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Weaving a Way Out of Isolation

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You can craft your way to a sense of community, says the artist Liza Lou. She's creating her "comfort" project on Instagram in real time.



Liza Lou in her studio, with "Sunday Morning" (2019), oil paint on woven glass beads and thread on canvas. Liza Lou and and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; Zihui Song

“It’s one thing to decide to be isolated,” said the artist Liza Lou, who in the best of times longs for uninterrupted solitude in her Los Angeles studio, as so many artists do. “It’s another to be told that you *must* be,” she added. “Something we crave can quickly become onerous.”

Looking to create beauty and build community in the time of social distancing, Ms. Lou is inviting other artists along with the general public to join her in a communal art project called “Apartogether.” She introduced the concept on her Instagram page last week, cuing people to begin gathering old clothes and materials around the house from which to piece together a quilt or what she’s calling a “comfort blanket.” (Ms. Lou showed herself hugging her own baby blanket.)

“The idea that an object can protect is, of course, a childlike idea,” she said in her posted video. “I think that making is a form of protection.” Known for her monumental sculptures and wall pieces encrusted with mosaics of individually applied beads, the 50-year-old artist has long explored the meaning found in process and labor traditionally associated with craft and performed by women.

Ms. Lou is rolling out more details of “Apartogether” on Instagram, using the handle @liza_lou_studio. She will post regular prompts and live videos over the coming weeks. Ms. Lou is encouraging people to share their progress by tagging it @apartogether_art so that it can be seen and archived on the website apartogether.com. She hopes that groups will gather on Zoom to talk and work on their projects in real time.

“Eventually, when we all come out of our caves, I want to to hang the blankets like banners,” said Ms. Lou. “The works of art will become a record of our days and time and a kind of monument to this extraordinary moment.”

Her gallery, [Lehmann Maupin](http://LehmannMaupin.com), with locations in New York, Hong Kong and Seoul, is committed to making the results accessible digitally and exploring ways to exhibit the blankets together, according to Rachel Lehmann, the gallery co-founder. Ms. Lou’s work, which sells there typically in the range of \$100,000 to \$500,000, has in recent years been acquired by institutions, including the Albright-Knox in Buffalo, the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Mo., and the Cleveland Museum of Art.

“It’s clear to me why she’s the first artist on our roster to jump into a community project because she has been doing it successfully in South Africa for 15 years now,” Ms. Lehmann said, referring to the [collective the artist founded in the city](#)

[KwaZulu-Natal](#). There, she works with several dozen women from townships on large-scale beaded installations, including one called “Continuous Mile,” a coiled cylinder of rope measuring a mile in length and sewn with more than 4.5 million black beads.

“Working with beads is a connection to an ancient struggle, a struggle I did not know,” she said in a talk several years ago at the Corning Museum of Glass in upstate New York. “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 on the marketplace. If you can weave, maybe you can survive.”



Ms. Lou's "Kitchen" (1991-96), beads, plaster, wood and found objects. Liza Lou and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; Tom Powel



Her "Kitchen" refers to various images (some derogatory) of women in American society, using beads and paint. Liza Lou and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul; Tom Powel

Ms. Lou, who had never been interested in craft and hated sewing, found her medium after dropping out of the recently closed San Francisco Art Institute in 1989. Moving back home briefly to Encinitas, Calif., in San Diego County, she was inspired in her mother's kitchen to build a full-scale model of an American kitchen. She used a dazzling palette of sparkly beads to cover every inch of every surface, down to the individual papier-mâché cornflakes in a bowl. What she thought would take a few months turned into five years of hand-applying one bead at a time with tweezers and glue.

Now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, "Kitchen" (1991-96) is part of the exhibition "Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019," through January 2021. "The way 'Kitchen' is made is so intrinsic to the meaning of 'Kitchen', how it amplifies this idea of undervalued and hidden labor," said Elisabeth Sherman, an assistant curator at the Whitney and co-organizer of the show, with Jennie Goldstein.



Figure 1 An Installation view of "Making Knowing; Craft in Art (1950-2019), at the Whitney Museum of American Art, from left: Marie Watt's "Skywalker/Skyscraper (Axis Mundi)" (2012); Simone Leigh's "Cupboard VIII" (2018); David James Gilhooly's "Merfrog and Her Pet Fish" (1976); Ms. Lou's "Kitchen" (1991-96) – Ron Amstutz

Ms. Sherman sees a direct connection to Ms. Lou's proposal for "Apartogether."

"It speaks to how we're all living our lives, just surviving with what's around us," the curator said. "I imagine there are many people who have always wanted to try making but their day-to-day lives haven't allowed dedicated time to that."

Ms. Lou especially wants to encourage those who don't consider themselves creative to participate. "People are more handy than they think," she said, adding that she plans to keep her instructions loose and simple. Go clean out your closets. Carve out a little corner to work. Cut old clothes into pieces and see what happens when you sew them together. If you prefer to use glue or staples or paint, no problem.

"I'm not interested in perfectionism," she said, approaching this project as she would an artist residency, where she would offer prompts and give feedback.

For young or emerging artists who haven't had much exposure, participating in "Apartogether" is an opportunity to get their work shown in a gallery. Even for well-established artists with their own busy studio lives, the project has its appeal.

The Los Angeles -based artist Elliott Hundley, who works in collage, was immediately on board. "One is always thinking about the outside world when you're in that studio by yourself," he said. Mr. Hundley imagines his comfort blanket "will just be another little spot in the room that I visit every day."

Shinique Smith is another L.A. artist who works with fabric and old clothes, though rarely collaboratively. "But I like the sound of this because I can participate from my usual solitude and still be in conversations with other people, sharing similar intentions and our own lens of the world," she said.

In her studio practice working with women in South Africa, Ms. Lou has seen the profound effects of focusing on something small. "The women would be dealing with something chaotic, and yet there was so much comfort in just knowing you could sit with needle and thread and make something beautiful," she said. "That action becomes a form of resistance against what goes on around us."

At the start of this year, Ms. Lou had resolved not to take on any deadlines in 2020 and just allow her work to emerge. Unintentionally, she said, "I cleared my schedule for a pandemic." She thinks that artists, who are used to living with uncertainty and making things they often don't get paid for, have honed a skill set that may help other people deal with the coming weeks and months.

"Being present in the midst of chaos and using that as mulch for what it is you make, that's what artists do," she said. "And we can do this together."