



Adnan

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Contents

Matthias Mühling, Susanne Gaensheimer, Kathrin Becker Preface	6
Etel Adnan Surge	11
Simone Fattal Painting as Pure Energy	16
Grégoire Prangé Timeline	31
Essays	65
Sébastien Delot A Multitude of References: Etel Adnan Between Languages and Cultures	67
Morad Montazami Etel Adnan: “Writing a River”	73
Giovanna Zapperi A Tale of Two Women: Etel Adnan and Delphine Seyrig	79
Kathrin Beßen, Melanie Vietmeier “Life is a journey”: Etel Adnan’s <i>Leporellos</i>	84
Catalog	91
Exhibited Works	202
Acknowledgements	206
Photo Credits	206
Imprint	207

Preface

Matthias Mühling, Susanne Gaensheimer, Kathrin Becker

“To transform matter into spirit. To cross the threshold. To abolish all signs, then go after them. To decode the future.”¹

Etel Adnan’s quest to free herself from the shackles of matter into an all-embracing spiritual world is expressed in an artistic, literary, and political oeuvre nourished by her love of nature, humanity, and the entire universe.

The Lenbachhaus in Munich and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf have long desired to develop a survey exhibition dedicated to this important representative of modernism, and now present the first comprehensive retrospective of the Beirut-born artist in Germany. The visual and literary work of Etel Adnan (1925–2021) is characterized by a comprehensive and lively exchange between the Arab and Western worlds. With her oeuvre, the poet, painter, journalist, and philosopher, who spent her life between Lebanon, France, and the United States, combines various art forms, media, languages, and cultures.

Her eventful life was framed by wars, exile, and ever-changing geopolitical conditions. “home’ is one’s life”², she writes in her poem “Night,” lending expression to her nomadic identity. With the Ottoman Empire in decline, she grew up multilingual in Lebanon, which was under French rule until 1943, went to study in Paris, settled in California in 1955, and from then on moved between cultures and continents. Her preoccupation with ever new cultural contexts and the ongoing trans-cultural exchange find expression on an artistic level in an openness to different visual languages and media. Adnan’s clear political stance is also expressed in particular in her literary work, in which she reveals the consequences of colonialism, critically examines forms of oppression, and takes a stand against the Vietnam War. Responding to the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), Adnan refused for some time to continue writing in the language of the colonial power and showed solidarity with Algeria: “I didn’t need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic.”³ During this period, she found in abstract painting a universal language of a spiritually formal principle of design, in which the mystery of colors is consummated.

1 Etel Adnan, “To Be in a Time of War,” in: Thom Donovan and Brandon Shimoda (eds.), *To look at the sea is to become what one is. An Etel Adnan Reader*, Brooklyn & Callicoon: Nightboat Books, 2014, vol. 2, p. 283.

2 Etel Adnan, “In that night,” (2014), kindly supplied by Klaudia Ruschkowski.

3 Etel Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” in: *Etel Adnan Reader* (see note 1), vol. 1, p. 253.

While Etel Adnan has long been known to a broad public as a writer and poet, her painting has only been noticed by the international art public in Europe and North America since dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, and has since been celebrated in several institutional exhibitions, including those at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (2021), the Mudam in Luxembourg (2019), the SFMoMA in San Francisco (2018), the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern (2018), and the Serpentine Gallery in London (2016).

The exhibitions at the Lenbachhaus and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen bring together more than 150 works from all creative phases and media, from the 1960s into the year 2021, thus paying tribute to the diversity of Etel Adnan’s oeuvre, which spans more than six decades. The German edition of this catalog is the first publication in that language to cover her entire pictorial oeuvre. In addition to texts by Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, her partner since the 1970s, the essays shed light on various themes essential to a better understanding of her work. They focus on her relationship with particular art movements of the past that informed her artistic reflection, her interconnections within the Arab world, and her contribution to the renewal of calligraphy, as well as the subsumption of her work within feminist perspectives.

In the course of the project, the KINDL – Centre for Contemporary Art in Berlin has joined as a third partner for the catalog. It will bring works by the artist couple Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal into dialog in a separate show in 2023/2024. A central theme of the exhibition at the KINDL is the importance of language in the works of these artists: Both had a keen interest in philosophy from a young age. Adnan’s preoccupation with poetry and her vision of the “poetic absolute” finds form in poems, paintings, tapestries, drawings, and leporellos. Simone Fattal founded Post-Apollo Press, a publishing house for experimental and innovative literature, in California in 1982 after fleeing Lebanon. The sources of her inspiration for her mostly sculptural works include myths, Sufi poetry, and war narratives.

The exhibitions at the Lenbachhaus and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, represented in the selection of works in this catalog, fit well into the respective programs of the institutions. In recent years, as part of the Federal Cultural Foundation’s initiative “Museum Global. Collections of the 20th Century from a Global Perspective,” both museums have used their own collections to focus on modernist movements elsewhere in the world and to question the Eurocentric art historiography that continues to prevail. Through the projects in question, it became clear how mobility and networking increasingly shaped the twentieth century, and how journals, manifestos, and personal encounters contributed to the circulation of artistic ideas and concepts. With

her anti-colonialist stance and transnationalism, Etel Adnan is not only a symbolic figure for Arab modernism but also stands for the numerous artists who were involved in multiple international aesthetic movements far beyond Europe, which we inadequately associate with “modernity.”

In recent years, both institutions have already been able to purchase paintings by Adnan. These new acquisitions fit naturally into the museums’ collections, as the artist also refers to the pre-war avant-gardes, the cornerstones of their respective collections. The Lenbachhaus in Munich houses the world’s largest collection of works by the Blauer Reiter, while the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen is founded on an extensive body of works by Paul Klee. As the artist Simone Fattal recounts, these were artists Adnan admired, “whose works she toured the world to see—Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Cézanne and Dürer—painters who were also theoreticians and who wrote extensively on painting.”⁴ Thus, many years ago, as part of a visit to the Salzburg Festival, Adnan and Fattal also stopped in Munich, visited the Lenbachhaus and looked at works by the Blauer Reiter. Adnan was particularly interested in Gabriele Münter as a successful woman artist of the avant-garde, whose works are characterized by a reduction of forms and strong color contrasts. While she was still preparing our exhibition, she studied catalogs on the work of Münter.

It was therefore a logical decision to bring Etel Adnan’s oeuvre into dialog with works from the collections concerned. In the case of the Lenbachhaus, the choice fell on paintings by Kandinsky, Münter, and Klee, while the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen also selected works by Klee, as well as by Henri Matisse. Etel Adnan and these artists approached similar questions about form, color, and composition, the intertwining of painting, signs, and writing, and—on a meta-level—the exploration of the cosmic dimensions of time, space, and spirit from different perspectives and during different epochs.

The realization of such an extensive project requires the constructive cooperation and dedicated support of numerous participants. Our deepest gratitude goes to the artist, who enthusiastically discussed and accompanied the exhibition in its early stages before she passed away during the preparatory phase in November 2021 at the age of ninety-six. Her work is an art-historical obligation for us, and this exhibition is dedicated to her memory.

We are profoundly indebted to Simone Fattal; without her support, trust, and aesthetic judgment, this exhibition would be inconceivable. Her commitment and affection mean a great deal to us. Her text “Painting as Pure Energy”—published in German for the first time in this catalog—provides a personal insight into Etel Adnan’s artistic universe and opens up for the viewer an intimate and empathetic view of her art.

4 Simone Fattal, “Painting as Pure Energy,” in this volume, pp. 16–29, here p. 19.

Special thanks are due to Sébastien Delot, curator of the exhibitions and Director of the LaM Lille métropole musée d’art moderne d’art contemporain et d’art brut, who has accompanied Etel Adnan and her work over the course of many years. Without his expertise and his excellent contacts to the lenders, the ambitious exhibitions would not have been possible to this extent and depth. In collaboration with the curators at the museums involved—Melanie Vietmeier for the Lenbachhaus, Kathrin Beßen for the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, and Kathrin Becker for the KINDL—he realized the exhibitions at the participating institutions. Grégoire Prangé, Dierk Höhne, and Catherine Frèrejean also provided valuable support. Special thanks also go to Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, whose film *Ismyrna* will be presented in the exhibitions.

We would like to thank the numerous international institutions and private lenders who entrusted their works to us for the duration of the exhibitions at all three venues. In particular, Etel Adnan’s galleries have provided invaluable assistance during the preparatory phase. It is thanks to Andrée Sfeir-Semler and the team at Galerie Sfeir-Semler that Etel Adnan’s work is given the presence it deserves in international exhibitions and art fairs. It was also Andrée Sfeir-Semler who, for example at the Lenbachhaus, repeatedly encouraged a deeper engagement with the artist. Galerie Lelong in Paris has also provided us with an extensive selection of works by Etel Adnan, including outstanding examples from all phases of her career.

Giovanna Zapperi and Morad Montazami have written illuminating contributions for the catalog, for which we are deeply indebted to them. We would like to thank Hirmer Verlag for including the catalog in their publishing program and Sarah Martinon, Paris, for the elegant design. We would also like to thank the museum staffs in every institution for their dedication and professionalism in producing the catalog, the exhibitions, and the educational programs. The Lenbachhaus is grateful to the Förderverein Lenbachhaus for its constant support. The thanks of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen go to the Rudolf-August Oetker Foundation, which is sponsoring the exhibition project, as well as to the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia for its constant, invariably benevolent support of the museum, through which the realization of such a project has become possible in the first place. And last but not least, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen would also like to thank its media partner, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung.

Surge
Etel Adnan



The bells of revenge are tolling: a spirit must be inhabiting these so-called inanimate things—that our theologies have despised for so long—as we have to deal with countless kinds of spirits, each with an assigned residence.

Waves keep coming but the sea doesn't move, and sunrises are parallel to sunsets.

Clouds of dust are filling the sky from end to end. We're out of sync with words. They remind us of atoms as they fuse their parts to create continuity, words making thoughts, particles making matter ... where's the difference? Let's leave reality deal with itself.

Every time I say "I know" I must be meaning "I am" (that simple?!). I keep repeating I am night, a statement as treacherous as the seasons, as unpredictable as they are, sensitive to humidity, improbable.

If you want to rest from the moon's haunting power, take a pencil and write on paper: "moon", then stop. That's what Bob Grenier does. Some

follow the trajectory of a ball in a ball game. Others see the hand of God on a gun's trigger. Poets remain the keeper of language, for whatever it's worth.

What about the painters? They "keep" nothing. They gather for drinks, for many drinks, after a day's work; their kind of a language has yet to be decoded.

Birds fly, and leave no traces.

Nothing ever rests, least of all this engine we call the brain, with its continuous soft nuclear eruption that we call the mind. But the stomach contains more neurons than this brain we hold in such awe; we mistreat this repository of food until we find some cures for its illnesses.

I am probably a "rainy" night, thick and soft, en route to encounter Paul Klee's (or his phantom's) stride over the land, and Roger Snell's letters, (and pebbles, the asphalt, wandering nymphs, remembrances of cold, frozen fields).

During a darkest night I did away with the word “I” on my way to being just a being. The land was of the past. We will soon return to inhabiting trees (if any are left).

It’s alright; the earth’s crust is incredibly thin and the fire underneath erupts as volcanoes. Did Empedocles ever water his rosebushes? If he had done so he would have lived longer, how to know?

This pure moment: light over light.

Space expanding, getting out of the way.

*

Silence in free fall. And water watering itself.

Further away light eating at light annihilating itself in greater intensity, entering the infinite.

Flowers are as obsolete as people. If you had to choose between the Mississippi and your neighbor wouldn’t you rather vote for the grand river’s survival? I would.

The city is sinking in repression. In front of the church of Saint Sulpice there’s a huge poster advertising the perfect family: a little boy, his father, and a robot. Did the robot replace the mother, or is he (or it) considered the ideal playmate for the child?

The feeling of a subtle and imminent apocalypse is taking hold of the place, in contrast to the flowing waters of the fountain that enchant the area.

In the church, Delacroix’s angels feel that they would need to return to paradise to warn their legions that a new Faust is born, as the old Faust has been revised, then murdered.

They already see that the robot that’s arrogantly standing on the wall, in open air, will grow and multiply, that old ladies, worn down by their loneliness, will soon, by the millions, fall desperately in love with him. The angels will cry.

*

Oh, to come down from Dante’s Paradise and end up spending afternoons with these creatures whose skulls are made of steel, and eyes of glass!

Bells are ringing, farmers are out on the streets. The beach will linger on the perimeter of one’s sleep.

In sleep, lands.

Labyrinths reach for open air—the open fields of southern Greece.

It’s essential not to lose one’s mind, even knowing that minds come cheap, inflation affecting them too; every head one sees in the street is carrying (at least) one.

The real requires patience. “The love that moves the sun and other stars” never wears a mask: It’s available. It’s generous, too. And let’s be as resilient as it is.

We keep wondering about the mind’s resting place, in relation to reality. How do they manage

to put up with each other? Mind is not reason, not an entity. It covers matter as moisture will do. It functions smoothly one day, then drifts ...

Sometimes mind becomes submissive. If it were an energy it would have had an origin, but does it have one? It’s not spatial, but it is the one to say so. We focus it on ideas, on itself too. To gain what? And who is this “we”?

*

The universe may end as sheer light ... the light might not end.

I am the tide that incessantly moves, and we incessantly part away.

Mind can be gone; how to figure out where and why?! In the here and now, we’re mulling over the slaughter of Moby Dick in the cold waters of the Arctic by Japanese killer-gangs, fishermen-daemons.

In the world at large there will be no attention paid to this archetypal aquatic hero, no burial. His death is the terminal episode of a confrontation that pitted the American nation against the rest of the world for more than a couple of centuries.

This time he has been killed not by Ahab, the father, but for a pitiful amount of money.

Saying this, all there’s left on the scene is the policeman over there, watching.

Mount Fuji surged during a summer night and Earth made room for it.

Poets resist the worship of death. Death is powerful, all too-powerful, but it’s death, so we shouldn’t even give it a name. But we feel too well this surging of a fear in the obscurity of the organs, this obscurity, this incestuous pain.

*

Yellow leaves in yellow wind.

The religion of the Chinese is their history, pretty soon, our own.

We pretend to imagine a galaxy, we’re crazy, after all. The cosmos wants to retire, why not? Hail and thunder are its voice on this side of its beauty. We hold onto anything that comes by: a twig, a sound.

As we’re always living in prehistory, the future will never happen.

Where, and why, make good questions when the fog covers our space totally or a marriage goes wrong. Wondering over such matters gets us nowhere, but to live is also to think.

We can’t stop this inner flow, this river of ideas that traverses our brain, that we freeze, and call it mind, call it the bed of reality.

There’s a sweetness to existence, a saying renewed, shadows that bring rest, the attenuation of angles, the growth of plants ...

The trees by the edge of the terrace carry on their tops my desire to soar, but I am made of fluids. And I need friends. I would have in this very

moment gone fly-fishing with Russell Chatham, though it had to happen sooner.

The voyage to the sun is a voyage into the past.

After his long trips into California's wilderness, rafting and climbing, Russell always came home to his desk and writing, his studio and painting. I see the silence that surrounds him like the sky does his canvases. In love's deepest sense.

This morning the fog entered the door, crossed the room, then went straight out the window. Me, observing for a lifetime this very event. Absurdity happens daily.

Standing by the Pacific Ocean. The ocean.

Paradise has rivers, it has been said. I think that it's a dry country with only mountains.

Madness can run as a sweat over the brain (and on the rest of the body) and evaporate from the line of one's head.

We live in days when we mistreat Nature, and keep asking her to come to our rescue.

It's given, then taken away.

*

At some point, we'll stand, move, go, will not return.

Time continues to speed frantically, remembering that it was once a divinity. It knew then, at least, what it was.

We pretend to measure the invisible and the unknown. It can all be just some entertainment. Better to claim ignorance, with pride, (we need the pride of not knowing, the breathing space).

Some weight has fallen over my house, (it spared the apple trees of the garden). In the interval, many thoughts expressed in many languages have piled up.

Thinking takes time, and probably resembles time, as we can't figure out what each is, or how they interact, or view themselves.

The tide comes at its own pace; this is why it never commits a crime.

Reality started to flow in the courtyard we name the real; we have no idea how the transformation came to be, or where in hot days the water is going—Philosophy used to deal with such things, but it ended in bankruptcy, like downtown, the banks.

Let the dead bury the dead; that's what we told a man who had just lost a son to a car accident. In the harbor, lines of boats—as bouncy as ever—are getting ready to go, to start a voyage out, and the place is resonating with voices.

Between the will and its destination there might be fields and fields. But the will can bend and not recede. I still prefer love's power, though it keeps us dangling between obscurity and daylight.

Love is the result of a throw of dice, Mallarmé's historic throw. Sometimes it surges with the evidence of a theorem in geometry, cleans out everything on its way—lands us on a remote planet, yet, it can sink in a gutter, kicking fallen leaves down the side of a dirt road ...

A radical pain traversed my life from end to end—a large band of light crossed the moon's hidden face. That kind of motion alters the world.

“Not all days are ripe for keeping”
Yes, Tom, they're not.

We said that predicting something may bring about its end; so I will suspend judgment. Anyway, our financial systems are weaving around our necks a network of steel in which we're entangled slowly and surely ...

*

Painting as Pure Energy Simone Fattal

The first time I saw Etel Adnan's visual work was in a series of long Japanese folding books in which she had quietly effected a revolution in Arabic calligraphy. These books unfolded in front of one's eyes as "readings" of poetry taking place in the parallel worlds of color and sensory perception. She had written out poems by the major contemporary Arab poets, each in a unique way, not trying to conform to the canons of calligraphy, and had accompanied them with drawings, watercolors, ink and pen work. The poems were brought to life more rapidly than if one followed the words alone. Also the tenderness of her line brought an immense emotion and empathy to the text and to its reading, so that the moment of this reading became intensely present in the imagination. The drawings and watercolors added a dimension of poignancy and urgency to the text, which was seen by Adnan twice, once as a text and once as an image. The reader was thus given three interpretations: that of the poet, the transcriber, and the painter.

Adnan worked in my studio for a few years soon after we met in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1972 as I had a large studio that could offer her space and freedom. The first time she used it was to draw a tree in watercolors. This flowering tree was a revelation. I looked at it for a long time. It had a lot in common with the world of Arab miniatures. It stood on the page diagonally, its flowers freshly shivering in the outside air, its colors unobtrusive and discreet, almost shy. A young tree.

I invited her to paint in my studio whenever her work at the newspaper *al-Safa* left her some free time. She would come on the weekends and work. Was it the urgency of time available or her own impatient energy that made her always finish an oil painting in one sitting? I would come later and discover the whole world transcribed on the surface of the canvas. She worked the canvas like a sheet of paper, the canvas laid on the table, using a palette knife instead of a brush. She imposed on it squares and masses—with vivid bright stretches of colors. I was startled by the difference from the original tree that I had seen. All the shyness had disappeared. In oil, Adnan had an assuredness rarely seen in other painters' works. The world was summoned and summarized on the canvas.

The first two canvases she painted in my studio were titled *Syria* and *Lebanon*. *Syria* was pink and *Lebanon* was blue. *Syria*: a pink sky, or was it earth—the pink the desert takes on? The Syrian hills are pink in the sunset and early dawn, and the Lebanese mountains are all shades and hues of blue due to the proximity of the sea. Strong, compact squares, hermetic because of the amount of intense color they contained, punctuated their skies and space. One could read the whole *esprit* of a place on one canvas. It was not only that place on that particular day when the sky was grey and some mist was getting in, it was the place the way it will always be, containing as well the very moment that place was portrayed. Adnan said once: "it is not because painting is visual that it is always comprehensible." The visual is a language one has to learn, the way one learns French or Spanish or German.

Adnan started as an abstract painter, using large squares compactly juxtaposed or floating on a background, or else with smaller squares composing a line that divided the area of the canvas or floated somewhere across its surface. Among these hermetic squares, there was always a red one. It was as if the rest of the composition emerged from this red square. Around it the world—its lines of forces, the large picture—organized itself. During a discussion of a show of Adnan's paintings in California, much later, I heard this comment: "It is as if you are seeing this from very far away." Indeed, her landscapes are seen from very far away, in order to reveal the whole picture.

It is only with painters that we know how he or she actually sees. In Adnan's world the landscape is compressed on a small surface. Only the strong lines, the large undercurrents emerge.

There are no people in her oil paintings; it is the world she is looking at, the beautiful physical earth with its mountains, hills, rivers and colors. She is a person *in the world*, in the sense Jean-Paul Sartre gave to that expression. Much as she talks about the social aspect of the universe in her writing, she talks about the physical beauty

of the universe in her painting. As she said: “Painting expresses my happy side, the one who is at one with the universe.” We must also say here that she is always at one with her environment. That is how she wrote in the most significant way about Paris, in her essay *Paris, When It’s Naked* (The Post-Apollo Press, 1993), and about some cities in general in *Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* (The Post-Apollo Press, 1993). A retrospective at the Wattis Center in San Francisco, in 2013, was titled *Words and Places*.

Adnan is a colorist. “Les coloristes sont des poètes épiques” (colorists are epic poets), said Baudelaire.¹ Who better than Adnan to be described in this way, since she is already an epic poet in words? There is an epic vision and rendering in these extraordinary canvases. She is tackling the world, wrestling with it, with love and passion. She told me once: “When I die, the universe will have lost its best friend, someone who loved it with passion.” She is in love with the beauty of it. She has a need to see color, and not at all to use the crayon as pen: “I started using oil pastels on their side, as bands of color, surfaces of color.” Color contains its own mystery.

In Beirut, she was in love with the sea. It is the sea she could see while walking from her home to school, from school to her place of work. During her childhood the sea in Beirut could be seen from everywhere. All the streets descended towards it. The sea was the subject of her first poem (only published in Arabic), *The Book of The Sea* (ca. 1951). In it, the Sea and the Sun are forever mating, and forever wrestling with each other. Both of these elements were to come in full force again in her writings, and paintings: *The Arab Apocalypse*, *Sea*, and the recent pictures. Most paintings she has made in Lebanon contain the reflective effects of the sea on the earth and mountains that border it.

One day in 1974, she went to Iraq to attend a Biennale of Arab painting. It had taken place in the early spring when the rains are plentiful, and as always in Iraq the mud was overwhelming. The Tigris carried huge amounts of eroded earth. When she came back to Beirut, she painted a large painting, with a pink river Tigris in the middle of which stood two rafts—two squares—following the flow to the fresh cadmium green banks of the river. (That is her secret, more often than not she will use paint fresh from the tube, as is). The picture was a Persian miniature in its spirit but needed a large scale to express it. That painting was exhibited at Dar al-Fann (a Lebanese cultural centre that existed between 1967 and 1975) along with another big painting of Mount Sannine.

¹ Charles Baudelaire, “Critiques d’art, III: De La Couleur,” in: *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961, p. 885.

Adnan started painting in California, while she was teaching Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art at Dominican College in San Rafael. She started teaching there in 1958. One day on her way to class Adnan met the art teacher Ann O’Hanlon. Ann asked her: “How can you teach philosophy of Art and not paint yourself?” Adnan heard herself answer, “My mother said I was clumsy.” And Ann said, “And you believed her?” This simple question and answer freed her hands and soon, at Ann’s invitation, she started using a table by a window in the Art department overlooking a little creek and fig trees. She painted on sample pieces of canvas, leftovers, irrespective of their size and shape.

She found her style immediately. Using a palette knife she applied large bands of color juxtaposed with each other. Many thought of Nicolas de Staël when looking at these early canvases; she acknowledges a family spirit. It is as if she and Nicolas de Staël use the same vocabulary. But unlike in the work of de Staël, there is no hesitation in her choice of colors and their masses. De Staël returns across an area over and over again. In the caesura between masses you can almost read the sequence of layers of colors used, for he almost always leaves traces of them, until he finds the one he will settle on. Adnan finds her definitive shape and color at once. Someone said: “Your painting is decisive.” It is the way her whole being is: no hesitation. There is no hiatus between the inception and the laying down on the page. It is all there from the first moment. When she poses her color on the page, it is the definitive color. She already mentally mastered her subject and she lands it down. Clear perception, clear execution.

