

Igshaan Adams

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IGSHAAN ADAMS

Editing

Christine Cronjé
Jonathan Garnham
Hannah Lewis

Text

Ruth Simbao
Josephine Higgins
Jennifer Ball

Design

Christine Cronjé

Photography

Kyle Morland

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113-115 Sir Lowry Road
Woodstock, 7925
Cape Town, ZA
Tel: +27 (0)21 4624276
info@blankprojects.com
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IGSHAAN ADAMS
Selected works 2009 – 2015
In conversation with Jennifer Ball

IA: It's something that I find interesting: how environments shape us, how we absorb whatever the environment has to offer and eventually becomes a part of us ... identity formation. I did that first body of work about my domestic environment, around how that affected the formative years of my life. And I always really wanted to know, so how did I get to be ... what would have been ... how would I be if I grew up in a different environment?

Page 12: *Self-portrait*, 2002
Oil on canvas, 90 x 60 cm



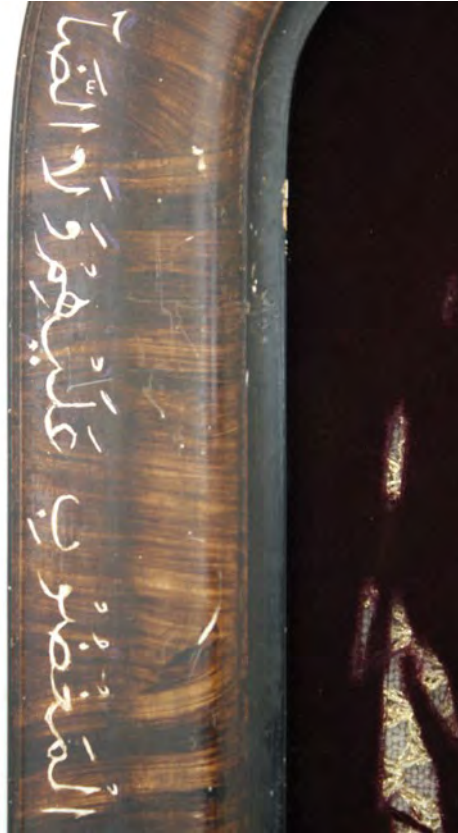
Jou ma se poes, 2009
Installation, dimensions variable



Jou ma se poes (detail), 2009
Installation, dimensions variable



Jou ma se poes (detail), 2009
Installation, dimensions variable



Jou ma se poes (detail), 2009
Installation, dimensions variable



Jou ma se poes (detail front), 2009
Installation, dimensions variable



Jou ma se poes (detail back), 2009
Installation, dimensions variable



JB: There seems to be a recurring theme of family and community in your work, particularly in terms of their position in reflections on your selfhood. Would you agree? One early body of work that comes to mind is *Vinyl*, in which you collected pieces of flooring from the homes of your childhood neighbours in Bonteheuwel. Could you tell me a bit about that?

IA: Yes, soon after I graduated I decided to take sections of people's homes, their vinyl flooring, the *tapyt*, and just cut out sections and then worked on top of it. I asked them not to clean it - they were all quite dirty. This one in particular [*Hennie se kamertapyt*, 2010] had a picture of a little girl in there. There are all kinds of stuff buried in there. It was caked with filth and grime, because it came from a guy who was paraplegic – he used to wet the bed. His bedroom was also the kitchen. He was really poor so in this particular one you could smell urine, you could smell food. I would draw into the dirt with Handy Andy, add some dirt of my own or hide things. You could see where it was walked off and where the furniture was and, of course, I titled the work in reference to where I got it from. So this was Hennie – I think he passed away – and it was important that the titles referred to the spaces that I'd gotten them from because I specifically chose families who had links to my own story. So I was in a way telling my own story through their stories. And the work did feel like a collective narrative. Each piece had a bit of a story when it came together.



Hennie se kamertapyt, 2010
Manipulated found floor vinyl, 107 x 135 cm



Boeta Joe se voordeurtapyt, 2010
Manipulated found floor vinyl, 110 x 113 cm



IA: It started with this dream ... I was in a warehouse, a space. It was very dark and there was a crowd of kids. They were all really sad and I was concerned about them. I wanted to make sure they were okay. As the kids moved past me, I saw a man – an amazingly beautiful man – radiating pure love. After we made eye contact, we embraced and cried. ‘I’ve missed you ... I’ve longed for you,’ he said.
I replied, ‘I love you so much, but I don’t know who you are. Who are you?’
‘I am you!’

I think another unknown part of my soul met my own in this dream. When I woke up, I couldn’t get over this feeling of absolutely being loved or having love for myself.

I am you, 2010

Performance and installation, dimensions variable
Installation view and photograph, Stevenson, Cape Town

IA: *I am you* was part of an exhibition titled *What we talk about when we talk about love*. My proposal centred around the Sufi concept of ‘the reflection’ – deeply spiritual, mystical ideas around love. My mom and I made this together – a maze-like, concentric structure suspended from the ceiling which people could walk inside. I did a performance in the centre, praying and chanting the holy names of God under this veil. If you listen carefully you can hear the sound. The idea is similar to the Whirling Dervishes, those Muslim Sufis with big dresses who twirl and spin around. It’s just a different form of praying, of chanting, of annihilation of the self. That’s why I titled the previous work *I am no more*. It’s this idea of pushing the self aside. So I just sat under this veil and really within that performance, within the chanting, you go into this state. You lower your voice and the idea is that you get the vibration closest to your heart so you can activate that heart chakra, I suppose. And the process is about getting the mind out of the way, just experiencing and falling into the unknown.

I wore only white because white is the closest colour to transparency. That’s how it felt in that moment: I was absolutely transparent. In Islam, you have the five pillars of Islam and the fifth one is that, if you have the means, you are required to do *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) at least once in your lifetime. During *hajj*, there is a moment where you stand on Mount Arafat with only two pieces of white cloth wrapped around you and everybody looks the same, your head is shaven and they say you can’t tell the millionaire from the *bergie* on the street. There is the belief that you have this meeting set up with God and at some point in your life you will know it’s the right time for you to go. And so this moment, standing, wearing white because it’s close to transparency, standing in front of God, showing up for your meeting. It was a reference to that.



I am you, 2010

Performance and installation, dimensions variable
Installation view and photograph, Stevenson, Cape Town



I am you, 2010
Bronze, 15 x 10 x 7 cm
Photograph: Stevenson, Cape Town

In Islam we speak about the thousand veils that separate us from the true reality and therefore, on this path of enlightenment, one encounters a constant unveiling – a process of seeing things that has always been there but you weren't able to notice it before. I think we all experience that to some extent during our lives, this concept of being unveiled. It's a different thing understanding it intellectually and just really knowing because you've experienced it. Carl Jung spoke about this idea of collective consciousness – that we are all born with this reservoir of knowledge that contains everything that has ever happened to human beings throughout time, and throughout our lives there will be moments where we touch on this and for once, for a simple moment, the façade of this apparent reality collapses and you are confronted with true reality – moments when you know without knowing.

