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In this essay, Jessica Hemmings touches upon culture, faith and personal identity in the work of Igshaan Adams

The synthetic rope that South African artist Igshaan Adams uses in his recent tapestry weavings comes from the Cape Town based Southern Rope company and always involves an element of chance. He works with the recycled version which means you are never quite sure if the colours visible on the outside of a spool will be consistent because



Igshaan Adams: Conduit I,
2018, Braided nylon rope,
cotton twine, approx. 86 × 96
cm



Igshaan Adams: Parda I, 2014



Igshaan Adams: Bent, 2018,
Mild steel, wire, rope, cotton
offcuts, twine, beads approx.
247 × 185 cm

various colours are re-twined by the manufacturers to create the new rope. The risk is a tolerable trade-off for Adams who explains that the colourful rope, a staple of his recent woven work, represents childhood memories of washing lines in the Cape Flats where he grew up. Born to Muslim parents and raised by his Christian grandparents in Bonte-heuwel on the Cape Flats – “barren stretches of land south-east of Cape Town’s city bowl where coloured and black communities were forcibly moved to during apartheid”[i] – biographic details are more than incidental to reading Adams’ diverse practice.

The history of Cape Malay culture arriving in the Cape Flats is one of upheaval. During Dutch colonisation of what is present day Indonesia, individuals were removed to yet another region of Dutch colonisation: South Africa. The first Cape Malay are understood to have been enslaved Javanese transported by the Dutch East India Company. Political dissidents and individuals opposed to the Dutch were exiled in South Africa with Cape Town acting as the convenient port for ships travelling between Asia and Europe to regularly stop, resupply and deliver dissidents. From 1654 onwards, these forced migrations brought Islam to South Africa and new vocabulary to the Afrikaans language. The complex frictions between culture, faith and personal identity, specifically Adams’ own homosexuality and the Islamic faith, remain themes throughout his current work informed by his Cape Malay culture. As Ala

Rabiha Alhourani observes, “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 others.[ii]



Igshaan Adams: Stoflike oorskot (2016), In collaboration with Kyle Morland, Woven nylon rope, string and mild steel, approx. 300 × 120 × 240 cm

I find a small team of studio assistants weaving when I visit Adams' studio in Cape Town where the final pieces for his solo exhibition *I am No More*, to be exhibited in early 2019 at Akershus Kunstsenter east of Oslo, are underway. Warp threads are stretched around nails strung from floor to ceiling; fork prongs tap down weft picks of multicoloured rope mixed with plastic and wooden beads. To create some of the earlier sack-like works (*Conduit I-V*, 2018) Adams shows me warps stretched around the perimeter of a cylinder. Weaving, quite literally, done in the round. He was introduced to weaving through teaching community arts workshops soon after graduation from the Ruth Prowse School of Art in Cape Town in 2009, although a keen attention to material predates this exposure to weaving. Justin Davy observes that the textile has been a constant presence in Adams' work, seeing

that “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.”^[iii] Tapestry weaving made its first appearance in this 2015 exhibition *Parda*. (The exhibition title refers to the thin cloth worn by some Muslim women as prescribed by Sharia law.) At the time Adams’ tapestries alluded to other versions of cultural veiling with many incorporating Arabic calligraphy with text from the Quran.

In his most recent work for his Akershus Kunstsenter exhibition, Adams works with the format of the prayer rug, abstracting imagery and combining multicoloured nylon rope, cotton twine, polyester, plastic, wooden and glass beads. Displayed on the wall, the weavings echo an earlier strategy to use worn linoleum flooring collected for large immersive installations. “This earlier period in Adams’ art-making is exemplified by his use of found objects, the marks left behind on their surfaces suggesting the physical space as a manifestation or reflection of our internal spaces.”^[iv] But where flooring captures daily residue, prayer mats hold an inescapable association to faith. Adams has been quoted referring to prayer mats as:

« the silent records of our lives [...] my friend gave me that [prayer mat] he had used for many years, possibly some thirty years. Look, there’s where the threads are worn through – the marks of his knees, where he was praying over and over. You can see where his feet and hands pressed in prayer. There’s where his forehead used to rest, you can make it out, it is worn down. It’s the imprint of his body acting on the prayer mat like marking on a canvas. A recording of the imprint of his body over all those years, acting on its surface, leaving its mark. This imprint might even outlast the person. This fascinates me.^[v] »



Igshaan Adams: Prayer Rug 11 & 12, 2018, from I am No More at Akershus Kunstsenter
Photo — Istvan Virag



Igshaan Adams: Prayer and meditation room, 2019, from I am No More at Akershus Kunstsenter
Photo — Istvan Virag

Adams is far from alone in this fascination with the material traces of ritual and devotion. Korean artist Kim Sooja's display of her well worn yoga mat offers another trace evidence of ritual and physical discipline. But where Sooja connects to her own rituals, Adams position is more fraught. His recent series of woven prayer rugs are clearly meant for the wall rather than floor. These new textiles interwoven with beads are no longer surfaces that could support the prone body. Instead they offer an optical rather than material residue of faith.

Inside the cover of Adams' catalogue to celebrate South Africa's Standard Bank Young Artist 2018 award are instructions to the reader of a far more functional kind:

« This book should be handled in a similar manner to the Qur'an, or other consecrated texts:

If the book is not in use it should be wrapped and placed on the highest level in the house, far from the ground.

The book should not be placed on the floor.[vi] »

A conflict between the authentic and the repurposed is clearly at work – one that Adams seems to have found a route to accepting rather than ignoring. His practice has evolved rapidly, from his studies completed less than a decade ago to receiving the Standard Bank award in 2018. In his biography for the award Adams is described as a “35-year old artist, who was born to Muslim parents and raised by Christian grandparents in a community racially classified as ‘coloured’ under

Apartheid, an observant but liberal Muslim who occupies a precarious place in his religious community because of his homosexuality.”[vii] The biography goes on to celebrate that the “quiet activism of his work speaks to his experiences of racial, religious and sexual liminality”. What Scandinavian readers may find harder to situate is the astounding historical complexity that has led South Africa to the present moment and the leaps Igshaan Adams has taken to trust that beauty can carry these contemporary realities.



Igshaan Adams: *Stoflike oorskot* (2016), In collaboration with Kyle Morland, Woven nylon rope, string and mild steel, approx. 300 × 120 × 240 cm (detail)

Notes:

[i] Justin Davy “Pasting Over the Holes of My Soul: Transformation in the Work of Igshaan Adams”, *Igshaan Adams: When Dust Settles* 2018: 106).

[ii] Ala Rabiha Alhourani “Art of Existence”, *Igshaan Adams: When Dust Settles* (2018: 114).

[iii] Justin Davy “Pasting Over the Holes of My Soul: Transformation in

the Work of Igshaan Adams”, *Igshaan Adams: When Dust Settles* (2018: 108).

[iv] Standard Bank Young Artist 2018 catalogue for Igshaan Adams: *When Dust Settles* at Standard Bank Gallery (26 July to 15 September 2018).

[v] Igshaan Adams quoted by Jade Gibson “Recollections of Conversations at Greatmore Studios”, *Igshaan Adams: When Dust Settles* (2018: 118-19).

[vi] *Igshaan Adams: When Dust Settles* (2018: 2).

[vii] <https://sponsorships.standardb...>

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