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IGSHAAN ADAMS

Igshaan Adams was born in 1982 in Cape Town, South Africa. Combining aspects of performance, weaving, sculpture and installation that draw upon his upbringing, his cross-disciplinary practice is an ongoing investigation into hybrid identity, particularly in relation to race and sexuality. Raised by Christian grandparents in a community racially classified as 'coloured' under apartheid legislature, he is an observant but liberal Muslim who occupies a precarious place in his religious community because of his homosexuality. As such, the quiet activism of Adams's work speaks to his experiences of racial, religious and sexual liminality, while breaking with the strong representational convention found in recent South African art. He uses the material and formal iconographies of Islam and 'coloured' culture to develop a more equivocal, phenomenological approach towards these concerns and offer a novel, affective view of cultural hybridity. Adams states:

"I am concerned with my two environments: the internal and the external; and the constant exchange of information between the two. As I project myself onto the world, so too do I internalize the world's projections onto me. Initially I grappled with deconstructing my hybrid identity, focusing on my multicultural, religious and sexual identities in relation to the domestic and political environments in which they were formed, hoping to understanding the conflict I was experiencing. My focus has since shifted to wanting to know more about the self from a multidimensional, universal and mystical position. Doing and undoing, pushing and pulling, employing restraint while at the same time being open to discovering new elements of beauty through playful experimentation, all of this allows me as the artist to insert my personal inquiry into the work. My aim has always been to question and challenge boundaries in a sensitive way." (Adams, 2017)

To date, Adams has held nine solo exhibitions at Akershus Kunstsenter (Oslo), blank projects (Cape Town), A Tale of a Tub (Rotterdam), Rongwrong Gallery (Amsterdam), Stevenson Gallery (Cape Town) and AVA Gallery (Cape Town). He has also participated in numerous group shows, both locally and internationally, including In *This Imperfect Present Moment* (2018) at the Seattle Art Museum, *Ravelled Threads* (2018) at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, *Da Uno a Dieci* (2018) at Galleria Massimo Manini, Brescia, *Les jour qui vient* (2017) at the Galerie des Galeries in Paris, *Sacre du Printemps* (2015) curated by AA Bronson at the Grazer Kunstverein in Graz and *Barriers* (2015) at the Wanås Foundation in Knislinge, Sweden. Adams has been selected for a number of artist residencies, among them the Sommerakademie im Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, Switzerland and the IAAB / Pro Helvetia residency, Basel, Switzerland. In 2018, Adams was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art. Presented annually, the prestigious award culminates in a solo presentation of the recipient's work, conducting a nationwide tour of museums and institutions.

Adams lives and works in Cape Town, South Africa.

curriculum vitae

Igshaan

Adams

When

Dust

S e t t l e s

Pasting Over the
Holes of My Soul:
Transformation
in the Work of
Igshaan Adams

Justin

Davy

A crowd waits outside the entrance to the Centre for African Studies gallery at the University of Cape Town. In the foyer a mix of aromas fill the air: freshly fried samoosas, pies and koeksisters lie waiting to be served as the finger food for the exhibition they're about to enter. The doors open and the audience is invited in. The smells enter with them, and together they are met by the smell of lobaan – the Cape Muslim term for frankincense, a tree resin often associated with burial – already burning inside the gallery. The lingering haze of this resin, coupled with the quiet of an empty gallery, quickly silences the eager audience. In a corner of the room are two performers, each holding a solemn pose. Igshaan Adams, the younger of



the two, is laid out half-naked on the table; the older – his father Amien Adams – stands alongside, watching the audience as they stream in. The crowd starts filling the space around the table, waiting for something to happen. Adams' father steps forward and starts to wash his son's body according to Islamic burial rites. The body is

Please Remember II,
2013, Centre for African
Studies, University of
Cape Town

dried and then meticulously wrapped in white cotton sheeting. His father takes care to manoeuvre Igshaan's body gently as he does so, making sure that his son is comfortable while he assumes the state of a lifeless corpse. Once completely wrapped, Adams remains motionless, ready for burial. Only, this is not a physical death, but a spiritual one.