IA: The Sufis speak about the 'Ocean of Oneness' and the 'Mirror', this internal mirror in which you look at your spiritual journey or the road to enlightenment as having to clean this mirror over time. So you're making *dhikr*, praying, being kind, doing good things, living your life well, with integrity; these are all things that help you clean this mirror until eventually you are able to see your reflection clearly within this mirror.

I am you, 2015
Black granite, life-size
Installation view, Wanås Konst, Knislinge, Sweden
Photograph: Mattias Givell



IA: A friend of mine gave me a carpet which he had been using to pray for over thirty years. The carpet was full of holes where his feet, his knees, his hands and his head went so you could see all those things. I just exhibited it as a found object. It's an artwork produced over thirty years and there's no way you can reproduce it. But what I quite liked was that you could see the little dull patch where the head or forehead used to rest, very subtly.



I am no more, 2012
Found Islamic prayer mat, 124 x 58 cm





Self-portrait, 2013

Islamic children's prayer mats and fabric, 180 x 100 cm







In between , 2012

Prayer mats, incense, blankets and embroidered element, 524 x 320 cm
Installation view and photograph, Stevenson, Cape Town



If that I knew, 2013

Quilted prayer mats and embroidered element, 366 x 320 cm
Installation view Rongrong, Amsterdam



If that I knew, 2013

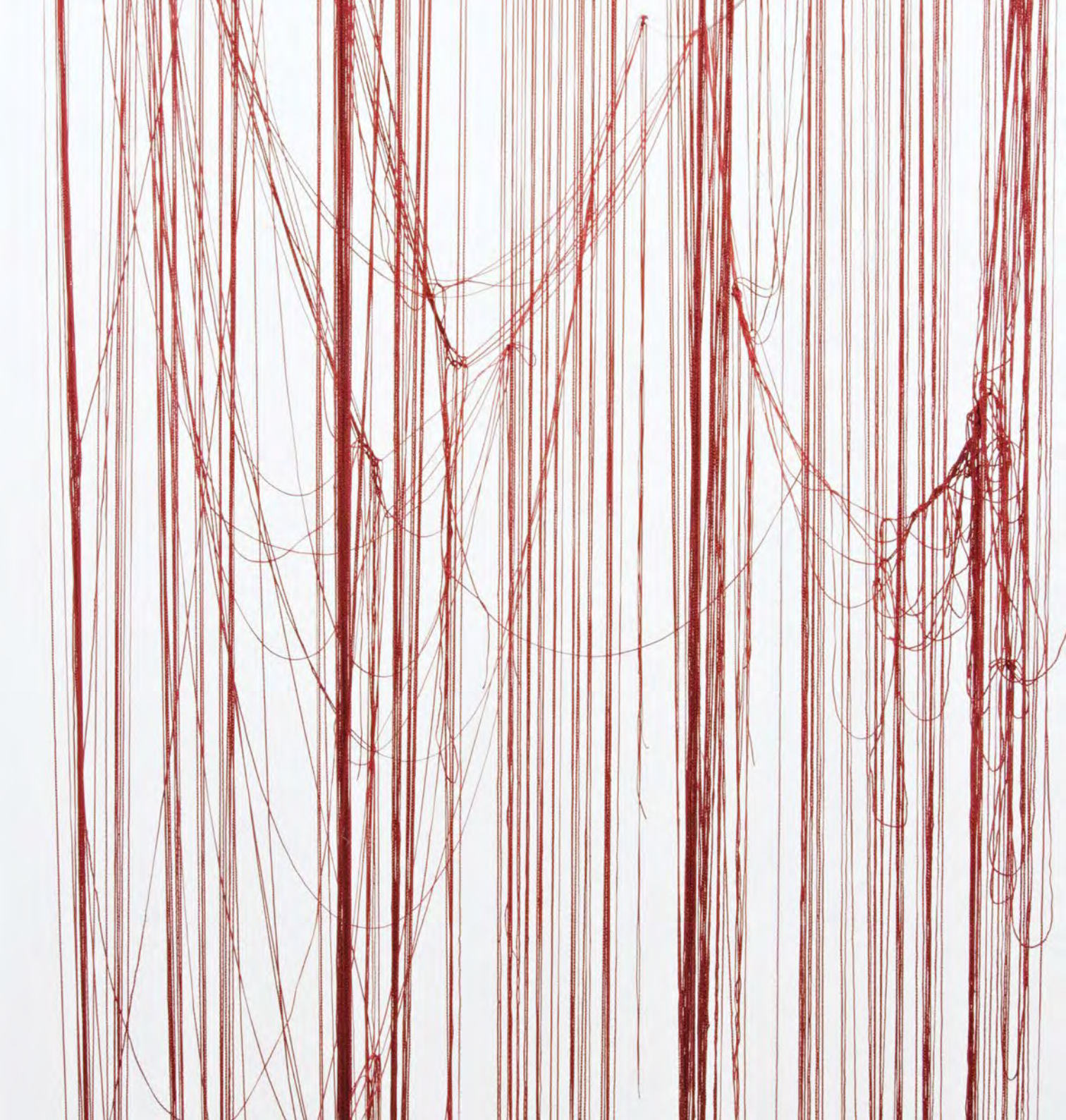
Quilted prayer mats and embroidered element, 366 x 320 cm

IA: I called this exhibition *Have you seen Him?*, meaning ‘Have you seen God?’ There’s a thirteenth century Sufi Master, Mullah Nasiruddin, who was called ‘The Wise Fool’. People thought he was crazy but he was actually wise or enlightened. He would stand in the marketplace and ask people: ‘Have you seen God? I’m looking for God. Is He in the cup? Is He in the water? Is He in the trees? I can’t find Him.’ So this is what I based this exhibition on – the idea of conversations with God and the nature of those messages.



69, 2013

String curtain and Islamic prayer mats, 238 x 135 x 138 cm







Scope, 2013

Wire, cotton thread and beads, 180 x 130 x 100 cm
Installation view and photograph, Stevenson, Cape Town









La, 2013
Steel ring and string curtain, 168 x 59 x 35 cm



I am home, 2013

Round carpet, string curtain, wooden ring, wire, thread and silk roses
Dimensions variable





Far left: *Self-portrait*, 2013
Cotton on tattered prayer mat, fabric, gold plastic frame, 43 x 35 cm

Left: *Melkbankie*, 2013
Cotton on found fabric and found gilt frame, 74 x 64 cm



Eenheid, 2014

Quilted prayer mats, assorted fabrics and embroidery, 162 x 200 cm



IA: The first few moments I couldn't breathe because my father had wrapped it too tight. There were about six layers of cloth over my face and I couldn't breathe and I went into a state of panic. At first I wanted to jump up and it was so loud, so noisy in that space that he couldn't hear me scream "Daddy", but eventually he did. He opened up the layers so that only the top layers were covering my mouth and my nose.

