

Uncovering Hidden Truths



Igshaan Adams, *Al-Hayy*, 2023. Cotton twine; polypropylene rope; cotton braid; glass, wood, plastic, bone, shell, and semi-precious beads; memory wire, polyester fabric strips; mohair, 79 ½ × 57 ½ × 1 inches (201.9 × 146.1 × 2.5 cm). © Igshaan Adams, courtesy the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche.

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Igshaan Adams' *Al-Hayy* (2023) is a large-scale woven tapestry composed of natural materials including beads, shells, wire, and polypropylene rope that create an immersive visual experience. From a viewer's perspective, the rose first appears delicate yet controlled. With tightly sewn beads and other materials, the rose is crafted to showcase an almost perfect picture. However, when seen up close, the rose reveals unique patterns and clusters of the same materials at different parts of the artwork, hinting at Adams' intentional use of different materials to create this piece. Similar to the contradictions within Adams' identity and cultural history, *Al-Hayy* uses contrasting textures that bring the artwork to life, emphasizing the spiritual symbolism, memory, labour, and history that are embedded within his art.

At first glance, the viewer is drawn to a muted color palette consisting of dusky pink, purple, and beige materials that highlight the calm nature of the piece. However, this calm is eventually interrupted by the dense clusters of beads, shells, and wire. When observed closer, the sharp, definite lines give the rose more structure, uncovering its petals – much like how Adams' exploration of *Sufism*¹ gave him a sense of spiritual peace. The culmination of these patterns created by Adams eventually makes a map of what seems to be his own life in South Africa. His use of different types of materials brings the artwork to life, illuminating the labour and history that is embedded within his art. The natural materials often seen in Adams' tapestries, like in *Al-Hayy*, add a touch of humanity, as though giving them life. The long strands of yarn hanging from the bottom of the rose illustrate the release of the struggles Adams faced growing up in apartheid South Africa. Encountering the large piece of art as a whole conveys the sense that the tapestry is not simply an image, but an environment, itself. Its size lets the viewer physically navigate through the various lines across the rose, creating a pathway that seems to be woven onto the artwork itself and further emphasizing how the contrast from the white background makes the rose appear bigger than its size. The scale of *Al-Hayy* therefore plays a critical role: due to its large size, the viewer does not simply stand before it, but rather, they enter into it. The different angles, such as the peripheral view of the rose, allow the viewer to experience the tapestry differently, similarly to how much of Adams' work often

¹**Sufism** is a “mystical Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God,” Britannica, October 28, 2025.

refers to social and geographical significance, highlighting the sense of movement and desire across different spaces.²

Igshaan Adams, born in 1983 in Bonteheuwel in the Cape Flats of South Africa, is renowned for his intricate textiles and heavy style of weaving tapestries. Growing up in an apartheid South Africa, Adams experienced many obstacles as a gay, Muslim man who was often criticized for his “unmasculine” appearance (Art Institute Chicago). In a 2022 interview with ICA Boston, Adams expresses how he used to be often picked on or publicly called out for his feminine appearance, which deeply scarred his mental health.³ Because of this, Adams often showcases his struggles of growing up in an apartheid land through a mix of heavy beading and complex structures in his art. This piece, named after one of the 99 Arabic names of Allah (God in Islam) signifies the “self-sustaining” or ever-living being of God.⁴ For Adams, naming this rose *Al-Hayy* demonstrates his ever-lasting struggles of growing up in an apartheid land and being involved in his Sufi journey.

Moreover, the process of making his artwork demonstrates Adams emphasis on communal labor. Ellen Ramsey explains that the collective communal involvement of friends, family, and community members echoes a sense of home and lineage in Adams' tapestries.⁵ The strenuous labor requires many people to complete Adams' pieces, and the fact that Adams uses his own people to craft these pieces tells us how he's constantly tying his artwork to his historical and cultural background. The involvement of community members and relatives makes his artwork more intimate and personal. Additionally, *Al-Hayy* is a piece that resonates with Adams' continuous interest in mapping domestic and geographical features. His practice often correlates to his use of “desire lines.” From linoleum floors, metal wires, and heavy beads, Adams uses these materials to illustrate a deep cultural significance in his artwork.

² Art Institute Chicago, “Igshaan Adams: Desire Lines,” Art Institute Chicago, February 23, 2022, https://www.artic.edu/press/press-releases/309/igshaan-adams-desire-lines?utm_source.

³ ICA/ Boston, “Igshaan Adams: On Softness and Desire Lines in Lynloop,” YouTube video, March 29, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHVdz4b5bnA>.

⁴ Amal Al-Sibai, “Asma’ Al-Husna – 3: Al-Hayy and Al-Qayyum,” <https://www.aljumuah.com/asma-al-husna-3-al-hayy-and-al-qayyum/>.

⁵ Ellen Ramsey, “In the Galleries: Igshan Adams,” June 12, 2022, <https://www.ellenramseytapestry.art/blog/in-the-galleries-igshan-adams?>

Initially when I first looked at Igshaan Adams' *Al-Hayy*, I felt at peace. The large shiny rose caught my eye as I admired the ombre hues that flowed throughout the piece. As I walked towards the tapestry, I noticed an infinite number of beads, small wires, shells and many more hidden colors that crafted the rose. I also noticed the beige yarn that hung down the rose, thinking that it dragged away the beauty of the rose. However, as I continued to look at every little detail on the rose, I realized how the vertical yarns hanging down symbolized freedom and peace.

In conclusion, *Al-Hayy* is not simply a rose that was created by using many different objects, but it is a piece of art that signifies the growth, sacrifice, and memory in Igshaan Adams' life. He binds his cultural and historical background through the complex use of materials that create a controlled yet carefree environment throughout the rose. Like the contradictions within Adams' identity and cultural history, *Al-Hayy* uses contrasting textures that brings the artwork to life, emphasizing the spiritual symbolism, memory, labour and history that is embedded within his art.

Works Cited

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