Adnan’s paintings are austere, almost severe. No facile effects, no adornments, no concession to the viewer: a simple statement about a proposed moment. Her paintings are succinct in the same way her writing is. She says it all in a few words. She lives in a rarefied world the way that monks do on the tops of mountains.

When Adnan started making these abstract paintings, Ann O’Hanlon changed her whole philosophy of teaching Art. She questioned: “Well, if Etel can paint so perfectly, spontaneously, then anyone can do it.” Ann left her job at the college and started workshops at her house, inviting members, teaching that art was just another way of perceiving. *We all perceive*.

Adnan continued the journey opened by her first encounter with the canvas. She looked up and painted. The essence of painting is this immediacy between the view and the canvas. We all perceive but the best rendering is from the one who does not let his or her ego get in the way. Ann organised a show at her studio and Professor Pepper, the

Aesthetics Professor at U.C. Berkeley—with whom she had come to prepare a PhD, when she came from Paris—attended and marveled. Indeed, there is an element of marvel in Adnan's work. It is as if a child discovers the way the world works, and the way to say it for the first time. Baudelaire describes it in this way: "Le génie est l'enfance retrouvée à volonté" (Genius is childhood found at will),² and when you say childhood, you mean for the first time. Therefore you also say innocence, which is truthfulness. If one is to understand her writing about the practice of her art, which she describes in her book *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, a work of art cannot be done without a strict adherence to a moral and honest behavior. Ideally she would have liked to create another Bauhaus, to work with a group of artists-artisans, and change the world. She was going to build this ideal in Lebanon, in a village, before the war killed a fellow organizer and killed the Lebanon where such a project could have taken place.

She conceives the artist as artisan too—the artisan of beauty and truth. One enters art as into religion and pledges truthfulness, for without it one cannot produce a work of art. In Adnan's case I would add that her truthfulness goes beyond, to a subject almost always situated outside herself. It is never her own "état d'âme" that is the subject of her art, but rather the outside world, the challenge of a world-event or a commission: "L'être au monde" using colors and canvas. (This *l'être au monde* was first defined by Baudelaire. The artist was, for him "Homme du monde," a man in the world).³

The concept of the cosmic started to appear in her work when the Apollo program took men to the moon and opened this new dimension to mankind, so earth-bound up to this point. The moon lost its status of unattainable good, and the universe became somewhere one could go to. Adnan immediately produced a large series of brush works entitled *The Apollo Series*. For this series she devised her own colors, making yellows and greens with onion skins and pomegranates, adding these dyes to the commercial watercolors and ink. She still produces these home-made colors on her table and uses them in her leprellos.

Adnan went on painting, all the while writing notes on her experience and on perception. After her beginning as an abstract colorist, she turned her attention to Mount Tamalpais. There in front of her window, everywhere in Marin County, where she was living, walking to Dominican College from home, or driving to go to the movies, the mountain was there. It became her point of reference, her home far from home. She looked at and lived with the mountain even after she

2 Charles Baudelaire, "Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne", in *Ibid.*, p. 1156.

3 The phrase "Homme du monde" is taken from a subsection of Baudelaire's "Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne", titled: 'L'artiste, L'Homme du Monde, homme des foules et l'enfant', in *Ibid.*, p. 1156.

returned to Beirut. All the time she was painting the mountain, drawing it in oil, watercolor, ink, or a combination of all of these. She made thousands of these drawings. The natural pyramidal shape of the mountain became embedded in her whole being. It became her identity. She could draw it while in Lebanon, at night and at dawn; the mountain was for her an ever-revealing mystery, an ongoing manifestation. I wonder whether in those days she loved someone as much as she loved Mount Tamalpais.

Her involvement with the mountain lasted until she published *Journey To Mount Tamalpais* in 1986. By the time the book was published, Adnan had been working on the mountain for twenty-three years. Her philosophical training and her specialization in aesthetics came together in this book. It is a philosophical meditation on the relationship between Nature and Art—in other words, on the meaning of perception—which she wrote over a period of twenty years, piling up her notes. (The element of time is telling, when we know that she wrote the novel *Sitt Marie Rose* in one month in 1977). Through her praxis as a painter she discovered her basic philosophy—we can also call it her credo—that the Universe is One. The relation of her journey into this praxis is that of a student of the meaning of Art. She is in dialog with the painters she likes, whose works she toured the world to see—Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Cézanne and Dürer—painters who were also theoreticians and who wrote extensively on painting. She was also teaching writings by painters in her aesthetics classes, believing that these were much more important and more accessible than the dry writings of theoreticians like Hegel or Panovsky [sic]. She included Leonardo's writings, Van Gogh's letters, and the journal of Delacroix, to name just a few. Her paintings are conceived in regard to those artists. They are the correspondents with whom she argues, on whose work she builds. They are familiar and family.

When abroad, the unfamiliar place opens up new sensory information, a new understanding of things. Suddenly one sees. We can cite Klee in Tunisia, exclaiming: "Color possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always. I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: Color and I are one. I am a painter";⁴ also the crucial travels of Renoir, Marquet and Matisse to North Africa; the trip that Dürer, and after him all the French painters, like Le Lorrain or Géricault, took to Italy, and the coming back of Cézanne to Aix-en-Provence.

In Lebanon, during the years she spent there from 1972–1975, Adnan created a body of work focusing on its landscape. Lebanon's high mountain, Mount Sannine, was never able to replace Mount Tamalpais in her work, although she has painted it—but who knows, if she had stayed in Lebanon...?

4 Paul Klee, "926 o. Thursday 16 April 1914", in *The Diaries of Paul Klee 1898–1918*, trans. Pierre Schneider, ed. Felix Klee, Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1964, p. 297.

When she was a child Adnan was asked what she wanted to become when she grew up, and she said she wanted to be an architect. It was a scandal for a woman to even aspire to be an architect, and so she attended the Ecole des Lettres, because it was a night school and she could go there after her daytime job. Her early paintings possessed a solid structure, an inner organisation, the vocabulary of an architect: squares and cubes mounted on each other, containing the possibility of matter. I should add that architects relate immediately to her work, and that she has a passion for architecture.

And so the square made room for the mountain. The square divided itself into a pyramid, which happened to be the mountain's form—a pyramid soon inhabited with spheres. To draw a sphere one needs a line, and the line led to an innumerable number of watercolors and drawings of the mountain. She drew Mount Tamalpais everywhere and all the time. She imagined the essence of it. She saw underneath its surface a number of Native Americans locked inside. A mountain of glass. As she writes in *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*:

“One October night, I dreamed that the whole Mountain was made of glass, with long and rusty streaks of kelp within it. I was lying over it, looking in, and discovering [Native Americans] telling me with sign language and impatient gestures that they were imprisoned for centuries.”⁵

Adnan reached a moment where she was (not quite) finished with the general shape of the mountain—seen at dusk, when the blue hues invade the whole universe, seen with rain and clouds. She was able to paint it moving, under the clouds, moving towards the sea. She saw it also as a Powerful Woman. These instances of perception are also related in her text. So she started painting close-ups, details. It was at the end of the winter when the mountain is green. This series of green pastures, patches of mountain earth, are quite astounding; they are a harmony of greens, illuminated with only a line of red that upholds the whole composition.

There are only a few of these paintings because she had to stop in order to have the show on the mountain series at the San Rafael Civic Center. This is where the book, the paintings, and watercolors and the leporellos were exhibited in the gallery of this building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, one of her heroes. I was especially able to appreciate his design when the show was taken later to Paris. The white cube of the Paris gallery did not convey the same magic, although both openings were great events. The curved walls in San Rafael and their rusty color had enhanced the strong, powerful paintings.

5 Etel Adnan, *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1986, p. 23.

Adnan's paintings play the role the old icons used to play for people who believed. They exude energy and give energy.

They shield you like talismans. They help you live your everyday life. I have noticed that people who have her paintings will more often than not keep them in their innermost chambers and not in their living rooms like *objets d'art*. The quickness of their making, the fact that they are finished in one sitting, their compactness, their one clear message, with nothing diluted or lost, convey the happiness experienced while painting them, the joy of using color. They reflect praise of the universe, the experience of it, immersion in it, participation in its formation. No lamentation, no elegy. Love.

Do colors have the power to break the time barrier, and carry us into Outer Space, not only those made of miles and distances, but those of the accumulated experience of life since its beginnings or unbeginning?⁶

“I am sitting as usual in front of Mount Tamalpais. I can't get over its deep greens. It is clear, it is empty. My spirit is anguished by color. Color is the sign of the existence of life. I feel like believing, being in a state of pure belief, of affirmation. I exist because I see colors. Sometimes, at other moments, it is as if I didn't exist, when colors seem foreign, unreachable, impregnable fortresses. But there is no possession of color, only the acceptance of its reality. And if there is no possibility for the possession of color, there is no possession at all. Of whatever it is.”⁷

This is the lesson of painting. We are here to perceive, and it is exhilarating, for when perception does happen it is a manifestation and perfect fulfilment. But this fulfilment does not last. Some trace of it gets on the paper, if we are able to catch it and freeze it. Painting as a lesson of purity of mind. Purity of purpose. Painting as an affirmation of life, of its very constitution.

We think in metaphors, for when the body is asleep, the mind works in images. It tells us in images what few people understand and know how to decipher. Those who understand this language we impart with special powers.

I always thought that dreaming was the honor of the human species. The logic of dreams is superior to the one we exercise while awake. In dreams the mind finds at last its courage: it dares what we do not dare. It also creates... and it perceives reality beyond our fuzzy interpretations.”⁸

“Sometimes while painting, something wild gets unleashed. Something of the process of dreams recurs... but with a special kind of

6 Ibid., p. 52.

7 Ibid., p. 51.

8 Ibid., p. 23.

violence: a painting is like a territory. All kind [sic] of things happen within its boundary, equal to the discoveries of the murders or the creations we have in the world outside.”⁹

Painting as pure energy, with which to live one’s life—with courage.

...

Let us go back to the description of Adnan’s paintings. The palette knife makes a thick paste, like the grain of earth. The taste of the land is on the canvas. Grainy, uneven, with accidents, with ups and downs, with more or less color, more or less substance. She follows the landscapes as it moves:

“Now the clouds are grandiose and turbulent. An autumn storm is coming. Whatever makes mountains rise, and us, with them, makes color restless and ecstatic. At my right, the Tiburon hills are somberly yellow. They have a strange power in their color. Is this pale gold on the surface of these hills so extraneous to its own place, that it makes my mind jump into the notion of some past I never knew and which still strangely I relate to them? Otherwise why do these dark and light hues of yellowish metal make me think of Louis The XIVth, of one of his incursions into Europe, of a particular day of his life, that remains lingering between the known and the unknown, that I see clearly and at the same time cannot pinpoint and give as precise reference. Do colors have the power to break the Time barrier...?”¹⁰

Adnan has been able to achieve paintings that one can pinpoint to the moment of the day, very precisely. A day in the autumn, or late spring, at the end of the afternoon when it has been raining, the sky has recovered its brilliance, and the moment is nostalgic yet shining. The hills are shining with clarity, but you feel the wetness and the happiness of the renewed freshness.

Painting as knowledge.

“But can I ever understand what Cézanne says in Mont Sainte-Victoire, and Hokusai in Mount Fuji, if after thirty years, I don’t know what Tamalpais means to me beyond the sketches, paintings, and writings that involved me with her. I know that the process of painting and writing gives me the implicit certitude of what the Mountain is and of what I see: I perceive a nature proper to her while I work. Tamalpais has an autonomy of being. So does a drawing of it. But they are mysteriously related.”¹¹

“A visual expression belongs to an order of understanding which bypasses word-language. We have in us autonomous languages for autonomous perceptions. We should not waste time in trying

9 Ibid., p. 26.

10 Ibid., p. 52.

11 Ibid., p. 55.

ordinary understanding. We should not worry either. There is no rest in any kind of perception. The fluidity of the mind is of the same family as the fluidity of being. Sometimes they coincide sharply. We call that a revelation. When it involves a privileged ‘object’ like a particular moment, we call it an illumination.”¹²

“To see in order to paint. To paint in order to see. Cézanne moves within this circle. With no satisfaction, no resting point. Bobby said: ‘Cézanne is a Newtonian machine thrown into an Einsteinian space.’ Yes, Nietzsche also: his nine summers in Sils Maria were nine ascensions into the next century. Not a single soul saw the shape of his ideas, because he was a peak visited by a clarity coming from the sun and invisible from below. Mountains are transitions. They are impatient spaceships. Cézanne knows it. His works start with a calm perspective and then, space-bound, attain the velocity of light.”¹³

Hers is an Apollonian world, and a Dionysian world at the same time.

...

Now to the pen. I call pen work everything that does not use the palette knife, which includes the brush, with ink and watercolors, crayons and pencils. Over the years, Adnan has developed a masterly brush work that some equate to the Japanese and Chinese masters. During her frequent visits to New York she stayed in an apartment on the 33rd floor overlooking the East River, from whose windows she could see six or more bridges. There ensued a whole series of thick black ink drawings of the New York bridges, with barges passing under them or anchored on their pylons. They are on Japanese papers so thin that they are transparent. The contrast between the strong lines of the subject matter and the fragility of the material on which they stand makes one wonder about the materiality of the world. They were the sole object of a beautiful show in Beirut at the Janine Rubeiz gallery.

These bridges and barges, and the constant passing of the latter over the ever incessant movement of the East River was to become the subject matter of yet another aspect of Etel’s work: films. During those years, the late seventies and eighties, when her transhumance took her from Paris to California and back she always had a Super 8 camera with her, with which she tried to also capture the movement of the water, the shimmering that light provokes over water and glass. Thus the glass skyscrapers around the building where she was staying entered the same research into light and matter that was the subject matter of a great amount of the Super 8 movies shot during that period. They were to be edited into the film *Motion* (2012) that premiered

12 Ibid., p. 55.

13 Ibid., p. 57.

during dOCUMENTA (13) in 2012, where Adnan was invited to show her paintings, and to be at the same time a writer-in-residence, giving readings, conferences, and showing the movie.

She then made a corresponding series of the stone bridges of Paris: smaller, more squarish, closer to the water and to the people, always used, always crossed. One of them is an echo of Baudelaire's poem: "Le soleil moribond s'endormir sous une arche."¹⁴ Indeed, we see the sun setting in the middle of the arch. One can still live the experience as one walks by the Seine's banks at sunset. The New York bridges are different: hardly walked on, or by rising higher in their metallic structures, belonging more to the pure realm of structure, being only lines.

In the Japanese folding books color comes back, also writing. The Japanese folding books were given to her by an artist who used to sit in San Francisco and draw the faces of the people around him for days on end. She met him in one of these cafés, The Buena Vista, and after a few encounters he gave her one book that he had started and told her: "this is yours to continue."

Unlike a drawing which one sees all at once on a page in one glance, these leporellos as they are also called were closer to being read, continuously. The fact that they unfold page after page led her to think that they had to be read in this way, page after page, that they were closer to traditional writing than drawing. In fact, she was discovering what the Chinese tradition knew all along, that *writing is drawing*. They were also very cinematic in their essence. One can see one image after another, there is a development, a *narrative*. Film was one of the arts she included in her teaching at Dominican College, taking her students to Berkeley to see the legendary Pauline Kael's movie sessions in an underground garage in the 60s.

Once the leporello was in her hand, she immediately thought of poetry. She missed Beirut and the Arab world; also the Algerian War of independence was raging. She embarked on the project of putting the great contemporary Arab poets into drawings. It was for her an artistic discovery and a political statement. Using her own handwriting, she wrote each poem in a very legible way, giving it a visual equivalent, each time evoking a totally different feeling, using watercolors, crayons, inks, pen, pencil, and brush. Sometimes the poem was accompanied by the landscape in which it had been read, other times, by signs, numbers, and geometrical symbols. Each book is unique. She showed the greatest invention in this innovative endeavour. These manuscripts are an anthology of contemporary poetry. She first started with Arab

poets—Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Yusuf al-Khal, Adonis, Mahmoud Darwich, Buland al-Haidari, Fadhil al-Azzawi, Georges Schehadé, Thérèse Awwad, Samia Tutungi to name only a few; sometimes she worked on her own poetry. Later she added American and French poets, among those Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud, Guillevic, Barbara Guest, Lyn Hejinian, Wendell Berry, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Duncan McNaughton, and many others.

She never made a manuscript of an ancient poet's work. She never wanted to just make a beautiful book. These manuscripts are political in the sense that they represent poets who are alive, working today, in the here and now. Most of the time she gave the "book" to the poet, wanting him or her to see himself or herself read in this special way. They were responses to a living text. She was a translator of a score. She saw the manuscript as a collaborative work.

These books are also a way of entering the element of time in a painting. One unfolds the scroll as one sees the landscape or the poem, bit by bit, and it is therefore closer to the way these things happen to one in real life. You look at a landscape page after page, you look again and the color has changed, the clouds have moved, the boat has left the harbor. The whole remains in your mind in a composite image; the scroll keeps the different moments alive, and allows you to read the images in their different stages, or in a totally different combination. You open the scroll on page one. You follow the sequence on page two. But if you open the page one and put it face to face with page seven, they are also a perfect sequence. Is it a chance occurrence? It cannot be, for it never fails: in all of these books the pages work together in every combination possible. It just tells us how the inner clock of Etel Adnan combines and absorbs the perfect unity of all the elements.

The leporellos are monumental works; they unfold to become, at times, several feet long, and yet can be transported in one's pocket. They are wonderfully modern in this way: they are minimalist and grandiose at the same time; they are also intimate and unobtrusive. They do not sit on your walls forever until they lose the impact of their beauty. They can be placed in a drawer and looked at only when the time is right for this particular contemplation. They are in many collections and institutions, notably the British Museum. They are the ones to have been noticed first by curators in England, which led the Institut du monde arabe to acquire the big *Zikr* they own, before the Institut had even opened its doors. The Bibliothèque Nationale included them in their beautiful exhibit in 2003, *L'Art Du Livre Arabe*, choosing her work to go on the brochures announcing and publicising the event. An

14 Charles Baudelaire, line from the sonnet "Recueillement," from *Les Fleurs du mal*, in *Oeuvres Complètes* 1961 (see note 1; footnote added by the editors of the catalog).

exhibition in 1979 that came as a surprise to Adnan was titled *Dessins d'Ecrivains*. A fellow poet asked Etel to lend one of her leporellos. She did, asking no questions. Then came the invitation to the opening, which took place in the beautiful castle of Ancy-le-Franc in Burgundy, France. When she arrived she found herself in the most unexpected company. Here with Etel's drawings were the works of Victor Hugo, George Sand, Rimbaud, Proust, and many other luminaries.

Adnan has also worked on tapestry and ceramic designs. She worked with the renowned tapestry artist Ida Grae. She wove and dyed wool herself. She also wrote "Notes on Weaving", a text that was published in a literary magazine in Lebanon, *Les Cahiers de l'Oronte*, and which has just been republished by Galerie Lelong in Paris. Her designs are exclusively made for tapestry. In them we find again the use of vivid colors and large areas of single colors. All of her tapestries are monumental, excessively colorful. But in contrast with the paintings, each stretch of color is impregnated with a number of other shades of color in order to make the wool vibrate. During her retrospective at Mathaf (the Arab Museum of Modern Art) in Doha Qatar, in 2014, two monumental ceramic walls in strong vivid colors were installed in the gardens of the Women's University; they will remain on view in the open air. With that project a most important wish was fulfilled, to see her work in a public space, outdoors, to be shared by all. For to her public art is the most important of all aspects of art.

Lately, she has been using these leporellos more for black ink and pen work depicting gardens, parks, (notably the beautiful park in Kassel) which she did while in residence there. She had actually started way before drawing her own park in Point Reyes, California, where she had set up her studio after the completion of the Mount Tamalpais period. And where she painted new hills and rivers, with a whole different palette. In these landscapes she no longer used compact, tense masses of color, but recognisable hills and rivers. The result was nearer to what we expect to find on a canvas entitled "Landscape". It was still made of stretches of color, but the point of view had become nearer to the subject. The square had disappeared little by little. It is as if these squares had opened up and one could see what each of them contained. Here we can say that with time, she had moved closer to painters like Arthur Dove, and Milton Avery.

The invitation to exhibit at DOCUMENTA (13) came in 2010. It had been a few years since Etel had painted. Being in Beirut, and living in an apartment near the sea, where she could see the sun set every evening, the setting sun invaded the canvas. A sun going deep

into the sea. The sea, her first love and her first subject in poetry, as we have already said, prevailed. The sun and the sea, her two dear elements, living in her imagination since that first poem, written in the same city (and never published), two elements in her psyche making love to each other for ever and ever. One entering the other, and the other emerging from the one, in an eternal and immutable ballet of love, movement, and color.

This subject, cosmic in its dimensions and impact, did not end after Etel left Beirut for Paris. There she went on producing small paintings, going more and more deeply into a cosmos of her own imagination; sometimes, two suns occupy the space. You cannot tell which one is rising, where, and which one is setting. Where are they going? While the universe in its totality is apprehended, and the planets are moving towards and away from us on their orbits, we witness in some canvases a slow accumulation of hills, foreboding in their aspect and color, with no apparent link to real landscape, to anything *déjà vu*. Unless one imagines that these formations can be seen on the moon.

I asked her recently about her most recent works: "What are these landscapes for you?" "I want to be there, I want to go outdoors. I could never climb mountains, because of my back pains. They are the places I miss." These are exact mental landscapes. These landscapes, she actually sees. Therefore they exist. As real as fiction, or more real than fiction. Or fiction more real than real.

As a result, Adnan's painting has become freer, bolder, even more imaginative. California is now too far away. She can't travel there, so California has grown in significance. Its importance in her imagination is equivalent to the cosmos. The cosmos has always been present, but now she really paints it.

This text was first published in *Etel Adnan: In All Her Dimensions* (Doha: Mathaf-Skira and London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), and was subsequently reprinted to accompany the exhibition *Etel Adnan: The Weight of the World* at the Serpentine North Gallery, London (June 2 – September 11, 2016). Amendments in spelling and punctuation have been made to conform to overall American usage.

Timeline

Grégoire Prangé, edited by Sébastien Delot in early conversation with Etel Adnan

1925

Etel Adnan is born on February 24, 1925, in Beirut, to a Greek mother and a Syrian father, a onetime officer in the Ottoman army and a former classmate of Atatürk's at the military academy. Her parents had met and married in Smyrna in 1913, before moving to Beirut at the time of the fall of the Ottoman Empire, in 1923.

"My mother was a Greek from Smyrna, and my father a Syrian from Damascus, who belonged to a family where the men served in the Army of the Ottoman Empire. He was the commander of Smyrna during the First World War and although he was already married and the father of a boy and of two girls, he married my mother who was about twenty years younger than he was. His first family had remained in Damascus.¹ Before World War I, Smyrna [*present-day Izmir*] was a predominantly Greek city, a Greek-speaking community within the Ottoman Empire. [...] I was born into a world totally different from the one my parents knew. The Allies had occupied the Arab Middle East and had divided it; the French kept for themselves a region they sub-divided into Syria and Lebanon."²

1926

On May 23, 1926, Lebanon is given a constitution under the authority of the French political scientist Henry de Jouvenel, then French High Commissioner for Syria and Lebanon. From the outset, the challenge for the newly founded parliamentary republic was the struggle to maintain the balance between the different religious groups (Christians, and Shia and Sunni Muslims).