After having been wrapped up in this position for so long, when I came up I really had a feeling of being clear and renewed, emptied out. I definitely experienced that some part of me, something had died – maybe something I used to identify with. I could feel that death of a whole part of myself, it felt like a new beginning. I didn't expect that. I experienced what would happen to my body when I died and I felt as if I had put to rest a certain aspect of my relationship with my father.

JB: What I've picked up on is that your performances are such an experience for you, even more so than what you intend for them to be for an audience, which is a very honest way of doing something.

IA: Yes, exactly. I really got it: the power of performance is to make it real and not scripted and it's not about pretending, it has to be real.



Please remember II, 2013
Performance, Centre for African Studies, Cape Town



Please remember II, 2013
Performance, Centre for African Studies, Cape Town





IA: ... we project onto the world all the time, but people project onto us and at some point those projections also become part of us.



Plate 7 (Neoscope series), 2014
Islamic burial cloth, fabric, thread, 195 x 130 cm









Plate 1 (Neoscope series), 2014
Found fabrics and brass-plated rail, 260 x 345 cm



Plate 9 (Neoscope series), 2014
Old South African flag, fabric, thread, frill, 122 x 150 cm



Plate 8 (Neoscope series), 2014
Found table cloth, fabric, thread, 120 x 118 cm



Plate 6 (Neoscope series), 2014
Found seat cover, fabric, clear thread, 102 x 200 cm



Plate 10 (Neoscope series), 2014
Found fabric, thread, brass-plated rail, 120 x 152 cm









Plate 2.5 (Neoscope series), 2014
Manipulated found cloth, 215 x 145 cm



Plate 3 (Neoscope series), 2014
Mattress fabric, glue, silk leaves, thread, 190 x 155 cm





Plate 2 (Neoscope series), 2014

Found tablecloth, tassels, wire, sponge, beads and artificial flowers,
approx. 160 x 180 cm diameter, dimensions variable



Plate 4 (Neoscope series), 2014
Bead necklaces, wire and cotton thread, approx. 120 x 40 x 40 cm





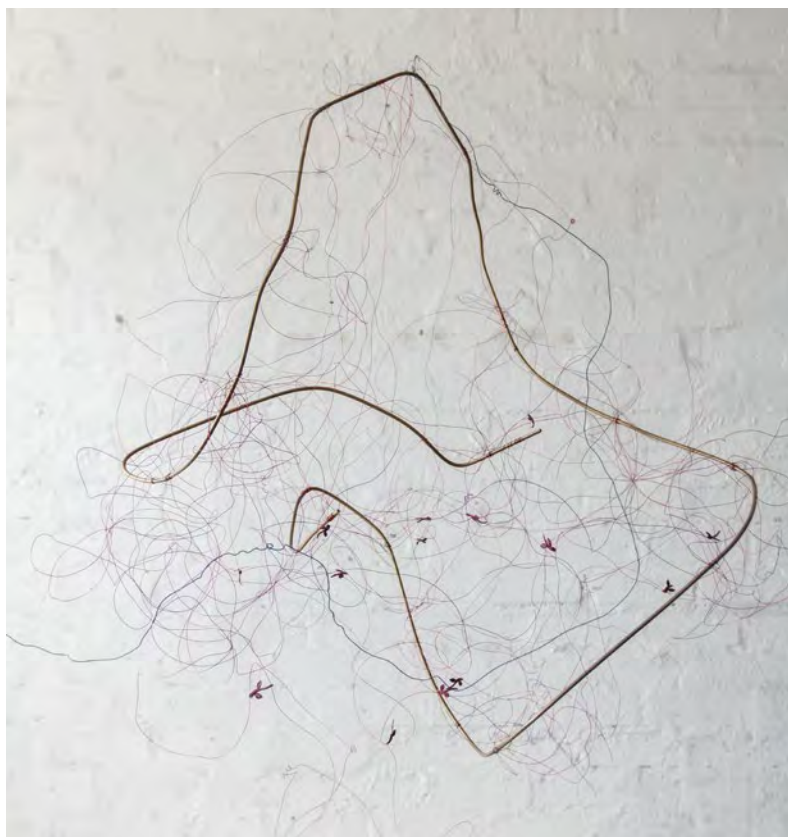


Plate 5 (Neoscope series), 2014
Metal rod, wire and silk leaves, approx. 120 x 70 x 60 cm

Notes on *Parda*

The woven works indicate Adams' conceptual and material development from the *Neoscope series* in terms of a visible shift towards non-figurative representation of his continued inquiry into the core of self-consciousness. The title *Parda* refers to a veil or fine material covering worn by Islamic women, as prescribed by Sharia law. The veil becomes synonymous with ideas around lenses and inherited meaning. Like the lens, the veil conceals and distorts information, creating blind spots and slips, binding and shaping perception.

In *Parda 1*, a loose rendering of an inkblot has been sketchily stitched into a tightly woven canvas; some of the dark threads hang loosely, unraveling towards the bottom of the composition. The linear form reads cartographically, depicting infinite paths, which cross over each other and sprawl across the woven surface. Subtle traces of Adams' process of threading and then unthreading the lower half of the inkblot emerge as small recesses in the tight woven pattern. This evokes a sense of revisiting, rewriting and remapping, which in turn reflects the indefinability and inconclusiveness of selfhood that Adams engages with.



Parda I, 2014

Woven nylon rope and string, 114 x 85 cm



Parda II, 2014

Woven nylon rope and string, 122 x 77 cm



Mukhannath, 2014

Found chair frame and found cloth bunting, 75 x 80 x 60 cm

For *Parida II* and *Parida III*, Adams continued to work collaboratively; similarly to the way he engaged with familial frames of reference in earlier works, in these woven tapestries he gives agency to his long-standing relationships with a group of women he mentored for several years at the Philani Art Centre. As the resident art teacher Adams assisted these unemployed women in using silkscreen, painting and weaving techniques to produce commercial craft work, enabling them to sustain themselves financially. These works were made in collaboration with the women, giving expression to the shared histories and personal narratives that have deeply affected Adams. This unfolds materially through the intricately woven detailing and in turn the performative process of weaving, which resonates as a meditative writing or inscribing of these histories. The presence and influence of these family and community relationships is tightly woven into the multi-faceted philosophical questions Adams asks about looking at, seeing and perceiving the relative self through varying means and modes.

