

Inkblots and their indices: rethreading perception in the work of Igshaan Adams¹

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ABSTRACT

Igshaan Adams is a young artist from Cape Town, working in multimedia and performance. In his practice, Adams brings ways of seeing and also ways of being into consideration through meditations on objects, dreams, Sufism, family relationships and the changeability of selfhood through perception of these phenomena.

This paper engages with Adams' affinity with objects, their agency and biography, and considers how his sensitive interventions alter their materiality, shifting the ways in which they can be seen. The ways in which Adams' family relationships play out in the processes of making his sculptural works, and also in his performances, are then elucidated and related to his ongoing processes of self-enquiry.

Furthermore, I consider Adams' latest body of work, a critical enquiry into the variable meanings of Rorschach inkblots. Adams reflects on the grounds for inkblot testing and, in so doing, tests and measures the nature of looking, perceiving and projecting.

Keywords: biographical objects; performance art; Rorschach; inkblots; Igshaan Adams.

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Preface

The trajectory of Igshaan Adams' artistic practice to date indicates his long-standing fascination with the nature of experience, especially in relation to his sense of self. Adams' early work foregrounds his interest in issues of identity, giving expression

to a process of balancing the multiple, sometimes conflicting, aspects of selfhood he experiences. His graduate exhibition,² for example, featured furniture from his family home in Bonteheuwel, a former “coloured” township in Cape Town, along with several self-portraits, one of which demonstrates Adams looking at his own reflection, restlessly searching for harmony in an ostensibly dissonant picture. The making of this work was an especially important development for Adams in terms of locating himself as a gay, Muslim, South African artist and of finding peace with being all of these things at once.

2. Adams graduated from the Ruth Prowse School of Art, Cape Town, in 2009. His graduate exhibition *Jou ma se Poes* highlighted the difficulties and discomfort he experienced in balancing the outwardly conflicting aspects of his identity. *Jou ma se Poes* was made up of lounge furniture and a number of framed portraits for which the artist made use of fine embroidery. In the portraits, Adams represents himself as well as his aunt, who made a particularly significant impact in the trajectory of his early life.

3. RAW – EC took place during 2014 and was organised and led by Ruth Simbao at Rhodes University. The project brought together artists, who participated in residencies in Grahamstown, and emerging writers based in the Eastern Cape who were assigned to writing mentors. The objective was to bring stimulating and cutting edge work to the Eastern Cape, and to provide young writers with the opportunity to work closely with artists for the duration of their residency. I was paired with Adams, and was fortunate to maintain contact with him during the year and closely follow his thought processes and works in progress for the duration of his residency. RAW – EC was funded by the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund (NLDTF) and was linked to the Visual and Performing Arts of Africa (VIPAA) research team run by Professor Simbao at Rhodes University.

4. Hermann Rorschach was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst. He was best known for developing a projective testing method using a series of ten inkblots. The Rorschach inkblot test is used as a tool in psycho-diagnostics, to record and analyse a subject's projections on to seemingly ambiguous images. The fundamental grounding for this test is that there is a relationship between perception and personality. In principle, a subject's results or projections, through formulaic interpretation by a psychoanalyst, should yield scientific readings of the subject's personality (Klopfer & Davidson 1962:14).

In the last few years, Adams has progressively expanded the scope of his work, opening it up to more nuanced and layered interpretation. In this paper, which is based predominantly on a series of interviews between the artist and myself during our mutual participation in Residencies for Artists and Writers – Eastern Cape (RAW – EC) 2014,³ I cover several interconnected aspects of Adams' practice, offering insight into how the artist's thought processes manifest in his finished works. I deal with the materiality of Adams' work, as well as the processes involved in its making. I explore the idea of object biographies, the agency of objects, and the tensions that form as different objects are brought into contact with one another and are repositioned in a new context. I elucidate the position of Adams' dream world, and the way that he relates and weaves this together with anecdotes stemming from Sufi philosophy. I consider the influence of Adams' family relationships and how this aspect of the artist's life plays out in his work, in terms of both process and inception. Lastly, I refer to Adam's latest body of work, which engages with the Rorschach inkblots,⁴ and relate the developments Adams has made in grappling with issues around looking, seeing and perceiving, to the fundamental principles of phenomenology. I suggest that the work Adams has made using Rorschach as reference has propelled his practice towards increasingly latitudinal philosophical musings on the nature of human experience.