“As children we were told that we have a guardian angel just behind our right shoulder, and a bad angel behind the left one. I was puzzled. I used to try to turn my head to the right, to see the good angel, but he never appeared. On the left side, I didn’t dare look, afraid to see the negative one. When around four years old, on a Palm Sunday, it happened that I wandered into the nearby church, and the priest fixed wings on my back, which dressed me as an angel and I led the neighborhood procession in the streets, and my mother was trying to find me and when at last she found me, she ran toward me and I told her ‘do not touch me I am an angel,’ and she cried. Ever since angels visited me on and off: They changed their nature according to the years, they haunted me, or disappeared for a while.”³

1930

Etel Adnan is sent to a kindergarten and then a school run by nuns, which she attends for ten years.

“The French nuns were stern. They behaved like colonialists and like missionaries: they had the dual purpose of extolling the virtues of French civilization, and the infallibility of the Church in matters of religion. [...] So I grew up thinking that the world was French. [...] This is what’s called alienation.”⁴

Etel Adnan lives in a family whose common language is Turkish, though her mother naturally speaks Greek to her. The children are taught French at school. Teaching children in French is the most important instrument for French colonization.

“So at age five I started speaking French and then only French, as Arabic was a forbidden language in these French schools [...] My mother not knowing Arabic, French took over as the language at home: we spoke less and less Turkish or Greek and more and more French.”⁵

At her father’s instigation, she begins learning Arabic, a language she already hears every day in the street.

“I remember my father [...], like somebody getting out of a dream, suddenly start to get worried and say to my mother [...]: “We are not in France, and all this French speaking is not right. This child must learn Arabic.”⁶

She begins to copy out lines of calligraphy that will long remain mysterious to her, only to resurface later. In her early years, as an only child raised mainly by her mother, Etel Adnan grows up in a world of women.

“Looking back on those years, I also wonder if my mother didn’t suffer from the fact that I was her only child and that she didn’t have a son. [...] Being dressed as a boy made me feel very happy. I felt special: no other girls that I knew ever dressed like that. (In fact, no boys either.) [...] I thought I looked beautiful in it, if not beautiful, certainly touched by some magic. In fact it must have reinforced my identity of being neither just a girl, nor a boy, but a special being with the magical attributes of both.”⁷

As the child of parents with different faiths, Etel Adnan adopts at an early stage an ambiguous position with respect to religion. The religious education by the Catholic nuns in the kindergarten and girls’ school began at an early stage:

“This question of religion or religions haunted my life. By the end of the kindergarten year the French nuns called in my mother and said something along these lines: “This child is six years old already and is still not baptised. Do you realize that if anything happens to her she will go to limbo?’ My mother must have been made to feel ashamed that she had not resolved that question with my Muslim father. [...] The sisters told her that I was asking to be baptised because I loved the little Jesus so much.”⁸

It is also during these early years at elementary school that Adnan develops her close relationship to writing:

“I loved the fact, the act of writing, as far as I can remember. In elementary school we were given words around which to build a sentence. I used to write long paragraphs, enjoying the pen, the ink, the page, and the words coming one after another with a feel of roundness, a comfort for the body and the mind. Later, we had composition classes. We had to write a few pages on a given topic. My writings were often singled out by the teacher and read out loud in class as a model. Once I was accused of having cheated, copied what I wrote, because the teacher could not believe that I had written the text I turned in to her. I also used to write the homework of class mates. The pleasure of inventing little stories, of achieving a kind of triumph, of winning a sort of victory, of having kids come around me for sentences and words, while I was not the best at running or at volleyball, made me feel early in life that writing was my little domain, a world where I had no fear, no tension, no problem.”⁹

As well as writing, Etel Adnan is fascinated by the cinema from the start:

“Movies were then mostly for adults and the kids I went to school with were marvelling at the fact that my parents took me to the movies. [...] My image of men, of love, of interaction with the outside world, the world at large, was formed uniquely by the cinema of the thirties and the early forties. And that cinema was not local, it was the cinema of Hollywood and France. [...] At age ten I was already in love with Marlene Dietrich, Garbo, and Gary Cooper while I was falling in love with the little girl sitting next to me at school. My first passion.”¹⁰

As Etel Adnan enters high school, war is declared and everything changes:

“When World War II erupted I was in secondary school. I saw the city of Beirut become an internationally important city. The French and British armies had headquarters in it and the cosmopolitan character of the city glittered with a special romanticism for which movies had prepared us. [...] It did not see the real war, but the armies that were tearing the world apart.”¹¹

Beirut became a boom town. Offices multiplied. Young girls were finding jobs as secretaries both in the military and in the civilian sectors of the war economy. The first generation of Arab girls going to work in offices with men was being born. Inflation and job opportunities made families accept that their girls should work. This new way of life shook society and a little revolution took place, a social revolution that went unnoticed. Girls were still required to come home just after work but you could see them steal away for a few hours that they spent with their boyfriends in the coffee shops and the tea houses that mushroomed in Beirut overnight as if by enchantment.”¹²

1940

Etel Adnan has to leave school, taking a job at the French Army Information Office in Beirut. There she observes the daily progress of the war for herself:

“I witnessed how political influence was wielded and how much propaganda was part of warfare. I had no theories, I had not the means to draw large-scale conclusions, I had no political upbringing, no college training, but I was watching events in their rawness, I was participating in my own limited way in a cosmic adventure.”¹³

1943

On November 22, 1943, representatives of General de Gaulle's Free France declare the independence of Lebanon, which becomes effective from January 1, 1944.

1944

Etel resumes her studies:

“I enrolled for the French baccalaureate, a degree which was given in two terms [...]. I skipped a whole year of studies, by special permission, and went to the morning classes considered the most important for the baccalaureate. The other studies I managed with a series of tutorial classes, some on Sundays, some during school vacations. I passed the first year exam with high honours as well as the second year one. I was the only person who ever passed these two exams without going regularly to classes and, also, while working full time at an exciting and demanding job.”¹⁴

1945

Attracted by mathematics, Etel Adnan dreams of becoming an engineer. Her future, however, was to take a different path.

“It happened then that the French University was opening a branch in literature: an autonomous institute for literature and linguistics named the *École Supérieure des Lettres de Beyrouth*.”¹⁵

While continuing to work in an office, she and eleven other students enroll at the *École Supérieure des Lettres*, recently established by writer Gabriel Bounoure at the French Embassy to provide a more liberal and literary education than at the *Université Saint-Joseph* run by the Jesuit fathers. Taking a degree in literature, she discovers philosophy and poetry with passion: “Philosophy and poetry practically knocked us sideways.”¹⁶

“Gabriel Bounoure's classes were the equivalent of these mystic encounters one reads about either in the great Sufis' writings of the Islamic past, or in the writings of German Romantic writers such as Novalis or Hermann Hesse. These were not ordinary academic teachings, but rather initiations into the life of the spirit as exemplified by the works of Pascal and Descartes or the poems of Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval and Rimbaud. I entered literature by the grand door, I discovered the golden rule of the mind. I participated for three or four years in an experiment that Plato himself would have envied.”¹⁷

“This is where and when I convinced myself that poetry was the purpose of life, poetry as a counter-profession, as an expression of personal and mental freedom, as a perpetual rebellion. Poetry became a revolution and a permanent voyage. [...] I can say that I experienced the feeling of knowing what angels could be. [...] I was living at home but not seeing my parents any more, or seeing them as if through a fog. I think that this is what is meant by being enraptured.”¹⁸

Two artistic encounters which are to permanently affect her life also take place during these years as a student. Lydia, a Russian friend from the École Supérieure des Lettres, gives Etel Adnan a copy of Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. The experience is decisive for her on two counts. Firstly, the poet's epistolary novel offers an "initiation on a pilgrimage to what life should be,"¹⁹ and Etel's love of Rilke will never dim. But her reading spawns a further fascination. Through the ardent description of the five medieval tapestries of *The Lady of the Unicorn* cycle, Etel Adnan discovers a love of tapestry. It is also through Lydia that Etel discovers the painting of Gauguin and classical music.

Her friendship with Lydia also encourages Etel in her desire to travel to Paris one day:

"My best friend, Lydia, a Russian girl whose parents emigrated because of the Revolution, a girl who was also the only child of her family, a few years older than me, and a being I equated with angels and spirits because she lived in an air even more rarefied than mine, had already left for Paris."²⁰

1947

Etel Adnan teaches French literature in the al-Ahliyah girls' school in Beirut:

"It was my first contact with teaching and with the Anglo-Saxon orientated milieu of Lebanon."²¹

1949

Etel now tries her hand at poetry.

"I started writing poetry at the age of twenty: it was a long poem that I called '*Le Livre de la Mer*,' '*The Book of the Sea*,' a poem which sees the interrelation between the sun and the sea as a kind of cosmic eroticism."²²

That same year she receives a scholarship which allows her to leave Beirut for Paris and to continue her studies at the Sorbonne:

"I accepted the scholarship for studies to France that I was offered two years earlier. The École de Lettres was not staffed enough to provide all the courses needed for a University degree."²³

At the Sorbonne, Etel studies philosophy, taking courses with the theoretician of aesthetics, Étienne Souriau, and the philosopher of poetry, Gaston Bachelard. After living in halls at the Cité Universitaire, she moves to rue de Tournon, immersing herself in the city and assiduously frequenting museums, including the Louvre. There she discovers famous

works of painting and sculpture for the first time, something which had not been possible in Beirut. She experiences some truly revelatory, essential moments—the Victory of Samothrace, for example, and the Venus de Milo.

During her sojourn in Paris, Etel Adnan meets many American students, who finally convince her to pursue her university studies at Berkeley.

1955

Etel Adnan enrolls at the University of California, Berkeley, to prepare a PhD in aesthetics, which she will not in fact complete. On her way to California, she stops in New York. She then settles in the San Francisco Bay Area. Life there could not be more different from that in Paris.

"I did not realize that changing universities was not just continuing one's studies elsewhere. It was a total subversion of one's own thinking, a little earthquake in a student's life. Going from the Sorbonne to the University of California, in 1955, was like changing planets."²⁴

Following her arrival in the United States, another decisive event takes place: She changes language and observes:

"I fell in love with the American language."²⁵



Etel Adnan and a friend (1-2), Etel Adnan in her dorm room (3), University of California, Berkeley, ca. 1955

In the Bay Area of San Francisco Etel Adnan encounters a scene which is in full swing—both artistically and politically—with the poetry renaissance, the Beat Generation, and various student movements. On October 7, 1955, a now iconic poetry reading takes place with five young poets at the Six Gallery. It is the first public event of the Beat Generation in San Francisco, the founding event of the West Coast Literary Revolution and the acme of the San Francisco Renaissance. Following an introduction by Kenneth Rexroth, Allen Ginsberg, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen read from their works. Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, and Jack Kerouac also attend the event. Above all, it is Allen Ginsberg whose presentation of his Beat manifesto: *Howl* causes a stir. The Beat Generation, a key literary movement in postwar America, coalesced at Columbia University in

1944 around Herbert Huncke, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Lucien Carr, and Jack Kerouac. In 1955, most of the leading members of the group had moved to San Francisco, striking up friendships with authors in the San Francisco Renaissance. The Bay Area was a major center of the American literary avant-garde at the time.

The San Francisco Renaissance was an avant-garde movement born at the end of the 1940s that developed chiefly at Berkeley, under the auspices of Kenneth Rexroth and Madeline Gleason. It was strongly influenced by jazz and the Japanese poetic tradition, both of which become major interests for Etel Adnan. During the 1950s, the movement forged important links especially with experimental poetry at Black Mountain College, notably through Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley.



Etel Adnan, The Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, ca. 1955

1956

The Suez Crisis. Etel Adnan follows the mounting tension in the Middle East from the United States.

1957

The avant-garde Arab literary magazine *Shi'ir* is established. Playing a decisive role in the development of contemporary Arab poetry and lyrical Arab language, it is a laboratory for experimentation and reflection, as well as an observation post for the global production in poetry. Tirelessly exalting freedom of creation and thought, it encourages cutting-edge creation and publishes translations of European and American poetry. Surrounding the *spiritus rector* of the group of the same name, Yusuf al-Khal, are some of the greatest contemporary Arab poets, such as Adonis, Unsi al-Hajj and Muhammad al-Maghut, who leave their mark on the magazine.

Etel Adnan publishes her first poems translated into Arabic here.

“It was a Lebanese man of Syrian origin, Yusuf el-Khal, who had lived in the United States and who also spoke English, who had founded this magazine.



Etel Adnan, Puerto Vallarta (1-3), Ava Gardner on the shooting of *The Sun Also Rises* (2), Mexico, 1957

[...] As I don't write in Arabic, many Arab poets say: 'Etel is not an Arab, she does not write in Arabic.' That was always painful to me. But Yusuf integrated me into Arabic poetry. Before even having read a line. It changed my life. It is very important. One speaks about identity, identity is not always a geographical territory. My identity was in not wanting to be rejected by Arab poets.”²⁶

That same year, she travels to Mexico, visiting Puerto Vallarta, Guadalajara, Merida and Mexico City, where she was particularly impressed by the large-format wall mosaics at the university. Thereafter she returned to Harvard for a further year of study.



Etel Adnan, Mosaic murals of the University, Mexico City, 1957

Death of Etel Adnan's mother

1958

Etel Adnan becomes a lecturer in philosophy at the Dominican College of San Rafael, teaching there until 1972 and settling in a northern suburb of San Francisco.

In the 1950s San Francisco is the nerve center of the West Coast Jazz, which Adnan listens to with enthusiasm. In 1957 the Monterey Jazz Festival is established, when she attends it—among many other concerts, in 1958, she writes:

“7,000 people dancing on iron chairs to the sound of the blues. Muddy Waters, Big Mamma Thornton, people of color in the aisles, Blacks draped in Nigerian cloth, Africanized couples who wandered back and forth for hours on end [...]”²⁷



Etel Adnan, Monterey Jazz Festival, California, ca. 1958

In Lebanon, the Suez Crisis leaves many in the Lebanese Muslim population wondering about the chess game of alliances being played by their government, led by President Camille Chamoun, and focusing on France and the United Kingdom. As the situation escalates, the latter calls in the US armed forces, and finally resigns. He is replaced by General Fouad Chehab as president, while, under pressure from the opposition, the leader of the insurrection, Rachid Karamé, is appointed Prime Minister.

1959

At the end of the 1950s, Etel Adnan is seriously contemplating a return to poetry. Though French is the language she writes in, the Algerian War (1954–1972) leads to a conflict of conscience. Shaken to the core, she is determined to abandon the language of the colonial power:

“I discovered a problem of a political nature. It was during the Algerian War of Independence. The morning paper was regularly bringing news of Algerians being killed or news of the atrocities that always seem to accompany large scale violence. Suddenly, and rather violently, conscious that I had naturally and spontaneously taken sides, that I was emotionally a participant in the war, and I resented having to express myself in French.”²⁸

At the same time, Etel Adnan makes another decisive encounter, this time with painting:

“I soon realized that to me this meant a new language and a solution to my dilemma: I didn’t need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic. [...] Furiously, I became a painter. I immersed myself in that new language. Abstract art was the equivalent of poetic expression; I didn’t need to use words, but colors and lines. I didn’t need to belong to a language-orientated culture, but to an open form of expression [...]”²⁹

Adnan’s new interest in painting results from her meeting with an art teacher at the Dominican College of San Rafael, Ann O’Hanlon. In Sausalito, she has another encounter, with Mount Tamalpais, which quickly becomes the main subject of her painting:

“I lived in an apartment with a bay window and a view over the mountain about ten miles away. But there is nothing fixed about a mountain, on the contrary, it never ceases to transform itself depending on the climate, the time of day, the rain, the seasons. Never quite the same, it is constantly shifting. I think that Cézanne expresses this phenomenon with his word “transitory.” He’s not talking about the mountain itself, but about painting. And he does so wonderfully. Over the years, the dialectic between fixity and change has generated many of my paintings.”³⁰

For Adnan, Mount Tamalpais becomes a symbol of her quest for an absolute that cannot be grasped to the point that, during a television broadcast, she once refers to it as the most important encounter of her life. A mystical experience, her relationship with the mountain plunges her into the very depths of her being. But in the last analysis, this obsession is the obsession of painting: “The mountain is unknowable... the essence of Tamalpais, a mystical experience.”³¹



Etel Adnan, California, ca. 1958

1961

Etel Adnan discovers a new medium: Japanese notebooks that fold out like accordions, and are called *leporellos*.

“I like the flow, the apparent lack of boundaries, the river image of these unfolding papers. China and Japan understood long ago that one reads an image the way one reads lines made of words. The rest of the world is slowly catching up with it.”³²

Adnan uses these notebooks when she returns to the practice of calligraphy that links image and text:

“Something from my childhood emerged: the pleasure of writing, line after line, Arabic sentences that I only understood very imperfectly. [...] Year after year, I worked on these long papers, like horizontal scrolls, with my imperfect writing, aware that it was the opposite of classical calligraphy that was at stake. [...] I integrated myself into the cultural destiny of the Arabs by very indirect ways [...]”³³

Her approach is similar to the experiments undertaken by Shakir Hasan Al Said in Baghdad, co-founder of the *Jami'at Baghdad lil-Fann al-Hadith* (Baghdad Modern Art Group). This group of artists initiated the *Istilham al-Turath* (“seeking inspiration from tradition”) movement, whose chief form of expression is Arabic script, and which has been termed *Hurufiyyah* or *al-Madrassa al-Khattiyyah fil-Fann* (the “Calligraphic School of Art”). Some critics consider Etel Adnan one of the main initiators of this movement, along with Shakir Hasan Al Said.



Etel Adnan, Mount Tamalpais, California, ca. 1958

First solo exhibition at the O’Hanlon Art Gallery in Mill Valley, California, a space set up by artists Ann and Richard O’Hanlon. It was through Ann O’Hanlon, then head of the Art Department at the Dominican College San Rafael, that Etel Adnan had first discovered painting. In the early 1930s, Richard had been Diego Rivera’s assistant in the mural in the San Francisco Art Institute.

Attempted coup by the Syrian Social Nationalist Party

1963

Death of Badir Shakir al-Sayyab, whom Etel Adnan called her favorite poet:

“I often come back to him because he is a heart-rending figure and an extraordinary person, a poet who writes of the earth.”³⁴

This admiration is behind the *leporello Al-Sayyab, Al-Umm wa al-Ibnat al-Da'i'a* (Al-Sayyab, The Mother and the Lost Daughter) of 1970. Solo exhibition at the Dominican College Gallery (San Rafael)

1964

The year sees the publication in English of the *Diaries* of Paul Klee by the University of California Press at Berkeley. Etel Adnan quickly acquires a copy, keeping it by her until she dies. This discovery of Klee’s painting and writing completely fascinates her.

“I think Klee was the first painter I fell in love with. He obsessed me. By obsessed, I mean that his paintings put me into a state of ecstasy. They possessed me. In Kairouan, he wrote ‘color and I are one.’ And I understood he was speaking of revelation. For me, he embodied the whole artistic world by himself.”³⁵

1965

The entry of the United States into the Vietnam War (1955–75) in 1964 makes the social climate in the US explosive. The assassination of John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 leaves American society deeply shocked. This marks the end of an era. Soon various counter-culture movements emerge which unite in protests against the Vietnam War:



Ramsès Wissa Wassef with one of his students, *Connaissance du Monde*, March 1965. Archives du Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris

“Then there was Vietnam. America in Vietnam. Vietnam in the American psyche. The war on television. Protests in the streets. The cultural revolution that was taking place in America had Vietnam as one of its sources, and one of its consequences was that the war issue became also a literary rallying point, a concern for the poets and a dynamic subject matter. Poets wrote against the war, or rather, fought against the war through poetry. [...] I came home, put a sheet of paper in my typewriter and, almost as if not paying attention to what I was doing, wrote a poem: “The ballad of the lonely knight in present-day America”³⁶ [...] I was a poet in the English language! I wrote some other poems, dictated by emotions and events, and I felt part of an immense movement of American poets at a time when poetry seemed to grow in that country like music and grass.”³⁷

The New Left makes its mark on the social climate. The Free Speech Movement led by Mario Savio gathers thousands of protesting students at the University of California, Berkeley, during the academic year 1964/65. After the ban on all political activities on campus they demonstrate for academic freedom and the right to free speech. The Free Speech Movement becomes the first major civil disobedience movement at an American university. In May 1965 numerous students at Berkeley join in a draft-card burning ceremony in protest against America’s military actions in Vietnam. This is one of the first large-scale campaigns of the Anti-Vietnam War Movement. Berkeley becomes a breeding ground for numerous protests by the Civil Rights Movement as well as the Hippie movement.

On August 5, 1965, CBS Evening News, anchored by Walter Cronkite, broadcasts a reportage by Morley Safer about the Vietnam War that was to shock America: *The Battle of Cam Ne*. As US military involvement in the field intensifies, widely publicized images of the South Vietnam village of Cam Ne set ablaze by the Marines upset the public’s view of their army and of the war:

“I saw with my own eyes US soldiers with hoses, with hoses of fire, burning thatched houses. All America reacted to these pictures.”³⁸

Solo show at Mount Angel College Gallery (Mount Angel, Oregon) and Karamanduca Gallery (San Francisco)

1966

Moonshots, Etel Adnan’s first published collection of poems, comes out. That same year she takes a semester off, traveling to Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya—where at the time no women were to be seen in the streets and cafes³⁹—and Jordan and Egypt, where she visits the Wissa Wassef Art Center in Harrania, founded in 1951 by Ramses Wissa Wassef to teach children to weave. Woven without the use of preliminary designs, the tapestries are very free in style, with simple, repetitive forms and often in striking colors. Etel Adnan is overwhelmed:

“The children come to the workshop as they feel like it, in pajamas, long dresses, blue shirts. They go to the village to live with animals and plants, and return to express their innermost secrets in spontaneous drawings...”⁴⁰

1967

During her sojourn in North Africa, Etel Adnan meets a master weaver from southern Tunisia. Returning from her trip, she sends him two drawings that he weaves, thus creating the artist’s first tapestries. In San Francisco she meets Hal Painter, one of the city’s few weavers, who also realizes some of her designs. Painter would found the American Tapestry Alliance with Jim Brown in 1982.

The “Summer of Love” takes place in San Francisco. Some 100,000 young people from all over the world congregate in the district of Haight-Ashbury. The event follows the “Human Be-In,” a giant happening in the Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, on January 14, 1967. The Hippie movement was an American counter-culture trend based on the Beatnik ideals of free love, non-violence and the rejection of comfort, and consumer culture, and the “American Way of Life” of the previous generation. From 1964 on, the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood, like the University at Berkeley, becomes one of its iconic venues. The Six-Day War: a lightning operation led by Israel against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, which sees the Hebrew State triple the land it occupied.



Portrait of Etel Adnan in Turkey, winter 1973

1968

The Dominican College of San Rafael hires Ida Grae, already known for her research on new forms of weaving and dyeing wool using plants.⁴¹ Etel Adnan follows her courses with interest, sharing this new passion with her friend Claire Paget, then living in Beirut, through letters, published in 1972 in *Les Cahiers de l'Oronte* and later reprinted in *La vie est un tissage*.⁴²



Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, February 1975

1969

Rising tensions in Lebanon as a result of the Palestinian guerrilla actions and the Cairo agreements.⁴³

Solo exhibition at the Dominican College Gallery and at the Unitarian Center in San Rafael

1970

Black September⁴⁴ and *L'Express Beyrouth-Enfer*:

“There was Black September in Jordan, the harsh repression of a Palestinian attempt to take over the country. And though I was living in America, I used to come often to Beirut during the summers and I saw the hatred, I saw the confrontational conversations, pro-Palestinian, anti-Palestinian. You see? I saw that the Lebanese would try to do the same, to get rid of the Palestinians living as refugees in Lebanon, and that, as Lebanon was sharply divided on the issue, it would create civil war and destroy the country. That’s why I called the book *The Beirut-Hell Express*, like a train that drives to hell. I wrote it some five years before the civil war.”⁴⁵

1971

Publication of *Five Senses for One Death*
Solo show at The Cannery (San Francisco)

1972

Returning to Beirut in 1972 for health reasons, Etel Adnan is approached by the editor-in-chief of a newly founded French-language daily, *al-Safa* to run its culture pages. Backed by a team of young people, for two years she covers the jazz scene, literature, pop music, cinema, theater, and exhibitions, with total freedom, all the while remaining involved in politics, which continues to be omnipresent in her articles.