Jennifer Ball
2015





Parda III, 2015
Woven nylon rope and string, 180 x 165 cm



Parda IV, 2015
Woven nylon rope and string, 210 x 165 cm





Self-portrait, 2015

Woven nylon washing line, string-beaded necklaces and string
200 x 150 cm



Surat Al'Ikhlās (front), 2015
Woven nylon washing line and string, 250 x 250 cm
Photograph: Monique Pelsler



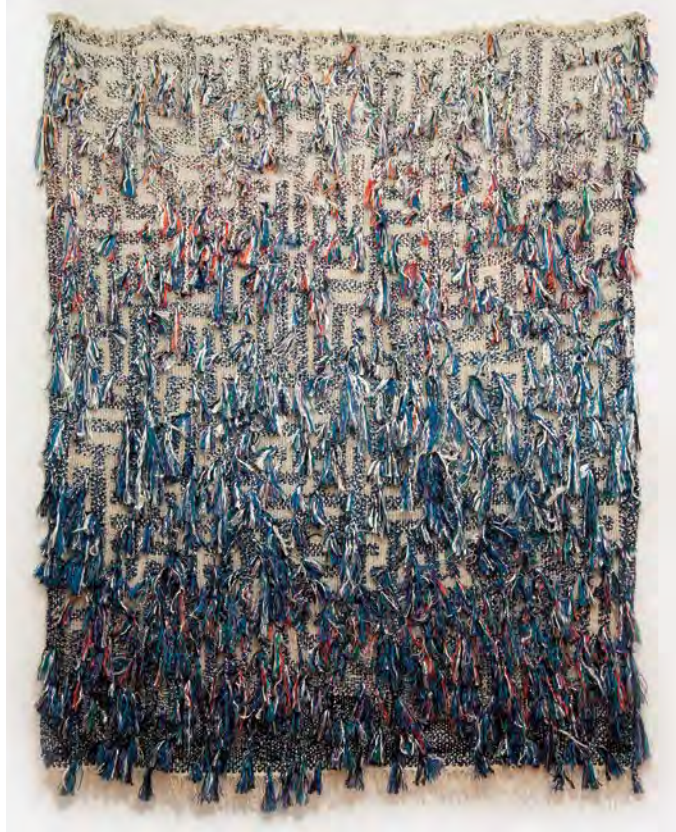
Surat Al'Ikhlās (back), 2015
Woven nylon washing line and string, 250 x 250 cm
Photograph: Monique Pelsler



Ayatul Kursi 1 (front), 2015

Woven nylon washing line, string-beaded necklaces and string, 230 x 180cm

Photograph: Monique Pelsler



Ayatul Kursi 1 (back), 2015
Woven nylon washing line, string-beaded necklaces and string, 230 x 180cm
Photograph: Monique Pelsler



Ayatul Kursi 2 (front), 2015
Woven nylon washing line, string-beaded necklaces and string, 230 x 180cm
Photograph: Monique Pelsers



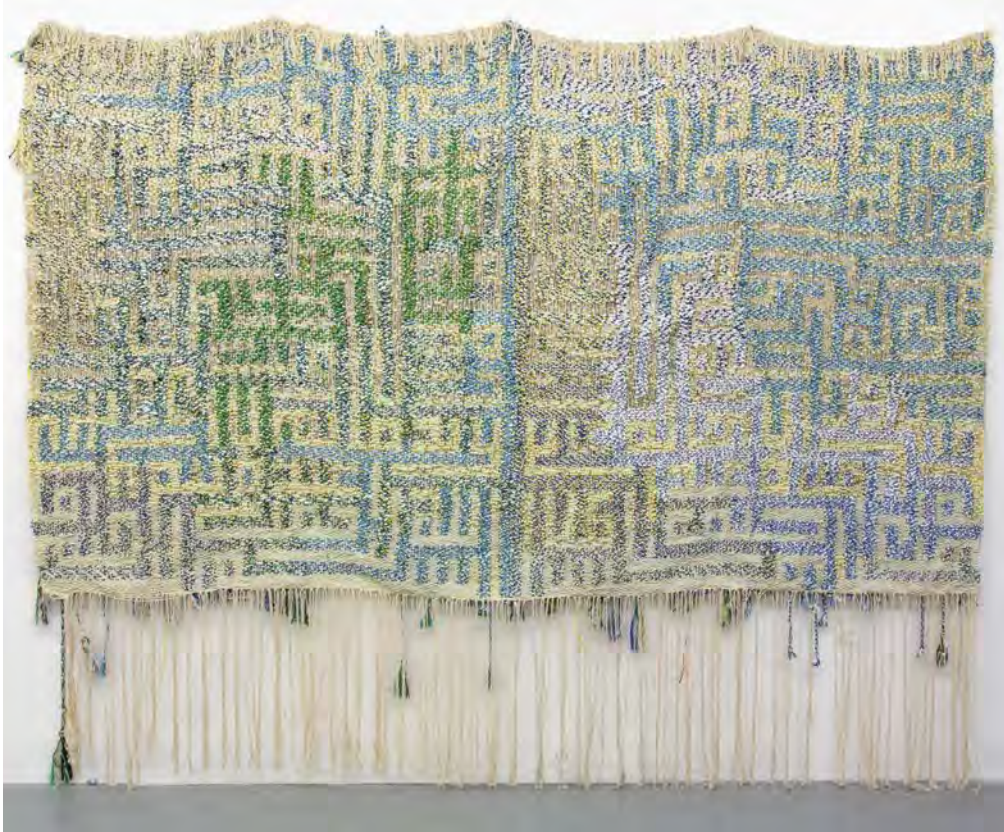
Ayatul Kursi 2 (back), 2015
Woven nylon washing line, string-beaded necklaces and string, 230 x 180cm
Photograph: Monique Pelsler



Bismillah hir-Rahman nir-Rahim (front), 2015
Woven nylon washing line, string-beaded necklaces and string, 150 x 150 cm
Photograph: Monique Pelsier



Bismillah hir-Rahman nir-Rahim (back), 2015
Woven nylon washing line, string-beaded necklaces and string, 150 x 150 cm
Photograph: Monique Pelser



Sūrah al-Kāfirūn III (part one & two) (front), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 180 x 292 cm



Sūrah al-Kāfirūn III (part one & two) (back), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 180 x 292 cm



Sūrah al-Fātihah II (part two) (front), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 248 x 230 cm



Sūrah al-Fātihah II (part two) (back), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 248 x 230 cm



Sūrah al-Fātihah II (part one) (front), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 241 x 230 cm



Sūrah al-Fātihah II (part one) (back), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 241 x 230 cm



Sūrah al-Kāfirūn II (part two) (front), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 180 x 144 cm



Sūrah al-Kāfirūn II (part two) (back), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 180 x 144 cm



Sūrah al-Kāfirūn II (part one) (front), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 180 x 144 cm



Sūrah al-Kāfirūn I (part one) (front), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 180 x 144 cm



Al-Wadūd II (part one) (front), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 220 x 200 cm



Al-Wadûd II (part one) (back), 2016
Woven nylon rope, beads and string, 220 x 200 cm





'SHOULD I JUST KEEP TELLING STORIES?'
The projections of self in the work of Igshaan Adams

Josephine Higgins



Listen (detail), 2012
Heatgun-manipulated found wallpaper, 150 x 115 cm

'SHOULD I JUST KEEP TELLING STORIES?'

