

ARTISTS WITH AN AGENDA

While discussing plans for this year's fair, we talked Japanese beadmaking with Liza Lou, poked fun at the art market with Bert Rodriguez, accessed the inaccessible with Taryn Simon and got completely lost in conversation with Robert Chambers.



Clockwise from right, *Barricade*, 2008; the artist Liza Lou at work; *Continuous Mile*, 2006-08



© LIZA LOU COURTESY JAY JOPLING / WHITE CUBE (LONDON). PORTRAIT BY MICK HAGGERTY

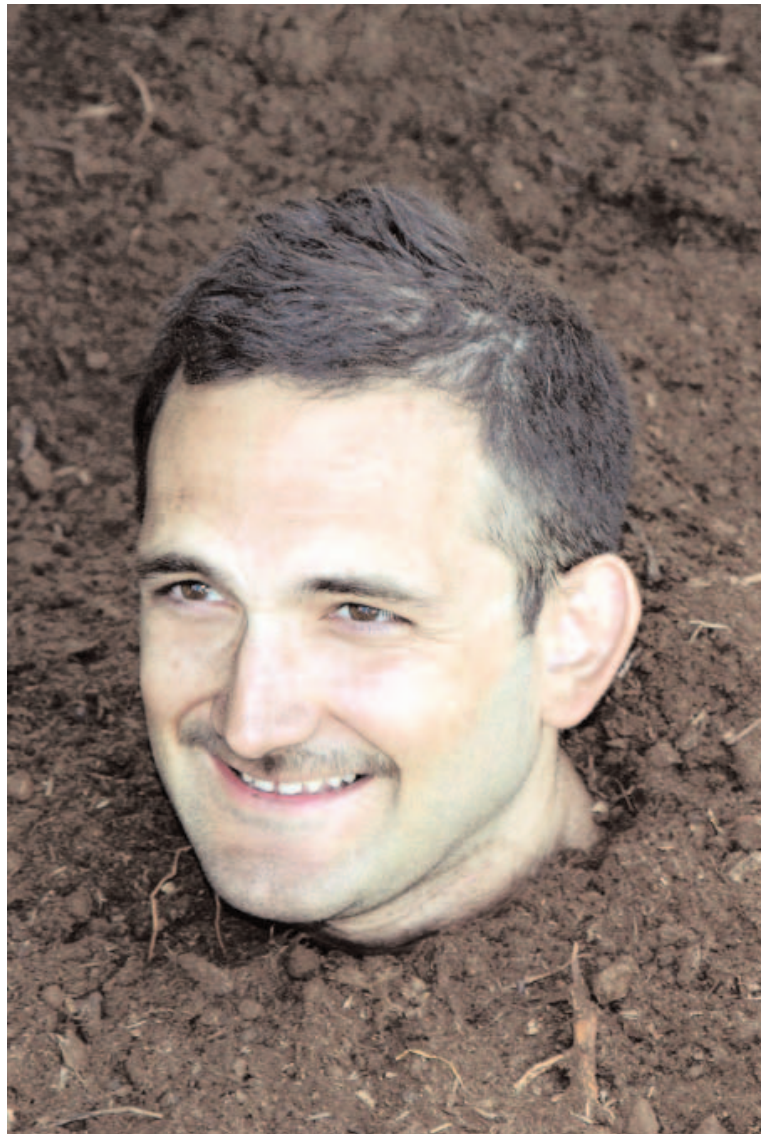
LIZA LOU

After winning the MacArthur Prize, this artist took the money and ran—to a remote spot halfway around the world that she now calls home.

