



Liza Lou

Shifts in Aspiration

by Jessica Hemmings

The glass beads that American artist Liza Lou has worked with since the 1990s have been deployed in incredible feats of personal discipline and attention to detail. Works such as *Kitchen* (1991–1996) rendered the room to scale and took the artist five years—working alone—to create. But the past decade has seen Lou's priorities shift beyond the seemingly contradictory aspirations of scale and minutiae to use her practice to support social change.

In 2005, Lou moved from Los Angeles to a very different context—the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, a region with a long established tradition of bead weaving. Today she divides her time between the city of Durban, on the eastern coast of the province, and Los Angeles. This geographic shift has allowed her to provide stable employment to a team of Zulu women who contribute to the creation of her large-scale works.

Historian **Eleanor Preston-Whyte** explains that the value of beads in southern Africa was driven initially by their scarcity. Locally available materials such as wood, seeds, and bone were used, but from the 16th century onward, glass beads manufactured in Europe were traded in the region. In fact, so many glass beads found their way to South Africa's shores that local taste became increasingly selective, with regional styles and trends favoring different colors in different regions while beads deemed out of fashion were rejected for trade.

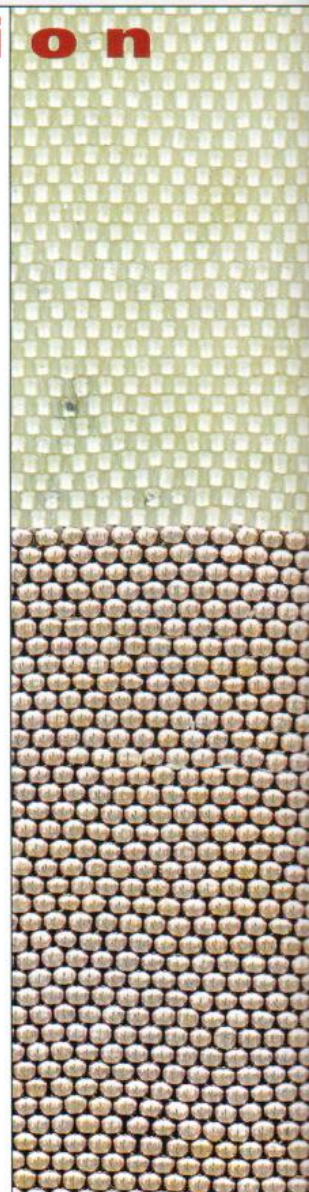
Today, the beads Lou and her studio work with are sourced from specialist manufacturers with geographies as far flung as Japan and the Czech Republic. But the labor that goes into the artworks they make is grounded in local realities. As Lou recounts in her 2013 book *Durban Diaries*¹, "Working with beads is a connection to an