Titled *Please Remember II*, the performance formed part of the 2013 exhibition *Three Abdullahs: A Genealogy of Resistance*, a visual investigation into the representation of Muslim resistance to colonialism and apartheid in Cape Town. In the lead up to the exhibition, Adams shared his thinking behind the performance with me. He is a regular visitor to the kramats – sacred Muslim burial sites – of various exiles scattered around Cape Town. These exiles were banished to the Dutch-controlled Cape of Good Hope from parts of the East Indies, located in present-day Indonesia, where they had resisted Dutch rule. They brought with them the linguistic heritage and religious doctrine that would come to define Islam at the Cape.

Visiting these shrines, Adams describes, had him reflect more deeply on the idea of legacy, and of what one leaves behind after one dies. He related this experience to the story of a beloved family member for whom he cared deeply, but who had become estranged due to their lifestyle of substance abuse. He recounts how they were no longer the person he had come to know and love. As a result he had started to mourn the death of the person he once knew while their physical body was still alive.

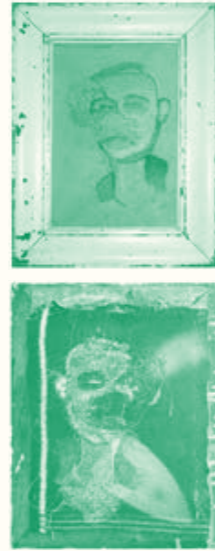
Adams envisioned this intimate burial rite, which is usually performed by the closest adult relative of the same sex, as a vehicle through which to rekindle his relationship with his father with whom he had also been estranged. His father's symbolic washing of his body, as much as enacting part of Muslim rites, is also reminiscent of Christ washing the feet of his disciples in an act of humility, just before his death. At the conclusion of the performance, Adams eventually emerges 'alive' from the shroud of white cotton sheets, mimicking Christ's resurrection. This symbolism is not lost on Adams who, though a practicing Muslim, was raised by Christian grandparents. He describes the symbolic rebirth as a "real experience", that "something actually died" inside him.

Through this performance Adams engaged multiple layers of Cape Muslim culture. While only certain elements of the Muslim burial rites were incorporated into the final performance, it did give the audience a very close viewing of what is usually a private aspect of Islamic practice in a way that was not gratuitous, but intimately personal to the artist. In contrast, the fried savouries and sweets which greeted the audience, in a sense, represent the public presence of Cape Muslim culture. This presence is often essentialised to the point where Cape Muslim culture is reduced to its food. The proximity of these contrasting, yet sometimes complimentary representations of Islam – these food items are often served after funerals in the Cape – in the exhibition, serve as a useful metaphor for a kind of dualism present in Adams' practice. He articulates this (in conversation with Jennifer Ball (2015)) as being his concern with his "two environments, both external and internal, and the constant exchange of information between the two". He states further, "I project onto the world, so too I internalise the world's projections on to me". It is this simple mantra of transforming the world – the everyday objects and fabric so embedded in his practice – and in turn being transformed by it, that gives

his work its power. These transformations can be described by three processes: deconstruction, reconstitution and re-creation, which the artist has employed in varying degrees and at various stages of his career.

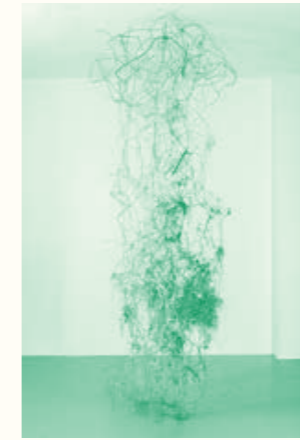
In 2009 Adams announced himself to the art world with *Jou Ma se Poes*, an installation in which he re-created a sitting room, at the Ruth Prowse School of Art exam show. Looking back, this exhibition served as the genesis of much of the work which was to come. Conceptually, the sitting room was meant to be an extension of the already familial and domestic environment Adams experienced at the school. It was decorated with the elements from a classic working-class coloured household, a homage to his upbringing by his grandparents. The customary family portraits associated with this kind of domestic scene were replaced by embroidered self-portraits of the artist, which appear as projections of the artist's alter egos. Some portraits seem to be left unfinished, alluding to a constant grappling with the material and even a projection of the 'loose threads' the artist employs in later works such as *Oorskot* (2016). This de-threading can literally be seen as a deconstruction of the artist's identities. *Jou Ma se Poes* is a derogatory reference to female genitalia. It nevertheless persists as an expression on the working-class Cape Flats – the barren stretches of land south-east of Cape Town's city bowl where coloured and black communities were forcibly moved to during apartheid – where it is the local patois equivalent of 'f*&% you'. It was perhaps a way for Adams to announce himself on two levels. Firstly to an art world where artists of colour are still often tokenised and made palatable to white audiences at the expense of a deeper contextualisation of their history or social conditions. And secondly, to a broader society in which his intersection of marginalised identities – he is gay, coloured and Muslim – were yet to find a place. This is his most directly confrontational gesture to date.

