-applying millions of glass beads one by one with tweezers. The monochrome cages and coils suggest the increasing role of security and confinement in daily life, attest to the labor of the largely anonymous makers behind these hand-crafted arts, and evoke life at its most elemental, micro-organismic level.

Seven unique reliefs, composed of tiny bugle beads of different lengths made to order in Japan and installed standing on their ends, suggest topographies of anything from military maps to skin. Lou says that the series, which was inspired by Muslim prayer rugs, started with “a desire to trace the patterns of an ancient religion,” but she soon began to “corrupt” the designs. “Over time, the reliefs opened out into ideas about process as well as destruction and creation, as the work evolved into abstracted forms, maps, ancient cities, and territories. Each bead is placed one at a time, like a soldier marching into battle.” Some of the reliefs show black or red “incursions” that may represent AIDS destroying the body or an invading army spreading into a populated territory. Each work is named after a military strategy: *Axis Defeat*; *Clear, Hold, Build*; *Find, Fix, Finish*; *Offensive/Defensive*; *Plan, Prepare, Execute*; *Quick, Cheap, Overwhelming Victory*; and *Conditions of Capture*.

Lou says that “living and working in South Africa has informed my work, with its enormous Muslim population, daily call to prayer, and many mosques throughout the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Also, working with my Zulu team in the studio—many with serious health and personal issues—was an important influence. My feelings while working were often of despair, and also of tremendous joy. They taught me what it is to live with dignity, no matter what the circumstances. It’s all there, imbedded in the work.”

The reliefs exemplify Lou’s complex thought processes. For instance, in *Plan, Prepare, Execute*, it’s hard to tell whether the partially obscured blue, red, yellow, green, and white border pattern is being “eaten” by or “eating” the dominant field of black. The intricate geometric symbolism of civilization, domesticity, and order seems to be crumbling. Furthermore, the “signs” in the reliefs are sometimes concave and sometimes convex. Whatever their exact message, these beautiful, intricate constructions present bleak, cautionary tales. Liza Lou is trying to wake up a few more people before it’s too late.

Notes

¹ All quotations from Liza Lou are from an October 2008 conversation with the author.

² The lives of Lou’s Zulu workers are described in Christopher Bagley, “Liza Lou: A Visit to Her South African Studio,” *W Magazine* (online), September 2008.

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Right and detail: *Plan, Prepare, Execute*, 2007–08. Glass beads on aluminum panel, 120 x 60 in.