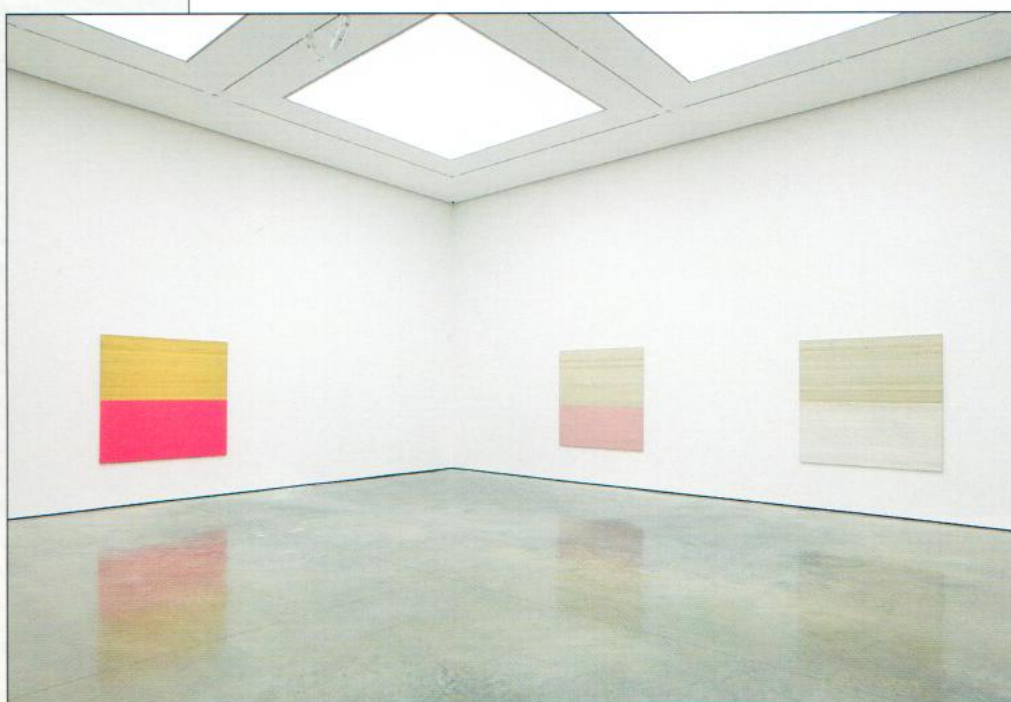
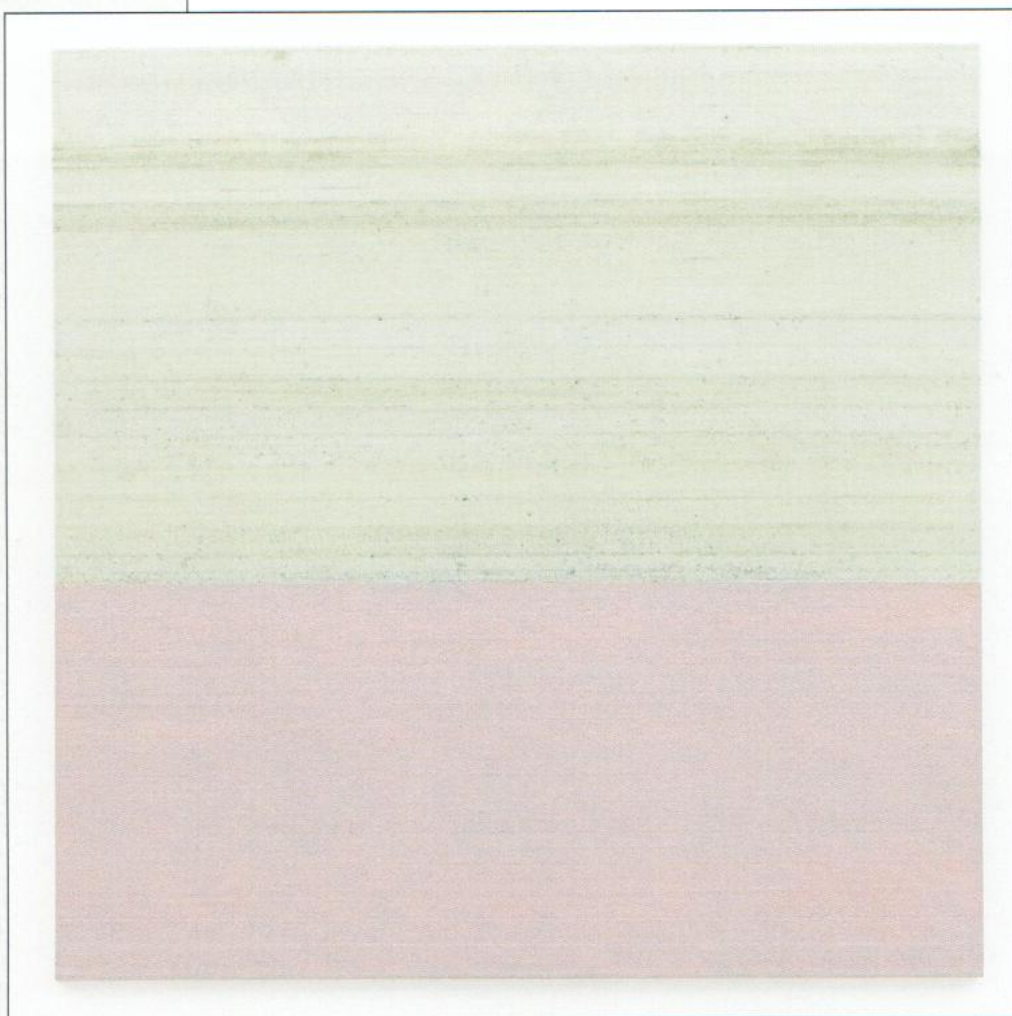
ABOVE: LIZA LOU (center) with the bead weaving studio team in Durban, South Africa. Photo: Byron Du Bois.