“As for this Lebanese identity that does not exist when analyzed and exists when ignored, too many ties to history seem to compromise it, to burden it with needless problems. It is in the present that we must build it, and around decisions about the future. It seems to me that nations are human creations open to evolution. They harbor a lot of irrationality. People are who they decide to be, rather than immutable absolutes. It is a domain in which, over time, the artificial becomes natural, the illegal becomes legal. Mouwanes talks about a “rendezvous with History.” For the poor of Bourj Hammoud, the rendezvous that counts is the one with the baker. For Palestinian refugees, the one on the Allenby Bridge. For the Beqaa farmer, the one with the water well and the agricultural cooperative. Seeking to identify real problems, looking for possible solutions to these problems, and forging an identity, is more easily achieved through them than through talk.”⁴⁶

Back in Beirut, she dreams of setting up a new Bauhaus:

“I thought I should do this because Arabic culture is a very schizophrenic culture. It has a sense of chaos more than of freedom, and at the same time it is so stiff. [...] I thought I would go there and find other artists and shape things around. This was around 1972 and in 1975, the civil war started [...].”⁴⁷

Adnan meets the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who some years later will translate some of Etel Adnan’s poems into Arabic in his magazine *al-Karmel*.

She meets the artist and art critic Simone Fattal, with whom she develops a relationship that will continue until her death. It was she who, through her publishing house The Post Apollo Press, was to publish a significant part of Etel Adnan’s writings.

1973

Publication of *Jebu* (written in 1967), followed by *L'Express Beyrouth* *Enfer* (written in 1970)

Solo exhibition in Dar al-Fann (Beirut)



“3 poèmes inédits,” illustration by Etel Adnan for poems by Nadia Tuëni, in *al-Safa*, Feb. 2, 1973
 “In Memoriam.... Le Testament de l'Ennemi,” in *al-Safa*, Jan. 26, 1973 “A Music of Cosmic Ecstasy,” in *al-Safa*, Dec. 21, 1973

1974

The proprietor of *al-Safa* is assassinated in Libya, causing the closure of the newspaper. *L'Orient-le-Jour*, a major French-speaking daily in Beirut, hires her services, but the heyday of freedom is over. With politics out of bounds, Etel Adnan has to limit herself to art criticism.

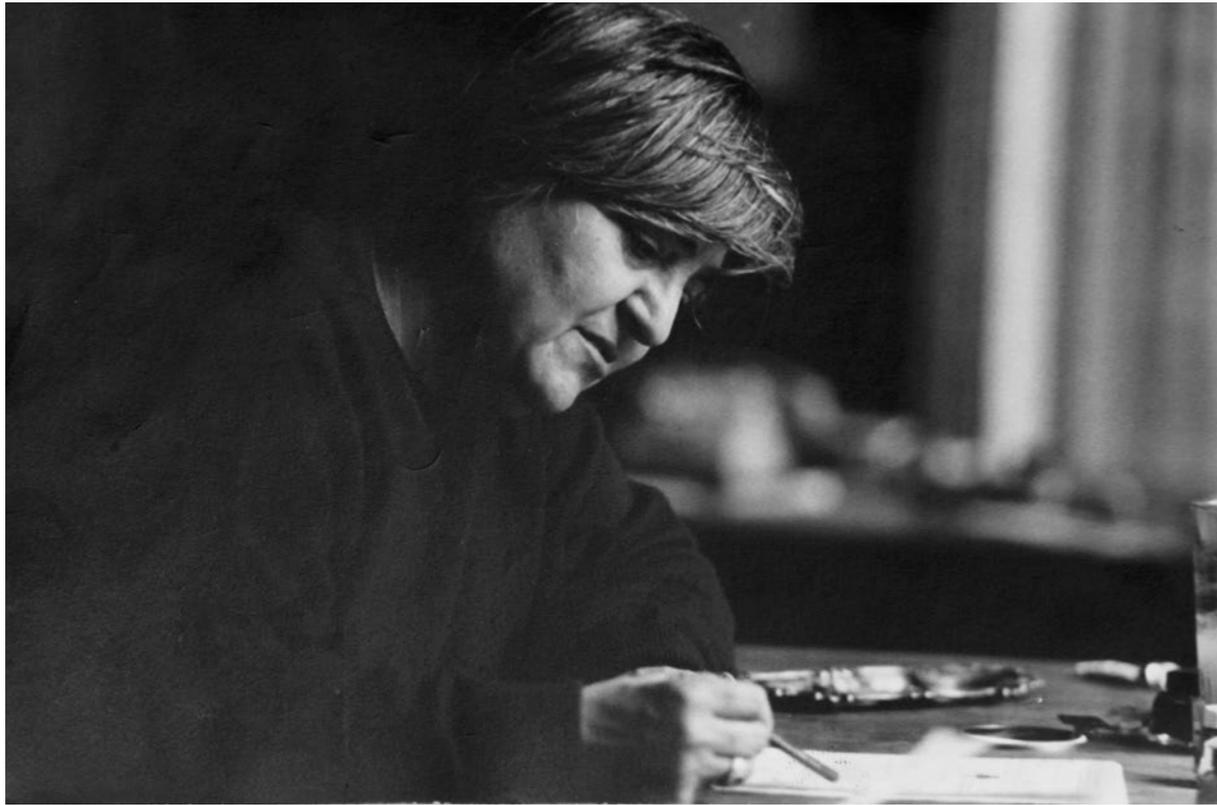
1975

Civil war breaks out in Lebanon (1975–1990). Smoldering in a volatile political environment and sparked by the confrontation between Palestinians and the Lebanese Phalange militia, it lasts fifteen years and claims between 130,000 and 250,000 lives:

“People’s lives exploded with the buildings and, like the pieces of the destroyed buildings, they went in all directions. [...] French-speaking Lebanese went to Paris [...]. I went to Paris two years after the war started, not to stay indefinitely, but to wait for things to calm down in Lebanon.”⁴⁸

1977

As the war ravages Lebanon, Etel Adnan settles temporarily in Paris, before returning to Sausalito, no longer to teach, but to paint and write. Solo exhibition at La Roue gallery (Paris)



Etel Adnan, L'Atelier gallery, Rabat, Morocco, 1978/79. Archives Pauline de Mazières

1978

Publication of *Sitt Marie Rose*. Written in 1977 in Paris in response to one of the many tragic deaths that plunged Lebanon into mourning every day, *Sitt Marie Rose* remains Etel Adnan's most widely read and translated work (10 languages), a true classic of anti-war literature that has been adapted for the stage and produced in 2009 at the Forum Freies Theater in Düsseldorf. Written in French, the text is translated into Arabic and published in Beirut even before the publication of the French edition. For the novel Etel Adnan receives the prize of Amitié Franco-Arabe, awarded by the Association de Solidarité Franco-Arabe.

Back in Beirut, Etel Adnan finds herself unable to rejoin the editorial office of *L'Orient-le-Jour*. The reasons are political and linked to the publication of *Sitt Marie Rose*. The book also earns her multiple death threats, urging her never to return to Lebanon.

Solo show at L'Atelier gallery (Rabat)

1979



Poster of Etel Adnan's exhibition, L'Atelier gallery, Rabat, Morocco, 1978/79. Archives Pauline de Mazières

Solo exhibition at the Asilah Festival (Morocco)

1980

Publication of *The Arab Apocalypse*, a passionate, violent work in which Etel Adnan combines writing with signs:

"In *The Arab Apocalypse*, the signs are my excess of emotions. I cannot say more. I wrote by hand, and, here and there, I put a word, and I made a little drawing, a sign. I kept those signs for the printed book. I did not add them [...]"⁴⁹



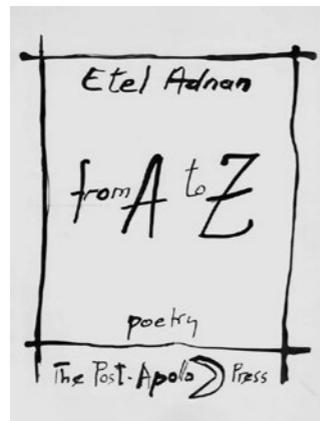
Etel Adnan, Simone Fattal, Maryette Charliten, Scotty Snyder, Liliane Kiesler, Art Department American University of Beirut, Lebanon, November 29, 1982
Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, 1973



Etel Adnan, Yosemite, California, May 1982

1982

Publication of *From A to Z*
Solo exhibition at the Al Sultan gallery (Kuwait)



Etel Adnan, *From A to Z*, The Post Apollo Press, 1982

1983

Solo exhibition at the Alif Gallery (Washington, D.C.) and at the Perception Gallery (San Francisco)

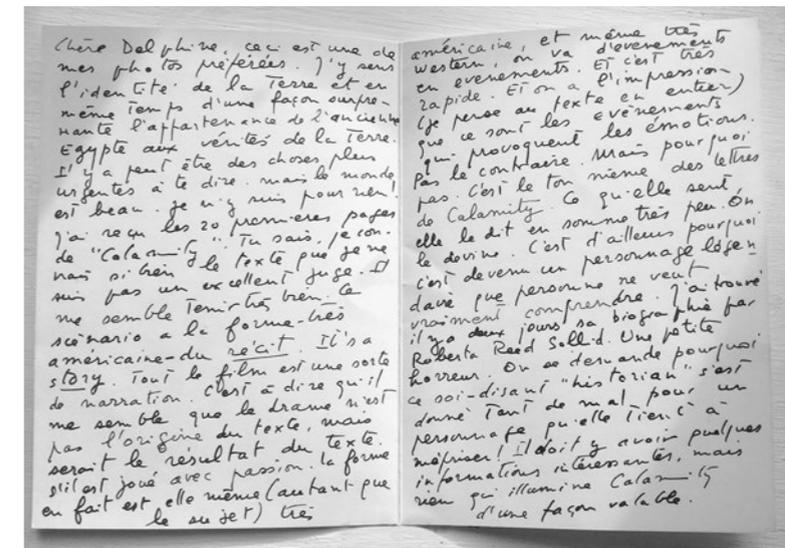
1984

At the request of Robert Wilson, Etel Adnan writes the French part of *The CIVIL warS: A Tree Is Best Measured When It Is Down*, a multilingual opera on the Civil War. Originally, the project was to consist of six parts, a collaboration between six composers (Philip Glass, David Byrne, Gavin Bryars, and others) of different nationalities, to be performed in their respective countries before joining forces in Los Angeles. Bob Wilson's project was to coincide with the 1984 Olympic Games. Due to funding and deadline problems it comes to naught, but nevertheless four of the six parts are realized. The libretto Etel Adnan writes for the French part is set by Gavin Bryars, the section being performed in Lyon and at Bobigny in 1985.



Rehearsal of *The CIVIL warS*, La Sainte Beanne, France, 1984

Rehearsals for *The CIVIL warS* take place at La Sainte Beanne, near Marseille, with, among others, the French actress and director Delphine Seyrig, who was working on a film dedicated to the figure of Calamity Jane. She asks Etel Adnan to work with her on the script.



Etel Adnan, unpublished letter to Delphine Seyrig, ca. 1985. Delphine Seyrig archives, Meschers

Solo exhibition at the Perception Gallery (San Francisco)

1986

Lecture at the annual conference of the American association for Middle East Studies in Boston. The text of her paper is published in English under the title *Growing Up to be a Woman Writer in Lebanon*, in the book *Opening the Gates. A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (Indiana University Press, 1990). It is published in French in 2019 (*Grandir et devenir poète au Liban*, Paris: L'Échoppe).

Publication of *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*

Solo exhibition at the Marin County Civic Center (San Rafael)

1987

Solo exhibition at the Samy Kinge gallery (Paris)

1988

Solo exhibition at the Administration Building, Fort Mason (San Francisco)

1989

Solo show at the Salazar Gallery, University of California (Sonoma)

1990

While in Barcelona, Etel Adnan visits the Picasso Museum, commenting on his landscapes:

“I nearly fainted standing before his early, first works. [...] young Picasso managed to define a place, to capture the spirit that invests a site, and which comes from a mixture of culture and geography, the one never without the other.”⁵⁰

Publication of *The Spring Flowers Own & The Manifestations of the Voyage*

Solo exhibition at the Kufa Gallery (London)

1992

Solo exhibition at the 50x70 gallery (Beirut)

1993

Publication of *Paris, When It's Naked*

Publication of *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*

1997

There: In the Light and the Darkness of the Self and of the Other published

1998

Publication of *Ce Ciel Qui N'est Pas*

Solo exhibition at Darat al-Funun (Amman), and at the Salazar Gallery, University of California (Sonoma)

1999

March: performance of the play *The Actress* at the theater, La Ménagerie de Verre, Paris

Solo exhibition at the Janine Rubeiz Gallery (Beirut)



Etel Adnan in New York City, ca. 1990

2002

Publication of *In/somnia*

2003

Performance of the play *Like a Christmas Tree* in San Francisco, Düsseldorf, San Carlos de Bariloche, and Udine (in 2005)



Article about Etel Adnan's exhibition "Peindre des Points, New York - Paris," Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, Lebanon, 1999

2004

Jemine is published. In 2002, the Israeli army carries out "Operation Defensive Shield," in which large parts of the Jenin refugee camp in West Jordan are destroyed.

"I lost my head and I wrote it just like that. I was sad, about the loss of the houses... I wrote it in two days. As I said, I write under impulse, in anger—a mix of emotions."⁵¹

Adapted for the stage, the poem was produced in 2005 at the Attis Theatre in Athens.

Publication of *The 27th of October 2003*

Solo exhibition at the Janine Rubeiz gallery (Beirut)

2005

Publication of *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*
L'Incendie de la Bibliothèque de Bagdad published

2006

Transcendance published

Publication of *A Deux Heures de l'Après-Midi*

Solo exhibition at Arte Mare (Bastia)

2007

Publication of *Retour de Londres*

Publication of *Vendredi 25 mars à Seize Heures*

Solo exhibition at the Janine Rubeiz gallery (Beirut) and at the Eileen Curtis Museum (Sausalito)

2008

Publication of *Seasons*

2009

Performance of *Proximité et éloignement de la mémoire* at La Panta theater in Caen. Publication of *Master of the Eclipse*, awarded the Arab American Book Award by the Arab American National Museum in 2010 and the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Book Award.

Solo exhibition at the Bonnafont Gallery (San Francisco)

Publication of *Belladonna Elders Series #5: Jennifer Scappettone hosts Lyn Hejminian & Etel Adnan*



Etel Adnan, Hans Ulrich Obrist, and Simone Fattal at The Serpentine Galleries, London, United Kingdom, 2016

Etel Adnan, *The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay*, published for DOCUMENTA (13), 2012

(Photo: Kassel city archive, 0.501.002, Carl Eberth)

2010

The al-Madina Theatre in Beirut organizes an important tribute to Etel Adnan, an event given blanket media coverage. On this occasion, the Etel Adnan Award for Women Playwrights is created to support women writers in the Arab world. That same year, the artist receives a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Radius of Arab-American Writers (RAWI).

Publication of *Pina Bausch Café Müller. Texte de Etel Adnan, Une Révolution appelée Pina Bausch*; Solo exhibition at the Sfeir-Semler gallery (Beirut) and at the Galerie Europe (Paris)

2011

October: *Masks of Violence* is staged at the Forum Freies Theater, Düsseldorf a play based on Etel Adnan's text *To Be In A Time Of War*, and poems by Heiner Müller.
 Publication of *The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay*
 Translation into French and publication of the play *Crime of Honor*



Etel Adnan with Carolyn Cristov-Bakargiev and Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Kassel, Germany, 2012

2012

Etel Adnan participates in the dOCUMENTA (13), marking the beginning of international recognition for her painting. The Sfeir-Semler gallery also devotes an exhibition to her in its space in Hamburg.
 Etel Adnan still has about fifty cartoons for as yet unrealized tapestries. On the occasion of the documenta, she asks her gallerist Andrée Sfeir-Semler to include a tapestry from her collection in the exhibition. The enthusiastic visitor response encourages the two women to have the cartoons woven, turning to the famous Pinton workshop based in Felletin, near Aubusson.
 Etel Adnan settles permanently in Paris, in an apartment on rue Madame.
 Publication of *Sea and Fog*, awarded a LAMBDA Literary Award and a California Book Award for Poetry in 2013. The French translation, *Mer et brouillard*, is published in 2015.
 Publication of *Homage to Etel Adnan*
Le Cycle des Tilleuls published
 Etel Adnan splices together film footage shot in New York and in the Yosemite Valley:

"I will name the edited film 'Again and Again', as that's what it's all about. Sometimes I filmed the sun with my eyes half closed."⁵²

2013

Publication of *The Ninth Page: Etel Adnan's Journalism 1972-1974*
 Solo exhibitions at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts (San Francisco), the Sfeir-Semler gallery (Beirut) and the Galleria Continua (San Gimignano)

2014

Publication of *To look at the sea is to become what one is: an Etel Adnan Reader*
Premonition published
 Solo exhibition at the Museum der Moderne (Salzburg), at Callicoon Fine Arts (New York), and the Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art (Doha)

2015

Publication of *Heiner Müller et le Tintoret: la fin possible de l'effroi*
 Solo exhibition at the Haus Konstruktiv (Zurich) and the Irish Museum of Modern Art (Dublin). Participates at Sharjah Biennial and the Istanbul Biennial.



Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal in their apartment in Paris, France, 2016

2016

Publication of *Orphée face au néant suivi de Delphes et Kiato*

Publication of *Sans oublier bien sûr*

Solo exhibitions at the Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris), at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery (London) and at the Sfeir-Semler gallery (Hamburg)

2017

First edition of the Etel Adnan Prize for Poetry, established by the University of Arkansas and the RAWI, is awarded for the first time

Solo exhibition at the UNAM, Mexico City

2018

Solo exhibition at the Galerie Lelong (Paris)

Solo show at the Zentrum Paul Klee (Bern)

2019

Solo exhibition at the Mudam (Luxembourg)



Etel Adnan in her studio in Paris, France, 2019

2021

Solo exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York)

Exhibition "Ecrire, c'est dessiner," at the Centre Pompidou-Metz, in dialog with Etel Adnan

November 14: Etel Adnan dies at her home in Paris.

2022

Solo show at the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam)

Solo exhibition at the Lenbachhaus (Munich)

2023

Solo exhibition at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen (Düsseldorf)

Exhibition at KINDL - Centre for Contemporary Art (Berlin)

- 1 Etel Adnan, *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon*, in: M. Bedran and M. Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates. A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, London: Virago, 1993, pp. 6–7.
- 2 Etel Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” in: T. Donovan and E. Shimoda (eds.), *To look at the sea is to become what one is. An Etel Adnan Reader*, Brooklyn & Callicoon: Nightboat Books, 2014, pp. 247–48. April 28, 1920: Lebanon and Syria were placed under French mandate by the League of Nations following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.
- 3 Etel Adnan, “Angels, more angels,” in: *Etel Adnan*, exh. cat., Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, and Mudam, Luxembourg, Paris & Bern: Dilecta, 2018.
- 4 Adnan, *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon* (see note 1), p. 7.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (see note 2), p. 249.
- 7 Adnan, *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon* (see note 1), p. 8.
- 8 Ibid., pp. 10–11.
- 9 Ibid., p. 11.
- 10 Ibid., p. 13.
- 11 Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (see note 2), p. 250.
- 12 Adnan, *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon* (see note 1), p. 15.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., p. 16.
- 15 Ibid., p. 17.
- 16 <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/hors-champs/etel-adnan> 33 min 08 secs.
- 17 Adnan, *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon* (see note 1), p. 17.
- 18 Ibid., p. 18.
- 19 Etel Adnan, *La vie est un tissage*, Paris: Galerie Lelong, 2016, p. 55.
- 20 Adnan, *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon* (see note 1), p. 19.
- 21 Ibid., p. 20.
- 22 Adnan, *To Write in a Foreign Language* (see note 2), p. 251.
- 23 Adnan, *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon* (see note 1), p. 20.
- 24 Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (see note 2), p. 251.
- 25 Ibid., p. 252.
- 26 Hans Ulrich Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” in: *Etel Adnan in all her dimensions*, exh. cat., Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha: Mathaf-Skira, 2014, p. 78.
- 27 Adnan, *La vie est un tissage* (see note 19), p. 23. In all probability concerning the Monterey Jazz Festival of 1958. Letter written in 1968.
- 28 Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (see note 2), p. 253.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” (see note 26), p. 42.
- 31 Ibid., p. 44.
- 32 Etel Adnan, “Journey to Mount Tamalpais,” in: Donovan and Shimoda, *To look at the sea* (see note 2) p. 312.
- 33 Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (see note 2), p. 255.
- 34 Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” (see note 26), p. 30.
- 35 Ibid., p. 44.
- 36 First poem in English, published in a free journal, the *S.B Gazette*, in 1965.
- 37 Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (see note 2), p. 254.
- 38 <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/hors-champs/etel-adnan>. 35min 50s.
- 39 <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/cultures-dislam/lerrance>. 39min 01s.
- 40 Adnan, *La vie est un tissage* (see note 19), p. 34. On Harrania, letter written in 1968.
- 41 See Ida Grae, *Nature's Colors: Dyes from Plants*, New York & London, 1974.
- 42 Adnan, *La vie est un tissage* (see note 19), 2016.
- 43 The Cairo Agreement or Cairo Accord, which was never officially released, was the result of negotiations between the PLO leader Yassir Arafat and the Lebanese army commander Emile Bustani. It attempted to resolve the conflicts between the various Palestinian groups and was one of the main reasons for the start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975.
- 44 “Black September” was the name generally given by the Palestinians to the civil war in Jordan in 1970/71, which began in September 1970 with the attempted assassination by the Palestinians of King Hussein of Jordan and the latter’s subsequent military operations, especially against the PLO led by Yassir Arafat. The fighting resulted in thousands of deaths, including a large number of Palestinian civilians. The terror group of the same name which was formed thereafter murdered the Prime Minister of Jordan, Wasfi Tell, in November 1971, and was responsible for the hostage-taking and murder of eleven Israeli sportsmen during the Olympic Games in Munich in September 1972.
- 45 Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” (see note 26), p. 80.
- 46 Etel Adnan, “An Idealistic Way of Thinking,” *al-Safa*, December 1 1973, in: *The Ninth Page: Etel Adnan's Journalism 1972–74*, 2013, p. 71.
- 47 Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” (see note 26), p. 42.
- 48 Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (see note 2), p. 256.
- 49 Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” (see note 26), p. 81.
- 50 Etel Adnan, *Des villes et des femmes, lettres à Fawwaz*, 2014, p. 15 (Of Cities and Women. [Letters to Fawwaz]), p. 70.
- 51 Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan,” (see note 26), p. 82.
- 52 Ibid., p. 47.



A Multitude of References:
Etel Adnan Between Languages and Cultures
Sébastien Delot

“Such poets will be! When the endless servitude of woman is broken, when she lives for and through herself, once man—monstrous until then—has discharged her, she too will become a poet! It is woman who will discover the unknown! Will her world of ideas differ from ours? She will explore strange, unfathomable, repugnant, delicious things; and we will make them our own and understand them.”¹

The passing years have seen Etel Adnan’s life attain legendary status. An art heroine of Arab modernity, she stands at the crossroads of languages and cultures. Etel Adnan appears to epitomize contemporary womanhood: courageous, well-read, and free.

A romantic destiny, perhaps? Heir—with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire—to the history of a vanished world, Etel Adnan grew up among a patchwork of languages. The two richest texts from a biographical point of view are *To Write in a Foreign Language* (1984) and *Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon* (1986), originally published in English.

¹ Arthur Rimbaud, letter to Paul Demeny, Charleville, May 15, 1871.