The projections of self in the work of Igshaan Adams

Josephine Higgins

In my practice I am concerned with my two environments, both external and internal, and the constant exchange of information between the two; I project onto the world, so too I internalise the world's projections on me ... I find myself playing different roles within this drama, belonging to different orders all at once; I am born Muslim and raised by my Christian maternal grandparents. I am openly homosexual and classified as 'Cape Malay' (of mixed race) in the Apartheid South African system. Navigating my way around the expectations imbedded within the stereotypes of my social roles, I continue to search for new understanding, new ways of seeing my combination of identities.

Adams' engagement with hybrid identity and his supposedly disparate roles has formed the foundation of his work, yet his interest extends beyond personal narrative and histories. Exploring the complexities of being, through an increasingly abstract approach, Adams reflects his '... need to unearth, unmask and unveil the mysteries hidden within the depths of the Self, beyond race, class, religion, sexual orientation, and gender. Who am I, beyond my identity?'"

In his first publicly exhibited work, *Jou ma se poes* (2009), Adams installed a 'typical' Cape Flats sitting room at the AVA gallery, Cape Town. The title of the work is a derogatory, yet occasionally playful, slang term stereotypically used by and associated with so-called 'coloured' culture in Cape Town. Emphasizing the domesticity and specificity of the space further, Adams' grandmother performed, watching re-runs of *7de Laan*. On the walls, Adams

hung representations of himself in various nameless guises, including a young woman averting her gaze, a pensive Muslim youth and a contour portrait, constructed with a tangle of loose stitches. Adams' adoption of 'craft' methods such as hand- and machine-stitching and the use of sewing, fabric collage, quilting and embroidery not only reflects his mother's background as a seamstress and his strong identification with women, but also complicates gender stereotypes. There is agency in the construction of Adams' identity here, as different roles are played and various realities coexist and intermingle. Identity, in Adams' work, is underlined as fluid and unstable, as opposed to monolithic and exclusive.

During his mid-twenties, Adams' spiritualism was renewed when he fell in love with the mysticism of the texts, stories and interpretations of Sufi Islam; a new way of looking at the world, of knowledge and understanding, based on his childhood upbringing in Islam. Described by some as the spiritual essence of Islam, Sufism provides insight into the internal and external realities of daily life. Importantly for Adams, Sufism also presents an unseen, chimerical world of disorder and creation, seemingly beyond language and representation.

In between (2011), an enigmatic installation consisting of rows of individual Islam prayer mats, illustrates the importance and influence of this 'unseen' world in Adams' work. The mats are sewn together and laid out on the floor to face Mecca. Unused and aged, cheap and expensive, the materials are placed side by side, encouraging the merging of multiple contexts. Adams collects these mats along his travels, buying some and borrowing others from friends and family. Having borne witness to the ritual prayers of their former owners – hours of standing, bowing and prostration (*Sujud*) in humility before God – the mats are faded and worn, bearing subtle traces loaded with memories and meaning. The objects become sacred as they provide a contained physical and mental site to communicate with God. Upon entering the installation, the audience was required to remove their shoes; a simple yet surprisingly humbling act. To provide comfort for the viewer, Adams added a layer of thick blankets underneath the mats, and burned frankincense. In many ways, viewers were invited to perform for Adams as he created a space where whoever entered had an opportunity to reflect in silence on their own self and experiences.

The varying colours and patterns of the traditional prayer mats in *In between* are interjected by the sinuous form of a large snake, constructed by inlaying contrasting prayer mats, in a curious mix of camouflage and conspicuity. The snake functions as an antagonistic symbol in the sacred environment of the installation; the disruption signals an inner battle. Openly homosexual since the age of nineteen, the conflict acknowledges Adams' struggle to reconcile Islam with his sexuality, and his lived experiences.

Reminiscent of *In between*, *If that I knew* (2013) represents a prone dog isolated amongst the architectural and patterned elements of a carpet of prayer mats. In Islam, dogs are considered impure animals and are commonly not allowed in people's homes under the Islamic legal tradition. However, there are also narratives in the Quran that highlight the value of the loyal companionship of dogs. These ambivalent narratives subtly reflect Adams' belief that there is room for interpretation in the Quran, reinforced by the rising visibility of individuals and groups calling for a nuanced examination and re-reading of Islamic sources. When discussing this ambiguity, Adams identified a number of narratives and progressive scholars who trouble and complicate the stories and interpretations most often used to condemn homosexuality. This includes the controversial story of the Prophet Lut and his people in Sodom, as well as narratives of *Mukhannathun*, effeminate if not sometimes transgender men who lived outside the patriarchal heteronormative sexual framework, who were accepted in the time of the Prophet. For Adams, 'superimposing the image of the dog on the Holy City is an act of claiming a stake despite rejection and ridicule'. It was only later that Adams would see this work as a self-portrait, where his feelings of segregation and alienation began to shift towards a quiet rebellion.

The combination of prayer mats, representations of self and a purposefully incomplete aesthetic draws links between *If that I knew* and *Self-portrait* (2013a and 2013 b). Adams' tenuous and half-formed self-representations suggest a process of becoming and of transformation. As evidenced in the sensitive and detailed form of the dog – created through stitching, embroidering, erasing and working into the surface – there is a complex balance between construction and destruction, and an emphasis on layering in both medium and

'Should I just keep telling stories?'
The projections of self in the work of Igshaan Adams

references in Adams' processes. Although contested, Islamic tradition forbids images of animate beings in the home, which includes dogs; the images are to be blotted or covered at the very least. These limitations are linked to the fable in which the angel Gabriel breaks conversation with the Prophet Muhammad, explaining 'We angels do not enter a home in which there is a dog or a picture.'