Biographical objects, agency and dreams

I don't really exist apart from the objects I see – what a strange thought (Elkins 1996:44).

Elkins' reflection on objects forms the basis for my discussion around the found objects present in Adams' work. Adams makes frequent use of found, or rather *carefully selected*, objects. The process of selection, repurposing and repositioning has significance in its own right. Adams allows for both conscious and subconscious connections to these objects to inform this process. Domestic objects, ranging

from furniture to curtains, prayer rugs, old fabrics and even vinyl flooring, have featured in Adams' work, and in each case his intervention shifts and activates the objects, transforming the position from which we see and engage with them.

Objects in all their various forms have come to make up our world; people and the things that they value are, as Hoskins (1998:2) observes, 'so complexly intertwined that they cannot be disentangled'. Appadurai (1986:3) suggests that it is social factors that shape our object world and accordingly objects become active in shaping human existence. The objects we tend to surround ourselves with are steeped in our own preferences, needs, desires and memories, giving them very personal and sentimental significance. Accordingly, objects accumulate meaning, biography and agency in relation to the way that they are perceived (Hoskins 2006:74). The treatment of objects by Adams in his work corresponds with these ideas; everything, from his process of sourcing and selecting objects to the means or process by which he transforms them into finished artworks, becomes active in the objects' potential to communicate. Adams is very conscious of the way in which he sees and perceives himself and, in turn, the ways in which he is perceived by various individuals and groups of people in his life. This consciousness is translated into his work through the inclusion of signs and symbols that are distinctly meaningful to him, and simultaneously open themselves up to an array of associative connections.

Elkins (1996:2) describes sight as something that is rooted in our experiences and interests, making each individual's visual perception different from that of others. Gell (1998:95) speaks about the possibilities of understanding this exchange between objects and people through what he describes as, 'looking at how people act through objects by distributing parts of their personhood into things'. What Gell suggests here is that we project ourselves, our personalities, our experiences and our beliefs on to everything around us, and that this projection of self shapes the way that we perceive. Gell's statement parallels Adams' increasingly phenomenological⁵ approach of balancing his identity and its respective articulation in his practice.

Adams is evidently drawn especially to objects that bear witness to human experiences and that also act as cultural, spiritual and personal signifiers. He shows great sensitivity to the way that objects become traces of the people who have used, owned and cherished them. Everything from the places in which they were found to the person to whom they belong, or once belonged, becomes significant. In an early body of work titled *Vinyl*, Adams explored these ideas by sourcing sections of used vinyl flooring from members of his community in Bonteheuwel. He offered his old neighbours and friends brand new flooring in exchange for their

5. Phenomenology is a field, or rather method of study, that looks to structures of conscious experience to explain reality (Butler 1988:520) Phenomenology explains subjective perspective as something that constructs knowledge and in turn produces 'blind spots' in knowledge (Sim-bao 2014).

old, worn and stained floors, a gesture that encapsulates the sensitivity Adams has shown through every process of making this work. The square-metre blocks of floor vinyl have been transformed by the artist, who has drawn, painted, or attached collage elements to their surfaces, enabling through this intervention the activation of both nostalgia and memory in accordance with his experience of these objects and the respective places and people they came from.

Adams (2014) remembers the multiple layers of vinyl flooring in many of the homes in Bonteheuwel. Residents would typically replace their floors without proper removal and installation, instead placing the new floor on top of the old one. Adams found interest in the sizeable stack he found in the home of his Xhosa neighbour, known by the community as Boeta Joe, where the layers of flooring represented enduring witnesses of the lived experience of the old man. *Boeta Joe se voordeur tapyt* (Figure 1) is a piece of flooring Adams selected and recovered from Joe's home. The vinyl's floor patterning and aesthetic character is typical of the fashions and tastes of Cape Town's informal settlements. In *Hennie se kamer tapyt* (Figure 2), Adams has deliberately left intact the embedded dirt, discolouring, stains, holes, scuffs and burns that mark the surface with residual traces of human presence and years of domestic life. The floor is imbued with the narrative of Hennie's wife's enduring devotion as she cared for him through his battle with illness. Adams has repurposed this especially discoloured, worn and encrusted layer of flooring and engaged with this richly biographical object through drawing and painting floral patterns. These additions and inversions signal a mindful and personal projection of memory and association on to this object, where the object's biographical resonance is recognised and simultaneously altered through Adams' artistic dialogue.

