



Kitchen, 1991-96. Glass beads, wood, wire, plaster, used appliances. 168 sq. ft.

Liza Lou

"MAKING KNOWING: CRAFT IN ART, 1950-2019"

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
NEW YORK
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I like doing things as an artist that feel a little bit transgressive but in the worst possible way—sugary and sweet and crafty and so wrong it becomes right.

—Liza Lou¹

After 24 years, Liza Lou's earliest work, *Kitchen* (1991-96), still has the ability to captivate—and it has a new opportunity to do so as a cornerstone of the Whitney Museum's exhibition "Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019." For the uninitiated, the work is a life-size replica of a kitchen complete with a cherry pie in the oven, dirty dishes overflowing in the sink, and cereal, milk, and toast on a checkered tablecloth. However, this quotidian scene of Americana has been painstakingly covered with glass seed beads, one by one,

with tweezers, by the artist, over the course of five years. The unimaginable amount of (female) labor that birthed this project is itself the work's core message, but its ability to evoke a nuanced conversation around ideas of domesticity, gender, popular culture, beauty, devotion, and labor is what has allowed it to transcend the vastly changing landscape of culture and feminism at the turn of the 21st century.

Kitchen is both real and artificial, uncanny in its imitation of a suburban domestic environment yet also an unattainable utopian ideal. Much like the American Dream itself, perhaps. *Kitchen* is undoubtedly a product of its time and of its maker. Lou was born in 1969 in New York and raised in Los Angeles during the 1970s, an era defined by feminism both in art and culture. In 1971, Judy Chicago founded the Feminist Art Program at CalArts (the first of its kind), and in 1972 Chicago and Miriam Schapiro created *Womanhouse*, a feminist art installation that utilized the

domestic structure of a house to express their gender theory. The 70s and 80s also saw the rise of the Pattern and Decoration movement, which celebrated ornamentation, decoration, and maximalist aesthetics that were historically associated with women and minority cultures. Despite being young at the time, Lou was maturing in this cultural landscape, and vestiges of this artistic legacy are evident in her early work. *Kitchen*, however, is also very much of the early 90s, as evidenced by the plethora of big-box brand names scattered across the familiar scene: Tide, Joy, Comet, Lay's, Budweiser, Honey Smacks, Cap'n Crunch, and Frosted Flakes, discarded mid-use by the room's occupant—the American woman.

Notably, the year Lou began the work, 1991, was also the year of Anita Hill's now infamous yet stunningly disregarded testimony of sexual assault during Clarence Thomas's Supreme Court nomination hearing (even more fresh in our collective minds after the startlingly reminiscent testimony of sexual assault by Christine Blasey Ford during current Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearing in 2018). As the country was captivated, and women were rocked by disbelief at the way Hill was treated, Lou beaded an entire kitchen, in an act of labor meant to honor women's unseen labor and assign it the dignity it's so rarely afforded.

The kitchen, as we see, is a contentious space. The kitchens we have in today's open-floor-plan homes are not the kitchens we've had for most of history, which were hot, dirty, closed off, and most frequently the realm of women and servants. The mammy figure inside the oven's door points to this history. This figure—an enduring racial caricature of African American women—was used liberally in American cultural iconography from Reconstruction through the Jim Crow era (and even beyond); however, she became iconized in mainstream awareness in the image of Aunt Jemima, the beloved but controversial spokesperson for the eponymously named pancake mix

reviews

company.² During the first half of the 20th century, kitchens were modernized and outfitted with time-saving appliances that were meant to liberate women from household drudgery, but nonetheless succeeded in tying them even more tightly to their prescribed roles.

Kitchen is ripe with cultural cues that provide hints in reading this complex installation. The wallpaper is covered with irons and cooking/cleaning tools, indicating work. The sink, of course, is overflowing with dirty dishes. The inside of the oven, however, is sexy in red and covered with topless pinup girls, alluding to the impossible standards imposed on women, exemplified in the midcentury housewife, to be alluringly beautiful while performing domestic labor. Lou includes excerpts of at least two poems in the installation that memorialize this sentiment. First is Emily Dickinson's poem #732, which Lou includes on the side of the oven in easy view: "She rose to His Requirement—dropt/The Playthings of Her Life/To take the honorable Work/Of Woman, and of Wife—". The second, on the side of the refrigerator, cleverly disguised as a shopping list, perhaps, is Isaac Watt's poem "Against Idleness and Mischief": "How doth the little busy Bee/Improve each shining Hour,/And gather Honey all the day/From every opening Flower!" Taken together, the meaning is clearly a lament against the self-sacrificial nature of domestic womanhood as dictated by most of human history, and certainly modern society. Thus, a wife is expected to be a servant who is simultaneously sexually appealing, as the pinup girls remind us.