At the outset of this journey it became clear that Adams was not always going to travel alone. He would take members of his family and community with him. Five months after the Ruth Prowse exam show he presented a series of tapyt



Untitled (Self-Portrait)
(front and back),
2009, machine-sewn
self-portrait on found
blanket, 30 × 20cm;
from *Jou Ma se Poes*

Oorskot, 2016, wire,
beads, string, wire coils,
nylon rope and fabric,
340 × 100 × 100cm



(linoleum floors used in working-class households across South Africa) works in his solo exhibition, *Vinyl*, at the AVA in Cape Town. Adams took the protective yet decorative flooring from the homes of neighbours in his community in exchange for replacing them with new ones. The often tattered floors were a record of movements within those households. The tapyt was often soiled with layers of dirt, remnants of food, and in one case, urine. Adams worked into the material in a reductive way, cleaning small sections as a form of mark-making. Except for these small sections, the large panels were exhibited mostly as they had been kept.

The disintegrating vinyl floors were tangible links to the poverty which Adams grew up in proximity to. They find resonance in a short poem written by artist Scott Williams of the Burning Museum collective when they used linoleum in an installation in 2015.

*Hoe plak ek die gate van my siel toe?
Die plakkers plak linoleum teen die harde sement vloere, teen die mure ...
in die hoop dat 'n lewe, 'n leefstyl weer aanmekeer geplak kan word.*

At various stages of his relatively short career Adams has been lead by a process of reconstitution. In his early phase this involved superimposing images, often his own portrait, onto existing patterned fabric. The result is a ready-made tension embedded into the work as elements lie intentionally juxtaposed with one another (see *In Between*). In later bodies of work, especially the 2015 exhibition *Parada* – the Persian word meaning 'curtain' – we are presented with more resolved 'patchwork' works. There is a harmony present here, even in the midst of what may seem to be politically or religiously charged pieces of fabric. In the exhibition, a series of ten of these patchworks use Rorschach inkblots as their central motifs. Armed with a collection of scrap material and these inkblots, Adams manages to break the power of the old South African flag (*Plate 9*, from the *Neoscope* series), almost to the extent that it becomes an object of beauty. To a similar extent an

Islamic burial mat (*Plate 7*, from the *Neoscope* series) is given an almost childlike playfulness. Finally, in *Plate 10*, from the *Neoscope* series, Adams presents us with the Islamic dimension of the meaning of parda, namely the veil – also known as niqab – worn by some Muslim women, which covers the entire face except for the eyes. Here Adams reconstitutes what seems like a veil-shaped hole of a found piece of fabric with another piece of found fabric. The common thread in these works is that Adams seems more concerned with finding a resolution inherent to the fabric, and less concerned with resolving an identity reflected in it. His preoccupation with found and used pieces of material, which can be made ‘whole’ again, trumps the need to author new works ‘from scratch’.

The presence of stray strands of thread and patches of various pieces of fabric lends the idea of the woven tapestry, albeit without the later specialised technique, to most of Adams’ early work. It seemed natural that at some stage Adams would incorporate the more formal process of tapestry weaving into his practice. Indeed, with the help of studio assistants, weaving has become a central process in Adams’ practice in the last three years. He has produced tapestries dedicated to various tenets and themes within Islam, such as *Surah al-Fatiha II (part two)*, the opening verse of the Qur’an. Adams masterfully weaves these arabic verses into an artwork that can best be described as calligraphic quilts. Yet, to the trained eye, not all of the words or verses can be fully deciphered. This partial obfuscation



Plate 9, from the *Neoscope* series, 2014, old South African flag, fabric, thread, frill, 122 × 150cm



Plate 7, from the *Neoscope* series, 2014, found tablecloth, fabric and thread, 120 × 118cm