What is activated in these works is consistent with what Janet Hoskins (1998:2) suggests with regard to biographical objects: 'Ordinary household possessions might be given extraordinary significance by becoming entangled in the events of a person's life and used as a vehicle for a sense of selfhood', she explains. By using objects that have significance in the lives of the people around him, Adams gives expression to the role that these people have had in his experience, and in forming his understanding of himself. Adams brings these objects and the unique anecdotes, histories and people attached to them into proximity, creating new objects with richly complex and layered biographies. The woven and stitched collages are both *many* and *one* simultaneously; in this way they articulate the position of their maker.



FIGURE N^o 1



Igshaan Adams, *Boeta Joe se voordeur tapyt*, 2010. Manipulated found floor vinyl, 110 × 113 cm.

6. In the Islamic faith, homosexuality is not tolerated. There are various verses in the Quran that forbid all lusts on men in preference to women. For Adams, an observant yet liberal Muslim, this is something that is very difficult to make peace with; his artistic practice allows him the necessary space to balance these apparently unharmonious aspects of who he is.

In the work that followed *Vinyl*, Adams' selection of objects is closely associated with his religious beliefs, and the precarious position he occupies as a practising Muslim who is openly gay.⁶ These objects and Adams' shifting interventions signify the unending journey he undertakes in a back-and-forth dialogue with God. In a series of works titled *Have you seen Him*, Adams gives expression to his conversations with God, his questions, and the frustrations he experiences. In an installation titled 69 (Figure 3), Adams has placed two Islamic prayer rugs beside one another on the floor. A mass of red threads hangs from the ceiling, their unravelled ends resting on the outer edge of the left rug. In making this work, Adams imagined himself kneeling in prayer next to God. Most of the dangling threads hang in uniform straight lines, yet others have been loosely and spontaneously



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Igshaan Adams, *Hennie se kamer tapyt*, 2010. Manipulated found floor vinyl, 107 × 135 cm.

tangled, disrupting the order and calm. Adams (2014) comments on the motif of visual tangling, which appeared in many of these works: 'In many ways the work is just me trying to untangle the chaos around me, trying to find some place in between, it's a constant process of trying to untangle and make sense of things'.

The Islamic symbolism Adams includes in these works does not necessarily seek to scrutinise the Muslim faith, but rather to serve as a medium of enquiry whereby Adams' concerns around perception of selfhood are lucidly and openly addressed in relation to religion. In turn, this also allows Adams the scope to connect his spirituality, his philosophical awareness, and his dream world. Through the inclusion of symbols, images and objects that feature in his dreams, his subconscious and conscious become intertwined through the works' materiality. Adams often refers to Sufi philosophy, a more mystical branch within Islam, relating the fundamental principles of this school of thought to dreams and anecdotal memories. Adams describes a dream he recalls, which led him to making a large-scale floor installation titled *In Between* (Figure 4). His reflections are as follows:



FIGURE **Nº 3**



Igshaan Adams, 69, 2013. String curtain, steel ring, prayer carpets, dowel rod, 238 x 135 x 138 cm.



FIGURE **N° 4**



Igshaan Adams, *In Between*, 2011. Islamic prayer mats, cotton thread, incense, blankets, canvas, 520 × 314 cm.

I had a dream on the 27th night of Ramadan, Lay'Latul'Quas'r (the Night of Power, when God sent the Holy Quran to mankind as a guide for judgement between right and wrong). In the dream the snake emerges from a pool of water. I am accompanied by a child and together we engage with the snake in fearless fascination. Taking her four young into her mouth, the snake exits the pool and slithers away. In this reoccurring dream the child grows up into a teenage boy and helps me to combat the snake.

The artwork Adams made in reply to this dream renders the figure of the snake in a collaged carpet made of prayer rugs. Adams depicts the snake in motion, distinguishing its figure with brightly coloured cut-out pieces of a number of prayer rugs. The rugs Adams has used were mostly sourced from friends, community members and Chinese shops. Accordingly, they vary from intricately detailed and luxurious fabrics to very cheaply-made and generically-patterned materials. Adams refers to one of the rugs, which is particularly worn, and bears visible traces of decades of use. He confirms that this prayer rug had belonged to a friend who had used it for over thirty years. The work is complicated by the proximity of the biographical presences of these objects to the religious and historical associations

with the snake. Although the snake is a symbol of deceit and treachery in Islam as well as in Christianity, in Sufism it is sometimes thought of as a symbol of knowledge, and of the transformational energy needed to reach spiritual enlightenment. This work demonstrates the multiple layers of interest and influence that inform Adams' processes; in consideration of this, it is important to note that Adams made this work with extensive help from his mother. Familial frames of reference play a distinguishing role in Adams' sense of self, and consequently the means by which he explores this through his practice.