Growing up in Lebanon under French rule, Adnan soon realized that she was different and became aware of her identity. Little by little, she started hearing thoughts. She can see what we say. She touched the very essence of the idea. She closed her eyes and words poured forth.

Leaving the Mediterranean for Paris (1949), Etel Adnan enrolled at the Sorbonne, frequenting students at the Cité Internationale and gaining a grasp of the potential of existentialism by reading Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. She understood the freedom offered by this new vision of humankind, which can remain moral without being religious. Opting for the side of beauty in all things, she embodied a way of reconciling diverse cultures. All through her life, Adnan regularly praised the importance of cultural interdependence.

The speech that another child of the Mediterranean, Albert Camus, gave on being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957 closely echoes Etel Adnan's vision of the role of the artist and writer: "[...] I have never placed [art] above everything [...]. It is a means of stirring the greatest number of people by offering them a privileged picture of common joys and sufferings. It obliges the artist not to keep himself apart; it subjects him to the most humble and the most universal truth. And often he who has chosen the fate of the artist because he felt himself to be different soon realizes that he can maintain neither his art nor his difference unless he admits that he is like the others. The artist forges himself to the others, midway between the beauty he cannot do without and the community he cannot tear himself away from. That is why true artists scorn nothing: they are obliged to understand rather than to judge. And if they have to take sides in this world, they can perhaps side only with that society in which, according to Nietzsche's great words, not the judge but the creator will rule, whether he be a worker or an intellectual. By the same token, the writer's role is not free from difficult duties. By definition he cannot put himself today in the service of those who make history; he is at the service of those who suffer it. Otherwise, he will be alone and deprived of his art. Not all the armies of tyranny with their millions of men will free him from his isolation, even and particularly if he falls into step with them. But the silence of an unknown prisoner, abandoned to humiliations at the other end of the world, is enough to draw the writer out of his exile, at least whenever, in the midst of the privileges of freedom, he manages not to forget that silence, and to transmit it in order to make it resound by means of his art."²

² Albert Camus, Nobel Prize Speech, Stockholm, December 10, 1957. English translation <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/> [accessed Aug. 8, 2022]

In the mid-1950s, Adnan left France and embarked for the United States, gradually acquiring a sense of her roots: "We are then like young trees whose branches grow in separate directions giving the impression that the stem will break apart under opposing pulls."³ Becoming involved with militant circles in California, she published anti-war poems. Poetry is the creation of forms that move people, be it by word, color, or sound.

Throughout her life and in all her art, Etel Adnan was to express this vision of the poetic absolute—poems, artworks, trees, the cosmos. She often quoted Heidegger, who recognized in poetry the ultimate form of thought, a relation to being that goes beyond metaphysics. In the United States during the 1960s, she discovered a vision of the East as seen through the eyes of Western culture,⁴ both artists and writers. At the turn of the twentieth century, many novelists were traveling to North Africa: André Gide to Tunisia, Edith Wharton to Morocco—she published the earliest travel guide to the country in the early 1920s—as well as artists, the best-known being Paul Klee, August Macke, and Louis Moilliet, who travelled through Tunisia in 1914.

Etel Adnan would refer regularly to Klee, he became the most significant artist to her, and the translation of his diary touched her deeply. Klee's adoption of color which Tunisia inspired, was to prove no less crucial for Adnan.

Etel Adnan quickly realized that she had to go back to the origins of Humanity and draw on that. Before writing, speech. Prior to language, poetry. Etel Adnan was heir to a language forged by Klee, Kasimir Malevich, and Wassily Kandinsky, artists rooted in intuition at the beginning of a turbulent era when the meaning of history, of politics, of humanity, and the world was starting to totter. She inherited a tradition of painting endowed at once with meaning and a magical opacity, painting which suddenly emerged from Western history to announce a new world.

Though every age and culture, every important form harbors all the varied paths leading back to the source that have existed, still exist and will ever exist, the source itself is never actually reached. It functions rather as an *a posteriori* hypothesis posited by the contingencies of history. Etel Adnan understood that painting is the fruit of a vastly long history, while artists are its living memory.

This tireless quest for origins left a profound mark on the great artists of the European avant-garde. The words of Paul Klee resonated with Etel Adnan: "I would like now to [...] try to show how it is

³ Etel Adnan, "Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon" (1986), in M. Bedran and M. Cooke (eds.), *Opening the Gates. A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, London: Virago, 1993, pp. 5–20, here p. 12.

⁴ Conversations of the author with the artist and Simone Fattal, both friends of the Saïds. The Palestinian-American public intellectual Edward Saïd published *Orientalism. Western Concepts of the Orient*, in 1978. Etel Adnan also worked on the construction of postcolonial discourse through both her writings and her commitment to journalism.

that the artist frequently arrives at what appears to be such an arbitrary ‘deformation’ of natural forms. [...] The deeper he looks, the more readily he can extend his view from the present to the past, the more deeply he is impressed by the one essential image of creation itself, as Genesis, rather than by the image of nature, the finished product. Then he permits himself the thought that the process of creation can today hardly be complete and he sees the act of world creation stretching from the past to the future.”⁵

Time is memory. Treating time as material, Etel Adnan understood the importance of forgetting, as a necessary mechanism to bestow a density on time and draw out its sensory structure. Thus the aim of time is that separation from itself which will set it free from slavish reproduction. Adnan’s is a memory that requires forgetfulness. She constantly has to forget everything in order to hark back as close as possible to the origin. Time and space merge. Endowing a shape, a line, a stroke with life means Adnan can express what she feels about memory by creating subtle variations in color, space, and line. A recent exhibition entitled *Écrire c’est dessiner* at the Centre Pompidou–Metz unveiled a primal interweave of writing and drawing that radiated a vital, universal energy. For Etel Adnan, regardless of its language or script, writing can be looked at just like a painting in a museum.⁶ She says: “I felt close to the icon painters of the past: they were in awe of the fact that they were dealing with sacred history, I was dealing with the combination of poetry, script and painting, I was finding a way out from the past (classical calligraphy), and still carrying on to new shores the inherent possibilities of Arabic writing: I was discovering, by experiencing it, that writing and drawing were one.”⁷

In Paris, the mid-1950s were marked by the rise of abstraction. Deprecated immediately after the War, it spawned in France a gestural painting the artist Georges Mathieu was to call “lyrical” and critic Michel Tapié would label “informel.” The keystone of an artistic debate, abstraction was set against realist representation, considered at that time to have reached a dead-end. Only the work of Nicolas de Staël stood above the fray, and Etel Adnan admired it hugely. Living in California at the time, she had discovered American Expressionist painting, which, along with jazz music, was to exert a considerable influence on her. Her curiosity led her to attend classes by the artist Ann Rice O’Hanlon, who was later to open the Mill Valley Center for Sight & Insight.

5 Paul Klee, *On Modern Art*, London: Faber & Faber, 1955 [1924] pp. 43–56.

6 *Ecrire c’est dessiner, d’après une idée originale d’Etel Adnan*, Centre Pompidou–Metz, 2021.

7 Etel Adnan, “The Unfolding of an Artist’s Book”, *Discourse*, vol. 20, nos. 1/2, Winter and Spring, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 1998, pp. 6–27.

In the 1960s, critics often referred to the crisis of easel painting as a crisis of form. For such commentators, the language of abstraction appeared as a rhetoric of the void, as the absence of any and all images. For Etel Adnan, de Staël alone managed to reconcile abstract form with an experience of the world. Unafraid to still distinguish form from ground, de Staël would place fantastical, shadowy structures in the foreground. Unlike Etel Adnan, the overlapping layers in his pictures endow them with a new skin.

For Etel Adnan, iterative form liberates the composition. In her first, wall-mounted canvases, she began by placing a red square which often serves as a pivot for the whole composition. With palette-knife and spatula, she interweaves pure colors one over the other, achieving precision and equilibrium. The diversity and the rhythm of the interactions in this skein of primary and secondary colors produce a new spatiality.

The Philosophy as Thinking of the World in Accordance with the Principle of the Least Amount of Energy Expenditure by the German philosopher Richard Avenarius also influenced Etel Adnan’s art. By the use of signs and words, the arts do no more than open the floodgates to a hidden world. The fragment allows it to apply unity to what is dispersed. With the constant transformation of each sign, a new, sensitive, organized world emerges. Fearlessly, she allows her hand to dance across the canvas, applying a color, a pattern, a sign; then, to achieve the correct balance, she stops to catch her inner breath. The self-evident appears, beginning again freely each time. Adnan knew that exactitude is not truth. Among these repetitive, wandering gestures, with their twists and turns, the intelligible gives way before the enigmatic.

Forms emerge, and they will give way to others. Present yet inaccessible. Adnan’s painting stands at the horizon of language. And of thought, of language, of dream, of memory, of speech, of desire. The impetus within us cannot be told; at best, it may be alluded to. Does telling a dream erase the dream (as) dreamed? What is it that turns words into more than just bearers of meaning? What is it that makes Adnan’s thought, in its strictures and the contradictions of its mobility, succeed in producing more than mere painting?

It may be that reminiscences serve as a screen for memory, when they pretend to be what is deposited in it, what it preciously preserves from the erosion of time. In one of her texts Adnan writes: “I am about to describe what I see as an act of last resort. A wave is surging

through the emerald waters. Water on water. Streaks of a dilute ultramarine compete against the luminous tremor of the minerals dissolved in the water. There's something hidden in these depths that reverberates in the cogs of my memory. But memory is itself a surface whose motion is subject to the waves."⁸

For Etel Adnan, painting possesses memory. Our lives are but fragments. For her, no painting has been ever evinced by another. A painting is not an object; it is a process of inquiry, a question without an answer. It can never be either finished or perfect.

Her painting is above all a space in which we divest ourselves of our prejudices. Her small canvases have often been called talismans that allow us to reach out to our true selves, where pure color extols the beauty of nature, where signs convey the mysteries of the world. By the magic of her talent, these images long haunt us. Hence the fascination or identification, the need to return to them, as we return to ourselves so as not to get lost. For Adnan, every canvas is an abstraction: "I love nature deeply, its more intimate side as well as its grandiose aspects: a rose, a tree, flowing water can give me a feeling of connection, which puts me in a state of bliss."⁹

As for her writings, they are mainly political and reflect the successive tragedies of the Arab world from which she comes. A committed journalist in the early 1970s, she described the intellectual and political climate in Lebanon. In 1972, after teaching for 14 years at the Dominican College in San Rafael, California, she left to become culture editor of the French-language newspaper *al-Safa*,¹⁰ reporting on Beirut's then effervescent art scene—on jazz, film, literature, theater, and art shows.

Each of her books displays a form of its own, but *Arab Apocalypse*—in which the painter seems to make the word her own, punctuating the text with signs—is surely the most astonishing.

For Etel Adnan, love is the most important and the most dangerous thing, as well as being dogged by madness. This love in which the poet and artist immerses herself stands for the acceptance of life. Etel Adnan's is a voice without borders, a living bridge between cultures and continents.

8 Etel Adnan, "Eau sur eau", in: Etel Adnan, *Je suis un volcan*, Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris, 2021, p.

9 (Trans. David Radzinowicz).

9 Etel Adnan, *Un printemps inattendu (entretiens)*, Paris: Galerie Lelong, 2020 (Trans. David Radzinowicz).

10 *The Ninth Page: Etel Adnan's Journalism 1972–1974*, San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2013.

Etel Adnan: "Writing a River" Morad Montazami¹

Any explanation of Etel Adnan's relationship to writing, and by extension, to language—whether through the verbal sign or the phenomenological presence of form, color, and light—has to take into account the many diverse positions adopted by this most solar of painter/poets (and vice-versa), one who was in turn poet, novelist, journalist, playwright, et al. As a writer, she took on many different faces, dipping a series of pens into various inkwells, calling several ports home, including Beirut, Paris, and Sausalito... By the end of a life lived in the Tower of Babel, she managed to dissolve herself, so to speak, into the system of stars and secret equations that had always been inherent in her poems and works on paper.

A genuine polyglot, speaking French, English, and Arabic..., Etel Adnan was no less a *translator*, or *decipherer*, of her time. Fitting in the anti-imperialist and postcolonial movement of poetic liberation exemplified by such authors as J. M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison, Orhan Pamuk, and Salman Rushdie, she features in this literary pantheon thanks to her novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978),² about the onset of the civil war in Lebanon, a text that was to make the conflict real for international audiences and that has been translated into at least ten languages. In a Lebanon torn apart by a soon-unbearable fratricidal war, however, it earned the author increasingly alarming threats to her person. Opting to return to Paris in the mid-1970s, in 1980 she moved to California; she already knew both worlds from her days as a philosophy student in the 1950s.

1 Morad Montazami is the director of Zamân Books & Curating.

2 Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose, A Novel*, Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1999 (Trans. Georgina Kleegle).

Remarkably, *Sitt Marie Rose*, Adnan's only true novel and her chief mainstream success, was written in conjunction with her most experimental poem, *The Arab Apocalypse* (cat. 140),³ begun in 1975 and finally published in 1980. In it, the extensive cosmogony of the elements that haunted Adnan's written and visual work to her very last days leaves its mark as a talismanic matrix. Among the many possible readings of the deliberately chaotic and devilishly rhythmic icono-textual system of *The Arab Apocalypse*, we note in particular the sickly, even psychopathological dialectic of the *sun* and *crude oil* as two equally generative and destructive forces; the Lebanese civil war that broke out in 1975 carries the scars of the 1973 oil crisis, the Yom Kippur War, and the anti-American energy supply policy of the Arab countries in OPEC. It is also worth observing how the recurrence of the theme of petroleum as a black puddle that morphs into the antithetical image of the river or the sea seeped into Adnan's visual output, as in the tapestry *Fields of Oil* (2013), though attuned as well to the sun as the power behind its combustion. With oil presented as the superego of an industrial, political, and ultimately warmongering modernity—the catalyst for most of the declared or latent conflicts in the twentieth century—Etel Adnan's poetic stance is clearly hypersensitive to the ambivalent motif of black gold. A source of wealth and a lever of resistance for some Arab nations against the American ogre, it is also a curse that trails in its wake coups, revolutions, and embargoes. The prose epic of *The Arab Apocalypse*, comprised of flashes of color salvaged from the throes of war and regional strife between Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Syria, and others, is perhaps also an instrument of the exorcism of Arabic itself, a language Adnan has always experienced as secret, even subversive: "The Arabic language has a certain aura in my eyes, partly because we were forbidden to learn it at the French school [in Lebanon]—and we were punished if we spoke it. And because I spoke it neither at home nor at school, I was locked out of it. I speak it in the street, but I can't write a poem in Arabic. This means I've made Arabic into a myth, into a kind of lost paradise."⁴

Returning to the origins of Etel Adnan's use of the *leporello*, that has since become characteristic of her work, it is above all a form that facilitated the resulting dynamic paradox: an augmented space, multiplying its potential over the pages, but which, once closed, is reduced to the symbolic space of a jotter—a metaphor for mobility and aesthetic nomadism. As Adnan recalls: "Around 1964, I discovered those Japanese 'books' which fold like an accordion, on whose pages the Japanese painters mixed

³ Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989 (Trans. Etel Adnan).

⁴ Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," in *Etel Adnan in all her dimensions*, exh. cat., Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Doha: Mathaf-Skira, 2014, pp. 29–30.

drawings with writings and poems... When I saw that format I thought it was a good way to get out of the page as square or rectangular; it was like writing a river."⁵

Staying with origins, and recalling an early *leporello* in which Adnan adopts the postures of poet, draftswoman, translator, and even scribe, mention should be made of an *Untitled* from 1970 (Tate Modern collection, London) in homage to/after the American Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, one of her close friends in California. In it, Adnan takes up the poem *Assassination Raga* (1968) from *The Secret Meaning of Things* (1968), an ecstatic funerary oration for Robert Kennedy that Ferlinghetti wrote while watching the senator's funeral on television on June 8, 1968. Following the logic of the palimpsest or ritual inscription, Adnan "re-writes" Ferlinghetti's prose along the sequence of pages, adding dabs of watercolor and abstract hieroglyphs, and superimposing a few Arabic words like waves onto the English text (as a reminder that a Palestinian was suspected of having perpetrated Kennedy's assassination). In so doing, the foundations of *The Arab Apocalypse* were already being laid: a feverish and deliberately discontinuous type of inscription, at once thrilling and haunting, which borrows rhythmic structures from the Beat generation, as well as from a vast reworking of pantheistic myths and cosmological systems, be they Indian, Chinese, or Mexican.

This practice of "drawn writing" and the dissemination of the sign receive a particular twist in an Arab-Muslim context, where—unlike in Western rationalism—writing and image often overlap, or, perhaps better, rarely separate. In Adnan's hands, the pages of the *leporello* turn into an authentic polymorphic medium, unfolding from the ancient book of miniatures to the flipbook you flick through to make the pictures move. Cultivating mobile landscapes of words and images, Adnan hides a multiplicity of references, from calligraphic manuscripts to travel journals, including representations of planets and constellations in the cosmos, and astronomy or alchemy treatises.⁶

In *War Poems* (cat. 117),⁷ Etel Adnan strings together atoms of meaning or signifiers floating through the ether among tiny cells of watercolor, each more violent than the one before ("*acid in our tears / blood in the sun / a soldier making love to his gun*"). And yet it is as if they are dampened by, and certainly *disseminated* in, these chromatic effluents, amongst a desert of pastel hues, where numbers and symbols released from the magic square whence they came are raised up and

⁵ Etel Adnan, idem, p. 45. Note that, in the exh. cat. *Etel Adnan*, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern and Mudam, Luxembourg, Paris & Bern: Dilecta, 2018, her discovery of these Japanese notebooks and of the *leporello* is dated, not to 1964, as in the conversations with Hans Ulrich Obrist, but to 1961.

⁶ Witness the most recent event testifying to Etel Adnan's influence beyond her own work, the group exhibition at the Centre-Pompidou Metz, *Écrire, c'est dessiner* (2021–2022): "Arising from a conversation with the artist, poet and writer Etel Adnan, [the exhibition] explores our fascination with writing and its signs, and their proximity to the practice of drawing, contrasting the handwritten world with the digital world." <https://www.centrepompidou-metz.fr/de/programme/exposition/ecrire-cest-dessiner> [accessed June 30, 2022].

⁷ Etel Adnan wrote the poems during the 1960s; the *leporello* reassembling those poems was created in 1988.

smashed. In the poems of the years 1970–1980, the turmoil of fratricidal conflict openly fostered in the name of barbarism with a human face becomes the often explicit context, its climax being reached in *The Arab Apocalypse*. Yet, over time, and despite the repetition of the avatars of conflict inherent in the West Asian region, from the First and Second Gulf Wars to the mass destruction in the Syrian-Iraqi area [...], and despite Etel Adnan's acute sensitivity to them, she finds a refuge, as it were, in a more intimate writing rooted in her family history. In her later accordion-fold pieces, she revisits this history as an album where photos are replaced by fragments of mobile captions. In *Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire* (2015), the concertina pages present memories of the family from before the poet's birth in 1925 in a mixture of Turkish and English (Adnan's linguistic constructions always end up in some form of vernacular or lingua franca). Etel Adnan was born in Beirut to a Syrian father from Damascus and a Greek mother from Smyrna, and this fresh brew of ink and watercolor is primarily concerned with stories of the civilizational catastrophe and the migratory consequences following the Armenian-Assyrian-Greek genocide.

Above and beyond the California Beat generation, mention should also be made of Toni Maraini among Etel Adnan's cosmopolitan literary connections. She is an Italian art historian, poet, and cultural activist who was a member of the Casablanca group in the 1960s and 1970s, along with Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, and Mohamed Melehi. The venue for their meeting was Morocco, where Adnan had probably exhibited her *leporellos* for the first time at the Galerie L'Atelier, Rabat, in 1978; it was Maraini who introduced her to the gallery's founder, Pauline de Mazières, who promptly fell in love with these works on paper.

Adnan befriended not only Pauline de Mazières, who should be hailed for having founded a small cosmopolitan space in Rabat where artists such as Dia Azzawi, Carla Accardi, and Hossein Zenderoudi could exhibit their work, but also her husband, the architect Patrice de Mazières, whose modernist constructions anchored in the local ecosystem after a methodology redolent of that of the Bauhaus, which Adnan admired. In the 1970s, Patrice de Mazières had notably been the driving-force behind projects boasting works by the most prominent Moroccan visual artists, notably those of the Casablanca school, in the interior architecture and general aesthetics of his constructions, carried out most often in collaboration with the Moroccan architect Abdesslam Faraoui.

In a text written by Tahar Ben Jelloun to accompany Adnan's exhibition at L'Atelier in 1978, we read the following splendid expression regarding the *leporellos*: "Drawing the sky onto which the poet has sown a few syllables [...] one just has to find the rhythm of the breath of the poem, said, sung, chanted by the colors, by traces on the sand."⁸

Etel Adnan maintained these links with Morocco since her early trips to North Africa around 1966 (Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt). It was a time of several important discoveries and fundamental experiences occasioned by the so-called traditional or popular arts, calligraphy as well as tapestry. It was also in the magazine *Intégral*, edited by Melehi, Ben Jelloun, and Maraini, that Adnan published a powerful essay in 1973 titled "Light: the ultimate material of art" alongside writing by other leading poets of the 1970s, such as Adonis and Mostafa Nissaboury. The penetrating and even prophetic conclusion seems to contain not only sparks of the refulgence and incandescence of her later *L'Apocalypse arabe*, but also harbingers of the far from metaphorical catastrophes that were henceforth to batter Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and all of Western Asia, starting with a chain of wars in the mid-1970s: "Each eye is an atom of light, each atom is an atom of light and the artist again is face to face with the naked light [...] light is also terror, the 10,000 suns of Hiroshima."⁹

Adnan and Maraini were to remain in contact throughout the 1970s and beyond, crossing paths in New York, Paris, Rome, and even Asilah, northern Morocco, at the famous Moussem cultural and artistic festival inaugurated in 1978 and cofounded by Mohamed Melehi with Mohamed Benaïssa and Toni Maraini. Maraini is also the Italian translator of Adnan's collection of short stories (*Ai confini della Luna*, Rome, 1995) and of a selection of her California poems from *The Spring Flowers Own* and *Manifestations of the Voyage* (1990), as well as being the author of various texts on and analyses of Adnan's oeuvre, together with the Italian translation of *The Arab Apocalypse* (published in English in 1989, and in Italian in 2001). To complete this intertextual circle, moreover, Maraini is also the translator of Ferlinghetti's poems into Italian. The fundamental role of Etel Adnan as *middlewoman* thus becomes clearer as she bridges many important waterways reaching out beyond the Mediterranean and into the Atlantic.

Without unthinkingly reducing Etel Adnan's literary influences to Lebanon, it would be wrong to avoid mentioning a possible, indeed fascinating, affiliation with her illustrious forerunner Khalil Gibran, a writer who, through his short stories and tales, allegories and

8 Tahar Ben Jelloun, text for the invitation to the Etel Adnan exhibition, December 1978–January 1979, Galerie L'Atelier, Rabat. Pauline de Mazières archives.

9 Etel Adnan, "La lumière: ultime matériau de l'art," *Intégral* ("Revue de création plastique et littéraire", Casablanca), nos. 3–4, January 1973, pp. 56–57.

proverbs, poems and prose, may be considered the initiator of the plural writing of exile. Not to mention their common links with the United States and the themes they shared: the visible and the invisible, the forces of nature, the breaking of religious taboos, etc. This pair of poet-artists can safely be considered as two sides of the same philosophical and artistic coin: both undergo existential experiences, not without links to mysticism, thereby transcending the dichotomy of word and form. For both, eulogies and anathemas of ritual writing often harbor explosive visions and dazzling flashes of subjective text. In a sense, through Khalil Gibran, Etel Adnan's cosmogonic work also reveals links to the English poet William Blake, the Indian Rabindranath Tagore and the Iranian Sohrab Sepehri (poets and painters all).¹⁰

She manages to transcend political events, wars, and exile using the same constellation of dead or reborn stars, chromatic storms and luminous metaphors, by way of a writing—that of most of the *leporellos*—often washed away by its own river of thoughts, visions, and ports of call, like in a mirror of ink where words dissolve into forms and vice versa.