This prohibition in the home is particularly interesting in relation to Adams' continual interest in the domestic: scenes, materials and methods of the family and community as home. This is an aspect furthered by the title of the exhibition, *Have you seen Him?* (2013), of which *If that I knew* formed a part at blank projects in Cape Town. The exhibition title references the fabled sayings and happenings of a 13th century satirical Sufi, Mullah Nasiruddin, who was sometimes wise, sometimes a fool, and sometimes both. The exhibition embodied Nasiruddin's humorous yet philosophical searches for God and understanding in the everyday. For Adams, 'all the works in this body are conversations: between God and myself, moments and experiences. These conversations are often argumentative and conflictual, yet intimate and at times reassuring.' This complex and layered web of references, emotions and conversations is suggested in Adams' abstract, hanging sculptural forms, such as *La* (2013). Constructed from an interweaving of string curtains, steel rings and glue, *La* is fragile and tenuous, and speaks to Adams' attempt to untangle the chaos and confusion of everyday experiences. Mirrored here is an unexpectedness and alternative to convention expressed by the wit/wisdom of Nasrudin.

An emphasis on intuition, interpretation and abstraction brings us to Adams' *Neoscope series* (2014), which centres on the work of Herman Rorschach, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst famed for creating the projective 'inkblot' personality test.¹ The test, based on

¹ The *Neoscope series* (2014) originated from Adams' participation in the annual workshop *Sommerakademie im Zentrum Paul Klee* in Bern. In 2014, the invited curator, Raimundas Malasaskas, presented the theme 'HR'. Whilst referencing 'human relations', the theme centres on the work of Herman Rorschach.

subjective responses to ten official inkblot plates, aims to uncover the subject's cognition and personality, including their personal and interpersonal perceptions. Adams' *Plates 1-10*, each based on specific inkblot images, are re-imagined through self-projection, and transformed into wall-hanging banners and tapestries that combine materials ranging from family-owned curtains and burial cloths to found tablecloths. Adams exhibited this series under the title *Parda*, which refers to a curtain, veil or piece of fabric that obscures and conceals. In Islam, *parda* also refers to the law under which women are required to cover their faces to protect their identity. Paradoxically, the veil is also a symbol of enlightenment, a search for answers, as the Prophet Mohammad's teaching states that there are 70 000 veils of light and dark separating individuals from God.

Parda II (2014) is one of several large-scale wall-based tapestries woven from common nylon rope (made from multi-coloured synthetic waste material) and string included in the exhibition. The series of tapestries resulted from Adams' long-standing relationship with a group of women working at the Philani Centre in Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Although Adams has only begun exploring tapestry as a medium, *Parda II* attests to themes engaged throughout Adams' career thus far, while illustrating his shift away from the representational. Multi-coloured and tightly woven, the piece points to hours of labour and collaboration. Occasional disturbances and disruptions occur in the form of an outpouring of threads, similar in shape to the ends of curtain ties. The tangled merging of colour and various contexts is reminiscent of Adams' prayer mats, as well as the conversations and webs of *Self-portraiture* and pieces such as *La*. There is also a feeling of the incomplete, as the underlying framework of the weaving is left exposed in the bottom half of the work. Again, identity is highlighted as a continuous construction, but in this work the shift is taken further; a move from stitching to weaving is mirrored by a move from personal to shared identity. The tapestries weave together an abstract narrative of personal experiences and histories.

'Should I just keep telling stories?'
The projections of self in the work of Igshaan Adams

The subtleties and nuances of Adams' increasingly layered pieces suggest that the very terms of identity limit all of the many instances that Adams is exploring; instead of a politics of identity, Adams engages being and selfhood. In a move away from a more representational style of working, Adams evades the very stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought, communication and experience.

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Josephine Higgins



CLEANSING VIA THE SENSES AS EYESIGHT FOLLOWS THE SOUL
Igshaan Adams' *Bismillah* performance

Ruth Simbao

Page 116: *Bismillah*, 2014
Performance, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown
Photograph: Rachel Baasch

CLEANSING VIA THE SENSES AS EYESIGHT FOLLOWS THE SOUL

Igshaan Adams' *Bismillah* performance

Ruth Simbao

Our senses are the tool our body uses to negotiate and move through the world; by their very nature, they orchestrate with others and our environment ... Artists who harness more than our eyes and ears encourage us to wake up, to be alert to the world around us, and to interact actively with the objects and creatures around us. It is an invitation to live, to feel, and to be part of a larger community.

Di Benedetto¹

BENEATH

The audience climbs down a narrow flight of steep steps into the dark underbelly of the 1820 Settlers National Monument – the basement of a large building that commemorates the British Settlers' arrival in the Eastern Cape. To reach the basement, viewers pass amply proportioned architectural gestures of tribute and validation, including high ceilings, polished banisters and symbols of British patriotism. The basement steps are hidden behind a yellowwood structure that is designed to look like scaffolding, symbolising the ongoing process of building, in this case explained as 'the notion that the work of the English speaker in South Africa continues'.² The rectangles and diagonals of this wooden construction 'represent the crosses of the British Flag'.³

The indoor Millstone Fountain, which is the 'symbolic heart of the Monument' is surrounded by the words, 'That all might have life, and have it abundantly'.⁴



Bismillah, 2014
Performance, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown
Photograph: Ruth Simbao

Beneath this grand tribute to the British Settlers, to the English language and to the abundance of life, unravels an account of death.

The concealed basement is dim and shadowy. The dust from the unpolished rocks that protrude from the earth hangs thickly in the air. A subtle smell of incense assumes enhanced impact, as sight lags behind smell while eyes slowly grow accustomed to the dark.

Viewers huddle together, hushed. In front of them, in what looks like a cavernous stone grave, lies a body on simple white cloth. The body – that of Igshaan Adams – is about to be prepared for burial; an act considered to be a communal obligation (*fard al-kifayah*) in Muslim legal doctrine.

B-ismi-llāhi r-rahmāni r-rahīmi.

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

BLIND SPOT

The blind spot is ... neither a visible absence (a darkness), nor a constructed absence (a hole papered over by extrapolating from visible objects), but an invisible absence: an absence whose invisibility is itself invisible. This is not the dark grey annoyance that is suffered in actual partial blindness, nor is it the oblivion of the fixed stare, but something different, another kind of blindness, where we believe we see but do not.

James Elkins⁵

Igshaan Adams performed *Bismillah* (2014) as part of the *Blind spot* performance art programme at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, a small town in an area still

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strangely referred to as Frontier Country. *Blind spot* was a series of site-collaborative⁶ performances that considered ways of *not* seeing, drawing from the notion of a blind spot that creates an absence of vision. Just as with *scotoma*, when the brain makes up certain details that are actually not there, in terms of ways of seeing and thinking about the world, ignorance and prejudice create cultural or cognitive biases that rely on farcical information and skewed perspectives. As Elkins emphasises, though, a blind spot goes beyond visible absence – it is *invisible* absence that registers the inability to *recognise* one’s blindness. In terms of metaphors of sight, *Bismillah* enters the spiritual realm, searching in death for the recognition of blindness. In terms of site, performance and place interact intertextually, igniting ideas of blind spots, where ‘spots’ refer to locations too.