Family matters

The assistance Adams received from his mother in making *In Between* (Figure 4) involved a collaborative effort to stitch together the fragments of prayer rug to form the large floor installation. The act of stitching in itself is a form of inscribing meaning, bringing two distinct elements together and forming a binding seam line. The objects or materials stitched together in the final artwork are read as one entity, made up of various parts. This sensitive and carefully-considered method is consistent with the complex and layered reflections Adams seeks to impart to his viewer. The process of stitching is also significant in terms of the relationship between Adams and his mother; Adams remembers going to work with his mother, who then worked as a machinist, on the weekends, and looks back to memories of her working on numerous textiles as the source for his affinity with material and fabric. As Adams' practice has developed, he has sought out assistance, involvement and incentive from the family members who have been most influential in his life, in order to make particular works. Adams frequently speaks about his mother, father, aunt and siblings, and also about his Christian grandparents who helped to raise him and his siblings during a difficult time for the whole family. In terms of what Adams is doing in his practice, with regard to his explorations of his familial frame of reference, the work is strikingly sincere considering this aspect of family support and collaboration.

Adams notes that including his family members in his artistic processes has allowed much better communication and understanding in their relationships. The performance Adams did with his father, for example, not only brought about a greater understanding between them, but also had a cathartic effect in terms of Adams' feelings towards his aunt. The idea for the performance, which is deeply connected to death and renewal, stems from his relationship with his aunt. Adams had for a long time associated his aunt with death, because he felt that she was dead to him. Adams (2014) explains the circumstances of their relationship as follows:

I have an aunt who is dead, well in a way. She is a drug addict. I used to look up to her, but I have realised that she is dead to me now. The person I really knew and loved is gone, there is nothing left of her. I think she is beyond the point of recovery. She has this scar on her foot and that is the only thing that reminds me of the person I used to know, because she was always barefoot. I forget sometimes that this is the same person; the scar is the one recognisable thing about her. In thinking about this, I realised that there are so many different forms of mourning people, in spite of them still being alive.

This prompted Adams to undertake what many viewers have described as a truly difficult and emotional performance to watch, *Bismillah* (Figure 5) meaning “In God’s name”, where his father prepares his body for burial as if he were dead. In the performance, Adams lies naked on a raised platform, with a towel covering his body. His father proceeds to recite verses from the Quran, and blesses Adams’ body before he cleanses it with warm, scented water. The ritual typically involves a strict sequence of turning the body, and cleansing each part of the body in a controlled order. Following the methodical washing and drying of the body, Adams’ father proceeds to wrap Adams in three layers of white linen, and reveals the traditional Islamic death cloth.

The considerations of death and mourning that came out of Adams’ memory of his aunt are what led him to think critically about the Muslim burial ritual and the secrecy around it. In this ritual, only one member of the family is allowed to cleanse and bless the body before enclosing it in layers of white linen and finally the traditional death cloth. Adams understands the secrecy surrounding the ritual to be a means of protecting the dignity of the dead, by not allowing any secret blemishes or abnormalities to be revealed. The memory of his aunt’s scar initially provoked this consideration, though as the idea for the performance developed, and after Adams and his father had gone through with it, the effect that the performance had on both him and his father became especially significant. Adams has described a feeling of renewal after being released from the layers of linen; a spiritual and psychological reawakening and rebirth that has engaged a phenomenological understanding of his existence. Adams states:

After coming out of that I really felt cleared and renewed, emptied out. I definitely had an experience where some part of me had died. Maybe the person I used to identify with had died. I felt the death of a part of myself. It felt amazing, like a new beginning.

Adams upholds that the performance had a transformative effect on him, and in turn brought him closure in terms of the troubled relationship he has with his father. Since his last performance of *Bismillah* (Figure 5) at the Grahamstown National



FIGURE N° 5



Igshaan Adams, *Bismillah*, 2014. Performed with Amien Adams. Igshaan Adams' body is washed and wrapped by his father in the traditional Islamic process of preparing the dead for burial. *Bismillah* was part of the performance art programme titled *Blind Spot*, which was curated by Ruth Simbao for the National Arts Festival. 1820 Settlers National Monument basement, Grahamstown. Photograph by Rachel Baasch.

