Hill Art Foundation

Igshaan Adams: *I've been here all along, I've been waiting*
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"Igshaan Adams: Lightness and Weight"
By Siddhartha Mitter

A warehouse studio in the Woodstock neighborhood of Cape Town is where the tapestries, suspended sculptures, and bejeweled artist books of Igshaan Adams find their form. Here are the materials: Hundreds of spindles of nylon rope and cotton twine in many hues, stacked along the wall as if in some stall deep in a labyrinthine import-export market. Plastic pouches bulging with beads, strung and unstrung, made of wood, glass, plastic, stone, and shell, bringing to mind how Adams likens his compositions to mixing spices. Bundles of fabric, scissored into long, ribbon-like strips, bunched on the floor and edging into the workspace like a multicolored tide.

And here are the people: The team, some twenty strong, is no ordinary roster of assistants. Many are Adams's family. They include Ursula Alexander and Athlene Dias, his aunts, who when I visited the studio recently were carrying on a lively banter as they stitched. ("They're the commenters," Adams quips.) Others are quasi-family, for instance neighbors from Bonteheuwel, the section of the Cape Flats where Adams grew up. He has known Morné Roux, his studio supervisor, since both were five years old. In fact, all the bonds here run deep. Adams met his principal weavers, Phumeza Mgwinteni and Busisa Mahlahla—whom I find perched on a scaffold, operating a room-height loom—some fifteen years ago, when he worked for a nonprofit in the Khayelitsha township. It was there that he himself learned to weave, the better to guide the women there in marketing their craft.

In the studio, I am gripped by a reluctance to take photographs. The inhibition is partly professional—an instinct to protect work in progress and assure the artist that nothing will leak. But something else commands respect here. In addition to all the diligent labor going on, there is the palpable intimacy that flows from these layers of personal connection.

Adams appreciates my deference, but laughs it off. He gets plenty of visitors. With growing art world fame—consecrated by his participation in the 2022 Venice Biennale and 2023 Bienal de São Paulo, among other major international exhibitions—the studio has become its own pilgrimage spot. In fact, he encourages a certain porosity. Twice he has relocated the whole operation into public view, first in 2020 at the A4 Arts Foundation, as part of its Open Production program, and then for seven months in 2022–23 as the atelier artist at the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, both in Cape Town. In turn, he has made the front section of his Woodstock studio into a project space, where he invites Cape Town artists to show work unfettered by gallery or institutional strictures.

His, then, is a social practice. He works best, he says, with the team all around, the radio playing, people chatting and teasing. But he will also stay late alone, or retreat home to sketch a new composition or work out some new material experiment with needle and thread. When by himself, he says, distraction and worry lurk. But Adams knows trouble. He grew up amid it; there was a time when he courted it. His art charts a journey into the light that is as personally searing as it is invested with certainty that any safety he achieves must be shared and collective. In his interpretation, the Sufi teaching is clear: It is by serving people that you serve God.

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Beauty is fundamental. It is a value that Adams seeks in his artworks. He wishes them to be apprehended, whether by new or familiar viewers, as aesthetically beautiful, no matter how freighted they may be by personal history or social context, in concept or in making.

This proceeds quite naturally from Adams's own way of seeing. He is attentive to patterns and actions of daily life, and the manner in which they produce intentional or incidental beauty. His most elegant and seemingly abstract works often find their impulse in a formal observation reached in this way.

Consider, for instance, the inspiration he has found in the *rieldans*, a folk dance of the Nama-Khoi Indigenous community of Northern Cape province, among whom Adams traces his ancestry on his maternal side. The *rieldans* is performed outdoors in arid landscapes, and the clouds of dust the dancers kick up become an integral part of the performance. The kinetic beauty of these clouds becomes a starting prompt for some of Adams's suspended wire sculptures that hover just off the floor—gracious, even ethereal compositions made from different qualities of wire threaded and laden with beads and charms.