RIGHT TOP: LIZA LOU *Arsenic Amethyst Divide* 2012–2014, woven glass beads, 65.3" x 65.3".

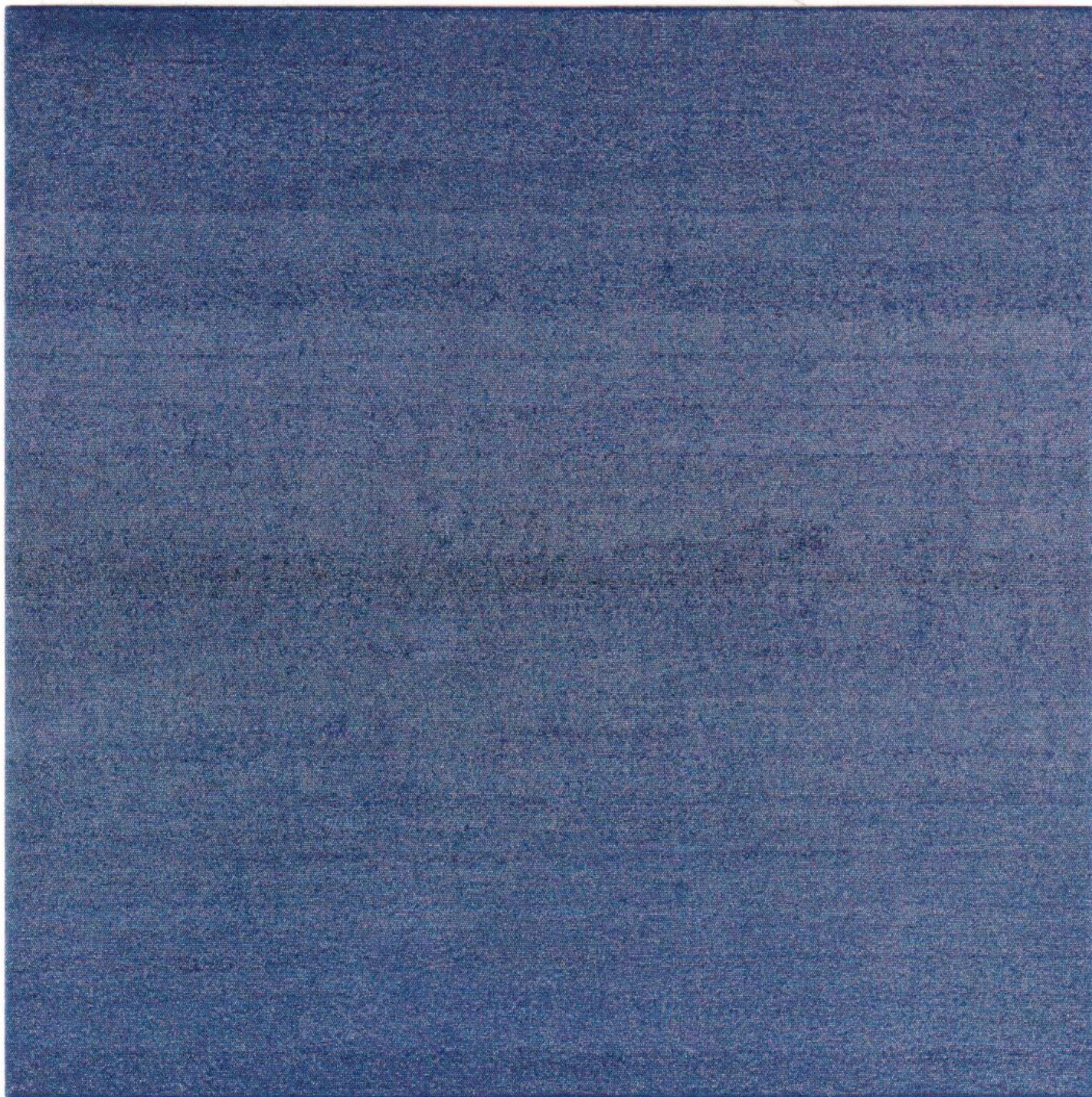
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube Gallery, London. Photo: George Darrell. With detail.