7. The Philani Maternal, Child Health and Nutrition Project is an organisation that provides aid to poverty-stricken and often destitute mothers in the informal settlements outside Cape Town. As part of its service, Philani provides income-generating opportunities to the mothers under its care. The art centre that forms part of the income-generation programme offers skills training, where mothers are taught silk-screening, painting, weaving, beading and other crafts. Adams' role at the art centre involved teaching the mothers various craft techniques and guiding their creative output.

Arts Festival 2014, it would appear that Adams has increasingly looked to his family relationships, and the relative collaborative processes that occur in the making of select works, as a means by which to untangle the complexities of his experience and find peace amidst them. The familial frames of reference that have formed the basis for Adams' outward experiences, and the way this has unfolded in his sculptural and performative work, speaks to the intricacies that constitute the phenomenon of perception. In Adams' most recent body of work, an increasingly nuanced and layered consideration of this phenomenon is expressed through a series of thoughtful interventions with the curious images of Hermann Rorschach's inkblot test. For one of these works, Adams relied on collaborative assistance from his mother, while a series of later works were made in collaboration with a group of Xhosa women Adams has mentored at the Philani⁷ art centre for several years. I discuss these works in relation to concerns around seeing, projecting and perceiving and, in turn, the way that relationships and experiences activate this perception.

Inkblots and their indices

Adams first came into contact with Hermann Rorschach's curious inkblot series after being invited to participate in the Sommerakademie 2014 at Zentrum Paul Klee in Berne.⁸ The philosophically mindful considerations of projection and perception that Adams has articulated in previous works made him an ideal candidate for the selected theme for the 2014 programme, Hermann Rorschach. The guest curator Riamundas Malašauskas (2014) opens up a discussion on his selected theme in the following extract:

'I want to read people', Hermann Rorschach proclaimed almost 100 years ago. As son of a Swiss art teacher, he drew and painted wondrously, albeit became a father of psycho diagnostics, a method of psychiatry based on perception. The marriage of art and science in Rorschach's case turned out to be a pretty extraordinary affair resulting in multiple schools, controversies, methods, career and life choices deriving from the same source: ten inkblot drawings that Hermann Rorschach left without a fully developed theory behind it. What was meant to unravel a character of a person subsequently turned into a character of its own, a synonym of ambivalence and undefinability. Not every artwork fares this far. The entire set of inkblots rests at Hermann Rorschach archive in Berne now.

During his stay in Berne, Adams had access to the Hermann Rorschach archives, as well as scope to discuss at length with his contemporaries the fundamental and historical grounds for the inkblot testing method. Malašauskas' statement certainly opens up questions around what constitutes personality, and whether or not this is something that can be read. The research Adams undertook in Berne set in motion a significant shift in his artistic practice. The work that followed Adams' experience in Berne renders a much more nuanced and layered understanding of perception and the activity of looking. Adams carefully considers ideas around seeing, and not seeing, slippages and blind spots, and, in turn, how this relates to human experience.

Adams' RAW – EC residency in Grahamstown became a space for these ideas to unfold through free and playful experimentation where found fabrics, textiles and materials were brought together in collaged representations of the ten distinguished inkblots, each finished work's title correlating the inkblot depicted. In *Plate 7* (Figure 6), Adams has recreated Card 7 by stitching colourful cut outs of material into a traditional Islamic death cloth. Adams explains that he was first drawn to this particular inkblot by the discernible presence of animal figures, which led him to consider the relationship between animals and death, as denoted in Sufism. Adams explains this as follows:

8. The Zentrum Paul Klee is a private institution based in Berne, Switzerland. Every year the academy invites artists, art critics, curators and writers to participate in a sharing of ideas around a predetermined theme. The theme for 2014, selected by guest curator Riamundas Malašauskas, was HR (Hermann Rorschach).



FIGURE N° 6



Igshaan Adams, *Plate 7*, from the series *Neoscope*, 2014. Islamic burial cloth, fabric, thread; 195 x 130 cm.

In Sufism or Islam, they speak of the animal farm. Apparently all of our negative qualities have this animal archetype attached to them. If you allow these negative qualities to take over you, then you will start showing animalistic behaviours and signs. If you haven't dealt with those things in your lifetime, you will have to face them after your death in the spirit world. I think this is what hell is supposed to be, there is a purification process, having to deal with each of these animals – jealousy, greed and so on.

