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Photograph: Rachel Baasch

CLEANSING VIA THE SENSES AS EYESIGHT FOLLOWS THE SOUL
Igshaan Adams' *Bismillah* performance

Ruth Simbao

> *Our senses are the tool our body uses to negotiate and move through the world; by their very nature, they orchestrate with others and our environment … Artists who harness more than our eyes and ears encourage us to wake up, to be alert to the world around us, and to interact actively with the objects and creatures around us. It is an invitation to live, to feel, and to be part of a larger community.*
>
> Di Benedetto[1]

BENEATH

The audience climbs down a narrow flight of steep steps into the dark underbelly of the 1820 Settlers National Monument – the basement of a large building that commemorates the British Settlers' arrival in the Eastern Cape. To reach the basement, viewers pass amply proportioned architectural gestures of tribute and validation, including high ceilings, polished banisters and symbols of British patriotism. The basement steps are hidden behind a yellowwood structure that is designed to look like scaffolding, symbolising the ongoing process of building, in this case explained as 'the notion that the work of the English speaker in South Africa continues'.[2] The rectangles and diagonals of this wooden construction 'represent the crosses of the British Flag'.[3]
The indoor Millstone Fountain, which is the 'symbolic heart of the Monument' is surrounded by the words, 'That all might have life, and have it abundantly'.[4]

Bismillah, 2014
Performance, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown
Photograph: Ruth Simbao

Beneath this grand tribute to the British Settlers, to the English language and to the abundance of life, unravels an account of death.

The concealed basement is dim and shadowy. The dust from the unpolished rocks that protrude from the earth hangs thickly in the air. A subtle smell of incense assumes enhanced impact, as sight lags behind smell while eyes slowly grow accustomed to the dark.

Viewers huddle together, hushed. In front of them, in what looks like a cavernous stone grave, lies a body on simple white cloth. The body – that of Igshaan Adams – is about to be prepared for burial; an act considered to be a communal obligation (*fard al-kifayah*) in Muslim legal doctrine.

B-ismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi.

In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful.

BLIND SPOT

> *The blind spot is … neither a visible absence (a darkness), nor a constructed absence (a hole papered over by extrapolating from visible objects), but an invisible absence: an absence whose invisibility is itself invisible. This is not the dark grey annoyance that is suffered in actual partial blindness, nor is it the oblivion of the fixed stare, but something different, another kind of blindness, where we believe we see but do not.*
>
> James Elkins[5]

Igshaan Adams performed *Bismillah* (2014) as part of the *Blind spot* performance art programme at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, a small town in an area still

strangely referred to as Frontier Country. *Blind spot* was a series of site-collaborative[6] performances that considered ways of *not* seeing, drawing from the notion of a blind spot that creates an absence of vision. Just as with *scotoma*, when the brain makes up certain details that are actually not there, in terms of ways of seeing and thinking about the world, ignorance and prejudice create cultural or cognitive biases that rely on farcical information and skewed perspectives. As Elkins emphasises, though, a blind spot goes beyond visible absence – it is *invisible* absence that registers the inability to *recognise* one's blindness. In terms of metaphors of sight, *Bismillah* enters the spiritual realm, searching in death for the recognition of blindness. In terms of site, performance and place interact intertextually, igniting ideas of blind spots, where 'spots' refer to locations too.

In *Bismillah*, Igshaan Adams performs with his father, Amien Adams, who tenderly washes, dries and perfumes his son's body as if he were dead. In this work, Igshaan moves beyond sight in multiple ways, playing with the relationship between seeing and not seeing, concealing and revealing, and between tangible and intangible worlds. In doing so, he draws on sound, touch, smell and metaphors of taste, engaging not only with the senses of the body, but the senses of sites and communities too.

Explaining his practice, Adams says he navigates between three environments that blur the boundaries between the visible and the invisible: the external world, the internal world and the mythical world: 'Sufi Islam offers me a framework to explore … a third "unseen" world. A mythical world of chaos and paradoxes beyond language, superimposed onto an existence of social structures and disciplines'. In much of his work, Adams subtly raises questions about our possible blind spots regarding our physical, emotional and spiritual lives, but revelling in complexity and even contradiction, he refuses to provide simple answers. *Bismillah* is not about a didactic impulse; it is about intimate knowledge and experiential growth. It is not simply a performance about codes of Islam, but is a self-reflexive familiarity with death even when death is not literally there. It is about a personal process – a cleansing – and in its palpable power it carries receptive viewers through a process too, one which exceeds their sight and their mental ways of seeing.