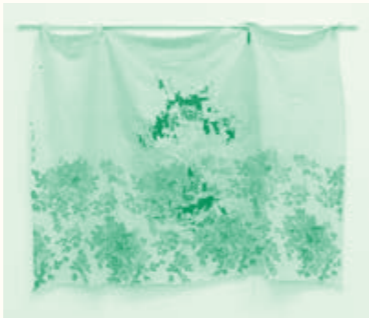
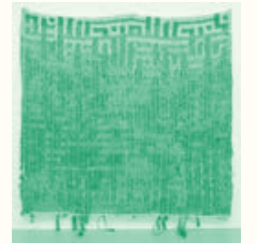


Plate 10, from the *Neoscope* series, 2014, found fabric, thread, brass-plated rail, 120 × 152cm

Surah al-Fatiha II (part two) (front), 2016, woven nylon rope, beads and string, 248 × 230cm

is consistent with the artist’s constant search for knowledge and truth exemplified by his often joking contention (voiced in a personal interview in 2013) that he does not “know much about Islam”. Looking back, it seems that the detreading and slow process of piecing back together has culminated in a period of prolific making. Adams’ early investment in making peace with his biography has also resulted in an air of peace in his practice. Through these tapestries Adams has been re-creating himself in the image of this peace, using the parts of himself that have become more resolved – pieces previously in conflict. The silent reverberation of this resolved peace is nowhere more evident than in two sculptural tapestry works presented at his most recent solo exhibition, *Al Latif* (translated as ‘The Subtle One’ in Arabic, and one of the ninety-nine names of God (Allah)) (2018). *I Am Enough* quite clearly speaks to a peace with his identity, while *Conduit I* speaks of Adams’ transcendence of his identities to become a vessel for something greater.

On the eve of his Standard Bank Artist of the Year travelling exhibition, Adams confirms that he is taking this moment to revisit earlier ideas, materials and processes in his practice. It seems fitting that these bodies of work, which invite their viewers to slow down and investigate their every texture, and which give space for multiple interpretations, should themselves undergo the same process of reflection and slowing down. Indeed the artist’s intimate dance with transformation in individual works is now being applied to his career as a whole. Adams has the opportunity to go back and reassess his archive of material and meaning making, using the experience and the peace he has now acquired. This exhibition survey can be seen as one in a series of full circle moments for the artist. We, as a public, wait with bated breath to share in the transformations yet to come.



Justin Davy is a Johannesburg-based artist, curator and member of the Burning Museum collective. Davy uses video and performance to investigate archives and memory, untangling African colonial histories. With the Burning Museum he has used street art and the gallery space to interrogate issues including gentrification, and missionaries in Africa. His curated exhibitions have focused on the contemporary intersections of politics and art, and included subjects such as the South African student uprisings of 2015-16. He recently curated an exhibition as part of the Bamako Encounters Photography Biennale 2017.

Art of
Existence

Ala Rabiha Alhourani

Igshaan Adams' artwork is an art of existence that narrates a trajectory of his own intimate, personal lived experience. Looking closely, his artwork reveals Foucauldian 'technologies of the self' – techniques that involve reflective thought vested in the artist's self-formation and freedom in the midst of inherited social and religious restraint. Adams' artworks subvert the social power that imposes uncertainty upon him in relation to his identification, spawned by the realisation of his status as a gay, Muslim and Cape 'Coloured' man in the dominantly white art industry. Adams has relied on art and its associated politics of aesthetics to reconcile, critically negotiate and affirm his identity position. Through his art practice Adams performs a personal and collective narrative of Islam and of being Muslim in Cape Town. His life trajectory and identity politics are seen clearly in installations such as *Jou Ma se Poes* (2009) and *I Am You* (2011), and in the performance, *Bismillah* (2014), as well as in his more recent woven installations.

Whilst studying at Ruth Prowse School of Art, Adams encountered the challenge of being 'Coloured' and born into a working class family, in a school filled primarily with white staff and students. Adams did not shy away from his class and racial background; neither did he wear the metaphorical Fanonian 'white mask' to escape the inherited stereotypical perception of his 'inferiority'. On the contrary, Adams affirms his belonging and pride of being Coloured through the *Jou Ma se Poes* (translating from Afrikaans to mean, Your Mother's Pussy) installation.