By connecting Rorschach's inkblots to his own experience and his identification with Sufi philosophy, Adams opens up the ground for unlimited enquiry and investigation, demonstrating what Elkins (1996:39) has described as being able to see not 'only one image at a time'; when the active observer looks at an object, it 'multiplies and changes under his very eyes'. Most interpretive utilisation of the Rorschach inkblots draws conclusions based on what a subject sees; however, what must be taken into consideration here is that sight is inseparable from blindness, as the eye is directed by the mind. Adams' *Plate 5* (Figure 7) renders a neatly dissected image of the lower half of the inkblot, shaped in red fabric and stitched into a found settee cover. Theorists of Rorschach interpretation have recorded a regular response to the inkblot series; subjects will respond to a particular section of the blot, and struggle to recognise anything in the remaining marks. Adams has aptly represented the significance of this pattern by means of the half blot, which speaks to Elkins' (1996:13) description of the 'twin blindnesses':

We are blind to certain things and blind to our blindness. Those two blindnesses are necessary for ordinary seeing: we need to be continuously partially blind in order to see. In the end, blindnesses are the constant companions of seeing and even the very condition of seeing itself.

The dreamy, ambiguous inkblots merge effectively with the curious and layered imagery of Adams' practice, making for very compelling works which are able to complicate and enrich dialogues around seeing and not seeing. Adams' interventions demonstrate the disputable restrictions of the empirical testing of a subject's personality that psycho-diagnostic theory proposes. His responses to the inkblots are revealing but also transformative, and reflect a distinct progression towards more nuanced considerations of selfhood. The intuitive, shifting force of Adams' inner world might be paralleled to the act of looking, which as Elkins (1996:11) has noted, is 'entangled in the passions ... and soaked in affect'. Looking is, indeed, an act, and by engaging in this act we become subject to a transformative shifting within ourselves.

As demonstrated by the *Neoscope*⁹ series, Adams' process of collecting objects and materials and, in turn, the interventions that occur during the making of the work have thematically matured. Adams' use of found objects has shifted towards the use of found materials and fabrics, which have manifested as hanging textiles. The process of making these works in terms of the familial collaboration, which reflects a familial frame of reference, not only subtly echoes the phenomenological perceptions of self, but also ensues transcendence towards a more latitudinal contemplation of perception. Traces such as coffee rings, colourful stains and unravelling metallic tassels on the collaged swatches of fabric that make up *Plate 1* (Figure 8) indicate the biographical resonance of each layer, brought together in this intricate bricolage of associations. Delicate lace from a dress Adams' grandmother once wore has been carefully stitched into the collage of materials. Adams found the dress amongst his grandmother's possessions, and remembers her sewing it by hand using material his aunt's husband had bought at the knitwear factory where the couple both worked for some years. A series of colourful threads form a seam which brings the dress material into proximity with an old swatch of fabric Adams sourced from his home. The colourful stains mark this fabric with memories from a time when Adams gave art therapy workshops to Muslim women in his community. Using templates of Islamic calligraphy, Adams guided the women in painting their names using symbols and signs attributed to God. Below this swatch, a synthetic silk settee cover, dense with embroidered detail, forms part of the background for the sprawling inkblot that is rendered in this tapestry. Adams had picked this out in a second-hand store, having been drawn by its likeness to the popular decorative flourishes he remembers from the homes in Bonteheuwel.

Through looking inwards to outline the multiple and varied aspects of influence that inform his outward perspective, Adams opens up a dialogue around the complexities of perception. In *Plate 2.5* (Figure 9), Adams has shifted his approach in terms of portraying the form of the inkblot. By means of pulling threads to create areas of tension, which translate as hollows and paths in the surface of the material, Adams renders the outline of the ambiguous blot. The eye is challenged by this subtle and ostensibly illegible representation, as it searches out something recognisable. This is particularly compelling in relation to the fickle nature of vision, which, as Elkins suggests (1996: 201), 'mingles seeing with not seeing, so that [it] can become less a way of gathering information than avoiding it'. The activity of looking is distorted by numerous lenses, which are 'thoroughly cultured' by individual experience (Tafarodi 2008:27). In turn, the act of looking constructs and develops our perception. As Elkins (1996:35) notes, 'Looking is something I do but also something that happens to me'. Adams looks into the complexities of this phenomenon by way of his inkblot interventions, which have progressively shifted towards abstraction.