RIGHT BOTTOM: Gallery view of Liza Lou: *Solid/Divide* solo exhibition at White Cube Gallery, London, 2014. Photo: George Darrell.





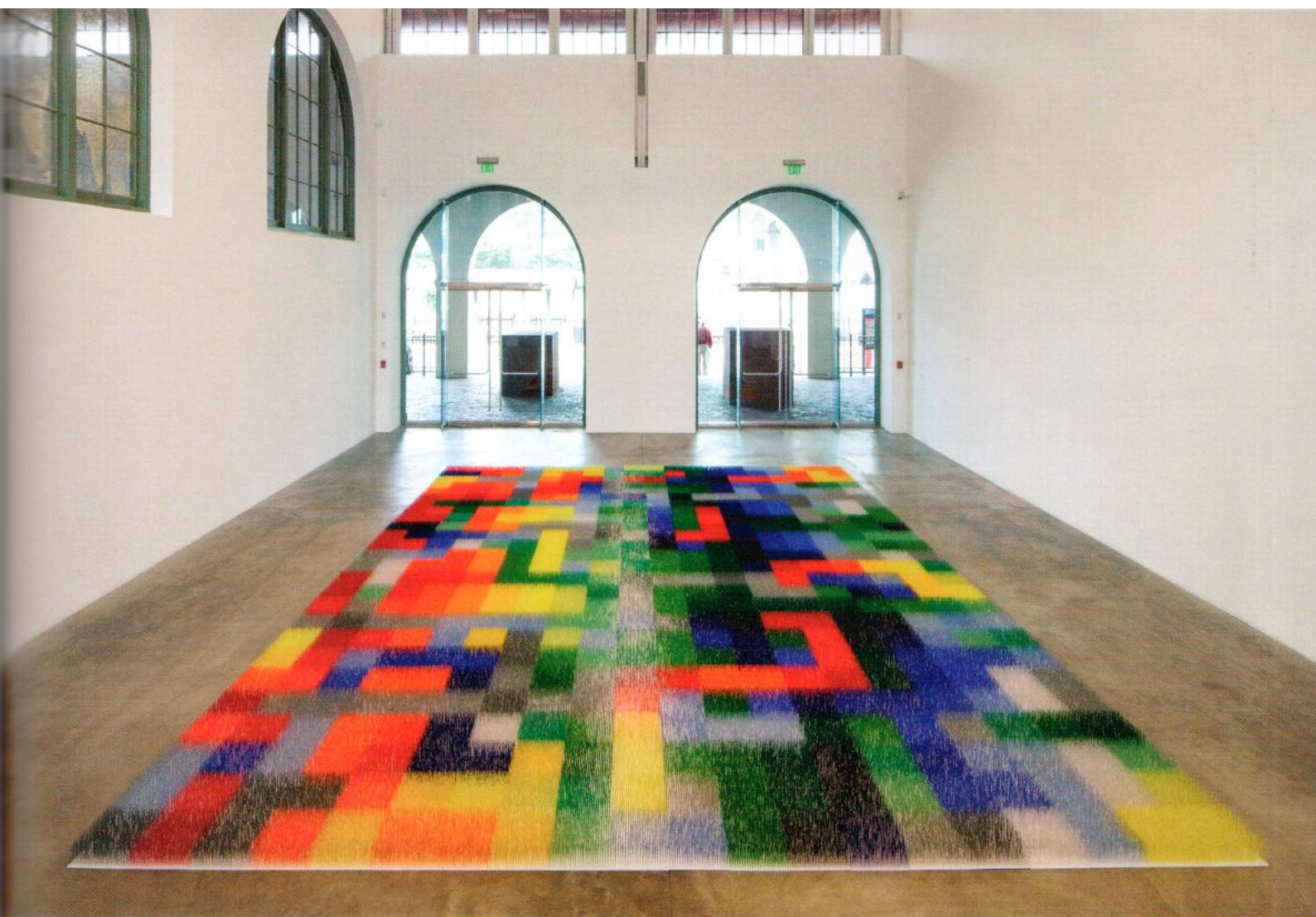
"Working with beads is a connection to an ancient struggle, a struggle I did not know...."