BY ROBIN SAYERS

“There are people that completely can’t stand my work, and then there are people that get it,” says Liza Lou of her intricately beaded, life-size sculptures. “I think the love/hate scale is pretty well-balanced.” Perhaps, but that scale is increasingly tipping to the *love* side as Lou, 39, becomes a favorite of curators, collectors and the MacArthur Foundation, which surprised her with a Genius Fellowship in 2002. “I was totally shocked—it’s such an honor,” she says of the five-year, \$500,000 grant. “It made me want to do some good in the world.” This necessitated a 10,000-mile move from her home in Los Angeles to Durban, the largest city in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa, which boasts an abundance of bead artisans but a nearly 30-percent unemployment rate. Lou set up studio, providing work to 30 Zulu men and women who helped create her recent pieces, including *Barricade* (2008, 24-karat gold-plated beads and steel), which will be shown at this year’s fair. When it comes to her medium, Lou can’t just run to the local art store for supplies: she estimates that her latest show at Manhattan’s L & M Arts consisted of more than one-and-a-half tons of beads. And not just any beads, but ones sequestered in what sounds like the art world’s version of *Skull and Bones*. “It’s a secret little society,” Lou says of her Japanese source. “You do research, write letters, use translators, get introductions. You have to do a lot to earn their respect.” Even after that’s accomplished, “They don’t let you visit the factory or know its location. These are not people looking for customers.” So how did Lou finally coax the tiny treasures from their makers? This artist who spent the majority of her 20s working on her first major piece responds without missing a beat. “I was persistent.”

Liza Lou shows with White Cube, Booth C13, L&M Arts, Booth F11 and Galerie Thaddeus Ropac, Booth E7.



Clockwise from top left, *The True Artist Makes Useless Shit for Rich People to Buy (Window or Wall Sign)*, 2008; the artist Bert Rodriguez during his performance piece *What a Tree Feels Like*, 2008; *A Meal I Made With My Mother*, 2008

BERT RODRIGUEZ

The artist, whose work is included in the permanent collections of the Kemper Museum and Rubell Family Collection, may be best known for performances that simultaneously channel Vito Acconci and Johnny Knoxville.

BY DAVID SOKOL

“I’m working on impulse most of the time,” says Bert Rodriguez. But if you had to assign a theme to the 33-year-old Miamian’s work, it would have something to do with unfettered capitalism. At a time when the art market has shot young talents into the stratosphere, Rodriguez pokes fun. “I don’t think you can make art anymore without acknowledging the presence of the market,” he notes.

Take his first solo show in 2000. *A Pre-Career Retrospective* displayed a collection of artifacts and creations from Rodriguez’s childhood that presumed instant fame. More recently, click the video at his website minegro.com, and an excerpt of *Two Heads Are Better Than One* shows Rodriguez transforming a gallery wall into a gloryhole—and suggesting that the inflated prices and back-room mechanisms of the art market have assumed a pornographic quality.