9. The *Neoscope* works were first exhibited in Grahamstown in a joint exhibition with Mbali Koza, titled *Slip*, in October 2014, and were again exhibited at Blank Projects Cape Town for Adams' latest solo show, *Parda*, in January 2015.



FIGURE **Nº 7**



Igshaan Adams, *Plate 5*, 2014. Fabric, thread.



FIGURE **Nº 8**



Igshaan Adams, *Plate 1*, from the series *Neoscope*, 2014. Found fabrics, brass-plated rail, 260 x 345 cm.



FIGURE **N° 9**



Igshaan Adams, *Plate 2.5*, from the series *Neoscope*, 2014. Manipulated found cloth, 215 x 145 cm.



FIGURE **Nº 10**



Igshaan Adams, *Parda I*, 2014. Woven nylon rope and string, 114 x 85 cm.

The woven works indicate Adams' conceptual and material development from the *Neoscope* series in terms of a visible shift towards nonfigurative representation of his continued inquiry into the core of self-consciousness. The title *Parda* refers to a veil, or fine material covering, worn by Islamic women, as prescribed by Sharia¹⁰ law. The veil becomes synonymous with ideas around lenses and inherited meaning. Like the lens, the veil conceals and distorts information, creating blind spots and slips, binding and shaping perception.

10. Sharia Law is a term for the framework of Islamic laws regulating the public and private behaviour of people living in a legal system founded on Islam.

In *Parda I* (Figure 10), a loose rendering of an inkblot has been sketchily stitched into a tightly-woven canvas; some of the dark threads hang loosely, unravelling towards the bottom of the composition. The linear form reads cartographically,



FIGURE **Nº 11**



Igshaan Adams, *Parada II*, 2015. Woven nylon rope and string, 210 x 165 cm.

depicting infinite paths which cross over each other and sprawl across the fibrous surface. Subtle traces of Adams' process of threading and then unthreading the lower half of the inkblot emerge as small recesses in the tightly-woven pattern. This evokes a sense of revisiting, rewriting and remapping, which, in turn, reflects the indefinability and inconclusiveness of selfhood with which Adams engages. For *Parada II* (Figure 11) and *Parada III* (Figure 12), Adams has continued to work collaboratively; similarly to the way he has engaged with familial frames of reference in earlier works, in these woven tapestries, he gives agency to his long-standing