LIZA LOU *Azure* 2016, handwoven glass beads, 47.83" x 47.83" x 1.38".

Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac.

Photo Credit: Ulrich Ghezzi.



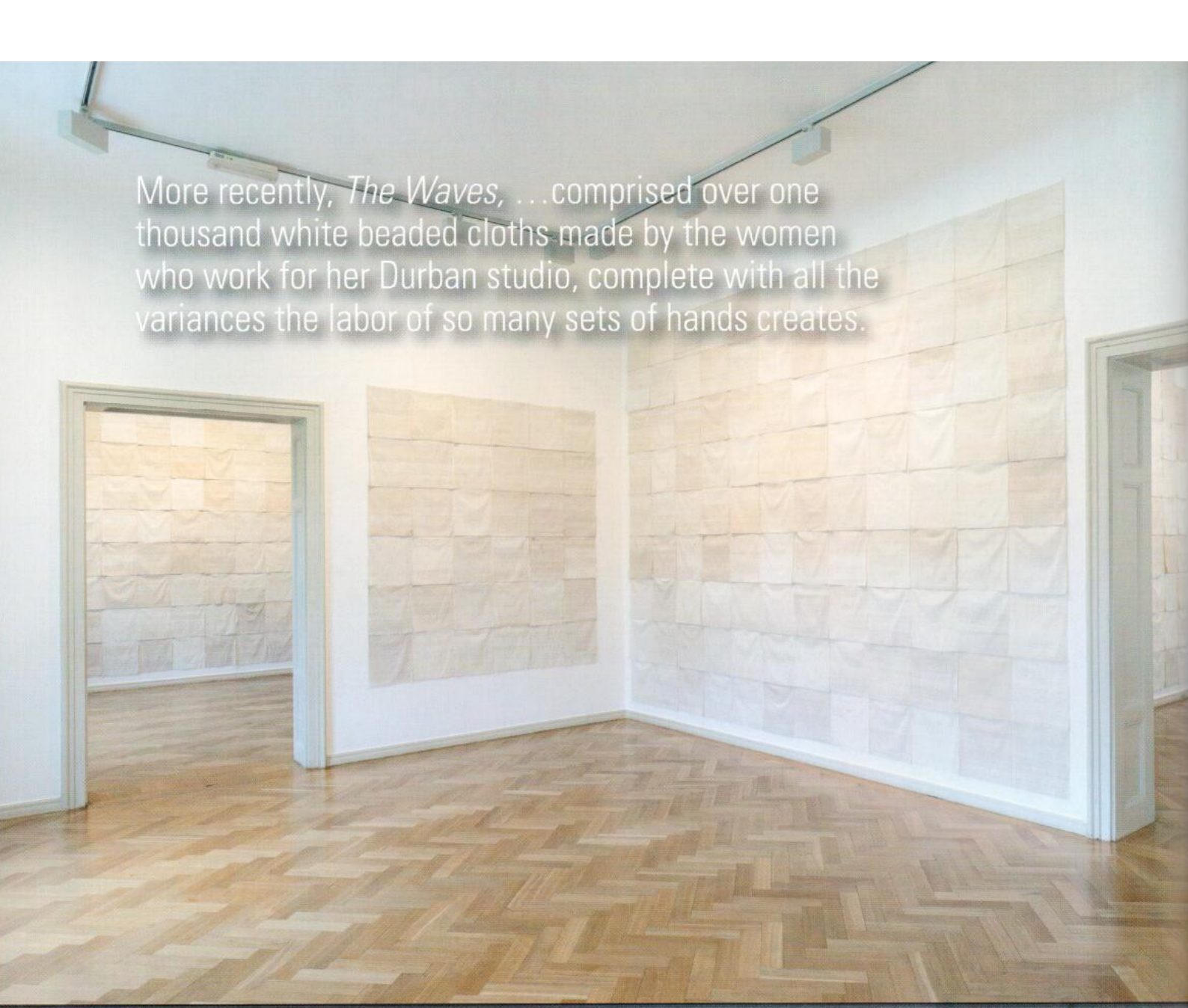
LIZA LOU *Color Field*
 2010–2013, handwoven
 glass beads, stainless steel,
 Perspex, 20' x 28'
 (dimensions variable).
 Courtesy of the artist and
 the San Diego Museum of
 Contemporary Art.
 Photo: Pablo Mason.