But beauty also provides an alternative register by which to index and remember daily experience that is otherwise disparaged or devalued. All the more in a setting like the Cape Flats, where Adams was born in 1982, while the apartheid regime still ruled. Starting in the early 1960s, the government delineated new neighborhoods across this vast expanse, away from the city center, and began populating them with people removed from more desirable areas under the Group Areas Act, a noxious law of spatial segregation whose social effects still linger thirty-four years after its repeal.

Bonteheuwel was a "Coloured" area. This complex term inherited from apartheid designates, on one level, people considered to be mixed race by the regime's racial classifiers, but it also identifies, more or less, a creole community that is as old as Cape Town itself, formed by three centuries of trade and migration, coerced or voluntary—from inland, from Southeast Asia, and from along the Atlantic seaboard. Whereas Adams's maternal grandparents came from the Nama-Khoi Northern Cape, his father is "Malay" and was born in District Six, a central area that was reclassified for whites in 1966, then mostly demolished.

Adams often says that he takes Bonteheuwel with him wherever he goes. The frankness with which he has described dysfunctions in his family during his childhood (and later, for that matter) may reflect the structural understanding that trauma, in these circumstances, operates as much at the social and collective level as it does at that of the domestic and particular. His art finds cues from observation at different scales: the neighborhood, as it articulates into the city; the home, with its comforts and dreads; and the individual—himself—seeking selfhood in this world.

The way in is the trace. If you zoom in on Bonteheuwel on a satellite map, you can locate sections of open land that Adams, like other residents, would have to traverse in order to reach a commuter train station, for example. These were fraught zones, prone to muggings, but could not be avoided. The diagonal paths worn by years of foot traffic are visible from above. These "desire lines," as planners call them, are interpolated in some of Adams's large tapestries.

The trace is domestic as well. Long before he brought weaving into his art, Adams had established a practice of registering the imprint of accumulated domestic life on the worn linoleum of his own family members' modest homes and those of friends and neighbors. In some cases he would arrange to pull up the linoleum and pay for its replacement. The retrieved surfaces became material in installations with an elegiac tone, acknowledging the dignity of private lives thwarted or devalued—often in internalized ways—by segregation.

Adams introduced his own marks by subtraction, etching into the grime with a household cleaning fluid. In other works he has enlarged the patterns from some of these encrusted tiles and reproduced them in mixed-media pieces on painted wood affixed with beads, silver chain, and rope. "Of course, I made the work beautiful," he tells me. These experiments express a kind of search: "I sometimes wonder if, within the dirt, there's an alternative route to find the light."

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Lately, Adams says, he's been feeling a disquiet that registers as a call to pause. It isn't art-world fatigue; that part is familiar and manageable. The demand now is more private and existential, resurfacing a crucial moment of self-confrontation at his career's very start. As a kind of mantra, "I've been here all along, I've been waiting" represents reassurance to the self. With this exhibition, it organizes a particular journey through his art since 2009—less *retrospective* than *introspective*, keyed to recurrence and renewal across the body of work.

In 2009, Adams was finishing his diploma at the Ruth Prowse School of Art, a Cape Town institution with a democratic impulse, founded in 1971 in the mansion home of the late painter for whom it is named. He was studying mixed media—a departure from his initial training as a painter. In some ways, he was on the cusp, but in others, close to the ledge.

He had recently cheated death twice. First he was stabbed in the lungs. Then he nearly drowned after a foolhardy dip, high on drugs and alcohol, at one of Cape Town's dangerous beaches. But he had courted danger for years. He had witnessed violence and addiction inside his family. As for the city, still de facto segregated, the signals it sent to a young Coloured man were the stereotype of criminality and unspoken limits on expectations. ("You might become a shop manager," he said.) Navigating this context as a queer man multiplied the hurdles. To practice art, under these conditions, might be a necessary refuge, but hardly sufficient.

Yet the city had answers, too. They manifested in its undergrowth through dissidents and seekers adept at slipping its boundaries. When he confided in one of his lecturers, Ilhaam Behardien, a Jewish-born woman who converted to Islam, she led him to her spiritual teacher, Ma Rukea, who led a heterodox Sufi community in Kensington on the Cape Flats. Adams made a radical break. He quit alcohol and drugs, ended toxic friendships, for a time went celibate. He would spend four years as Ma Rukea's tenant before moving

on—grounded by her teachings, yet knowing that his self-understanding ultimately overflowed the framework she proposed.

