



WORKLINES

MICHAEL DANGO ON THE ART OF IGSHAAN ADAMS

Igshaan Adams, *Langa*, 2021, paint on wood, plastic beads, glass beads, stone beads, bone beads, polyester rope, nylon rope, cotton fabric, chain, wire, cotton twine, 7' 10½" × 10' 2⅝".

Opposite page: View of "Igshaan Adams: *Desire Lines*," 2022, Art Institute of Chicago. Floor and hanging: *Epping II*, 2021. Walls, from left: *Upheaved*, 2018; *Al-Muhyee (The Giver of Life)*, 2020; *I was a hidden treasure, then I wanted to be known . . .*, 2016.

THE SECOND OF TWO GALLERIES in Igshaan Adams's solo exhibition "Desire Lines," currently on view at the Art Institute of Chicago, contains a tapestry that would appear somewhat conventional, at least compared with the sculptural tangles of rope and gossamer clouds installed nearby. Across a vertical grid of white cords, Adams has woven an assortment of cotton strips, skeins of nylon, wires. The colors are muted sienna and moss, parcels of earth tones, save for the stray flash of turquoise or glint of stone, bone, plastic, or glass beads. Cutting across the tapestry is a bright, elongated X woven in golden chains.

The intersecting chains are examples of the desire lines of the show's title: pathways gradually imprinted by pedestrian traffic across unsanctioned territories or along unofficial routes. This particular set, Adams informs us in one of the labels he has written to accompany the twenty works on display, derives from a Google Maps satellite view of an unused plot of land in Bonteheuwel, the township in Cape Town where the artist was born in 1982. Bonteheuwel was created in the 1960s to absorb the population designated "Coloured"—neither "white" nor "native"—by the apartheid-era Group Areas Act. The artist explains that "Bonteheuwel is often discussed in the South African media, but always in terms of death and gangs and as a dangerous place," and yet the X itself is "evidence that

people are willing to go against what's been laid out for them, or what the expectation is for their life."

The tapestry, *Langa*, 2021, is in fact named for the neighborhood immediately west of Bonteheuwel, the first Black township in Cape Town. The X reflects the path residents of both neighborhoods took to cross the land and highway dividing them. In 1976, this highway was where residents of Langa and Bonteheuwel crossed the color line to unite in clashes against police. The chiasmic lines traced in *Langa* are the prehistory, documentation, and ongoing reenactment of organizing against segregation and official borders.

A Google Earth search today within Bonteheuwel reveals an almost identically proportioned elongated X, rotated ninety degrees and flanked by residential streets, with schools, a police station, a community center, and a mosque all within a few blocks. The lines express a desire not just to bridge neighborhoods, but also to connect and integrate family, work, and religion within them.

The cross-township trajectories that inspired Adams model a larger phenomenon of crossing borders that are intended to cordon resources off for some nations or populations while leaving others deprived. The fields and deserts of Central America and the southwestern United States and the uncharted reaches of the Mediterranean are overlaid by the trails of migrants



who are looking for employment or love they cannot find in their homes or who have lost their homes. These tracteries mark the collective nature not just of desire but of struggle. In another context, Mexican American artist Tanya Aguñigas's collaborative *Quipu fronterizo/Border Quipu*, 2016–18, allows migrants to add knots of quipu (an Incan tool for using thread to record information) to an ongoing piece that speaks to this collectivity.

Earlier in his career, Adams collected his friends' and family's linoleum floors, their bright colors worn down where people had walked or placed furniture on them. He further aestheticized these surfaces by cleaning parts or papering over others to enhance found patterns. These works were literal indexes of human movement, like footprints in sand. But in the weaving practice that has come to define his work in the past decade, Adams more often introduces additional layers of mediation. *Langa* is a good example, its golden X transposed from aerial photographs the artist studied. Other works at the Art Institute, such as the wall-hung tapestries *Agter Om* (Around the Back) and *Spoorsny* (tracking footprints), both 2020, return to domestic scenes, this time transferring, as Adams puts it in a label, "the physical gaps in the linoleum to weaving."

The centerpiece of the Chicago show, covering almost the whole floor in the same room as *Langa*, also thematizes the notion of the gap: It is a collection of irregularly shaped rugs, the negative space between them suggesting additional desire lines. The work, *Epping II*, 2021, is named for the largest industrial area in Cape Town, traversed daily by people seeking work. We can walk these open lines while still obeying the museum rule not to touch the work of art. We are able to join in the collective desire. While *Epping II* gives us the land around the lines, in *11b Larch weg (i)* and *11b Larch weg (ii)*, mirror images from 2019, the desire line is positive space, radically decontextualized. The skinny textiles (one is hung on the wall, the other laid on the floor, awkward like an isthmus), make clear how little space there was for a family friend who lived at the Cape Town address in the title to move around her small apartment. Adams weaves in beads where her feet would have rested in front of her chair.