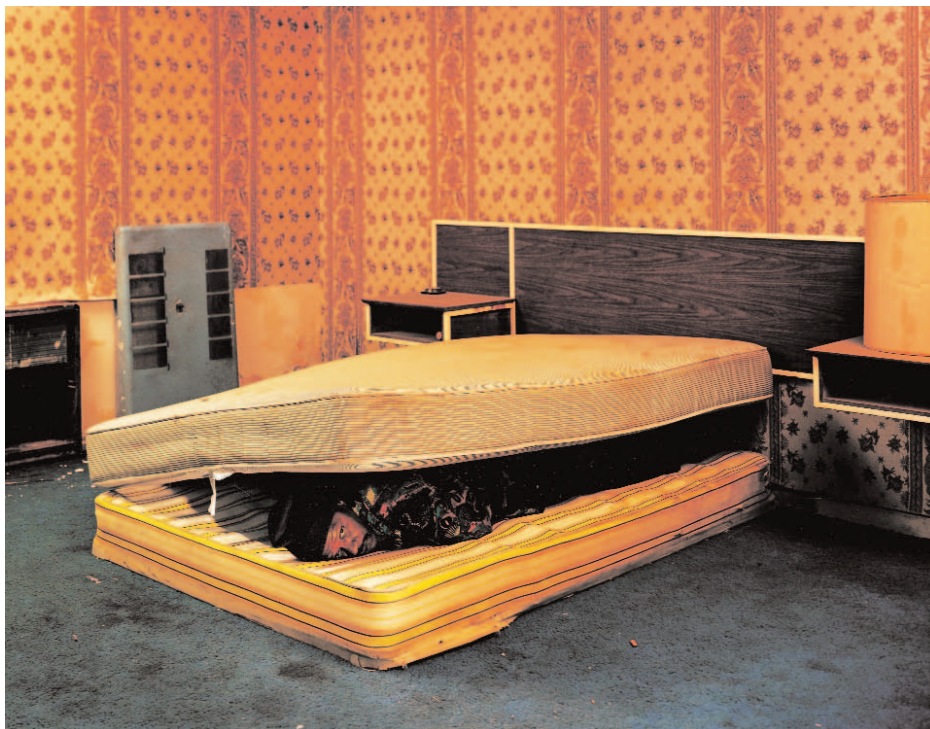
Rodriguez actively subverts the market, too, by designing experiences that are “as normative as possible.” At this year’s Whitney Biennial, he installed himself in a white box at the Park Avenue Armory, its interior outfitted like a psychoanalyst’s office, and listened to visitors pour out their hearts (by appointment only). At the Frieze Art Fair this past October he gave foot rubs. The performances, he says, are about pursuing a hope that “when followed to its logical conclusion, art will eventually make itself useless. We will have evolved to the point where our daily experience is an art experience.”

Until then, Rodriguez continues making tangible artworks that offer commentary on this profiteering life. At this year’s Art Basel Miami Beach, for example, a sculpture that has been years in the making recreates the monolith from Rodriguez’s favorite movie, *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Yet this 12-foot-tall totem sheds a tear every minute. “I have an image of this icon from this hyper-intellectual civilization suddenly showing its emotion, expressing its disappointment in us.”

Bert Rodriguez shows with Fredric Snitzer Gallery, Booth B8.



Clockwise from top, *White Tiger (Kenny)*, *Selective Inbreeding*, 2007; the artist Taryn Simon; *Larry Mayes, Scene of Arrest*, 2002



© 2007 TARYN SIMON. COURTESY GAGOSIAN GALLERY/STEIDL

TARYN SIMON

This young Guggenheim grant recipient calls America the "proper site of research" for stark photos that offer a stylized glimpse at its reality.

BY JULIA COOKE

For a photographer like herself, Taryn Simon points out, finding a light source you haven't already toyed with or documented is pretty serendipitous. So she was looking forward to capturing the blue glow of nuclear waste capsules submerged in water at the Nuclear Waste Encapsulation and Storage Facility in Washington State. It wasn't until she was at the pool of water to shoot that she found a section among the 1,900 capsules that resembled a map of the United States of America. The resulting photograph appears in *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Simon's recent series documenting places and scenes integral to American mythology, security and identity but inaccessible to ordinary citizens.