ancient struggle, a struggle I did not know. Since being in Africa, I have met women who can weave faster than other people can walk. Weaving is a way of getting somewhere. It puts food on the table, has agency in the marketplace. If you can weave something with beads, you've got skill. Maybe you can survive... "

Lou's geographic and cultural move was driven by a desire to provide women with stable employment while continuing to realize her large-scale projects. Along the way, an unintended outcome has been a dramatic aesthetic shift in her work. Zulu beading traditions tend to favor vibrant, patterned color combinations—in many ways the antithesis of what Lou has produced in her stark, often monochrome, works made in South Africa. And while beads historically were used as a form of (handily portable) currency, today it is the practical commitment of providing stable employment that informs her artistic values.

Time in Durban has taught Lou to adjust her original visual aspirations. She recounts, "She tells me resignedly that her hands are too large and the beads are too small. Her work is crooked, misshapen. And what about the strange discoloration, and the wonky strings with loose beads across the top? If I reject her work, her family won't eat... Yet, if I accept the work, I don't have an artwork. Or do I. Not what I intended, but instead, what the work wants to become. I saw one thing in my mind and something else emerged."

Cultural appropriation is a criticism hard to countenance after hearing the self-critical and often doubtful voice Lou uses in her narration of much of *Durban Diaries*. She recounts funerals, sickness, and a constant questioning of her place, her race, her purpose, and the possibility that her optimism will not be able to make an



More recently, *The Waves*, ... comprised over one thousand white beaded cloths made by the women who work for her Durban studio, complete with all the variances the labor of so many sets of hands creates.

Gallery view of the exhibition *Liza Lou: The Waves* at Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria, 2016. With detail. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac. Photos: Ulrich Ghezzi.

impact in the context she has chosen to adopt. But she also writes of coming to terms with the facts the women she employs face as daily challenges—from raising grandchildren orphaned by South Africa's widespread HIV/AIDS epidemic to a basic need for eye glasses to see the detail working with beads demands.

