

The Rose: Mapping the Self



Igshaan Adams, *The certainty of being a rose (i)*, 2025.

Cotton twine; polyester and polypropylene braided rope; cotton fabric; wood, glass, stone, and plastic beads, and tiger tail wire. 94 ¾ × 52 × 1 inches (240.7 × 132.1 × 2.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Mario Todeschini

Alexander Hernandez
Hill Art Foundation
December 16, 2025

Upon entering Igshaan Adams's exhibition *I've Been Here All Along, I've Been Waiting* at the Hill Art Foundation, one is greeted by the striking image of the rose. The layout of the exhibition itself creates a garden of roses, with Adams' *The certainty of being a rose (i)* displayed adjacent to *I Am With You* and *Rahama (Grace)*. The installation is composed of various materials, including cotton twine, polyester, wood, glass, stone, plastic beads, and tiger tail wire, diverging from the more traditional art mediums of paint and graphite. In the artwork, Adams uses weaving to transform the contradictions of his upbringing into a piece that appears seamless from afar yet fragmented up close, inviting viewers to embrace complexity as an essential part of identity.

Raised in South Africa during the last decade of the apartheid regime, Adams draws deeply from his community and upbringing. Instead of relying on a conventional roster of assistants, Adams' family and childhood friends work in his studio, with his aunts working on the weaving for his collection.¹ He explains that he works best in “chatty” environments, where people are laughing and conversing.² Adams recognizes the importance of weaving his community together in his creative process, very much like the weaving of threads in his pieces, because his community was not always united.

Growing up in Bonteheuwel—a township created by the Group Areas Act to segregate mixed communities—Adams was subjected to living in a violent, divided community, resulting in unsafe areas prone to muggings. As such, pedestrians found a way to avoid these areas by

¹ Siddhartha Mitter, "Igshaan Adams: Lightness and Weight," in *Igshaan Adams: I've been here all along, I've been waiting* (New York: Hill Art Foundation, 2025), 1.

² Ibid.

using informal shortcuts, a contradiction to urban planning.³ Adams imitates these lines in his works, showcasing his ability to transform traumatic childhood memories into beautiful works of art, created from community efforts. For Adams, Bonteheuwel's "desire lines" symbolize the ability to carve one's own path despite oppression, reflecting how he maps his sense of self in *The certainty of being a rose (i)*.

At first glance, the light blue rose appears smoothly before our eyes: light blue petals, white highlights, and leaves and stems that transition between light and dark greens. Despite its perfect appearance from afar, the rose's details reveal a different story up close, illustrating intricacies and imperfections through an array of beads in shades of pink, blue, yellow, and green. The beads come in a variety of sizes, creating a rough texture upon close inspection. In doing so, Adams shifts viewers from a state of graceful wholeness to one of detailed discomfort.

The rose's complex weaving and rich details dominate the visual weight, causing the eye to move inward and outward, contrasted by the simple white tassels below which offer the viewer a place to rest. Reminiscent of the French impressionistic technique pointillism, in which an image is created through either points or smaller abstractions, Adams crafts a piece that engages the viewer with both a sense of completeness and fragmentation. Ultimately, it is important to take a step back to understand the entirety of the rose while also stepping forward to understand its hidden meanings.

Adam's choice of materials is also intentional. By primarily using beads and thread, Adams invites viewers to question both outer appearances and the hidden truth within. The rose motif, introduced by his Sufi master Ma Rukea during his formative struggle with faith, signifies

³ Ibid., 4.

that the rose's overall shape remains a perfect face despite the complexity of its details.⁴ Like a rose, Adams may have appeared to be in a perfect, whole state, but inside, he was deeply impacted by the legacy of the apartheid regime. For Adams, his faith in Sufism and Christianity may have been the only source of comfort he had, resembling the way the dangling white tassels provide the only resting space for viewers in his work.

Weaving is essential to Adams' artistic process, functioning not only as a medium but also as a philosophy of metamorphosis and self-determination. Before this series, he was fascinated by Islamic prayer rugs due to his belief they revealed the action of worship through human imprints.⁵ In unraveling Islamic prayer rugs and weaving installations from them, he believed that “everybody has to make their own Islam in a way because we would focus and attract things that are most meaningful to [us].”⁶ This is very similar to his inspiration behind desire lines, both in the sense of human imprints and the concept of individuals creating their own spaces.

Growing up as a gay mixed-race man during Apartheid, when miscegenation was a crime, Adams faced constant persecution, even within religious spaces. To find solace and self-acceptance, he transformed religious concepts, such as the Islamic prayer rugs, to create works like *The certainty of being a rose (i)*. In this context, the rose symbolizes Adams, whose life has encompassed both hardship and community, aligning with the Islamic representation of the soul as a multifaceted entity composed of many attributes, much like the rose's petals.⁷

⁴ “Igshaan Adams: I’ve been here all along, I’ve been waiting” Hill Art Foundation.

<https://hillartfoundation.org/art/exhibitions/view/igshaan-adams-at-the-hill-art-foundation/>

⁵ Igshaan Adams, “About the Rose: Igshaan Adams and Hendrik Folkerts in Conversation,” interview by Hendrik Folkerts, The Art Institute of Chicago. July 19, 2022.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Anne Baring, “Rosa Mystica: a symbolic quest from the West and the East,” Anima Mundi School, December 13, 2020. <https://www.animamundischool.org/voices-of-the-well-blog/symbol-of-the-rose-by-anne-baring>.

Ultimately, *The Certainty of being a rose (i)* is not just a mere installation; it is an engaging experience of both beauty and imperfection. Throughout the piece, Adams employs a pointillistic technique to create the seamless appearance of a rose. Yet, up close, the imperfections in the uneven beads and threading become clear. Drawing from his experiences in apartheid South Africa and the comfort he found in Islamic prayer rugs, Adams transforms his fragmented identity into this spectacular work of art. Instead of solely viewing identity as a fixed or “certain” concept from afar, he invites audiences to take a step forward, seeing contradictions and complexities as part of identity, where sexuality and religion meet. Adams envisions a world in which we create spaces that accept our whole selves.

Works Cited

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