The installation represents a 'typical Cape Coloured' living room, decorated with various self-portraits, as well as framed verses from the Qur'an that infer the essence of Islam. The performance includes his grandmother, who is staged sitting and watching a soap opera on TV. In this work, Adams seems aware of the power these aesthetics have in



Jou Ma se Poes, 2009, installation, dimensions variable, blank projects, Cape Town

translating the sense of the environment to his audience: in addition to the sound of the TV and the presence of his grandmother, he also relies on the smell of cigarettes to sensorially imitate a 'real' scene of a Coloured living room. The audience enters a 'real' living room; most people who enter the room greet Adams' grandmother,

while she welcomes them and engages in conversation with some of them, reflecting the fact that she herself perceives and lives the performance as though a 'real' event. Adams' titling of this installation, *Jou Ma se Poes*, is a bold expression of him declaring, "Fuck it, I'm Coloured".

Adams was raised a Muslim, reared by his Christian grandmother, and at the age of fifteen he personally acknowledged his homosexuality. The complexity and uncertainty generated by perceived contradictory cultural expectations of who and what a Muslim man should be, have had a profound impact on his sense of identity. Adding to his already complex relationship to his Coloured identity, Adams

previously sidelined his religiosity, focusing rather on issues related to his gender and sexual orientation, based on an assumption that there was no way to reconcile being both gay and Muslim. This period in his life was by no means a peaceful time, and Adams describes having felt a lingering nostalgia and need for spirituality that was amplified



I Am You, 2011, fabric, wood, metal hooks, light, crochet pillow, 300 × 350 × 350cm

by the fear of losing his family and friends. Adams ultimately has reclaimed his membership and belonging to his family, friends, to Muslim community, and to Islam, through his art. In December 2011 Adams exhibited *I Am You* in the Stevenson gallery group exhibition, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, curated by Federica Angelucci. The installation consisted of a circular maze structure made up of fabric suspended from the ceiling, hung in such a way that allowed people to walk inside it. Adams sat in the centre of the structure, unseen behind the fabric, wearing only white garb and fez, chanting softly in Arabic. There the sound of Arabic mediated an aesthetic of Muslim-ness and affirmed the artist's Islamic identification. For Adams, the power of the sound in the performance is something he came to understand through his participation in the Sufi dhikr ritual (repetitive utterances of short sentences glorifying God). In this artwork, Adams enacted his religiosity and commonality with other Muslims to appeal for inclusion and recognition of his Islamic identity.

Adams resisted his exclusion from the Muslim community through his art performance *Please Remember II* (2013) (that he re-enacted and renamed *Bismillah* in 2014). In this performance the artist poses as if dead, while his father, Amien, prepares him for burial through Islamic cleansing and wrapping rituals. The performance shows Adams striving toward healing the rift that was created between the artist and his family, his friends, and the Muslim community as a result of his sexuality. For Adams, his performed death, as he described to me in a 2013 interview about the work, implies a death of inner fear and conflict of how and who to be, a celebration of a reconciliation of being a reborn gay Muslim. A critical engagement with his performance reveals an attempt to strategically evoke religious sentiments by enacting a symbolic embodiment of his death, alongside resistance to his everyday sense of a 'living death'. Adams describes that he had always felt out of place in every environment, no matter where he was – always Othered by one aspect of his identity against the others. Now he performs Islam and claims his Islamic identity through a carefully chosen regime of aesthetics and rituals: the enactment of dhikr, the naming of works, such as *Bismillah* (in the name of God); the sound of his father reciting the Alfatihah Qur'anic verses, adorning himself with Palestinian scarf (keffiyeh) and fez; the green cloth ornamented by Qur'anic verses written in gold, and the Islamic perfume (a pure perfume without any additives). All of these details embody the symbolic enactment of Islam to which he affirms his belonging and identification with the Muslim community. Aesthetic politics, such as those employed in Adams' work, reflect Alfred Gell's notion of art as a 'technology of enchantment' through which an individual strives to secure acquiescence in the network of sociality in which they are enmeshed. Adams' affirmation of his Islamic identity is carried on into his more recent collections of woven Qur'anic verses. In these works, he appears no more to be reconciling any uncertainty, nor appealing for recognition, but rather he expresses confidence in being 'Muslim enough' to claim the authority to exhibit such sacred Islamic aesthetics.