These works might almost be the antithesis of Alighiero Boetti's "Mappa," 1971–73, tapestries diagramming geopolitical flux from a traditionally omniscient cartographic vantage, with landmasses identified by national flags. *11b Larch weg (i)* and *11b Larch weg (ii)* map through touch





Opposite page: Igshaan Adams, *Antie se voorkamer tapyt* (Auntie's Living Room Carpet), 2010, vinyl, debris, 71 3/4 x 110 3/4".

Above: Google Earth screen capture of Bonteheuwel, Cape Town, 2022.

Below: Igshaan Adams, *Agter Om* (Around the Back), 2020, wooden beads, plastic beads, glass beads, stone beads, shells, polyester rope, nylon rope, fabric, wire, cotton twine, 103 3/4 x 81 3/8".



The chiasmic lines traced in *Langa* are the prehistory, documentation, and ongoing reenactment of organizing against segregation and official borders.

as much as distance and chart knowledge from intimacy outward, refusing the national or territorial meanings imposed on land. Rather than seeing positive and negative as opposed, or domestic and public as split, Adams stages their overlapping nature. It matters that even the works depicting migration across landscapes are fabricated from the tradition of domestic arts. Weaving is typically considered an art and a labor of the home.

The first piece of linoleum Adams collected, which is revisualized in the exhibition as a tapestry of polyester, nylon, and cotton (*Mapping Yvonne's Kitchen*, 2021), captures the floor of a woman named Yvonne who “dedicated her life to taking care of Hennie, her husband. He had ended up bedridden, with Yvonne as his primary caregiver.” This is, of course, caregiving that is uncompensated, something women are required to do especially in nations without universal health care. The movement beyond the home, for instance to the industrial neighborhood just north, is a movement in search of the waged work that can afford health care and other necessities. In a period of neoliberalization that has hollowed out the so-called family wage—the idea that a whole family could possibly survive on one person’s productive labor—women, especially, are called on to assume a double burden: unpaid caregiving at home, plus underpaid, but at least waged, work in the public marketplace. These tapestries are records of the daily labors and commutes required to survive economic precarity.

BEFORE IT IS ANYTHING ELSE, a canvas is a piece of cloth. When artists in the 1960s such as Sam Gilliam began to remove the canvas’s stretchers, they learned to treat the material like drapery: folding, crumpling, dangling, wrapping, warping. They called attention to the canvas not just as a medium for art but as the art itself, an object in which substance and support are unified. Whereas, say, the slashed canvases of Lucio Fontana rely on the tension of the primed surface, Gilliam foregrounds the malleability of woven cotton. Whether it travels under the label of “textile art” or not, work that centers the historical and material specificity of modern painting’s support is self-reflective of erasure, too, ineluctably conjuring that which is overlooked or slathered with an occluding medium. The Seoul-based artist Kyungah Ham presents her embroidered works with lists of the invisible labor and emotions that have shaped them; the label for her aptly titled *What you see is the unseen/Chandeliers for Five Cities BK 04-06*, 2016–17, reads, “North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, smuggling, bribe, tension, anxiety, censorship, ideology, wooden frame, approx. 2000 hrs/1 person.”

During roughly the same period when Gilliam and others were exploring the slippage and indistinction between work and support, an international network of feminist activists was also rethinking the value of and relation between “support” and “work.” What counted as work in most Western nations was what was “productive,” which meant work that participated in a market and created profit. But this productive labor could not exist, Marxist feminists began pointing out in the early ’70s, without reproductive labor: nursing and educating the children who would become workers; feeding and tending the workers who came back from the factories and



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Opposite page, top: View of "Igshaan Adams: Desire Lines," 2022, Art Institute of Chicago. Wall: *11b Larch weg (i)*, 2019. Floor: *11b Larch weg (ii)*, 2019.

Opposite page, bottom: Igshaan Adams, *11b Larch weg (i)* (detail), 2019, nylon rope, cotton twine, seashells, stones, glass beads, wooden beads, plastic beads, fabric, 11' 2 1/4" x 27' 2 3/4".

Above: Senga Nengudi performing with her 1976 sculpture *R.S.V.P. X*, Los Angeles, 1976. Photo: Ken Peterson.

