

*lise*

## adam christensen

solo exhibition

30 april — 6 june 2026

As chance would have it, I was in Copenhagen visiting friends — a lesbian couple and their one-year-old — when a message arrived from Adam, asking if I'd like to write a text for his upcoming exhibition in Copenhagen.

Of course, I accepted, and of course, we would have to meet up, if only for a quick hello at the gallery. That evening, I told my friends about meeting Adam at art school, how he'd always worn these bright, hand-knitted sweaters with haphazard stripes and colour blocks; hippyish creations that could also be designer but were in fact knitted by his mum. Somewhere in my mind's eye, I watched a flickering reel, saw how he'd moved and danced and yawned through our early twenties, the weave of those sweaters expanding and contracting with his tall, lithe body, arms snaking, the necks widening as he tugged himself free and dove back in to their cocoon-like safety. I told the story of how I'd played accordion for Adam in his bid to represent Denmark in the Eurovision Song Contest, which had failed but more importantly ignited his own accordion playing, and how he'd made a music video for it and attempted to make me glamorous by blowing a hairdryer into my hair as I played. I told them how he'd grown up in Denmark, just as their child would do, with two mums, but it had been tough, something to do with his crazy dad and attempted kidnaps, I couldn't quite remember. In that moment, my friends and I shared a tacit nod to the queers who walked before us.

*Lise knitted them, but Lene chose the colours*, Adam would tell me, some days later, when I told him I'd been thinking about his sweaters. He'd been wearing one that weekend, in Jutland for the confirmation of his cousin's daughter, and sent a photo of him lying there in the garden, bundled into the sweater as though needing its love, a hat shading his face from the sun. It was important for him to be there for the family event: his mothers no longer alive to be part of it. *Right now, he said, I'm also wearing Lene's long johns. They feel great.*

*Lise*. Adam's 'second mum'. His mother Lene's partner, after whom the exhibition is titled. Lise co-parented Adam for most of his life, and the artworks that comprise the installation were made in response to her death in 2022. Gauzy curtains embroidered with the flowers of the local countryside, a hairy arm with golden fingernails, a wine glass, the claret wine flung out into space. A large textile portrait of Liza Minnelli fashioned from weighty silks and black laces that he'd purchased from shops in Prague (*where I was kind of hiding out after a right-wing politician in Denmark started vilifying me in the press... The Mafia supplied local dealers with the finest fabrics used by Dior and Versace. I have friends in fashion who recognised them from the catwalks, couldn't fathom how I'd gotten my hands on such rare fabrics...*). The visage that emerges from the collage is recognisably the beloved gay icon of *Cabaret* fame, but transformed into a Victorian mourning memento.

Anchoring the works is a bed, made up with a duvet set printed with an iconic portrait of Madonna in her *Who's That Girl?* era, her hair styled into a platinum crop. She wears black leather studded fingerless gloves that show off her red lacquered nails, her hands framing her intense, seductive gaze. A 'come to bed' look, which is apt considering the context. The bed sheets had been a gift to Adam on his thirteenth birthday from Lise, and three decades later, were the sheets under which she died.

*Lise introduced me to Madonna, who was a Lesbian icon, of course, and Lise fancied her, so I think she sort of expressed that vicariously through me, through getting me into Madonna too. We thought about cremating her in those sheets, but decided against it. I wanted to keep them for myself and made sure they weren't thrown away.*

Adam saved the sheets, as he did other items from his mums' house after Lene's recent death. In his video work, *Under hypnose* (not exhibited here), he records Lene's account of maintaining custody of Adam and his sister when they were children and their period living in a women's refuge, alongside moments of leafing through her scrapbook on Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, her reactions to a weekend of incessant rain. His camera circles Lene at an oblique angle and passes through the house as gently as a fly landing on the side of a cabinet or the slat of a venetian blind. The drama in Adam's work is always underpinned by the patient, measured care and concentration of a diarist or archivist, or indeed, as is evident in this exhibition, the 'unserious' (read 'feminine'), intimate, resistant craft of the textile artist.

I only had a spare hour to meet Adam in Copenhagen and as that hour approached, it was clear he wasn't going to make it. The previous night he'd fought bitterly with his boyfriend; he was heartbroken, bereft, still in bed. I went to the gallery in any case, where the Madonna bed sheets were unfolded from a plastic box. I felt the fabric, so soft and faded after numerous laundry cycles. As I stroked Madonna's cheek, I recalled a photo of me and my dad on a camping holiday in the 1980s, him in a tight dressing gown exposing his hairy chest and his usual tangle of gold chains, his arm around my shoulder and both of us beaming as I hold up my birthday present, my most treasured possession; a cassette of the *Who's That Girl?* soundtrack.

*Wonderful man* writes Adam, when I text him the photo. Adam had often hung out at my parents' house in London and knew them well. Dad died five months ago, and I've been going through his studio, unearthing trunks full of silk kimonos, filthy wedding dresses, tiny high-heeled shoes and malting furs. Like Adam, he was an artist and had a thing for glamorous women's apparel.

It's hard to think about grief when you're in it. But at first, it is a state of raw attention. What was unthinkable, totally abstract no matter how 'prepared' you thought you were, demands to be tethered to reality. *A week ago today, three months already since...* one says, shocked that any aspect of what's happened can already be quantified and put into some kind of pattern. It's hardly surprising that in this state, we become more attuned to coincidence, to the lay lines between *x*, *y* and *z*, to the downright spooky. Grief's beat gradually becomes less intense, her rhythm more erratic, but once grief opens her mouth, you can't un-hear her voice; her range interminable, like that of the perpetual, Shepherd tone. In grief, normality and eeriness merge in this same, Mobius strip fashion. I've never been religious, but I've found comfort in conjuring Oizys (Οἰζύς), the Greek goddess of grief. I'd wager that Adam might be one of her messengers. I say this not because he assumes goddess form (by way of the more earth-bound deities such as Brigitte Nielsen, Madonna or Liza Minnelli) in his performances, swathing himself in robes and singing his lamentations, but because of his *attention*. Attention is the gift of grief, and Adam personifies this gift. His art is that gift passed on to us, and I treasure it just as I did that cassette from dad, who always encouraged me to wonder, *who's that girl?*

text by Phoebe Blatton