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6 Artists Turning Beads into Spellbinding Works of Art

By Ariela Gittlen

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E pluribus unum. Out of many, one. It's the United States motto, embossed onto coins since 1795, but it would also make an excellent slogan for beadworkers of any nation. Whether the result is as immersive as one of Nick Cave's beaded Soundsuits, or as discreet as a rosary, the practice of beading transmutes a jumble of parts into a meaningful whole.

Many cultures have rich beadwork traditions, yet aesthetics and motifs can vary widely, even within the same region. Like other traditional craft forms, such as embroidery or weaving, beadwork is often seeded with symbolic visual language, messages passed down within a community or family unit.

Yet beads are not merely benign, traditional objects. Beginning in the 15th century, when Portuguese traders arrived in West Africa, glass "trade beads" were used by Europeans to establish trade networks, barter for resources, and buy slaves. In North America, beads were likewise used for nefarious purposes, perhaps most infamously by Peter Minuit, a Dutch trader who is said to have purchased Manhattan from the Lenape Indians in exchange for a box of beads and assorted trinkets.

For many artists working with beads today, the medium's historical connection to colonialism, slavery, and genocide is still potent—it may even be the reason they employ it. Others use beadwork to explore different kinds of conceptual concerns, from challenging the invisibility of women's labor to asserting the importance of the individual. The following artists engage with beadwork in diverse ways, but each is pushing the medium in new directions.

Liza Lou

B. 1969. Based in Los Angeles, California and South Africa



“One reason that crafts, decorative arts, and folk art are seen as outside the high art tradition is because non-artists don’t have the same kind of respect for things that we could make ourselves,” observed the curator Marcia Tucker in the introductory text to the 1996 New Museum exhibition, “Labor of Love.”

The group exhibition, which tested the boundaries between art and craft, marked the debut of Lou’s monumental sculpture, *Kitchen* (1991–96), a life-sized model of a rather ordinary suburban kitchen that demanded the precise application of millions of glass beads and took Lou five years to complete. The domestic space of the kitchen, with its sink full of dirty dishes, a frying egg, and a cooling pie, as well as the unimaginable labor of Lou individually placing each tiny bead onto the wood and papier-mâché base, both nod to the invisible work performed by women.

While the work’s immaculate construction and level of detail is astonishing, the critical reaction to the piece was mixed, as Tucker’s essay had anticipated. “When I started out making *Kitchen*, I took a lot of flak,” Lou says. “Beads were not considered a serious art material. Twenty-some years later, and that has changed.” In 2002, before even a decade had passed, Lou was awarded a MacArthur “genius” grant, and *Kitchen* is now part of the Whitney Museum’s permanent collection.

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For her part, Lou's enthusiasm for the medium has endured. "The material still sings to me, tells me what it wants to be," she says. "It's been a long love affair."

Ran Hwang

B. 1960. Based in Seoul, South Korea and New York, New York



Ran Hwang, Soaring Again M4, 2015, Leila Heller Gallery



Ran Hwang, Soaring Again M6, 2015, Leila Heller Gallery

Hwang combines beads and buttons, and sometimes crystals and sequins, to create glittering reliefs, some stretching as long as 27 feet. Clearly the result of intense labor,

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her compositions nonetheless feel ephemeral, like you should hold your breath in their presence.

Although Hwang's subject matter is familiar—cherry blossoms, palaces, and birds in flight—her technique for representing these motifs is unusual. For Hwang, the process itself is a kind of meditative ritual. “I nail hundreds of buttons in place from top to bottom, left to right, waving my arms in repetitive action,” she explains. “I go through the ritualistic process of hammering in each bead to suggest that the existence of each ordinary person has meaning.”

Hwang's notion that each button or bead symbolizes an individual person came to her after watching the World Trade Center attack in 2001. As the curator Ki Hye-Gyeong writes, “The change, which occurred after she witnessed people falling down from the building during 9/11, came from her new perspective on common people that form the society—an understanding that, although common people are trivial like thread and buttons, without them, no society or no artwork can exist.”

Paying careful attention to the smallest element while keeping your eye on the bigger picture is the delicate balance that animates beadwork. Or as Hwang puts it, “The core of my practice is to enliven these tiny beautiful objects.”

Hew Locke

B. 1959. Based in London, England

Locke first began to incorporate strings of beads into his work after seeing the frayed tapestries on the walls of once-stately European homes. Their dangling threads especially interested him. “In [my] wall drawings, the beads act as equivalents to broken threads,” he says. “The shape of the shadows cast by the beads is very important, animating and enlivening them.”

Sea Power (2014), a wall drawing commissioned for the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in Kochi, India, is a haunting composition of cord and plastic beads, which Locke uses to create lines, rather than surfaces or volumes. Huge figures, some resembling the figure of Death himself, stand astride ships old and new. Strings of beads hang down, like trails of dripping paint.