THE FAILURE OF SEEING

> *When the soul is taken, the eyesight follows it.*
>
> Qur'an[7]

Bismillah (2014), which evolved from the 2012 performance *Please remember II,* is informed by the artist's experience of losing an aunt who was still alive, but due to a drug addiction was in effect dead to him. A scar on this woman's foot was the only remaining sign of the person he once knew. By sight he recognised what signalled his relative, but this visual reminder failed him as his full experience of her had passed away. Merely *seeing* does not necessarily allow one to *know* in a more intimate sense. In order to see – especially to see clearly – some distance is required. But to touch is to be close. To understand is to connect. In this performance, touch becomes a point of intimate familial knowing as Igshaan's father lovingly washes the body of his son, whereas sight – the sight of a scar that might elicit mental or even emotional recognition – ultimately failed.

In the Muslim process of preparing a body for burial, the eyes of the deceased ought to be closed as soon as possible. Sight accompanies the soul; it is as spiritual as it is physical. Importantly, preparation for burial is usually hidden, and what is seen, felt or smelt by the person performing this duty must remain a secret: 'He who washes a Muslim and conceals what he sees (i.e. bad odors, appearance, and anything loathsome), Allah grants him forgiveness forty times (or for forty major sins)…'.[8] Generally males take on the responsibility of washing males, and females wash females. The only exception to this rule is in the case of husband and wife, or small children. There is no audience.

Bismillah is an uncomfortable and disconcerting performance to experience. Not only does it bring the audience palpably close to witnessing death, but it also hovers between what is

allowed and forbidden; what is desired and reviled. While death holds the power to push the living away, duty, respect or the desire to manage the unmanageable coaxes the living to perform this tender ritual.

In certain cultural histories of visualising death, a tension often exists between submitting to the inevitability of death and wanting to cheat it through various forms of representation. For centuries death masks recorded facial features by casting a mould taken directly from the deceased's face.[9] In the Victorian era, post-mortem photographers sometimes staged the recently deceased as if they were alive, opening their eyes and propping them up on chairs next to living relatives.[10]

This impetus to retain some aspect of presence through representation does not exist in the context of the Islamic burial preparation. What is seen should be hidden. What is visible must be let go, just as the corporeal organs that do the seeing in the physical world – the eyes – must be shut as eyesight follows the soul. In the performance of *Bismillah*, Adams' eyes powerfully reveal both death and life. Making no forced attempt to 'act dead', Adams calmly keeps his eyes open. He blinks when he needs to blink. Like his aunt, he is both dead and alive, but perhaps unlike her, he is simultaneously blind and sighted – consciously so. Deliberately grasping at death he becomes aware of his own blindness.

SOUND

B-ismi-llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīmi.

As is required in this death ritual, Amien Adams performs this recitation in a quiet, serious voice. No loud mourning is permissible. His low voice and the near-silence of the rest of the twenty-minute performance create a painful experience for viewers. An unspoken code

suggests that they must all keep still, and the occasional shuffle creates a stir. Viewers feel the heaviness of their breath.

There is no background music. No voiceover. Just the occasional, almost inaudible, sound of water; of the towel wiping dry a limb; of a few footsteps as Igshaan's father walks around the body of his son, and of the subdued groans of the building as festival-goers move above the basement oblivious of the ritual of death below. The audience is trapped by the sparseness of sound. There is no leaving this scene, which has become part-mortuary, part-graveside. Unlike an earlier version, *Please remember II*, this performance does not take place in a gallery space. No artworks that would legitimise the desire to walk away surround the performance; there is nothing on which viewers can rest their eyes in the reassurance that what they see is *only* depiction.

Even if viewers close their eyes, they are 'forced' to watch; it's as if they see *via* the tension of the almost inaudible sound.

TOUCH

Nearly everything that the audience hears is touch. Literally.

A wet hand touches a foot. A towel rubs an arm. Cloth makes contact with skin.

At some point it's as if death pushes back at the viewers' eyes, forbidding them to physically see, and they regard the scene before them through the acts of tender touch that almost inevitably race through their minds. Some picture themselves washing their sons, drying their daughters, or perfuming loved ones. They begin to *feel* death.

In this ritual, the deceased body must be handled with respect, with great care and with gentleness. Igshaan's father is attentive. Contained. Dutiful. He washes his son with soap. He rinses. He dries. He turns the body over. He washes. He rinses. He dries. Then, once he has

Bismillah, 2014
Performance, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown
Photograph: Ruth Simbao

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completed the methodical ritual of cleaning the body he finally relinquishes the intimacy of skin-on-skin touch and shrouds the body with white, modest sheets and a green burial cloth, which is embroidered in gold with the name of Allah. Sometimes in this ritual a parting is made in the shroud near the right side of the face, allowing it to touch the earth directly. It is *makrooh*[11] to bury the deceased in a coffin, and the earth *feels* the body as it absorbs the remains.

SMELL

During the washing of the body the orifices of the nostrils, ears and mouth are closed off with cotton wool to prevent water from entering the body. After washing and drying, perfume such as camphor is applied to the forehead, the nose, the palms of the hands, the knees, and the feet. In *Bismillah*, Amien Adams places pieces of cotton wool into Igshaan's nostrils just before he folds the white sheet over his face.