Right: Sam Gilliam, *Swing*, 1969, acrylic and aluminum on canvas, 9' 11 5/8" x 23' 7 1/2".



offices; building the communities that sustained a sense of belonging even as labor itself was alienating. This nurture work was almost always performed by women and almost always occurred outside of a market and was therefore uncompensated. "Wages for Housework" became the demand of feminists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Selma James, who sought to call attention to, and secure fair recognition of, capitalism's reliance on this hidden labor force.

Many artists have thematized the association between reproductive labor and textile art, which has long been devalued because of its association with the domestic and feminine, with "craft." The best of this work has visualized how care labor is not just gendered but racialized, particularly in late-capitalist economies, where white women increasingly participate in the productive workforce and delegate housework to undercompensated domestic laborers, who are disproportionately women of color. Adams's own visualizations are indebted to those of Senga Nengudi. Nengudi has called her nylons, suspended and sagging with sand, "abstracted reflections of used bodies," invoking "black wet-nurses suckling child after child—their own as well as those of others, until their breasts rested on their knees, their energies drained." Connecting contemporary reproductive labor to historical regimes of enslavement, Nengudi's works track a genealogy between past and present.

Critics tend to comment on the flexibility of nylon, its ability to withstand pressure and manipulation, but the other central ingredient of Nengudi's sculptures—sand—tells a similar story of being beaten and handled, albeit on a different timescale. Sand is, after all, eroded rock, each granule the product of millions of years of weathering—a long process of being abraded, filed, and polished by wind and water. In bringing together the two materials, Nengudi allegorically encapsulates a longer and less

reversible history of violence (sand) within a more contingent but more violent form (nylon). She suggests a permanence to the raw stuff of violence, even though the forms it takes are historically variable: from lynching to police brutality, from enslaved wet nursing to exploited domestic labor. It is not just the body that is morphed by violence; violence, too, morphs to meet the labor needs of its historical present.

Shinique Smith's sculptures of discarded T-shirts and other garments, wound together like bulging bales of cotton, continue to reference the Southern plantation, at the same time that the cast-off fast fashion indexes the transit of cheap labor and goods from the neocolony to the metropole. There is a carbon footprint to this new global economy of synthetic manufacturing. Nengudi's nylon is ultimately derived from fossil fuels; the company that invented it, DuPont, emphasized in early advertisements that it was made only from "coal, air, and water," in part to undercut a rumor that it was made from corpses.

There are nylon ropes, too, in the tapestries of Igshaan Adams. And there is a tension in his work, too, between the rigid and the flexible—where flexibility need not mean freedom but, more likely, just heralds more creative ways to exploit and endanger. Moreover, the cheaply sourced beads placed along many of Adams's threads reference the same global supply networks as Smith's sculptures. In a work like *Langa*, adorning that X of desire between two townships, the bits of glass and plastic suggest the Coke bottles and other pieces of junk dropped by passersby. Along the lines of desire are its debris. Like Nengudi, Adams is interested in erosion as a symbol and a site where violence and labor meet. Like Smith, he is interested in how the global inequalities underlying racial capitalism are evidenced by environmental devastation and crisis, as climate change forces more and more migration.



Left: **Kyungah Ham**, *What you see is the unseen/Chandeliers for Five Cities BK 04-06*, 2016–17, North Korean hand embroidery, silk threads on cotton, middle man, smuggling, bribe, tension, anxiety, censorship, ideology, wooden frame, approx. 2,000 hrs/1 person, 100% × 70½".

Right: **Shinique Smith**, *Bale Variant No. 0021 (Christmas)*, 2011–17, clothing, fabric, objects, wrapping paper, ribbon, 84 × 30 × 30".

Opposite page: **View of "Iqshaan Adams: Desire Lines,"** 2022, Art Institute of Chicago. Floor and hanging: *Epping II*, 2021. Wall, from left: *I was a hidden treasure, then I wanted to be known . . .*, 2016; *Langa*, 2021.



What is at stake in textile art is less the interface of individual and collective identity and more the interface, and sometimes obfuscation, of individual and collective labor.

You need a grid before you can traverse it. Where Adams picks up on the tradition of textile art's laying bare the material supports of art and productive labor alike is by calling attention to the warp. In *Langa*, cords hang from the bottom, a half-articulated grid. In works like *I was a hidden treasure, then I wanted to be known . . .*, 2016, a huge collage of fabric, multicolored ropes, and drooping tassels, we see patches where no weft has been woven through the cords, giving the impression of bone peering through flesh. *Upheaved*, 2018, is installed so the warp fibers are horizontal and exceed the frame of the tapestry, a footlong fringe trailing down its sides. In *Spoorsny (tracking footprints)*, fringe dangles down from the work's top, obscuring nearly a fifth of the tapestry.