Think of the graphic upsurges that scatter the text of *The Arab Apocalypse*, or of all the other graphic gestures that flirt with the unconscious: spirals, arrows, zigzags, and scratches with which the writer douses her carnivorously accented text with pre-linguistic aggressiveness, ever in search of the degree zero of syntax and for a maximum of rhythmic impact, like a river that eats its own words and its own dead:

“Beirut syphilis carrying whore the sun is contaminated by the city a blue sun receding a Kurd killing the Armenian the Armenian killing the Palestinian the solar wheel of Syrian races oh insane nomads drinkers of dust a hydrophilic purple sun a hilarious yellow sun red and vain red sun Beirut-the-Mean a Party drunk with petroleum militia in whirlpools.”¹¹

In a transient aesthetic where time and space are by definition mutable and only to be gauged at the intersection of different languages and continents, Etel Adnan always displayed the same unchanging transcultural and exilic impulses, both in her iconic abstract paintings and in her various writings. As she further explains: “Abstract art was the equivalent of poetic expression; I didn't need to use words, but colors and lines. I didn't need to belong to a language-orientated culture, but to an open form of expression.”¹² In sum: “Writing is a form of drawing, although we don't notice it.”¹³

10 The same might be said of her relation to the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, in: Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan” (see note 4), p. 30.

11 Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (see note 3), n. p.

12 Etel Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” (1996) in: T. Donovan and E. Shimoda (eds.), *To look at the sea is to become what one is. An Etel Adnan Reader*, Brooklyn & Callicoon: Nightboat Books, 2014, p. 253.

13 Obrist, “Conversations with Etel Adnan” (see note 4), p. 31.

A Tale of Two Women: Etel Adnan and Delphine Seyrig Giovanna Zapperi

The condition of being a woman in a world blighted by war and catastrophe remained a recurring theme in the works of Etel Adnan throughout her life. Her novel *Sitt Marie Rose* was based on the story of a real woman who was kidnapped, tortured, and killed because she supported the Palestinian cause. Its main character emblemizes female resistance and resilience in the context of the civil war that was raging in Lebanon between 1975 and 1990. Adnan wrote the novel in 1976 in Paris, whence she had fled to escape the hostilities, and the book was first published by Éditions des femmes, whose history and genealogy are deeply entwined with the rise of the MLF (*Mouvement de libération des femmes*).¹ While the tragic events were unfolding in Beirut, the feminist movement was at its height in the French capital, with mass demonstrations that ultimately led to fundamental changes with regard to reproductive rights and sexual freedom. Even though the novel mainly focuses on male sexuality and violence, it can also be said that the way Adnan elaborates the figure of Marie Rose is informed by the international women's liberation movement as it gained momentum in the mid-1970s. In an interview, Adnan defines Marie Rose as a feminist: a woman who chose to be free to love and live the way she wanted to, and who was killed for this reason.²

1 Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose*, Paris: Éditions des femmes, 1978. (English edition: Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose*, Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1999, trans. Georgina Kleege).

2 Lynne Tillmann, “Etel Adnan. Children of the sun,” in: *Bidoun*, no. 18, Summer 2009. URL: <https://new.bidoun.org/issues/18-interviews#etel-adnan> [accessed July 5, 2022].

Notwithstanding her ongoing interest in translating women's—especially Arab women's—experiences and desires in her writing, Adnan's name is very rarely directly associated with the feminist movement. The strong political dimension of her writings did not necessarily correspond with feminist activism per se, but the acumen with which she wrote about being a woman certainly needs to be reassessed within an interpretative feminist framework. Moreover, during the course of her life, Adnan met and collaborated with several women who were actively involved in the women's movement. One of these was the French actress, video maker, and feminist activist Delphine Seyrig.

Adnan and Seyrig met in February 1984 in La Sainte Baume, near Marseille, where they were participating in rehearsals for *The CIVIL warS*, Robert Wilson's monumental project for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. Wilson wanted to stage an opera in five parts, each produced in a different country, that would somehow be put together in Los Angeles. The vastly ambitious project was never realized in its original dimensions, but several acts were produced, in particular the French one, for which Adnan acted as writer and librettist. Wilson's opera referred to the historical events of the American Civil War that culminated in the abolition of slavery, but the idea was also to emphasize the subject's present-day topicality, a fact that must have strongly resonated with Adnan's recent wartime experiences in Lebanon.

Wilson and Adnan had met in Beirut in 1971, where they had become friends. Seyrig was born and raised in Beirut, where her father had been a prominent archeologist and General Director of Antiquities in Syria and Lebanon under the French mandate. Besides being raised in Lebanon, Adnan and Seyrig had many other interests in common, and their friendship intensified after the two weeks spent in La Sainte Baume, even though the French actress had to leave the rehearsals prematurely: her mother died during those weeks and she was therefore obliged to quit Wilson's opera.

Following this first encounter, Seyrig reached out to Adnan regarding a film project based on the alleged letters of American frontierswoman Calamity Jane to her abandoned daughter.³ Calamity Jane, real name Martha Jane Cannary (1852–1903), was a legendary figure of uncompromising female independence who quickly became an icon for the 1970s feminist movement. During the 1980s, and following her active participation in the women's movement, Delphine Seyrig had become increasingly dissatisfied with her career as an actress. Throughout

3 Seyrig came across Calamity Jane's letters in the late 1970s: *Letters of Calamity Jane to her daughter*, San Francisco: Shameless Hussy, 1976. Regarding the many doubts about the letters' authenticity and for an in-depth examination of Delphine Seyrig's project and collaborations (which also include her son Duncan Youngerman and film maker Babette Mangolte), see the forthcoming book edited by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez: *Delphine Seyrig's Calamity*, Amsterdam: If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution (forthcoming).

the 1970s, and in conjunction with her activities as a video maker together with Carole Roussopoulos, Ioana Wieder, and others,⁴ Seyrig had developed her own views on the film industry's structural sexism and gender imbalance. In addition, her experience of working with female directors such as Marguerite Duras and Chantal Akerman contributed to her desire to direct a film herself.

Seyrig's vision of the film is revealed in some of the letters she sent to her son in the early 1980s, as well as in the project proposal for the film, for which she never secured financial backing. In the latter, for example, she writes:

“The drama: relation between mother and daughter, rejection of the child and repeated adoption of children who are abandoned by others; instinctive refusal to fulfill a sexual role and subsequent isolation and misery; independence of spirit and body and a single-mindedness of feelings. All these upheavals will provide the fabric of the film and its raison d'être [...] It might seem too ambitious: in reality, the image of the West that we know from so many Westerns evokes a cinema which is well executed according to Hollywood norms. My proposal is much more modest and different. Images that come to my mind are simple images without any artificiality. A fragment of a silent movie.”⁵

Seyrig envisaged a silent black-and-white film, accompanied by music, and with herself playing Calamity Jane. She wanted to avoid a realist style and convey an atmosphere reminiscent of silent cinema, to give expression to her personal involvement with the subject.

After their encounter in La Sainte Baume, Seyrig proposed to Adnan that they should work together on the script. Initially they intended to write in French, but subsequently decided to write in English, which would enable them to use the actual words employed by Calamity Jane herself in her letters. Adnan was living between France and California at that time, but the numerous letters she exchanged with Seyrig indicate the intensity of her commitment to this project. In a postcard illustrated with one of Anselm Adams' epic photographic representations of the American West, Adnan comments on her first reading of Calamity Jane's letters: “It seems to me that the drama does not originate in the text, but that it would result from the text if it is acted with passion. It is the events that arouse the emotions. And not vice versa. Basically, she says very little about what she feels. We guess it.”⁶ Interestingly, Adnan juxtaposes the magnificent and emotionally laden view of the West, emblemized by Adams' picture, with

4 These video productions are the main topic of the exhibition I co-curated with Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and in collaboration with Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir: *Defiant Muses. Delphine Seyrig and feminist video collectives in France, 1970s–1980s*, Lille, LaM, and Madrid, Museo Reina Sofia, 2019–2020, traveling to Kunsthalle Wien, Kunstverein Stuttgart, 2022–2023.

5 Delphine Seyrig, “Calamity Jane”, unpublished project proposal, Delphine Seyrig archives, Meschers.

6 Etel Adnan, unpublished letter to Delphine Seyrig, undated (1985?), Delphine Seyrig archives, Meschers.

Calamity Jane's factual account of her life and personal feelings. By staging Calamity Jane's letters, the two women wanted to challenge the conventional format of Western movies by infusing it with the intimacy and the affective complexity of the imagined relationship between a mother and her lost daughter. In this way the film could respond to the overwhelming feelings prompted by the immensity of the Western landscape in a way that avoided Western cinema's mythical apparatus and its implicit gender inscriptions.

In an interview with Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Adnan recalls her encounter with Seyrig and the unfolding of their friendship.⁷ She especially underlines Seyrig's profound identification with Calamity Jane but also the fact that she was not so much interested in assessing Calamity Jane's legend, as wanting to explore the topic of the mother-daughter bond via the letters. As a matter of fact, writing letters was an important activity for Seyrig herself: her life circumstances and profession kept her away from members of her family for long periods of time, so that exchanging letters was the best way to keep in touch. According to Adnan, Seyrig wanted to look at the experience of motherhood from the perspective of someone who was remote from the cultural maternal stereotypes, but then became equally interested in Calamity Jane's supposed daughter, Janey Hickock McCormick. According to the account in the letters, Janey was the daughter of James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickock (1837–1876), another legend of the far West, but was given up for adoption by her mother after Hickock left her and married another woman. Calamity Jane's letters to her daughter are therefore a painful attempt to reconnect with the daughter she had to abandon.

By around 1987, Adnan had completed the script for the film and returned to California. Seyrig asked an American student to typewrite the manuscript. However, the young woman left without giving an address, and the manuscript disappeared with her. Only forty-seven pages of the typewritten scenario have survived; the rest has been lost. In her interview with Petrešin-Bachelez, Adnan recalls that around that time she had an accident and was therefore unable to reach out to her friend in France, who in the meantime had become ill and died prematurely in 1990.

Shortly after Seyrig's death, Adnan wrote a twenty-one-page libretto for an opera titled *Calamity Jane*. Dedicated to Delphine Seyrig, it was a concise reworking of the scenario they had written together.⁸ The opera opens with Janey reading a letter from her mother and closes with a scene in which she receives the letters and starts reading them,

7 Interview by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez with Etel Adnan about her collaboration with Delphine Seyrig, February 12, 2018 (Archive Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris) URL: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/multimedia/etel-adnan> [accessed July 5, 2022].

8 Etel Adnan, "Calamity Jane. An Opera", undated (1990?), Delphine Seyrig archives, Meschers.

long after they were written. By focusing on Janey's indirect encounter with her mother, whose story materializes throughout the opera's narrative, the text focuses on a sense of recovery and healing in their disrupted relationship. As Seyrig wrote in one of her notes, Calamity Jane did not correspond to the idealized (and therefore oppressive) images of motherhood of the time; on the contrary, the way she cared about her daughter suggests a radical change in perspective: "What daughter would not wish to have as role model a woman who managed to live for purposes other than only for her children? Daughters do not want to resemble their mothers."⁹

Even though she expressed the difficulty of giving shape to the wishes of someone else—Seyrig's personal commitment to Calamity Jane—Adnan ultimately succeeded in carving out the contradiction between maternal love and the desire for independence that marked the attachment between the two protagonists of their scenario, Calamity and Janey. Moreover, the story brings us back to Adnan's own preoccupation with women that, so to speak, transgress the multiple boundaries within which women's lives are often contained. One cannot help drawing a line connecting Marie Rose to Calamity Jane: both women, as it were, were punished for crossing boundaries that were spatial (the city of Beirut and its civil-war topography, and the frontier of the American West) just as they touched upon issues of intimacy, feelings, and life choices. Whereas both figures are fictional, their desire to live a life with purposes other than complying with normative ideals and behaviors was real, for their freedom still resonates in the entwined trajectory of Etel Adnan and Delphine Seyrig.

9 Delphine Seyrig, Unpublished manuscript, undated (1983?), Delphine Seyrig archives, Meschers.

Kathrin Beßen, Melanie Vietmeier
 “Life is a journey”: Etel Adnan’s *Leporellos*

Etel Adnan was a storyteller. In her autobiographical essays from the mid-1980s onward, she traces the many threads of her eventful life and strings them out before the reader. She reports on her parents, on life in Lebanon, on her moves to Paris and California, on her work, and on the importance of the different languages in which she wrote and spoke.¹ These texts, which take us to the most diverse places at different times, are impressive documents of a multi-layered transnational biography. Categories such as cultural origin or affiliation are still used to define identities, but at the latest in the face of narratives such as Adnan’s—of situations of upheaval and an experience of constant in-betweenness—they inevitably lead nowhere.²

Such a moment of in-betweenness is described by Adnan in terms of her approach to language, which, as she says, begins “at home.”³ The writer, poet, and artist Etel Adnan was the daughter of a Greek mother and a Syrian father who met in Izmir, which was occupied by Greece at the time and is now Turkish; as such, there was no dominant mother tongue in her life. The languages of her childhood in Beirut were Turkish and Greek, and the colonial Catholic school she attended taught French. Arabic was a punishable language there. Adnan’s multilingualism, which evolved further throughout her life, was determined by ever-changing political realities and a network of transcultural encounters.⁴ Adnan guides us through this web, recounting how one emerges from the other.

The years following Adnan’s move from Paris to California, where she lived from 1955 until the mid-1960s, are marked by significant upheavals. She was confronted with situations that she understood as adventures and used productively for herself: “After Paris, I went to California by a series of occurrences which I am not going to linger on today. [...] This break which proved to be a radical one, was not an exile. It was adventure. I had decided to give myself a destiny for which nothing had prepared me.”⁵

The important features of her artistic work evolved during this period. Adnan began to paint and draw; she developed designs for

1 These essays include, for example, “To Write in a Foreign Language” (1984), “Growing up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon” (1986), and “Voyage, War and Exile” (1995).

2 Jennifer Scappettone, “‘Fog is my land.’ A Citizenship of Mutual Estrangement in the Painted Books of Etel Adnan,” in: Georgina Colby (ed.), *Reading Experimental Writing*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020, pp. 15–33, here p. 17.

3 Etel Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” in: T. Donovan and B. Shimoda (eds.), *To look at the sea is to become what one is. An Etel Adnan Reader*, vol. I, New York: Nightboat Books, 2022, p. 47.

4 Scappettone 2020 (see note 2), p. 17.

5 Etel Adnan, “Voyage, War and Exile,” in: *AlArabiyya*, vol. 28 (1995), p. 6.

her first tapestries and discovered the form of the *leporello* for herself, a book format with folded concertina-style pages. Like no other medium in Etel Adnan’s oeuvre, this medium stands for a junction at which multiple threads come together productively. The *leporello* was more than merely a medium of expression in which painting, drawing, and her love of poetry intertwined, overcoming the separation between the genres. The medium of the *leporello*, as Adnan understands it, namely as an interplay of text and image, stands for encounter. It embodies transnational action and transcultural contacts, her networks with Arab as well as American and French poets. The *leporellos* also evoke her encounters with the writings of modern artists such as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky.

Her decision to use Arabic texts in her first *leporellos* resulted from political circumstances and a related personal crisis she experienced in California in the late 1950s. The Algerian War of 1956–1962, one of the largest and bloodiest wars of decolonization, shook Adnan in her use of French. This language, in which she had written her first poems since the late 1940s, while studying, now became “the language of the oppressive colonial power.”⁶ After her arrival in California, Adnan had encountered students from various Arab countries who connected the fate of the Arab world to the outcome of the conflict and helped shape Adnan’s new sense of herself as an “Arab American.”⁷ The current political events and the shift in her own sense of identity intertwined in this moment. The political situation in North Africa left a formative impression on her. “I was disturbed in one fundamental realm of my life: the domain of meaningful self-expression. Something quite unexpected solved my problem.”⁸

In the early 1960s, during this existential loss of expressive possibilities—for she did not yet feel proficient enough in English—Adnan had two encounters with artists who had a decisive influence on her artistic work. One was her contact with Ann O’Hanlon (1908–1998), who introduced her to painting, and the other was her chance meeting with Rick Barton (1928–1992) in San Francisco, who gave her a Japanese *leporello* and invited her to work on it further.⁹ For Adnan, this encounter was “one of the most lasting of my artistic impressions.”¹⁰ Her first drawings in Barton’s folding booklet, which has been preserved as the “first *leporello*,” are characterized by experimentation (cat. 124). In 1964, she then found what was, for her, the logical approach to the medium: the combination of a hand-copied Arabic poem and her drawings and watercolors. “I soon realized that to me this meant a new language and a solution to my dilemma: I didn’t need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic.”¹¹

6 Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, *Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art. Three Case Studies: Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Abd al-Rahman Munif, Etel Adnan* [Literaturen im Kontext. arabisch – persisch – türkisch, vol. 34], Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2012, p. 112.

7 Adnan 2022 (see note 3), p. 253.

8 Ibid.

9 See Simone Fattal’s essay, “Painting as Pure Energy,” in this volume, pp. 16–29, here p. 26.

10 Etel Adnan, “The Unfolding of an Artist’s Book,” in: *Discourse*, vol. 20, nos. 1/2, Winter and Spring 1998, pp. 6–27, here p. 8.

11 Adnan 2022 (see note 3), p. 253.

Adnan had retained a special, in some ways abstract access to Arabic in concentration on the Arabic script from her childhood. Her father Assaf Kadri, who was from Damascus, had taught his young daughter Arabic at home out of frustration with the French-influenced school system in Beirut—Lebanon did not become independent from France until 1943. “It’s hopeless, the schools should be doing that, and these nuns are propagandists. Everything is propaganda in this country!”¹² He had her copy his old Arabic-Turkish grammar book page by page.¹³

Looking back, Etel Adnan described how, in the early 1960s, medium and language merged into a meaningful unity: “Poetry and Painting stayed separate, but one day when I decided to write, or to be precise, copy poetry in Arabic with the intent to integrate ‘calligraphy’ into a style of working with watercolors and inks which was contemporary, I engaged myself on a trial that is still in front of me. I found Japanese folded papers, like the old books of Japanese woodcuts where each double page was an image tied, or not tied, to the following ones. Something from my childhood emerged: the pleasure of writing, line after line, Arabic sentences which I understood very imperfectly: I took modern poetry written by the major Arab poets and ‘worked’ with them. [...] They represent to me a coming to terms which I would never have expected until it happened, with the many threads that make up the tapestry of my life.”¹⁴

For her first *leporello* in 1964, Adnan used the poem “Madīnat al-Sindibād” (Sinbad’s City) by the Iraqi poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab (1926–1964), who had died shortly before and who had fundamentally influenced and changed Arabic poetry. Apart from al-Sayyab, whose “Al-Umm wa al-Ibnat al-Da‘ī’a” (The Mother and the Lost Daughter, cat. 46) she put down on paper for a visually stunning *leporello* in 1970, it was exclusively living poets with whose texts she worked—“an anthology of contemporary poetry.”¹⁵ “What interests me is to respond to someone else’s poetry, but not in words. Instead of writing a poem about a poem or a piece of criticism, the books are a visual reading of the poetry.”¹⁶ She knew many of the authors personally and was in close exchange with

12 Assaf Kadri, quoted by Adnan in: Ibid.

13 The book was published before the language reform in Turkey in 1928, when the Arabic characters were exchanged for the Latin alphabet when writing Turkish. Adnan’s father experienced this as a shock; it was as mysterious to him as it was to his young daughter. Scappetone 2020 (see note 2), p. 17.

14 Adnan 2022 (see note 3), p. 255.

15 Fattal 2022 (see note 9).

16 Etel Adnan, quoted in: Daedalus Howell, “Artist Transforms Verse into Visual Poetry,” in: *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 18, 1998.

them. Two of them, Yusuf al-Khal (1931–2019) and Sargon Boulos (1944–2007), contributed significantly to Adnan’s acceptance as an Arab poet in the late 1960s, without her ever formulating a poem in Arabic herself. Al-Khal, as editor, included Adnan’s poems, which Boulos had previously translated, in the influential poetry magazine *Shi‘ir*, which had been published in Beirut between 1957 and 1964 and again between 1967 and 1969.

The threads that weave the fabric of her life during the 1950s and 1960s include not only exchanges and collaborations with writers, but also encounters with contemporary artists and an exploration of the work of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Vincent van Gogh, Paul Klee, and Wassily Kandinsky.

From 1958 to 1972, Adnan was a lecturer for Philosophy of Art at Dominican College in San Rafael, and she also dealt in her courses with “writings by painters [...], believing that these were much more important and more accessible than the dry writings of theoreticians like Hegel or Panovsky [sic].”¹⁷ She read Klee’s diaries immediately after they were published in English by the University of California Press, Berkeley in 1964. She was also particularly interested in the theoretical dimension of Kandinsky’s writings. In her courses, she included his essay *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, originally published in German in Munich in 1911, which had already been translated into English for the first time in 1914 and received further distribution in the United States through its publication by the Guggenheim Foundation in New York in 1946.¹⁸

Adnan also studied the visual work of these artists during visits to exhibitions. The repression of modern art in Germany during the Nazi era had stimulated interest abroad.¹⁹ Also after the end of World War II, several gallery exhibitions featuring works by Klee were held in New York. In Etel Adnan’s immediate environment, the University Art Gallery of the University of California at Berkeley presented works by the artist in 1962.²⁰

Adnan’s understanding of the *leporello* as a cross-genre medium reveals a particularly close parallel to Klee. Both reflected with great interest on the possibilities of the interplay between writing, drawing, and painting and explored these in their creative processes. The study of (Arabic) calligraphy was an integral part of their artistic practice.²¹

17 Fattal 2022 (see note 9), p. 21.

18 First published as *Über das Geistige in der Kunst insbesondere in der Malerei* in 1911 by R. Piper & Co. in Munich (dated 1912); *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, London & Boston, 1914; *Della spiritualità nell’arte, particolarmente nella pittura*, Rome 1940; *On the Spiritual in Art*, New York 1946 (Trans. Hilla Rebay); *Concerning the Spiritual in Art, and Painting in Particular*, New York 1947; *Du spirituel dans l’art*, Paris: René Drouin, 1949; *Du spirituel dans l’art*, Paris: Editions de Baune, 1951.

19 Works by Klee and Kandinsky were increasingly represented in exhibitions and collections in the United States as early as the 1930s. For further information on the reception of Klee in the United States, see: *Paul Klee, Leben und Werk*, exh. cat. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012, pp. 260–261, 292–293; *Ten Americans. After Paul Klee*, exh. cat. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern and Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., Munich: Prestel, 2017.

20 *Paul Klee. An Exhibition from the Galka E. Scheyer Collection of the Pasadena Art Museum*, University Art Gallery, University of California, Berkeley, May 3–27, 1962. The exhibition *Paul Klee. Oils, Watercolors, Gouaches, Drawings, Prints from the James Gilvarry Collection* was also presented at the Art Gallery of the University of California, Santa Barbara, from October 5 to November 12, 1967.