Immediate anxiety is felt in the audience. Drawn so close to the experience of witnessing 'real' death, the slippage between being dead and alive that is observed in Ighsaan's wrapped body transfers to the bodies of the viewers. There is a need to breathe, to prolong the smell of perfume that reminds viewers that it is not they who have died. There is a need to keep their orifices open, to keep sensing.

Harnessing more than our eyes and our ears, *Bismillah* 'is an invitation to live'.[12]

As Amien Adams pulls the last sheet over the face of the 'deceased', the tension mounts. He begins to tie a knot above the head. Securing death. Viewers breathe heavily, as if to keep at bay the 'last breath' of the body they see disappearing before them. Their eyes fix on the chest below the shroud. It gently moves up and down in its own determination not to lose concentration, not to panic. The rising-falling chest reassures onlookers that the 'factness' of 'mere' representation does not elude them. This image must not slip away.

Then, inaudible to some, the simple word ‘Daddy’ is unexpectedly heard. Wrestling with the dual urge to simultaneously experience some kind of death and to stay alive, Igshaan is overwhelmed by the perfume trapped beneath the closed sheets and involuntarily whispers. But he stays still, contained in the transitional space between life and death, between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, between the ‘transformed’ and the ‘untransformed’. The psychoanalytic space that a baby experiences *between* mother and child, between ‘not-I’ and ‘I’, is a critical, creative space that gives birth to a transformed human being with an essential sense of self.[13] In a spiritual sense, this is where Igshaan lingers during *Bismillah*, as ‘not-quite-dead’, ‘not-fully-alive’.

CLEANSING THROUGH TASTE

> *Every soul will taste death*.
>
> Qur’an[14]

If *Bismillah* were merely an attempt to perform a representation of death, then the utterance of ‘Daddy’ might be read as a mistake, as a breaking of character that would jolt viewers back into the present-ness of their full aliveness. But the performance is about slippage. About being dead *and* alive. About dying in order to live. It’s about pulling viewers closer to the whisper of death, the smell of death, the touch of death. Rather than interrupt the performance, the utterance seems to pull viewers closer. Some were unaware of the actual father-son relationship until this point; some were gripped by the panic in Igshaan’s voice. Through an orchestration of the senses, the viewers almost taste the closeness of death.

In contrast to his experience with his aunt in which a visual trigger fails to generate, for him, vivacity, in *Bismillah*, even though 'dead' himself, the intense preparation for burial leaves Igshaan feeling remarkably renewed.

Cleansed.

BENEATH

Viewers walk back up the stairs, some shaken, and pass the Millstone Fountain inscription: 'That all might have life, and have it abundantly'. These words of reassurance, however, are hidden from view. Trapped beneath a temporary stage set up for the festival their supplication for life is muted, and beneath this, below the inscription on the floor, a death took place that these very words were blind to.

Invisible absence.

1 Di Benedetto, S. 2007. 'Guiding somatic responses within performative structures: contemporary live art and sensorial perception'. In Banes, S. and Lepecki, A (eds). *The senses in performance*. London: 133-4.

2 The Grahamstown Foundation. 2015. Available at: http://www.foundation.org.za./index.php?pid=23. (Accessed March 2015.)

3 Ibid.

4 The Grahamstown Foundation. 2015. Available at: http://www.foundation.org.za./index.php?pid=25. (Accessed March 2015.)

5 Elkins, J. 1996. *The object stares back: On the nature of seeing*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

6 I use this term in place of site-specific art to indicate that a performer does not simply respond to an existing site, but that performer and site create meaning together. Significantly, site has agency too.

7 'When the *Ruh* (spirit) is taken out, the eyesight follows it'. See Mission Islam: 'The Mysteries of the Soul'. Available at: http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/mysterysoul.html. (Accessed January 2015.)

8 Aisha, B. 'Funeral Rites and Regulations in Islam'. Available at: http://www.missionislam.com/knowledge/funeral.htm. (Accessed January 2015.)

9 Schuyler, J. 1986. 'Death masks in Quattrocento Florence'. *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 5(4): 1.

10 Enoch, N. 2013. 'Post-mortem photography'. *Mail Online*, 29-30 January. Available at: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2270169/Post-mortem-photography-Morbid-gallery-reveals-Victorians-took-photos-DEAD-relatives-posing-couches-beds-coffins.html. (Accessed February 2013.)

11 '*Makrooh* in Arabic means the opposite of liked or loved. In the terminology of *sharee'ah* it means that which the Lawgiver asks us not to do, but not in a definitive manner. It may be said that it means that for which the person who does not do it out of obedience will be rewarded, but the one who does it will not be punished.' Available at: http://islamqa.info/en/9084. (Accessed March 2015.)

12 Di Benedetto, S.: 134.

13 See Winnicott, D.W.W. 1971. *Playing and reality*. London: Tavistock Productions.

14 Surat al-'Ankabut: 57