In *Bismillah*, Igshaan Adams performs with his father, Amien Adams, who tenderly washes, dries and perfumes his son’s body as if he were dead. In this work, Igshaan moves beyond sight in multiple ways, playing with the relationship between seeing and not seeing, concealing and revealing, and between tangible and intangible worlds. In doing so, he draws on sound, touch, smell and metaphors of taste, engaging not only with the senses of the body, but the senses of sites and communities too.

Explaining his practice, Adams says he navigates between three environments that blur the boundaries between the visible and the invisible: the external world, the internal world and the mythical world: ‘Sufi Islam offers me a framework to explore ... a third “unseen” world. A mythical world of chaos and paradoxes beyond language, superimposed onto an existence of social structures and disciplines’. In much of his work, Adams subtly raises questions about our possible blind spots regarding our physical, emotional and spiritual lives, but revelling in complexity and even contradiction, he refuses to provide simple answers.

Bismillah is not about a didactic impulse; it is about intimate knowledge and experiential growth. It is not simply a performance about codes of Islam, but is a self-reflexive familiarity with death even when death is not literally there. It is about a personal process – a cleansing – and in its palpable power it carries receptive viewers through a process too, one which exceeds their sight and their mental ways of seeing.

THE FAILURE OF SEEING

When the soul is taken, the eyesight follows it.

Qur'an⁷

Bismillah (2014), which evolved from the 2012 performance *Please remember II*, is informed by the artist's experience of losing an aunt who was still alive, but due to a drug addiction was in effect dead to him. A scar on this woman's foot was the only remaining sign of the person he once knew. By sight he recognised what signalled his relative, but this visual reminder failed him as his full experience of her had passed away. Merely *seeing* does not necessarily allow one to *know* in a more intimate sense. In order to see – especially to see clearly – some distance is required. But to touch is to be close. To understand is to connect. In this performance, touch becomes a point of intimate familial knowing as Igshaan's father lovingly washes the body of his son, whereas sight – the sight of a scar that might elicit mental or even emotional recognition – ultimately failed.

In the Muslim process of preparing a body for burial, the eyes of the deceased ought to be closed as soon as possible. Sight accompanies the soul; it is as spiritual as it is physical. Importantly, preparation for burial is usually hidden, and what is seen, felt or smelt by the person performing this duty must remain a secret: 'He who washes a Muslim and conceals what he sees (i.e. bad odors, appearance, and anything loathsome), Allah grants him forgiveness forty times (or for forty major sins)...'.⁸ Generally males take on the responsibility of washing males, and females wash females. The only exception to this rule is in the case of husband and wife, or small children. There is no audience.

Bismillah is an uncomfortable and disconcerting performance to experience. Not only does it bring the audience palpably close to witnessing death, but it also hovers between what is

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allowed and forbidden; what is desired and reviled. While death holds the power to push the living away, duty, respect or the desire to manage the unmanageable coaxes the living to perform this tender ritual.

In certain cultural histories of visualising death, a tension often exists between submitting to the inevitability of death and wanting to cheat it through various forms of representation.

For centuries death masks recorded facial features by casting a mould taken directly from the deceased's face.⁹ In the Victorian era, post-mortem photographers sometimes staged the recently deceased as if they were alive, opening their eyes and propping them up on chairs next to living relatives.¹⁰

This impetus to retain some aspect of presence through representation does not exist in the context of the Islamic burial preparation. What is seen should be hidden. What is visible must be let go, just as the corporeal organs that do the seeing in the physical world – the eyes – must be shut as eyesight follows the soul. In the performance of *Bismillah*, Adams' eyes powerfully reveal both death and life. Making no forced attempt to 'act dead', Adams calmly keeps his eyes open. He blinks when he needs to blink. Like his aunt, he is both dead and alive, but perhaps unlike her, he is simultaneously blind and sighted – consciously so. Deliberately grasping at death he becomes aware of his own blindness.

SOUND

B-ismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi.

As is required in this death ritual, Amien Adams performs this recitation in a quiet, serious voice. No loud mourning is permissible. His low voice and the near-silence of the rest of the twenty-minute performance create a painful experience for viewers. An unspoken code

Ruth Simbao

suggests that they must all keep still, and the occasional shuffle creates a stir. Viewers feel the heaviness of their breath.

There is no background music. No voiceover. Just the occasional, almost inaudible, sound of water; of the towel wiping dry a limb; of a few footsteps as Igshaan's father walks around the body of his son, and of the subdued groans of the building as festival-goers move above the basement oblivious of the ritual of death below. The audience is trapped by the sparseness of sound. There is no leaving this scene, which has become part-mortuary, part-graveside. Unlike an earlier version, *Please remember II*, this performance does not take place in a gallery space. No artworks that would legitimise the desire to walk away surround the performance; there is nothing on which viewers can rest their eyes in the reassurance that what they see is *only* depiction.

Even if viewers close their eyes, they are 'forced' to watch; it's as if they see *via* the tension of the almost inaudible sound.

TOUCH

Nearly everything that the audience hears is touch. Literally.

A wet hand touches a foot. A towel rubs an arm. Cloth makes contact with skin.

At some point it's as if death pushes back at the viewers' eyes, forbidding them to physically see, and they regard the scene before them through the acts of tender touch that almost inevitably race through their minds. Some picture themselves washing their sons, drying their daughters, or perfuming loved ones. They begin to *feel* death.

In this ritual, the deceased body must be handled with respect, with great care and with gentleness. Igshaan's father is attentive. Contained. Dutiful. He washes his son with soap. He rinses. He dries. He turns the body over. He washes. He rinses. He dries. Then, once he has

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Bismillah, 2014
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completed the methodical ritual of cleaning the body he finally relinquishes the intimacy of skin-on-skin touch and shrouds the body with white, modest sheets and a green burial cloth, which is embroidered in gold with the name of Allah. Sometimes in this ritual a parting is made in the shroud near the right side of the face, allowing it to touch the earth directly. It is *makrooh*¹¹ to bury the deceased in a coffin, and the earth *feels* the body as it absorbs the remains.

SMELL

During the washing of the body the orifices of the nostrils, ears and mouth are closed off with cotton wool to prevent water from entering the body. After washing and drying, perfume such as camphor is applied to the forehead, the nose, the palms of the hands, the knees, and the feet. In *Bismillah*, Amien Adams places pieces of cotton wool into Igshaan's nostrils just before he folds the white sheet over his face.

Immediate anxiety is felt in the audience. Drawn so close to the experience of witnessing 'real' death, the slippage between being dead and alive that is observed in Igshaan's wrapped body transfers to the bodies of the viewers. There is a need to breathe, to prolong the smell of perfume that reminds viewers that it is not they who have died. There is a need to keep their orifices open, to keep sensing.