Adams' artwork makes clear the potential role of art to generate a space of self-formation; in this instance, a space that allows a gay, Muslim man to re-imagine a social reality and relationship beyond conservative Islam and a prescribed social



Bismillah, 2014,
performance.
National Arts Festival,
Grahamstown

identity. Here we see the potential of art not only to represent Islam, but rather to push the limits and transform the normative religious restraints on Muslim identity politics. Adams shows enormous bravery in this regard – through his ever-emerging and critically engaged public performances of Muslim-ness and Muslim identity formations – to encounter and challenge the mainstream religious authority of Muslims in Cape Town, and to openly enact his sexual identity, while still claiming his Islamic identity in post-apartheid Cape Town. His artwork is not to be understood merely as reflections on his personal narrative; rather, Adams' art embodies the social dramas lived by Muslim youth, in Cape Town and elsewhere. His artwork offers an insight into his ongoing individual and active collective engagement with, and appropriation of Islamic traditions. His aesthetic politics of performing Islam facilitate the conception of a modern Muslim religiosity and citizenship. Adams' artwork is generative of modern Islamic discourse, and of Muslim engagement with secularism. Through his carefully constructed sensorial regime of aesthetics, Adams performs Islam not as being static, but rather as a dynamic religion, asserting both its dynamism and the hybridity of Muslim identity politics.

Dr Ala Alhourani is an anthropologist, currently a postdoctoral fellow, involved in a larger project, 'Ethics of Religion in and of Public Life' in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. Alhourani's PhD thesis explored the resurgence of public performances of 'Muslim-ness' and the Muslim aesthetic politics of difference, community making, and multiple intersected belongings in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

Dying and

B e c o m i n g

Through the Art

o f

Igshaan Adams

Ilhaam

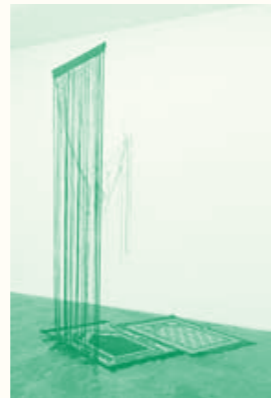
Behardien

Igshaan Adams began to develop his artist identity by exploring himself in the most physical way possible, focusing on the features of his own face and home. He wanted to understand how his appearance and environment contributed towards shaping his hybrid identity as a gay, ‘coloured’ son of a Christian mother and Muslim father. Through engagement with his overlapping intersectionality, Adams launched a body of work called *Jou Ma se Poes* (2009), a series of embroidered self-portraits and an installation of his Ouma’s (grandmother’s) living room. Every kitsch trinket, detailed doily and plastic bouquet was charged with the utmost symbolism that Adams absorbed as a child and adolescent.

Having grasped the construction of his own identity, he realised that he was more than this visually centred interpretation of his own knowledge, truth and reality, and began to meander into exploring musallahs (prayer mats), seeking what he could not see. Through his explorations with invisibility, he began to realise the disparity between who he appeared to be, and who he is. He also understood that his current visual language could not possibly be sufficient in encapsulating his authenticity of self.

Adams yearned to go beyond his identity, to dislocate and liberate himself from the social categorisations that had bound him. He responded to the invitation by the collective consciousness of Sufism (the mystical dimension of Islam) to move beyond the limited, reactionary mentality of society’s so-called ‘knowledge’ – of who we are thought to be and therefore ought to be – and into the limitless action-orientated mentality of who we know ourselves to be. Adams’ oeuvre shows us that it is feasible to create more solid foundations of consciousness to use as a beacon of unswayable strength amidst the complex ideology of identity construction.

Historically, Muslims have used the Arabic word, *Tasawwuf*, to identify the practice of Sufis. Mainstream scholars of Islam define *Tasawwuf*, or Sufism, as the name for the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam, which is supported and complemented by the outward or exoteric practices of Islam, the *Shariah*. The physical dimensions of the *Shariah* forms the space from which the metaphysical phenomenon of Sufism can operate. The practice of Sufism



69, 2013, string, curtain, steel ring, prayer carpets, dowel rod, 238 × 135 × 138cm

is a commitment to the purification of the heart and is predicated on the *jihad* of the *nafsul-amarah* (the ‘commanding self’) that commands you to respond to desire and disease. The higher self, i.e. the spiritual self, is exerted over the lower self, or animal self, which positions the body in an untouchable paradigm where constructions of identity have no performative power. This is a matter of rehumanising the body so that it asserts its own essence, as opposed to being a mere reflection of the perception of others.