“Quite often in my work the beads have symbolized water or tropical decay, dripping and oozing,” Locke acknowledges. “Many Guyanese artists reference Kaieteur Falls, a

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national symbol. For me, beads hanging down in a sheet evoke the falls.” (Locke was born in Edinborough and lived in Guyana from 1966 to 1980.)

Locke’s use of cheap plastic beads, which he first found in discount stores and Halloween costume shops, has a social dimension. “Beads sometimes mimic expensive materials, such as gold and pearls,” he says. “I like the idea of elevating this ‘poor’ material to the status of high art.”

Cherice Harrison-Nelson

B. 1959. Based in New Orleans, Louisiana



Cherice Harrison-Nelson. Photo by Jeffrey David Ehrenreich. Courtesy of the artist.



Work by Cherice Harrison-Nelson. Photo by Phillip Colwart. Courtesy of the artist.

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“My dad always said, ‘You can’t create a suit just to be pretty, you must address social issues,’” Harrison-Nelson explains. “As an artist, you are obligated to get people to think about being agents of change.”

The artist, educator, and author is a co-founder and curator of the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame. She’s also a third-generation Mardi Gras Indian and Big Queen of her tribe, Guardians of the Flame. (Mardi Gras Indians are organized groups of black Mardi Gras participants, whose beaded and feathered suits appropriate Native American ceremonial aesthetics—a tradition that dates to the 19th century.)

Harrison-Nelson’s suits do indeed address social issues, in keeping with her father’s expectations. Her designs frequently refer to her West African ancestry and to black culture and achievements—a sankofa bird inside an outline of the African continent, a phoenix rising, even a beaded President Obama with the U.S. flag rippling below him. Further adorned with fringe, ruching, and coronas of feathers, her suits and headdresses are only worn once, yet they can take up to a year to construct by hand.

Harrison-Nelson is currently creating her next suit, which celebrates Afro-Liberation. It is red, black, and green, the colors of the pan-African flag.

Jeffrey Gibson

B. 1972. Based in New York, New York

Raised in a military family, Gibson had an itinerant childhood, growing up in the U.S., South Korea, England, and Germany. He also has Cherokee ancestry and is a member of Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. When describing the appeal of beads, Gibson seems to see something of a reflection of himself: a global traveler, but one who values his roots. “The bead has successfully moved around the world, seducing us in order to maintain its longevity,” he explains. “Conceptually, I also like that they are glass, a material made from sand, the earth.”

Gibson first began incorporating beads into his work during his undergraduate years at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he made small dolls, decorating them with paint and beads, and allowing the latter to act as a sort of pigment. The versatility of the medium, with its many practical functions and multitude of possible meanings, attracted him. “I think of beads as sculptural objects, weights, pixels, glass, plastic, clay, as currency, toys, jewelry,” he says.

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Although Gibson is a multi-disciplinary artist, beading is the medium that most explicitly conjures his roots. His beadwork often combines artifacts of popular culture, such as the lyrics of pop songs and Everlast punching bags, with Native American art materials and techniques. His heavily embellished punching bags and his powerfully charismatic beaded figures challenge the notion that Native American craft traditions are only historical, insisting that they refer to vibrant and living cultures.

Joyce J. Scott

B. 1948. Based in Baltimore, Maryland



Joyce J. Scott

Head Shot, 2008

Grounds For Sculpture

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Joyce J. Scott

Vessel, 2006

Mobilia Gallery

Scott, also a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship (she won the award in 2016), doesn't believe in pussyfooting around. Her work bluntly confronts difficult subject matter, including classism, racism, and misogyny, or as Scott calls them, "your general basket of humans sins."

She approaches beadwork with reverence for its history and cultural significance. "This is an ancient skill and I must be worthy of the task," Scott says. "I'm a loopy fool with a gift that brings great joy and power to myself and the viewers of my art."

Scott's sculptures frequently combine glasswork and found objects with beadwork in both witty and disturbing ways. *Head Shot* (2008) depicts a hollow glass hand gripping a gun with a beaded head balanced on its barrel. Look closer and you'll see that the hand is full of real bullets and the head has lost the top of its skull, exposing bumpy beige brains. Lovely to look at yet disturbing to contemplate, it reads as an indictment of our passivity in the face of gun violence, particularly against people of color.

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Day After Rape Series: Gathering Water (2009) shows a pair of tobacco pipes joined together by delicate beadwork depicting a woman's naked and headless body. The series of which this work is a part refers to the rape and murder of women during the conflict in Darfur. Scott is determined that we not ignore injustice, whether it belongs to the past or the present. Her mastery of technique and genius for storytelling guarantees that we cannot.