Perfection no longer rules Lou's practice. Instead, an acceptance of imperfection—discoloration from dirt as well as variations in the work each pair of hands creates—has introduced a visually sophisticated, contemplative beauty to her practice. Many of the predominantly monochrome surfaces exhibited under the title *Solid/Divide* are also reminiscent of the meditative atmosphere of paintings by Abstract Expressionist Mark Rothko, or the quiet mesmerizing detail of Minimalist Agnes Martin's drawn and painted grids. What the camera often struggles to record are the subtle gradations that have marked the beads and the journeys they often travel from studio, to home, and back when complete for piecing together.

Lou is not alone in her motivation to harness bead traditions for the empowerment of women local to the KwaZulu-Natal region. For example, the four women strong **Ubuhle Art Collective** are well regarded for their support of contemporary



textiles by such institutions as the **Museum of Arts and Design** in New York and the **Textile Museum of Canada** in Toronto. Founded in 1999, they continue to produce beaded works exhibited in galleries worldwide.

But Lou's artistic values could also be compared to fellow American artist Thayer Gates—a contemporary often celebrated for moving beyond commentary on current social problems to instead provide on-the-ground solutions, such as opening library and community spaces in the resource-poor south side of Chicago. Early more politically overt work by Lou may also benefit from comparisons to early work by American artist Kori Newkirk. As inspiration for his use of plastic pony beads, he recounts constant reporting in the media about tennis player Venus Williams' beaded hair and anxieties about potential danger on the court posed by a player slipping on a rogue escaped bead.²

Lou's more recent work leaves politics behind, instead focusing entirely on the material and what its making means. Speaking in 2013 at the **Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego** in California, she explains, "Over the last ten years, my work has become more and more abstract, more and more about the material itself, about the way that it is made—and this is it." This intense attention to the material qualities she exclusively works with has not been at the expense of vibrant color. Instead, motivated to "use all the colors in my store room and use up everything I had," *Color Field* was made over a number of years without a concrete plan of the final outcome. Lou explains the open-ended strategy behind the work: "I was handing out [bead] colors for years... creating employment [that was]... building homes, financing loans, paying for funerals, paying for hospital bills... all this real world stuff was happening, in the mean while whether it could be an artwork was a real question."

Unquestionably, *Color Field* is a real artwork. It also represents the labor of craft. Thirty Zulu women contributed to assembling the blades of grass beads initially exhibited in San Diego in 2013 and then, as a significantly larger version, exhibited in 2015 at **Neuberger Museum of Art** in Purchase, New York, where it was assembled with the assistance of more than 500 local volunteers. More recently, *The Waves*, installed at the **Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac** in Salzburg, Austria (May–July 2016), comprised over one thousand white beaded cloths made by the women who work for her Durban studio, complete with all the variances the labor of so many sets of hands creates. Historian and curator **Julia Bryan-Wilson** explains, "It matters that Lou is always there at the studio, listening to the stories, attempting a new kind of model of making that emphasizes the value of women's work and their lives."

Bryan-Wilson's observations are echoed by Lou in a 2016 interview with *The New York Times Style Magazine* when she explains, "The story and the way things are made is very important, it is part of the meaning... I don't think you can separate the meaning from how things are made... if we do that, then what we do is negate labor, and the people that are part of a process." Many of the weavers Lou works with now oversee teams of weavers themselves. The continuation of these relationships provides necessary and stable employment to a group of women who, in turn, are responsible for having taught Liza Lou so much.

¹ Lou, Liza. *Liza Lou: Durban Diaries*. White Cube, 2013.

² Hemmings, Jessica. "Kori Newkirk: Painter Without Paint," *Surface Design Journal* Fall 2006: "Photographic Surfaces," p.38-41.

Liza Lou is represented by Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac in Austria, Paris, and London; Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York City and Hong Kong; and White Cube Gallery in London.
www.lehmannmaupin.com
www.whitecube.com
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