The idiosyncratic but sincere querying of Islam that percolates in Adams's art stems from childhood roots. He grew up Muslim—including while living with his Christian grandparents, who respected the faith—but his practice was riven by doubt, skeptical of the contradictions that he noticed between people's public observance and their private behavior. Time with Ma Rukea provided spiritual clarity. It also yielded cues for art making. One is the symbol of the rose, whose thorns afford protection but also pain, while its petals evoke the mental veils that, in Sufi thought, hold us back from enlightenment. Roses recur intermittently in Adams's drawings, sketches, and tapestries, like a summons. *I am with you*, the new work that anchors this exhibition, confirms its symbolic force in the artist's self-understanding.

"I've been here all along, I've been waiting"—the message, Adams tells me, is one that he received in a kind of trance after Ma Rukea challenged him to confront what blocked him. The messenger, of course, was himself. The moment, he believes, likely saved his life and certainly unlocked his practice. How the message ends—*I love you*—is clear but held unsaid.

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In 2009, Adams made a series of small self-portraits with a sewing machine, stitching onto sections of old household fabrics like felted blankets. He used a blind technique, trusting his hands to work the machine. One of these pieces features in this exhibition—a rare reprise of his graduation show at Ruth Prowse, where they first appeared. In that show, Adams presented a re-creation of his grandmother's living room, with the appropriate furniture and decor but adding these and several other self-portraits, framed at different places in the installation. The self-portraits are tender and a little wild. Sections of blue, red, orange, and white thread delineate his head and upper torso,

incompletely. Dense in places, elsewhere they fray, tangle, and loosen, surrendering parts of his face to negative space.

The installation had a performative dimension: His grandmother took part, seated on the sofa, crocheting while she watched episodes of a popular Afrikaans soap opera. Adams titled the whole tableau *Jou Ma Se Poes*—an all-purpose vulgarity ("your mother's pussy") much employed in the Cape Coloured vernacular across genders and ages. In the Cape Town context, to present an ordinary Cape Flats home, in effect, as art was an unmistakable work of dignity and defiance. The truculent title gestured to quotidian language but leveled a sharp barb at the city's hierarchies. For Adams's grandmother, who had retired from the courts and prison system (the regime missed few opportunities to pit communities against one another), the performance afforded a different way, liberated from political stigma or social stereotype, to hold space, to exert creative agency and be seen.

But Adams, too, was shuffling the perspective at the domestic level, the self-portraits asserting his own sense of identity in lieu of the ways that others might perceive him. He would perform again with relatives thereafter. In the most intense instance, presented in 2012–13, he lay inert under a shroud while his father washed his body in the manner required for Islamic burial rites. Another time, Adams and his brother washed each other's feet. One can read these pieces as power moves—the artist recasting relationships according to his conceptual logic—though it's just as remarkable that his relatives were game. He describes the works more as necessary healing—clearing grievance and regret so that all can instead look forward.

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Woodstock is a survivor. While nearby District Six was emptied and bulldozed, Woodstock slipped through thanks to inertias and delays. Whites lived up the hill; Coloureds near the port and the railway. Today, gentrification threatens instead. But nothing is settled. The streets near Adams's studio are a high-low jumble of fancy shops

and dingy warehouses, import-export businesses, phone repair joints, art spaces, Congolese restaurants, rows of tidy cottages.

Adams can't solve Cape Town. But he has slipped its determinative social machinery and alchemized instead his own impossible city. From a lexicon of humble, domestic materials he is composing a sublime alternative cartography, the trace of a city as it might be. In the process he beckons toward ways of making that might not only dignify labor, but heal.

It is democratic and speculative work that gets heavy at times. Laced into the sense of spiritual duty is a lurking survivor's guilt. But Adams remembers: He's been here all along. And in the glimmer of beads, the shimmer of wire, everything is reaching toward the light.