21 Fabienne Eggelhöfer, “Etel Adnan meets Paul Klee,” in: *Manazir Journal*, no. 1, 2019, pp. 8–13, here pp. 8–9.

Paul Klee had intensively studied the North African region. Especially his trip to Tunisia with his artist friends Louis Moilliet and August Macke in the spring of 1914 had an impact on his approach to color. In 1928/29, he visited the Egyptian pyramids and studied writing systems such as Egyptian hieroglyphics and Ancient Oriental cuneiform. At the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, where he taught from 1931 until his dismissal by the National Socialists in 1933, he advised his students to study Chinese calligraphy as an example of a graphic form of expression.²² Klee was fascinated by the close connection between writing and drawing, an aspect that was also central to Etel Adnan's *leporellos*, as she describes in retrospect: "I used my (extremely imperfect) handwriting, figuring out the visual possibilities of the manipulation of letters and words given the elasticity of Arabic script. [...] I was dealing with the combination of poetry, script and painting, I was finding a way out from the past (classical calligraphy), and still carrying on to new shores the inherent possibilities of Arabic writing: I was discovering, by experiencing it, that writing and drawing were one."²³ Breaking away from the classical heritage of calligraphy based on the "codification of script,"²⁴ she experimented with a specific free form of expression in hybrid works, such as the *leporello Allawn wa Alrasm* (Color and Drawing, 1971; cat. 44), which is why she has been called a pioneer of the "Calligraphic School of Art" (known as *Huruftyya*), along with painters such as Shaker Hassan.²⁵

In other *leporellos*, Adnan dispenses entirely with a textual level. In the work *Untitled* (cat. 45), also created in 1971, the poetically oscillating flow of color unfolds over a length of more than five meters, interrupted only by a speech bubble with symbolic signs. In this horizontal format of the *leporellos*, as well as in the large-format tapestries, a parallel between Adnan's and Kandinsky's reflections on the movement of colors manifests itself in the color gradients and color explosions. In their own specific ways, both explore the potential of color and form, of an abstraction that arises from within. In 1963, Adnan traces Kandinsky's search for the symbolic content of abstract forms and for further dimensions in a review titled "L'orient magique de Kandinsky," which she wrote about an exhibition of the artist's works at the Guggenheim Museum in New York: "It is often said that Kandinsky's last period lacks poetry, that it is rigid because it consists of circumscribed forms, circles and triangles. It is somewhat contemptuously called geometric. But this is to say that the sky

22 Ibid., p. 9.

23 Adnan 1998 (see note 10), p. 20.

24 Ibid.

25 Scappettone 2020 (see note 2), p. 27.

has no grandeur, that the circle has never been an amazing symbol. It is forgotten that Kandinsky did not speak so much of abstract painting as of 'absolute painting'; it is forgotten that, for him, the mystical search was expressed in painting as naturally as we are used to finding it in texts written with words. He wrote and painted simultaneously."²⁶

In the review, Adnan writes about Kandinsky's sojourn in Tunis in 1904/05 and its later effects on his oeuvre,²⁷ as well as the fact that she herself developed a deeper understanding of Kandinsky's works precisely through an atmospheric experience in Egypt.²⁸ The fact that the report on her visit to the exhibition was published in *Jeune Afrique*,²⁹ a French-language journal on the politics and culture of the African continent, which was first published in Tunis in 1961, is another example of Etel Adnan's networks and her transnational activities.

Etel Adnan used the medium of the *leporello* throughout her life. She continued creating new works in this medium until shortly before her death in 2021. The numerous fanfold books tell of her own experimental relationship to Arabic script, as well as of her love of poetry and modern painting. They reveal which social constellations Adnan reflected on and which incidents had an impact on her. Thus, her political activism against the Vietnam War in the mid-1960s is also evident in the *leporellos*—for *War Poems* (cat. 117), Adnan once again compiled her first poems in English. In the mid-1970s, her stance on the civil war in Lebanon became apparent. Some of the *leporellos* also bear witness to the cities she lived in, such as Paris and Beirut—as well as those she visited time and again, such as New York. "Life is a journey, it's a journey because we don't know where we are going of course we plan but not all plans are realized and sometimes it's better when they don't then there is place for openness."³⁰ It is this openness to new things, to different forms of artistic expression, to encounters and collaborations, as well as her political-activist attitude, that distinguishes Etel Adnan's artistic work.

26 Etel Adnan, "L'orient magique de Kandinsky," in: *Jeune Afrique*, no. 131, April 22–28, 1963, p. 43 [translated].

27 Between 1904 and 1908 Kandinsky traveled together with the artist Gabriele Münter to the Netherlands, Tunisia, Italy, and Paris.

28 "When one evening, from the base of the Great Pyramid, an array of light rays emerged I grasped the cosmic scale on which these great funerary triangles were built. It is on the same cosmic scale that Kandinsky's last works are constructed." Adnan 1963 (see note 26), p. 43.

29 The magazine, which is still active today, emerged from its predecessors *L'Action* (1955–1958) and *Afrique-Action* (1960–1961). See: <https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32681694d> [accessed July 27, 2022].

30 Etel Adnan, quoted in: "Schiff im Sturm. Etel Adnans Reise durch Leben und Länder," in: *Deutschlandradio Kultur*, 2008, manuscript, p. 9, <http://jean-claude-kuner.de/index.php/horspiel/etel-adnan/> [accessed July 27, 2022].



Catalog



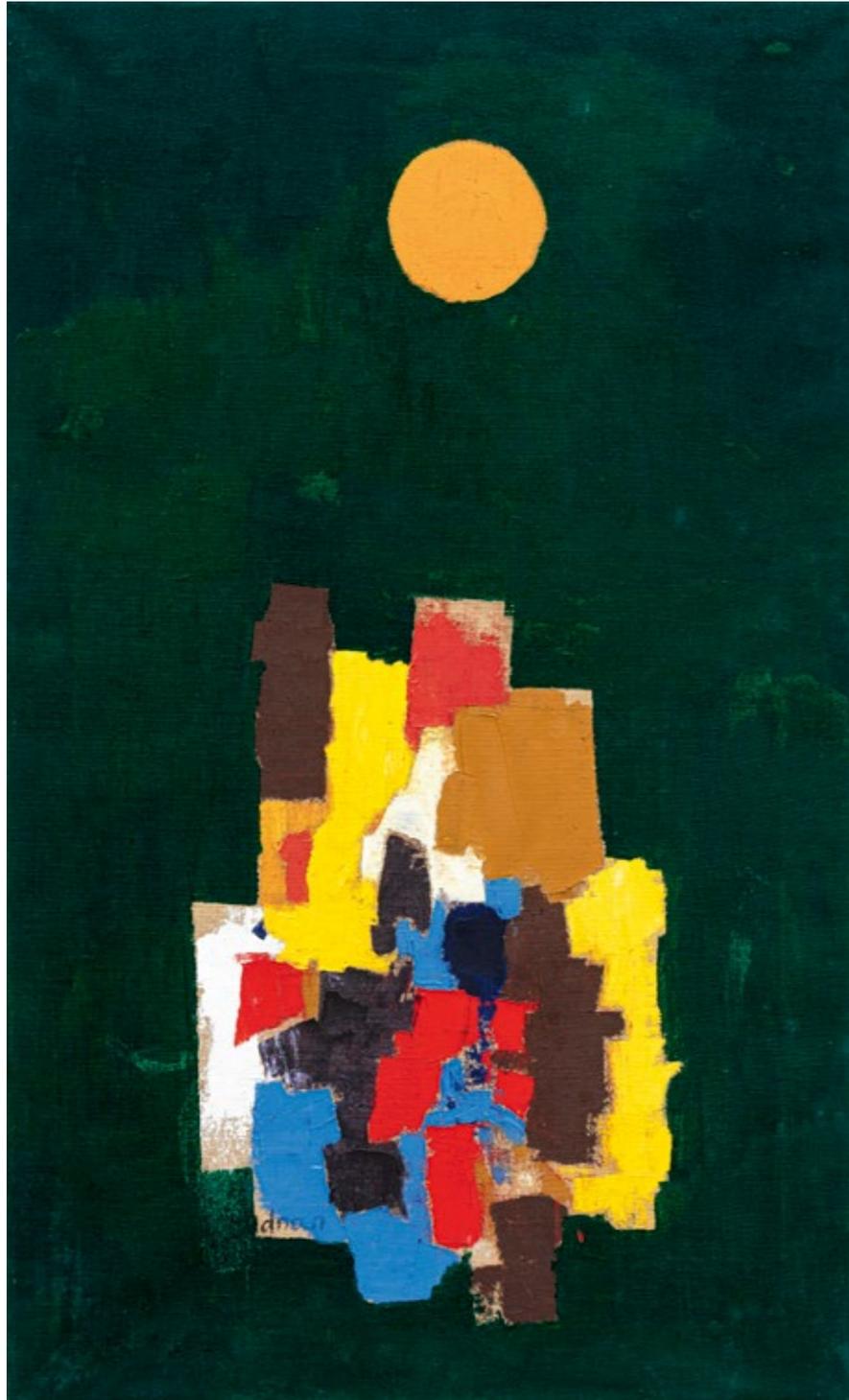




10. *Persian*, 1963/64



11. *Roi Inca (Inca King)*, 1965



12. Untitled, 1962/63



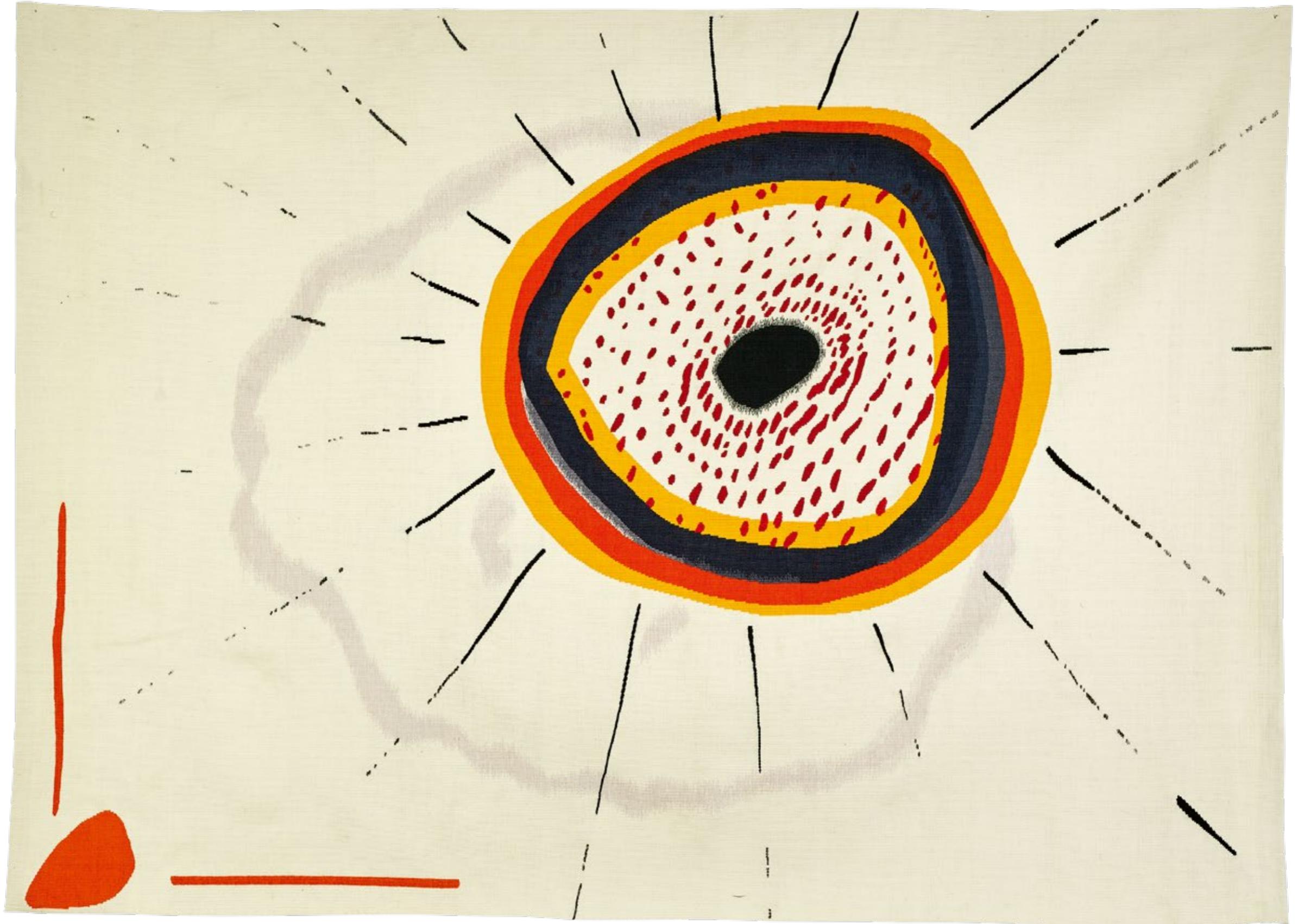
13. Untitled, ca. 1960



Detail of cat. 25
14. Tapestry design, 1960s
15. Tapestry design, 1969



17. *Hot*, ca. 196018. *Untitled*, 1961







21. Untitled, 1965



22. Untitled, 1973



23. Untitled, 2012
24. Untitled, 2010



25. Untitled, 2010
26. Untitled, 2010/11



27. Untitled, 2010



28. Untitled, 2010
29. Untitled, 2010



30. Untitled, 1972-75



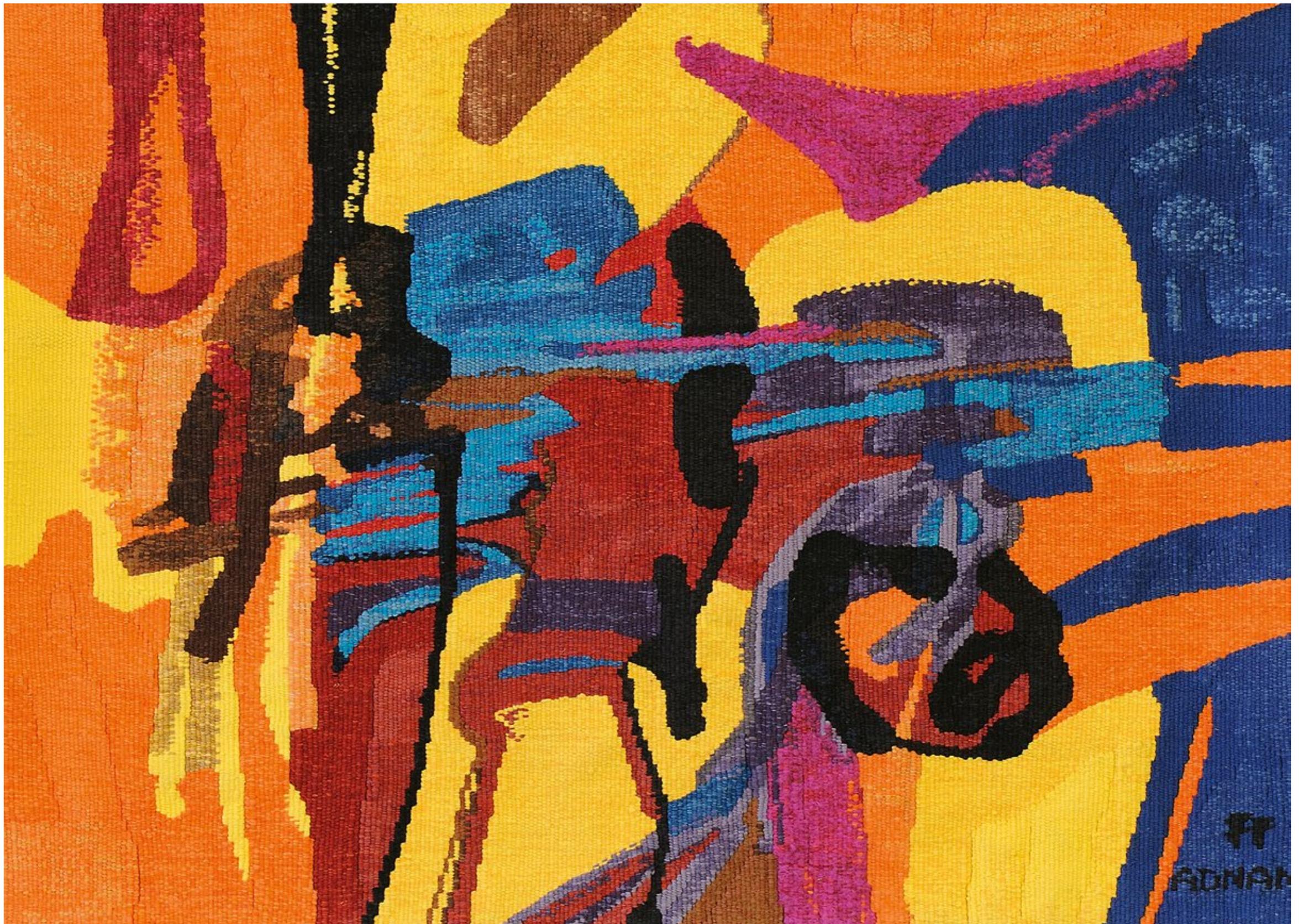
31. Untitled, ca. 1970



32. Untitled, 1960s



33. Untitled, 1972



34. *California*, ca. 1968

35. *Plants Marina*, 2019 (details)36. *Untitled*, ca. 1970



37. *Matinée récréative* (Recreational Morning), 1970/2015



38. Untitled, 1960s

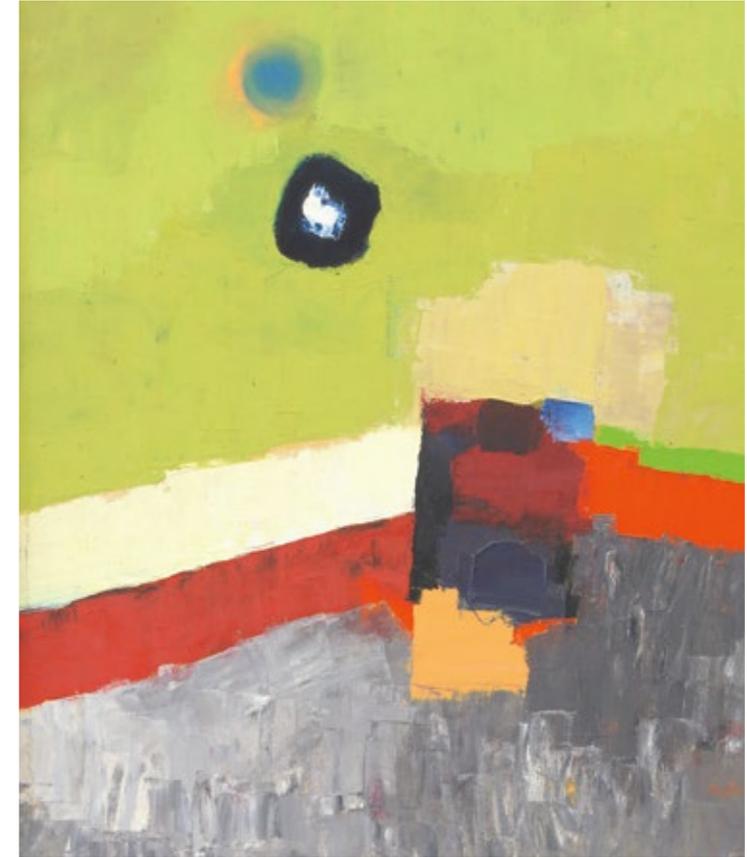


39. Untitled, 1960s





40. Untitled, 1960s (detail)
41. Untitled, 1960s

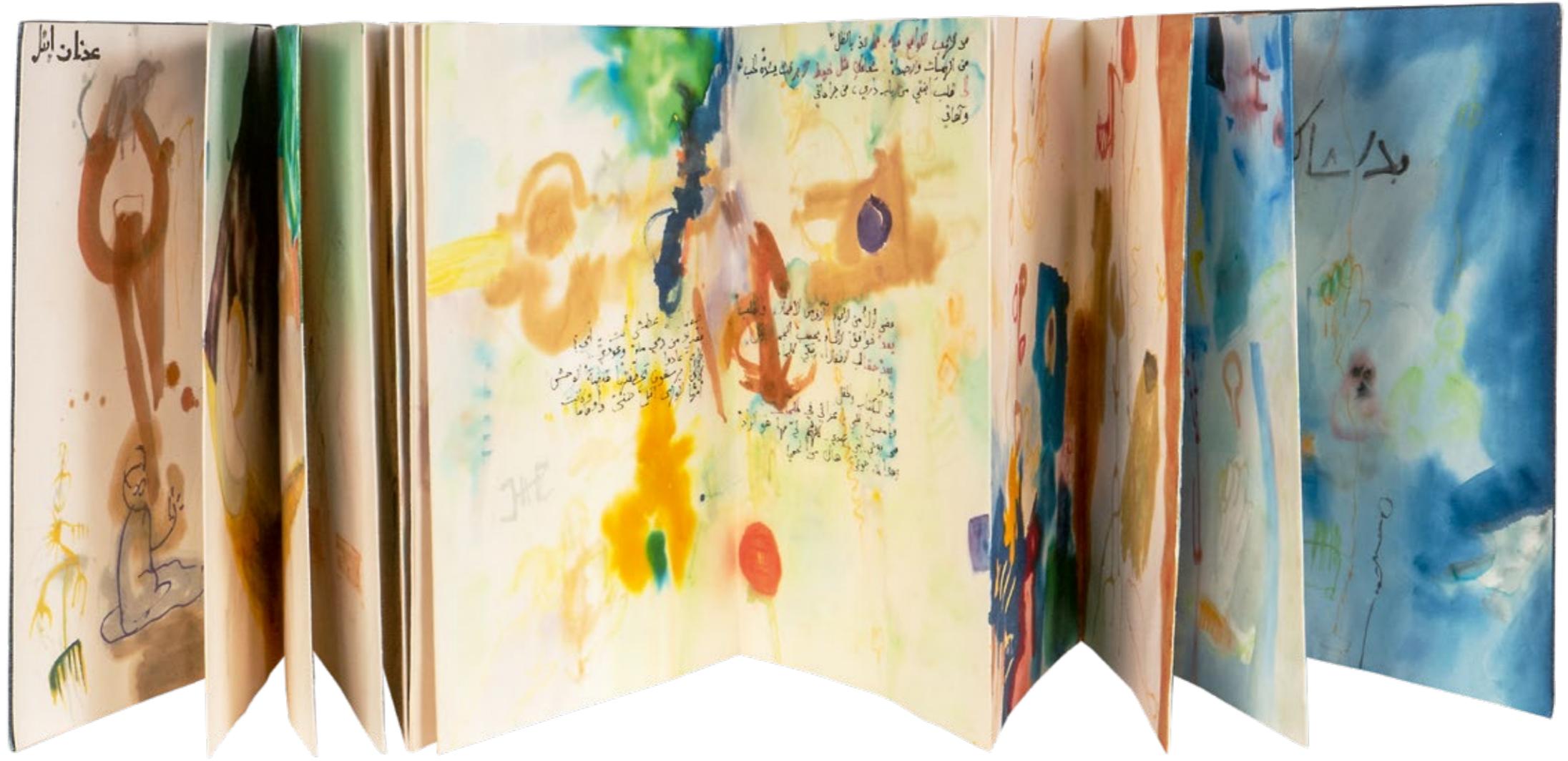


42. Untitled, 1969
43. Untitled, ca. 1965/66



44. *Allawn wa Alrasm* (Color and Drawing), 1971

45. Untitled, 1971



46. Al-Sayyab, *Al-Umm wa al-Ibnat al-Da'i'a* (Al-Sayyab, The Mother and the Lost Daughter), 1970

47. *Untitled*, ca. 197048. *California*, ca. 1960



49. *Oliveraie (Olive Grove)*, 2021/2022



50. Bouyout Al Ankabout (Spider Web), 1967

51. Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire, 2015
52. Mezza voce (lecture visuelle du texte de Anne-Marie Albiach par Etel Adnan) (Mezza voce [visual reading of Anne-Marie Albiach's text by Etel Adnan]), 1988