Harnessing more than our eyes and our ears, *Bismillah* 'is an invitation to live'.¹²

As Amien Adams pulls the last sheet over the face of the 'deceased', the tension mounts. He begins to tie a knot above the head. Securing death. Viewers breathe heavily, as if to keep at bay the 'last breath' of the body they see disappearing before them. Their eyes fix on the chest below the shroud. It gently moves up and down in its own determination not to lose concentration, not to panic. The rising-falling chest reassures onlookers that the 'factness' of 'mere' representation does not elude them. This image must not slip away.

Then, inaudible to some, the simple word ‘Daddy’ is unexpectedly heard. Wrestling with the dual urge to simultaneously experience some kind of death and to stay alive, Igshaan is overwhelmed by the perfume trapped beneath the closed sheets and involuntarily whispers. But he stays still, contained in the transitional space between life and death, between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, between the ‘transformed’ and the ‘untransformed’. The psychoanalytic space that a baby experiences *between* mother and child, between ‘not-I’ and ‘I’, is a critical, creative space that gives birth to a transformed human being with an essential sense of self.¹³ In a spiritual sense, this is where Igshaan lingers during *Bismillah*, as ‘not-quite-dead’, ‘not-fully-alive’.

CLEANSING THROUGH TASTE

Every soul will taste death.

Qur’an¹⁴

If *Bismillah* were merely an attempt to perform a representation of death, then the utterance of ‘Daddy’ might be read as a mistake, as a breaking of character that would jolt viewers back into the present-ness of their full aliveness. But the performance is about slippage. About being dead *and* alive. About dying in order to live. It’s about pulling viewers closer to the whisper of death, the smell of death, the touch of death. Rather than interrupt the performance, the utterance seems to pull viewers closer. Some were unaware of the actual father-son relationship until this point; some were gripped by the panic in Igshaan’s voice. Through an orchestration of the senses, the viewers almost taste the closeness of death.

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In contrast to his experience with his aunt in which a visual trigger fails to generate, for him, vivacity, in *Bismillah*, even though ‘dead’ himself, the intense preparation for burial leaves Igshaan feeling remarkably renewed.

Cleansed.

BENEATH

Viewers walk back up the stairs, some shaken, and pass the Millstone Fountain inscription: ‘That all might have life, and have it abundantly’. These words of reassurance, however, are hidden from view. Trapped beneath a temporary stage set up for the festival their supplication for life is muted, and beneath this, below the inscription on the floor, a death took place that these very words were blind to.

Invisible absence.

- 1 Di Benedetto, S. 2007. 'Guiding somatic responses within performative structures: contemporary live art and sensorial perception'. In Banes, S. and Lepecki, A (eds). *The senses in performance*. London: 133-4.
- 2 The Grahamstown Foundation. 2015. Available at: <http://www.foundation.org.za./index.php?pid=23>. (Accessed March 2015.)
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 The Grahamstown Foundation. 2015. Available at: <http://www.foundation.org.za./index.php?pid=25>. (Accessed March 2015.)
- 5 Elkins, J. 1996. *The object stares back: On the nature of seeing*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- 6 I use this term in place of site-specific art to indicate that a performer does not simply respond to an existing site, but that performer and site create meaning together. Significantly, site has agency too.
- 7 'When the *Ruh* (spirit) is taken out, the eyesight follows it'. See Mission Islam: 'The Mysteries of the Soul'. Available at: <http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/mysterysoul.html>. (Accessed January 2015.)
- 8 Aisha, B. 'Funeral Rites and Regulations in Islam'. Available at: <http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/funeral.htm>. (Accessed January 2015.)
- 9 Schuyler, J. 1986. 'Death masks in Quattrocento Florence'. *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 5(4): 1.
- 10 Enoch, N. 2013. 'Post-mortem photography'. *Mail Online*, 29-30 January. Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2270169/Post-mortem-photography-Morbid-gallery-reveals-Victorians-took-photos-DEAD-relatives-posing-couches-beds-coffins.html>. (Accessed February 2013.)
- 11 '*Makrooh* in Arabic means the opposite of liked or loved. In the terminology of *sharee'ah* it means that which the Lawgiver asks us not to do, but not in a definitive manner. It may be said that it means that for which the person who does not do it out of obedience will be rewarded, but the one who does it will not be punished.' Available at: <http://islamqa.info/en/9084>. (Accessed March 2015.)
- 12 Di Benedetto, S.: 134.
- 13 See Winnicott, D.W.W. 1971. *Playing and reality*. London: Tavistock Productions.
- 14 Surat al-'Ankabut: 57

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CURRICULUM VITAE

BIOGRAPHY

1982 Born in Cape Town, South Africa

EDUCATION

2009 Diploma in Fine Art with a Distinction in Mixed Media, Ruth Prowse School of Art

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2016 *Oorskot*, blank projects, Cape Town
2015 *Please Remember, A Tale of a Tub*, Rotterdam
2015 *Parda*, blank projects, Cape Town
2013 *Have you seen Him?*, blank projects, Cape Town
2013 *If that I knew*, Rongwrong, Amsterdam
2011 *In between*, Stevenson, Cape Town
2010 *Vinyl*, AVA Gallery, Cape Town

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2016 *Women's work*, Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town
2016 *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, Stevenson Gallery, Johannesburg
2015 *Sacre du Printemps*, curated by AA Bronson, Grazer Kunstverein, Graz
2015 *Barriers*, Wanås Konst / The Wanås Foundation, Knislinge
2014 *next thing you know*, blank projects, Cape Town

- 2014 *No fixed abode*, The New Church Museum, Cape Town
- 2014 *Bismillah*, performance at the National Arts Festival in collaboration with Amien Adams, the artist's father. Grahamstown, South Africa
- 2014 *Between subject and object*, Michaelis Galleries, Cape Town
- 2013 *Three Abdullahs*, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town
- 2013 *This is the thing*, blank projects, Cape Town
- 2012 *When form becomes attitude*, blank projects, Cape Town
- 2012 *Ingekluer, beyond the borders*, AVA Gallery, Cape Town
- 2012 *A century of self*, The Copy Shop
- 2011 *What we talk about when we talk about love*, Stevenson, Cape Town
- 2011 *Slices of life*, Infecting the City Public Arts Festival in Cape Town CBD
- 2010 *Swallow my pride*, blank projects
- 2010 *Greatest hits 2009*, AVA Gallery

RESIDENCIES

- 2015 A Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam
- 2014 Rhodes University residency and culminating exhibition, *SLIP* with Mbali Khoza at the Alumni Gallery in the Albany Museum, Grahamstown, South Africa
- 2014 Sommerakademie im Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, Switzerland
- 2013 IAAB / Pro Helvetia residency, Basel, Switzerland

