

Threads of Memory



Igshaan Adams, *Onder Die Voorkamer Lig* (Under The Living Room Lights), 2022. Wooden, plastic, stone, bone, glass, and metal beads, mixed braid and polyester rope, metal link chain, wire, and cotton twine. 93 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 113 inches (238 \times 287 cm) Photo: Kyle Morland

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Onder Die Voorkamer Lig (2022), by South African artist Igshaan Adams, is a large textile work, resembling a domestic rug. Through intricate layering and mixing different materials, such as beads, rope, chain, and twine, Adams reimagines the domestic use of a rug into a personal and cultural site of memory, showcasing where order and chaos, and tradition and transformation, intersect. Adams' use of textiles explores the concept of belonging through personal and cultural identity and history.

Onder Die Voorkamer Lig is a large work that immediately grabs the viewer's attention due to its scale, detail, color, and aesthetic. From a distance, the colors blend and create abstract forms. Up close, however, you can see tiny beads, ropes, and gold chains woven together to create intricate patterns. There are contrasting colors and tones with shimmery silver and gold metallics. Glass, stone, and plastic beads are woven with thick ropes and thin, delicate chains, creating a surface that is textured and visually complex. Subtle shifts in neutral colors and soft textures blend and contrast with dark, beaded clusters to disrupt the monochrome groupings of color and pattern. Rather than lying flat on the ground, like a typical rug, this piece is displayed on the wall, which invites the audience to examine the work at eye level, allowing viewers to see the piece through a new lens, as a creation, instead of a functional piece. The placement of the textile prompts spectators to reconsider the work beyond what it appears to be.

Igshaan Adams was born in 1982 in Cape Town, South Africa, during the last decade of apartheid, a pivotal period marked by racial segregation.¹ Growing up in a multi-faith household with a Muslim father and Christian mother, and identifying as queer, Adams' childhood was marked by constant hardship. The conflict that he faced growing up would later shape the themes present in his artwork. His work draws on his craft, faith, memory, and cultural influences from his upbringing in a mixed-race Muslim community. In his early twenties, he encountered Sufism

¹ "Igshaan Adams." Institute of Contemporary Art. <https://www.icaboston.org/exhibitions/igshaan-adams/>.

through a mentor named Ma Rukea. These teachings, which taught Adams about introspection, symbolic death, and transformation, became crucial to his worldview. Adams describes Sufism as “an internal focus,” looking inward to find peace and self-discovery, amid the chaos of his upbringing.² His work reflects a spiritual and communal lens; much of his work is created collaboratively with friends and family.³

A central theme in *Onder Die Voorkamer Lig* is the idea that domestic spaces serve as archives of lived experiences, rather than purely functional environments. The work is based on a piece of linoleum flooring with visible wear taken from the house of a friend in his community.⁴ Through this representation, the rug is treated as a symbolic archive of memory, instead of a functional object. This work suggests that visible marks, discoloration, and deterioration are not accidental but serve as evidence of daily movement, presence, and the passing of time. This supports the central idea that the artwork takes and repositions an ordinary domestic object as a record of human experience embedded within its dwelling.

Looking beyond Adams' reference to linoleum flooring, *Onder Die Voorkamer Lig* further develops his exploration of memory and identity. The surface of this piece has geometric patterns that are disrupted by beads and breaks in pattern, and includes contrasting materials, like metal chains and soft cotton twine. These interruptions and contrasts create visual weight that suggests something moving across the surface, further imitating the movement of bodies in confined spaces. The disorder and disruption in the patterns demonstrate Adams' interest in the intersection of tradition with personal identity, as he uses elements that connect to his lived experience. This reinforces the idea that cultural identity is fluid and can continuously be

² “Igshaan Adams: Desire Lines | the Art Institute of Chicago.” The Art Institute of Chicago. 2022. <https://www.artic.edu/exhibitions/9626/igshaan-adams-desire-lines>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ David Behringer, “Surprising Materials and Literal Pathways: The Tapestries of Igshaan Adams,” Design Milk, June 29, 2021. <https://design-milk.com/surprising-materials-and-literal-pathways-the-tapestries-of-igshaan-adams/?scrllybrkr=d8163582>.

reshaped. Adams states, “For a long time, I’ve been thinking about domestic space as an external space where I can investigate my internal world—my home and the people who contributed to my development. I knew something went wrong. I needed to be healed from the chaos I experienced as a child.”⁵ Together, the materials and composition reflect this healing, using fragmentation and pattern to visualize memory and identity.

I think *Onder Die Voorkamer Lig* is intriguing because it takes an ordinary, and often overlooked, part of domestic life and makes it something that displays deep personal and cultural meaning. I appreciate the way Adams invites his audience to reconsider their daily environment and the way he amplifies the small and mundane details of our daily lives by using linoleum flooring as inspiration. I respect the choice to focus on humble and familiar elements – I think it is a deliberate and effective decision. In doing so, Adams challenges the traditional hierarchies of what is considered “important” art. Visually, I find the piece very aesthetically pleasing and enjoy the composition. At first glance, I was unsure of the meaning behind this piece. I assumed that there was some story being told about light fleeting, or a disruption of pattern and order.

Onder Die Voorkamer Lig transforms a domestic item into physical records of identity and memory. Through the layering of different materials and the connection to the mapping of worn domestic surfaces, Adams turns the ordinary into a site of reflection. His collaborative and community-based studio process further embeds the work with collective histories. As a reflection of his background, the tension between order and disorder in his work mirrors the complexity of his life experience and traditional practices, and multiple religious and cultural inheritances. This piece is a reflection, and a place where everyday life, emotions, and historical landscapes are explored. Ultimately, Adams reminds his audience that beneath the everyday surfaces we take for granted lie the stories that shape us.

⁵ Tarini Malik, “Igshaan Adams on Mapping Desire Lines,” Ocula, March 22, 2022, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/igshaan-adams/>.

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