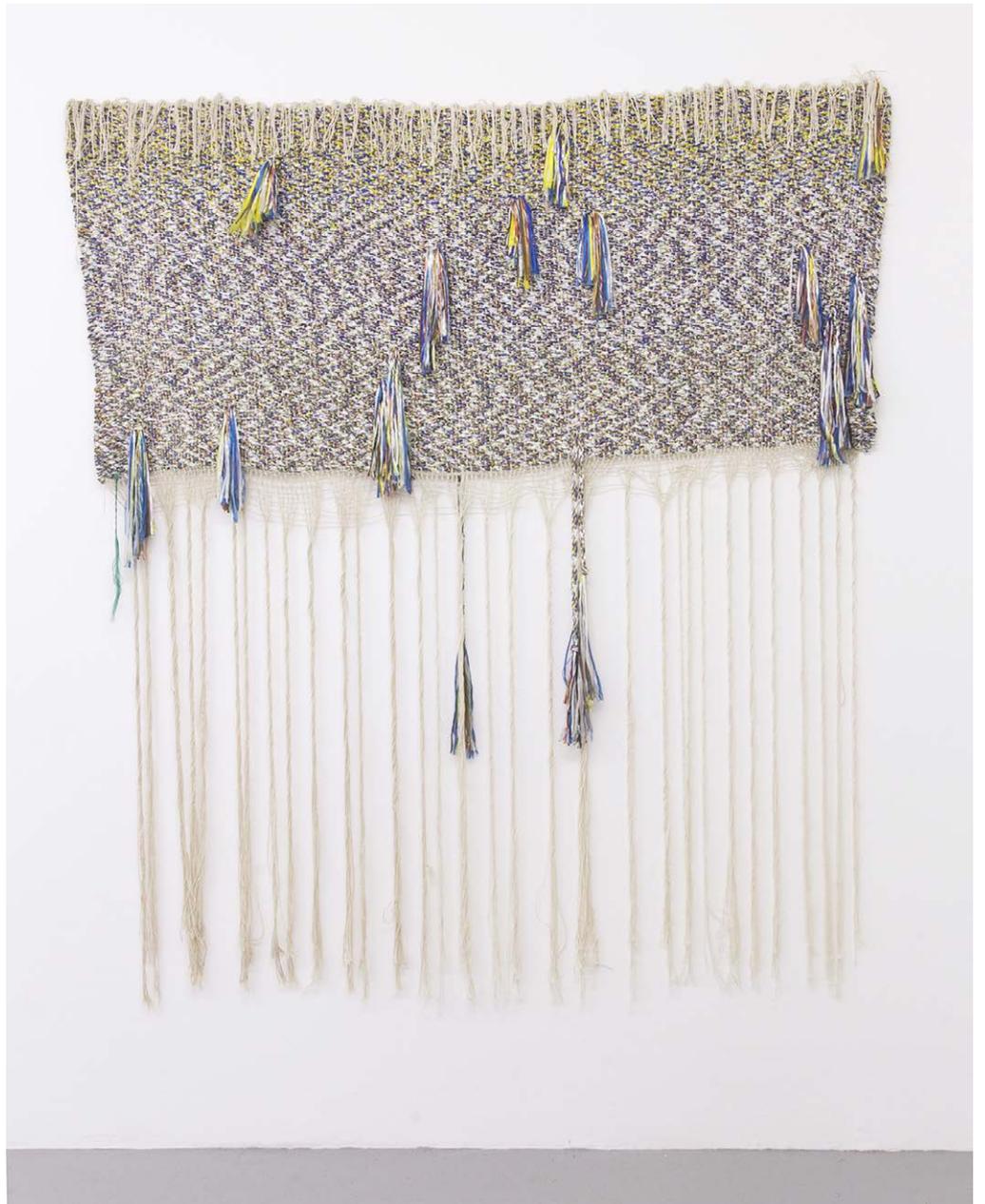


FIGURE **Nº 12**



Igshaan Adams, *Parda III*, 2015. Woven nylon rope and string, 180 x 165 cm.

relationships with the women he mentored for several years at the Philani art centre. As the resident art teacher, Adams assisted these unemployed women in using silk-screen, painting and weaving techniques to produce commercial craft work, enabling them to sustain themselves financially. These works were made in collaboration with the women, giving expression to the shared histories and personal narratives that have deeply affected Adams. This expression unfolds materially through the intricately-woven detailing and, in turn, the performative process of weaving, which resonates as a meditative writing or inscribing of these histories. The presence and influence of these family and community relationships is tightly stitched into the multifaceted philosophical questions Adams asks about looking at, seeing and perceiving the relative self through varying means and modes.

Adams' response to, and progression from, the inkblots reveals his enduring pursuit to expand his awareness, or "Neoscope", meaning a wider range in which to see, or a new way of looking, which informs and guides understanding of selfhood. Adams' lucid interventions with Rorschach's inkblots make for compelling works, which complicate and enrich his ongoing inquiry into selfhood, especially in terms of the exacting references to the notorious projective personality test and the relative questions that arise. The works forming the Neoscope series show an active inquiry by Adams into the mysterious translations that occur between the eye and the mind, and the slippages and indeterminacy of this transaction. Speaking to the nature of sight, Elkins (1996:201) explains, 'Because we cannot see what we do not understand or use to identify with, we see very little of the world'. As Adams' work develops, he seeks out to see, unearth, and understand more. Accordingly, the processes involved in making his work articulate a restless and unending search for a more lateral and layered insight into the nature of human experience and perception. Vision, as Elkins (1996:201) has noted, 'entangles us in a skein of changing relations with objects and people'. In consequence, perception is always in motion, always changing and evolving.

As Adams' reflections and considerations have elucidated, selfhood is articulated through experience, giving it its relative form and meaning. Through recognising his relationships, experiences, spirituality, philosophy, sexuality, dreams and memories as parts of himself that simultaneously exist as one and many, Adams commits to ongoing conversation with himself. He explains that he finds himself occupying these multiple, shifting environments, all at once. Amidst the constant exchange of information running between them, his projections on to the world and his internalisation of the world's projections on to him have shaped his sense of self. This phenomenological self-consciousness carries through Adams' *oeuvre* not only as subject: the increasingly nuanced recent works also indicate the surfacing of this phenomenon as product of the work.

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