In fact, beauty is inherent to the work in a way that the art world rarely embraces. Lou's use of glass seed beads is important. She chose the medium for her misunderstanding of the medium's lack of art history. When Lou later went to work in South Africa with Zulu women, who have a long history of beading, she began to understand the importance of the medium in other cultures. However, she wasn't wrong in regard to the Western history of art. In fact, Lou left the San Francisco Art

Institute, where she was studying painting, after her professors rejected her introduction of beads, telling her it wasn't allowed.³ Beads were a craft material, reminiscent of women's work, and were associated with the growing feminist movement—all negative qualities. (Lou's experience was not unique: Judith Schaechter speaks openly about receiving similar reactions from her teachers when she turned to stained glass around the same time.)

Beauty, outside of being a legitimate pursuit in its own right and a goal of art for centuries, is a useful tool that artists employ when tackling difficult subject matter. Is women's subjugation more palatable because Lou makes it appealing to the eye? Would the realities of prison be as well? Lou asks this question in her work *Maximum Security* (2007-2008), a fully beaded chain-link fence in the form of a narrow pen oriented in a cross formation. Similarly, *Loo* (2006) is a prison toilet, fully beaded, with the grime and shadow of human waste intact.

Lou's activism is not overt despite the subject matter she has chosen. (An exception being when she decided to move her entire studio to South Africa to employ a group of Zulu women, a decision made specifically so that Lou could contribute to the financial security of women who needed it while allowing them to employ their traditional beading skills. The move provided Lou with the artistic assistance she was previously getting in L.A.) In fact, it is more like a series of prayers. Writer Jeanette Winterson said it beautifully: "She is not a Catholic, but sometimes, when I look at her work, I think of it as the longest rosary in the universe—every bead is a reminder that there is more to life than meets the eye, and paradoxically, it is art, the world of surfaces, that acts as this reminder."⁴ Lou's stunning work (of which I've barely been able to scratch the surface) is in fact an act of devotion by the artist, her many collaborators, and the viewer, who is asked to look slowly and unravel the many symbols and meanings behind it. As a result, it's work that endures and continues to give back.

A contributing editor to *Glass*, SAMANTHA DE TILLIO is curator of collections at the Museum of Arts and Design. Her exhibition "Beth Lipman: Collective Elegy," a midcareer survey of the artist's work, will be on view from May 14, 2020, to March 28, 2021.

¹ Madeleine Luckel, "A Fully Bedazzled Kitchen Is On View at the Whitney Museum Right Now," *Architectural Digest* PRO (December 12, 2019), <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/a-fully-bedazzled-kitchen-is-on-view-at-the-whitney-museum-right-now>.

² Storyteller, cook, activist, and former slave Nancy Green (1834-1923) was the original model for Aunt Jemima.

³ Christopher Bagley, "Liza Lou," *W Magazine* (September 1, 2008), <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/liza-lou/>.

⁴ Jeanette Winterson, "Liza Lou," Jeanette Winterson.com (April 10, 2006), <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/journalism/liza-lou/>.

Group Exhibition

"OUT OF THE VAULT: HIDDEN GEMS FROM THE MUSEUM OF GLASS PERMANENT COLLECTION"
MUSEUM OF GLASS
TACOMA, WASHINGTON
MARCH 30, 2019 - ONGOING

Describing the permanent collection, the word curator Katie Buckingham uses most often is "new." The second most frequent is "young." The Museum of Glass officially began acquiring work for its permanent collection in 2007, and a selection of works from this 1,400-object trove went on extended exhibition in March 2019. With much of the collection produced in the museum's hot shop, the collection is indeed both new and young (certainly in traditional museum-world terms).

The first works were donated by artists in the museum's widely subscribed artist-residency program, through a relatively common transaction in the glass field in which grateful artists understand the expenses of maintaining facilities and are generously inclined. What's unique about the residency in Tacoma is that the works are automatically entering a museum collection, an honor that confers prestige and value.

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