For Adams, this allegorical attention to the reproductive labor that makes art possible is particularly important because of the ways in which a kind of housework—or really, a kind of workshop—facilitates his artwork. Originally an oil painter, Adams learned to weave while an artist instructor at the Philani Child Health and Nutrition Center in Cape Town. His job was to teach the mothers of malnourished children how to, in his words, “elevate” their crafts, including woven objects, so they could generate income. In 1997, the center launched the Philani Printing Project, originally funded as part of an antipoverty campaign underpinned by a belief

that economically empowering women would help their children. When Adams began to work there, he learned to weave from the mothers and in turn taught newcomers. Many of the participants contribute the weaving labor that goes into Adams's larger-scale works today.

At its best, textile art has come from traditions of imagining alternative economies to the capitalist one, spaces of communalism protected from the dictates of the market. The Freedom Quilting Bee, a cooperative founded by Alabaman Black women in 1966, functioned in this way. But alternative economies are hard to sustain when the hegemonic one is so powerful and unrelenting. The famed quilter Mary Lee Bendolph, for instance, had to quit the collective because she couldn't earn enough to live on. There is always a risk that art, too, produces work but not wages.

Just as a transnational network of feminists called for “Wages for Housework” in the '70s, Leigh Claire La Berge's 2019 book *Wages Against Artwork* considers what she calls “decommodified labor” in cultural production today, with socially engaged artworks that either thematize or are a product of labor that seems “indistinguishable from formal employment” but is uncompensated. For instance, student or amateur artists may be asked to take on unpaid or underpaid internships for “exposure” or unremunerated “experience” instead of a wage. This is the neoliberal successor

to an earlier capitalist creation of the “aesthetic” as a field of experience defined in ostensible opposition to the marketplace: Art was supposed to be the sign of beautiful freedom from ugly necessity, an artwork’s uselessness compared with a commodity’s utility. But La Berge’s point about decommodified labor is that the seeming uselessness of the final artwork, the fantasy of an art world somehow sequestered from a larger world fully subsumed by the logics of capitalism, can be an alibi for not paying for the sometimes traditional labor that produces artworks.

Adams’s practice provides a curious wrinkle. His art is the result of workshops originally designed to create commodities, not unlike the work of the Dutch artist Renzo Martens in Congo, which La Berge explores in one chapter of her book. Martens trained plantation workers to make cacao sculptures he then sold in European galleries, with the proceeds channeled back for further investment in the ground. Adams pays his employees a more immediate wage, a monthly salary through his own registered company. But this collective work still gets absorbed into his own proper name. This is not unusual for artists, who, whether working with textiles or steel, rarely name the fabricators who actually produce their art. But the haptic and artisanal nature of textile fabrication seems to raise the question *Who made this?* in an especially pointed way. And because of textile art’s history as an allegory for the invisibility of reproductive labor, there is something particularly ironic about a patronym covering the skilled labor of women. Tapestries meant to foreground the precarious position of domestic labor in the global economy may risk reproducing it.

Critics usually discuss Adams’s work as an exploration of his own personal identity. He stitches together diverse materials as a reflection of hybrid

identity-making and manipulates culturally coded objects, like the old South African flag or a Muslim prayer mat, to navigate his place within collective institutions, for instance as a gay man who also practices Islam. When a gay man works with fiber art, as does Adams’s countryman Nicholas Hlobo, seven years his senior, we are usually invited to read the work in terms of androgyny or of the crossing of masculine and feminine, a redeployment of the gendered coding of domestic arts for an emerging queer world.

I have tried to resist beginning with a list of Adams’s identities. I have wanted to think instead through reproductive labor and wages for housework and the afterlives of slavery that are incarnate in the life of domestic work today—all to suggest that what is at stake in textile art is less the interface of individual and collective identity and more the interface, and sometimes obfuscation, of individual and collective labor. Adams’s tapestries are ways of visualizing labor that is not captured in official economic metrics. At their most provocative, they map out how domestic and economic labor can be conflated, and how the imperative to work, and to work double time, is gendered and racialized under the constitutive inequalities of global capital. But to fully realize this political critique requires accounting for how these maps may still hide the very labor that produced them. For textile art to continue calling attention to reproductive work, to women’s work, it will need to continue giving wages for that work. But it is likely more is also needed: a recognition of not just the work but the names of the workers. □

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