Adams began to draw inspiration from his spiritual encounters with Sufism. In his works *69* (2013) and *I Am Home* (2013), he shows us his fleeting



moments of departure from the *dunya* (earth), his rising up from the demarcated structures of his prayer and identity mats into the spiritual realms of the unbounded. The tension between the static and the dynamic domains of our existence and their interdependency are transmitted through

every thread that Adams suspends. The intentionality of each string is felt as it runs from a foundation, whether upright or entangled; it tells a story of its entwinement.

Interwoven within the fabric of Sufism is the concept of dying before death. Islamic *Irfan* (gnosis) is inspired by the Holy Prophet’s (peace and blessings be upon him) pronouncement: “Die before you die”, recorded in the *Hadith*, a collection of sayings of the prophet Muhammad, which account for his daily practice known as the *Sunna*, and which constitute the major source of guidance for Muslims apart from the *Qur’an*. The first ‘death’ refers to the willful act of ceasing to follow the mind, desire, the carnal self, while the second death is not optional, and is the destiny of every single human being. To kill one’s own identity within the context of Sufism is also to operate within the context of Post-Identity,

which refuses to announce the social constructs that frame one's identity. Adams realises that these circuits in which he operates on an external level are often the result of the psychological projections that others confer onto him, and which are inadequate in describing who he is.

The refusal of the body to conform to expectations, or rather its tendency to be more than expectation allows, is communicated particularly well through the mode of performance. Adams' wandering into performance is an investigation into the interface of his own body; it forms the veil between his internal and external worlds. Adams performs his own death in *Please Remember II* (2013) and *Bismillah* (2014). In *Bismillah* his father conducts the Islamic cleansing ritual for the dead on the body of his 'lifeless' son, and smears him with camphor, scatters rose petals and then shrouds him with six layers of white cotton. Adams treats these scenes as more than performances for an exhibition audience, but also as opportunities to experience and process the idea of his own death and its nearness.

Adams' work is the culmination of a process of performativity to become who he truly is and an acknowledgement that his search is a complex one. Through rigorous self-inquiry he develops a visual language that communicates the conversations between his internal and external worlds, and he calls on his viewers to do the same. In *Plate 7*, from the *Neoscope* series (2014), a poster-like quilt of a Rorschach inkblot projected onto an Islamic burial cloth, he reminds us of our own death. He superimposes the icon of a psychological projection test onto an index of death to confront our relationship with our own mortality, and whether we will die as a mere projection of others' ideas of us, or as an agent of self-transformation.

Adams continues to explore the relationship between the physical and the spiritual world by weaving the tapestries of his existence to the breath of his heartbeat. Nylon rope, typically used for the very visible washing lines of the Cape Flats where he grew up, is woven with prayer beads into large wall hangings of key Qur'anic verses in Arabic calligraphy. Again, Adams uses a medium that has in some way shaped his identity, while repurposing and transforming it into structures that inform his post-identity. So abstract and geometric is this text that it signifies the pattern of a maze, with no reference to a beginning or an end, highlighting a Sufi teaching, and one of Adams' areas of interest: that the beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning. A universal language is imbedded in the tremendous

Surah al-Kafiroon III (part one & two) (back), 2016, woven nylon rope, beads and string, 292 × 180cm

Surah al-Fatiha II (part two) (back), 2016, woven nylon rope, beads and string, 248 × 230cm

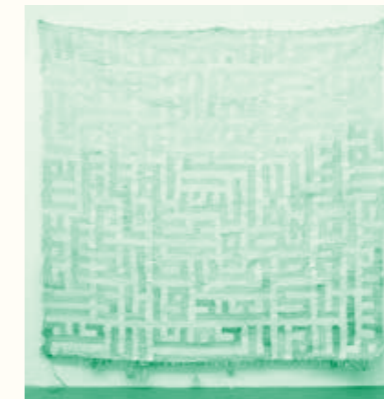
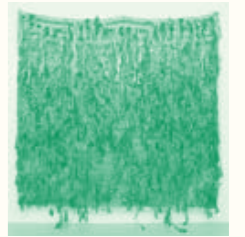
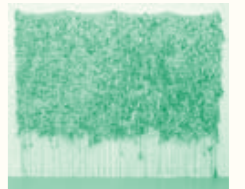
Surah al-Fatiha II (part one) (front), 2016, woven nylon rope, beads and string, approx. 241 × 230cm

abstraction and the kinetic patterning of the text, issuing messages of otherworldliness.