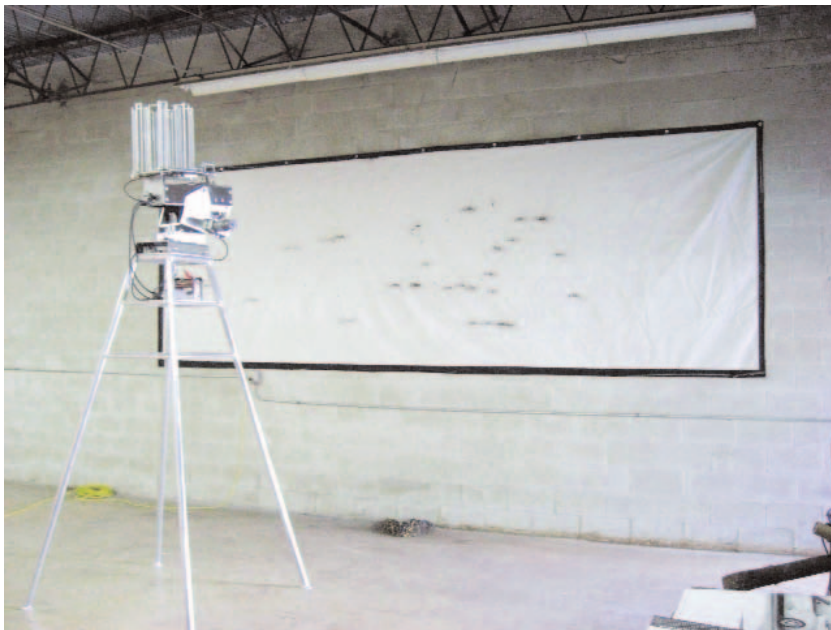
"Sometimes I admittedly intervened in the scene to make the work seductive; I'm not just documenting," says Simon. "But for something like nuclear waste, there's no way in hell I could intervene."

It was a lucky surprise, which happens when the sites in question are as tightly controlled and rarely photographed as those Simon includes in her project.

Surprises notwithstanding, Simon's work is the calculated product of careful investigation and consideration. Her photographs engage viewers with, as she puts it, elements of fantasy and seduction in scenes that deepen and shift as viewers learn the stories behind them.

"I'm very interested in the space between text and image; how the text changes as you look at image more and more, and how the image changes when you look at the text more and more," she explains. Both of her major projects, *The Innocents* and *An American Index*, center on, as Simon puts it, the "divide between public access and expert access" and the relationship between text and photograph. While she's keeping quiet about her next project, we can probably expect similarly thought-provoking themes from Simon. We'll just have to wait a few years for confirmation.

Taryn Simon shows with Gagosian Gallery, Booth E13.



Clockwise from top: *Impact Drawing Machine*, 2008; the artist Robert Chambers; his newest 25-foot sculpture *John John*, showing at CasaLin.



ROBERT CHAMBERS

This sculptor mentions bioluminescence, Anthony Quinn and Cuban coffee when trying to pin down his muses—and his body of work is just as wide-ranging.

BY JULIA COOKE PORTRAIT BY TROY CAMPBELL

Robert Chambers exudes a mad scientist-like exuberance when he talks about his sculptures. He starts to explain, peppering the discourse with a combination of artistic references (Mark di Suvero and the Socrates Sculpture Park) and scientific inspirations (Johannes Kepler's Laws of Planetary Motion), and inevitably manages to lose and re-engage whoever he's talking to as he tangentially winds his way around the many things that influenced the work at hand.

Chambers says that his father, a renowned scientist, raised him to follow in his footsteps—and so did his mother, an artist. Thanks to them, he's comfortable in both contexts. It's little surprise that today Chambers is a sculptor whose art is inspired by science.

Chambers' work ranges from a massive model of a molecule of propane cast in big bronze balls to *John-John*, two gas-powered Depression-era John Deere tractors attached at their heads to form both impasse and bridge. *John-John* was created for the *Yard Work* show at The Yard at Casa Lin, which will run concurrently with Art Basel Miami Beach this year. Some of his works are static, sitting in place like obedient pets; others whirl and beep and move like perturbed living beings. The only thing that unites his work, says Chambers, is the thread of science weaving through all of it. It's the nucleus of all of his projects.

His robotic *Impact Driving Machine* will greet visitors who tour his open studio on December 6th. It falls into the second category: Chambers sets tea saucers loaded with bits of charcoal and blobs of paint in its robotic arm, and it launches them at a canvas stretched on the wall behind. The resulting "landscapes," as Chambers calls them, don't wear their science on their sleeve, but that's not to say that it's not there.

Robert Chambers' work can be seen at The Yard at CasaLin (55 NW 30th St.) through December 7th and during his studio open house on December 6th.