As one stands in the presence of these tapestries, irrespective of religiosity or irreligiosity, one may be reminded of the interconnectedness of the structures that make up our existence, and that those structures can have the appearance of being strong, yet also can unravel at any point. In *Surah al-Kafiroon III (part one and two)* (2016) almost one third of the tapestry is made up of individual strands of string that hang onto the floor and remind us of this possibility.

Other woven textiles of Arabic text, such as *Surah al-Fatiha II (part one)* (2016) and *Surah al-Fatiha II (part two)* (2016), reveal and display the most significant verse in the holy Qur'an in a 'heavily weighted' manner close to the gallery floor, suggesting its substance and solemn material. Conversations between Adams' work and the gallery space continue according to the way his forms punctuate the 'white cube' as well as the stand-alone power they embody. The select few who speak the specialised language of contemporary art are all too familiar with the ideology of the white cube, the 'sacred space' it holds, and its power to elevate ordinary objects to the status of the extraordinary. Yet when considering the art of Igshaan Adams, it is his work – which is far from ordinary – that elevates the space beyond measure. Adams' work holds the spiritual power to transform the gallery space into one that is free

from demarcation and restriction. His tasselled tapestries and frayed fibres shimmer like woven waterfalls whose forms appear simultaneously fixed and in flux. While the gallery space offers a small and exclusive crevice in the landscape of our existence, and while Adams' tapestries occupy this space with absolute certainty, as well as falling and rising like water, he reminds us how the exoteric and the esoteric dimensions of our existence interweave to form a full way of being in our world.



We are made aware of the other side of the artist's wall hangings by the tassels and details that he makes visible from the back. At times he even presents the viewer with the back of a piece, and by doing so recalls the relationship between the inner and outer dimensions of our being; to what extent our outer world reflects our inner world. In this way, they function as a metaphorical veil between our constructed self that we are inclined to make visible, and our true self that we tend to hide. Another way in which Adams' large weaves operate as veils is in the way they hang like knitted skins that can be lifted from the gallery wall. The tension between these massive membranes

that are sewn with the signs of Allah (God), and the stark gallery walls, entices the observer to examine the view that is being covered and intercepted, and with that the idea of that unexposed 'something'. In *I Was A Hidden Treasure, Then I*



I Was A Hidden Treasure, Then I Wanted to Be Known ..., 2016, fabric, fabric paint, metal, beads, rope and tassels, 200 × 500cm

Wanted to Be Known ... (2016), Adams positions a vast panoramic wall piece, resembling camouflaged terrain, laden with embellishments typical of his cultural aesthetic, as both a symbol of his own unearthing and a request for us to lift our own veils so that we may also discover the secret of who we are.

Being in Adams' studio is like inhabiting a woven warehouse of worship. He constructively plays with his multitude of materials that cover and climb every corner of the space until he has the clarity of purpose to guide his team of weavers to enter the process of making. Half-made monuments of wire, beads, fibre and tassels punctuate the layered landscape of prayer mats, old tapyt (vinyl flooring), rugs and wall hangings. The repetition of movement and sound, which that production makes, is like the familiar rhythm of the chanting of the dhikr (repetitive utterances of short sentences glorifying God). The process of intricately interlacing strands of thread is a meditative process that teaches patience and trust; trust in the process. Adams ensures that he provides himself with a palette of paraphernalia to play with. His work is at times the result of intuitive navigation through the materials, while

I've Been Here All Along. I've Been Waiting ..., 2018, rope, beads, cotton twine, wire, approx. 200 × 82 × 15cm



at other times emerges in the form of non-negotiable, deliberate emblems. Such is the Sufi way: to know when to surrender to the process, and when to take charge of it.

Adams' most recent work is curious and anthropomorphic, with objects of ritual either baring testimony to a mystical experience that he has had, or containing a message about Sufi practice. *Between Breaths* (2018) is an elongated amulet showing the rhythm of the breath, reminding us mere mortals of the fragility of our existence, and signifying the breath-giving dhikr. In *I've Been Here All Along. I've Been Waiting ...* (2018), and *I Am Enough* (2018), we see and hear the declarations of Adams' higher self, conveyed through the contorted and twisted tassels and bunched-up folds. In these pieces, Adams shows us that the path towards the self is knotted and twisted, and requires the utmost exertion to disentangle from the taut tackle of our ego, so that we may find our pure essence.

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