53. Untitled, 2018



54. Untitled, 2017
55. Untitled, 2016



56. Untitled (#181), 2012



57. Untitled, 2020
58. Satellites 22, 2020





59. Untitled, 2019



60. Untitled, 2020

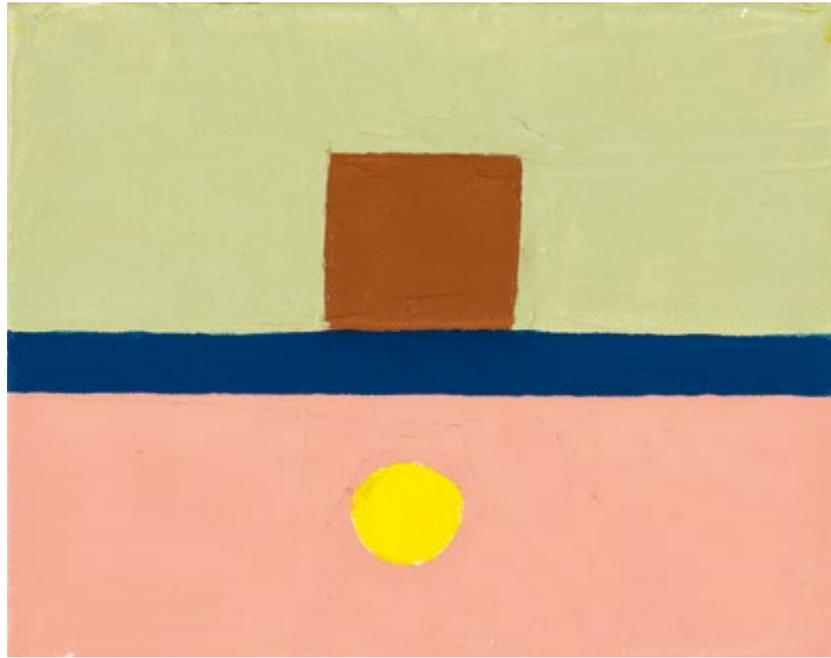


61. Tapestry design, 1960s
62. Tapestry design, June 21st, 1965



63. Untitled, 1972
64. *Eclat de lumière* (Burst of Light), 1960s/2021





65. Untitled, 2010
66. Untitled, 2012



67. Untitled, 2010
68. Untitled, 2012



69. Untitled, 2010
70. Untitled, 2010



71. Untitled, 2010
72. Untitled, 2013



73. Untitled, 2019
74. Untitled, 2019



75. Untitled, 2019
76. Untitled, 2019



77. Untitled, 2010
78. Untitled, 2010

79. Untitled, 2012
80. Untitled, 2010





82. Untitled, 2010



83. Untitled, ca. 1980
84. Untitled, ca. 1995-2000



85. Mont Tamalpaís, 1986



98. *The Mount Tamalpais*, 1985



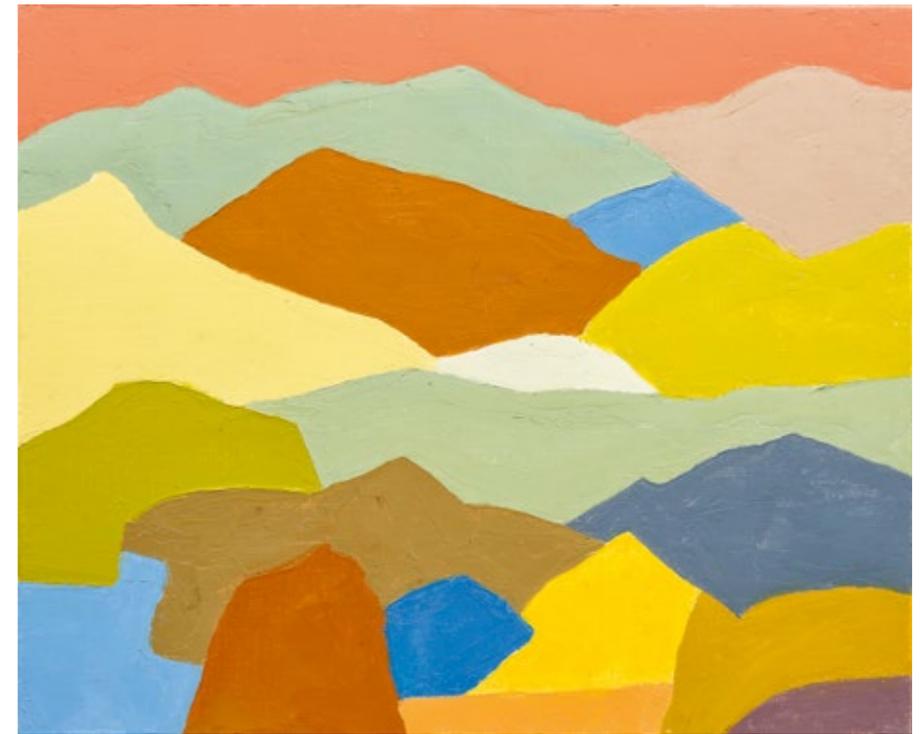
99. Untitled, 2013



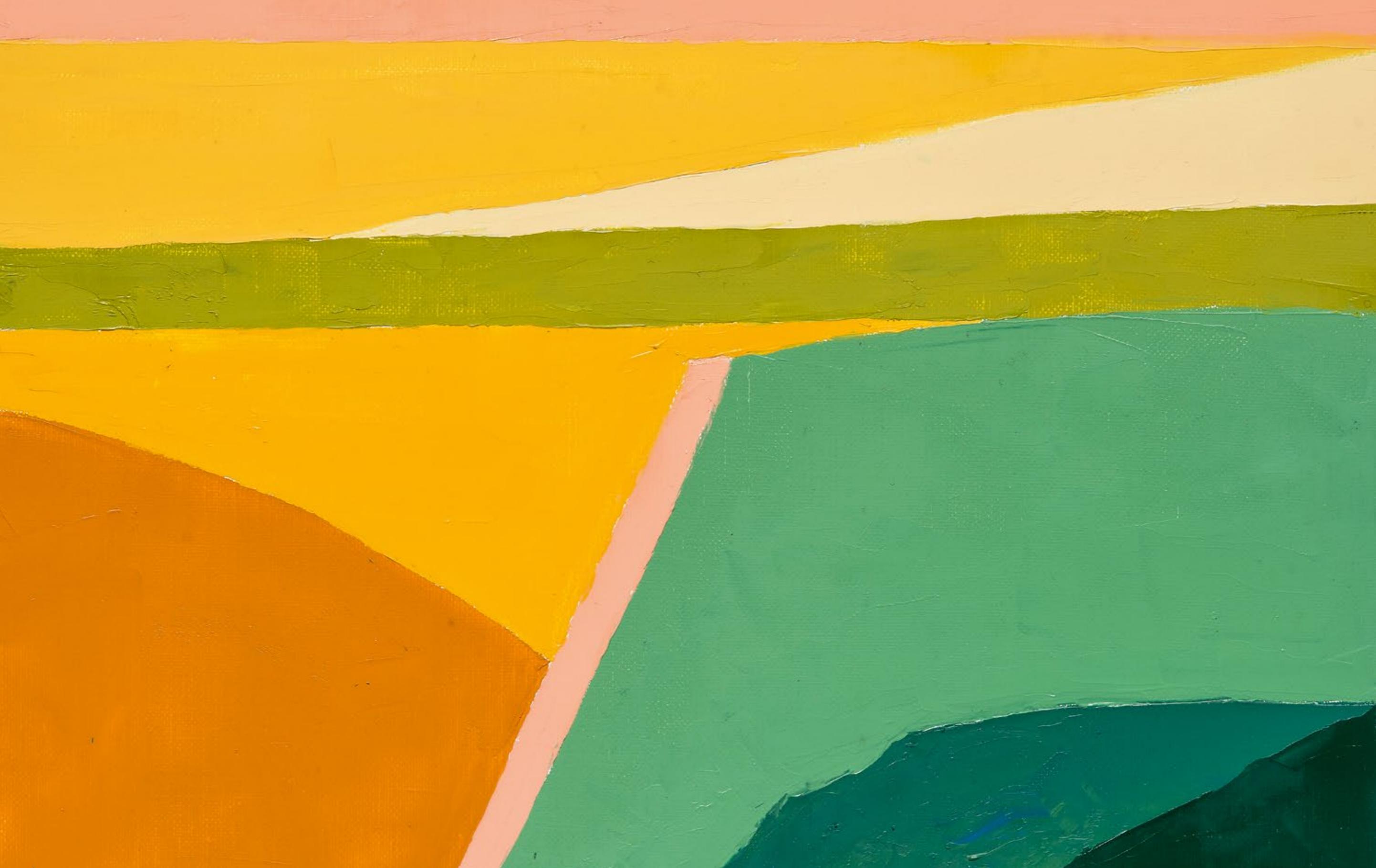
100. Untitled, 2012
101. Untitled, 2012

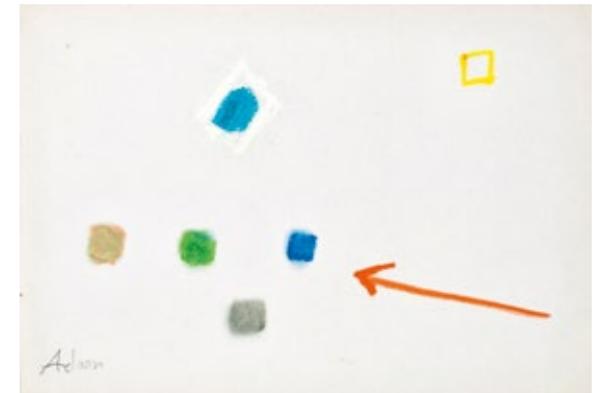
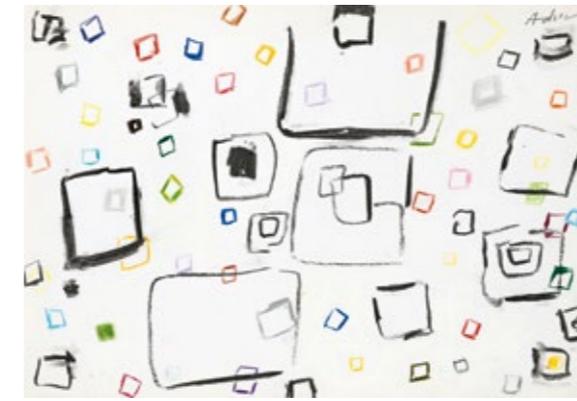
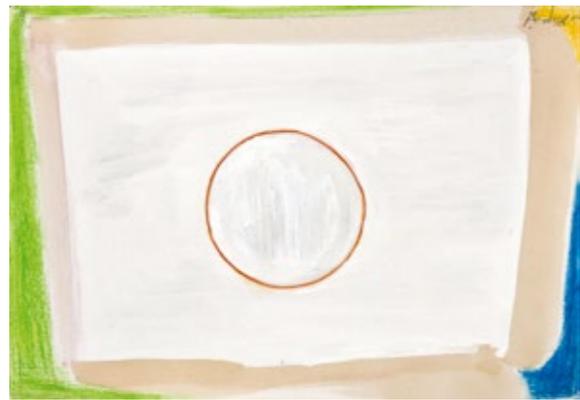
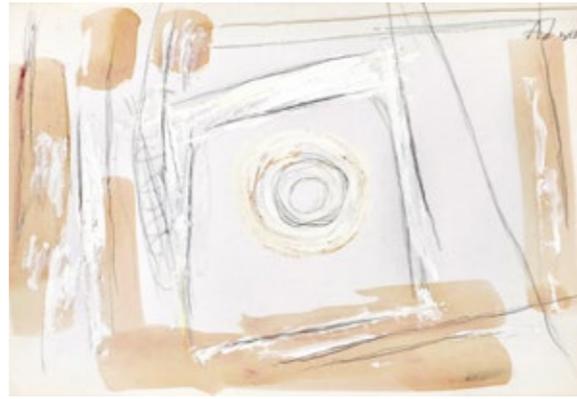


102. Untitled, 2016
103. Untitled, 2016



104. Untitled, 2015
105. Untitled, 2014 (detail)

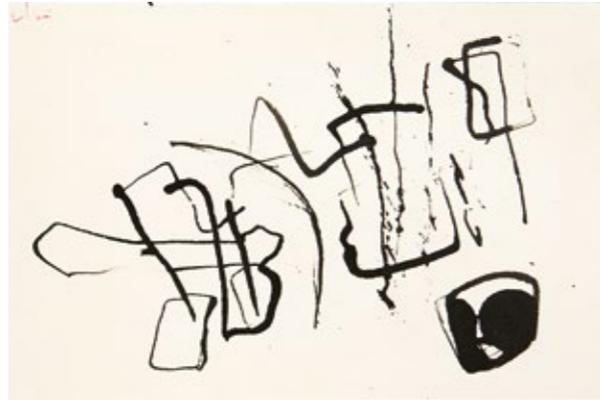






118. East River Pollution "From Laura's Window", April 1979

117. The War Poems, 1988
119. Paris Roofs from Jim's Window no.1, 1977

120. *Hyper Espace*, 1964121. *Untitled*, 1985-89



122. *Intrusion de la mémoire 10* (Intrusion of Memory 10), 2021

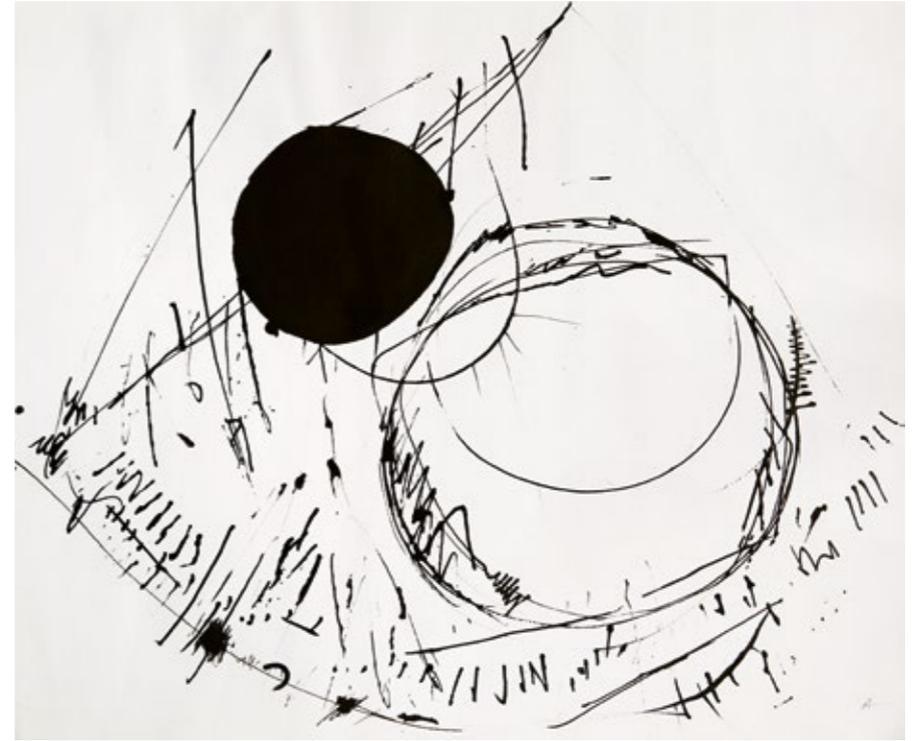


123. *Intrusion de la mémoire 9* (Intrusion of Memory 9), 2021

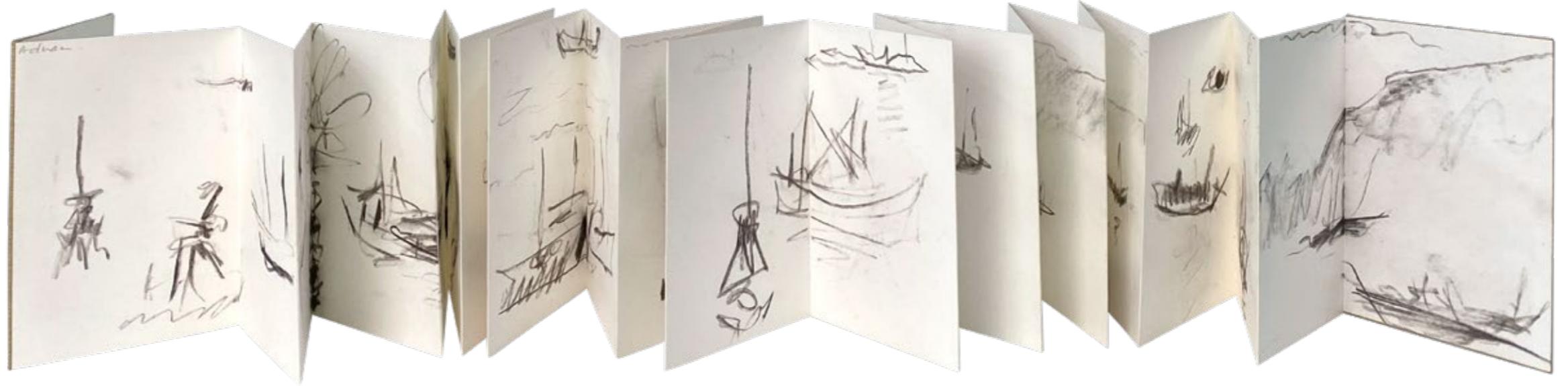




125. *Découverte de l'immédiat 56* (Discovery of the Immediate 56), 2021

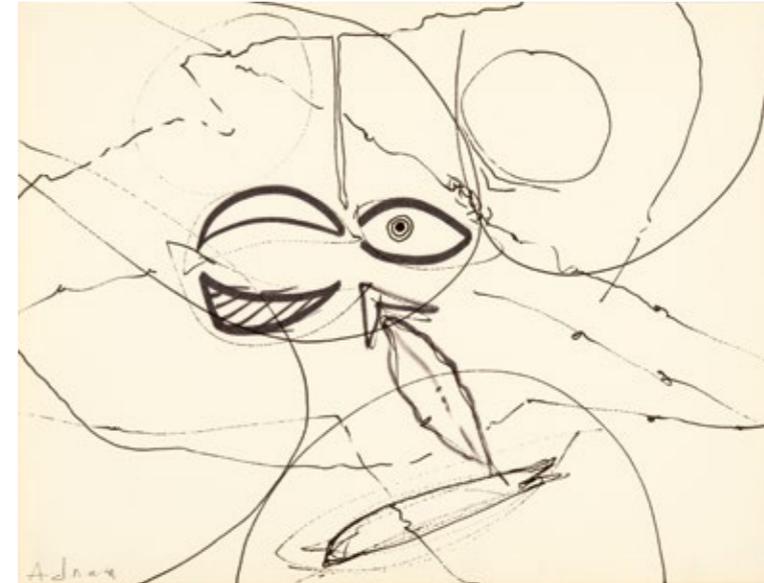


126. *Hyper Espace*, 1964
127. *Hyper Espace*, 1964

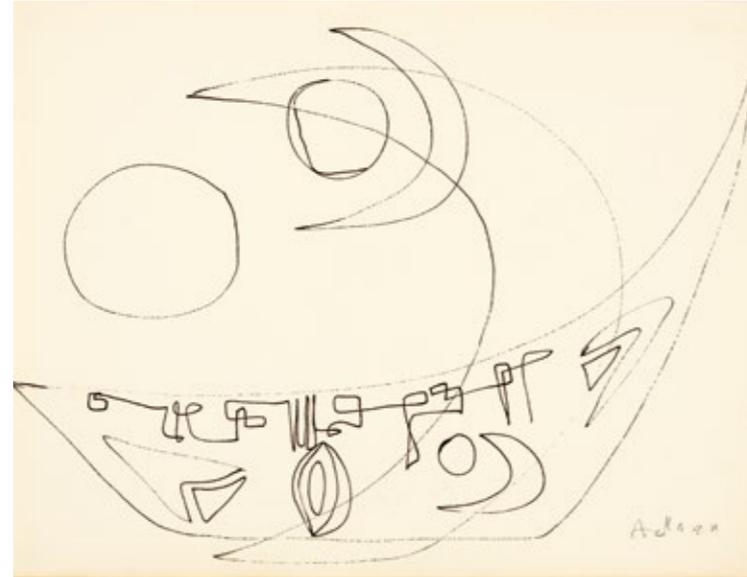




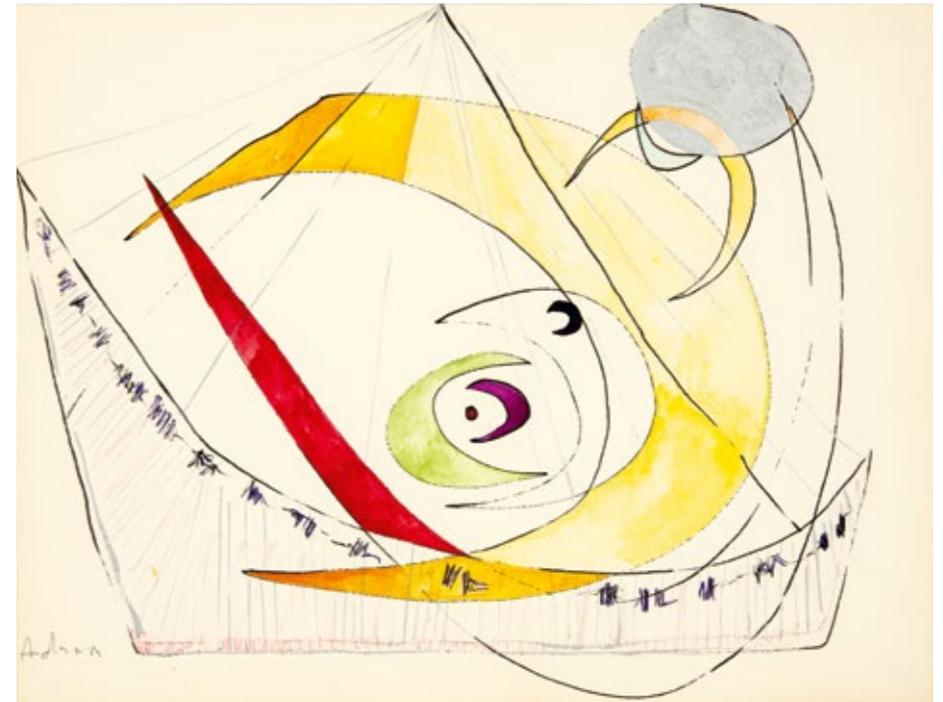
129. Untitled, 1960s
130. Untitled, 1960s



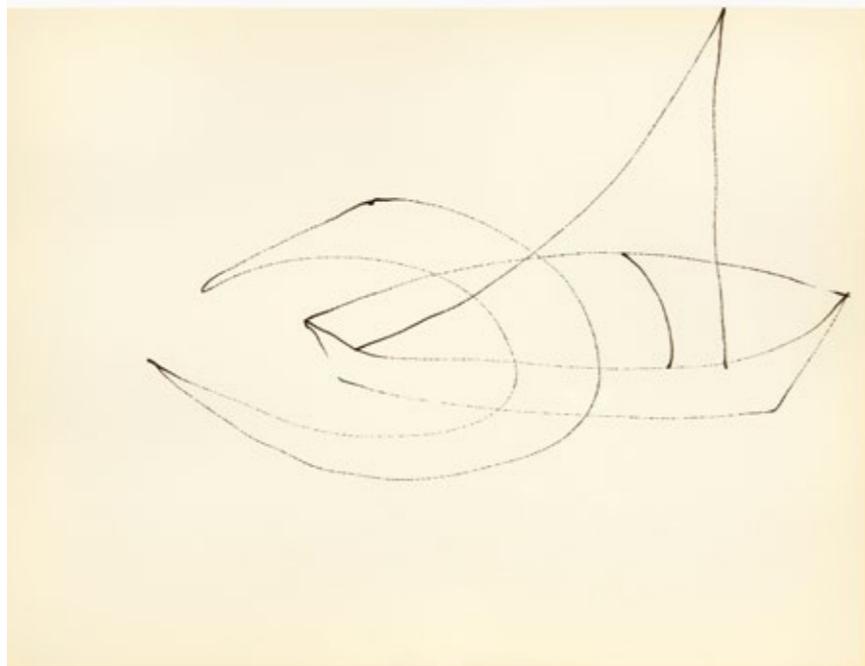
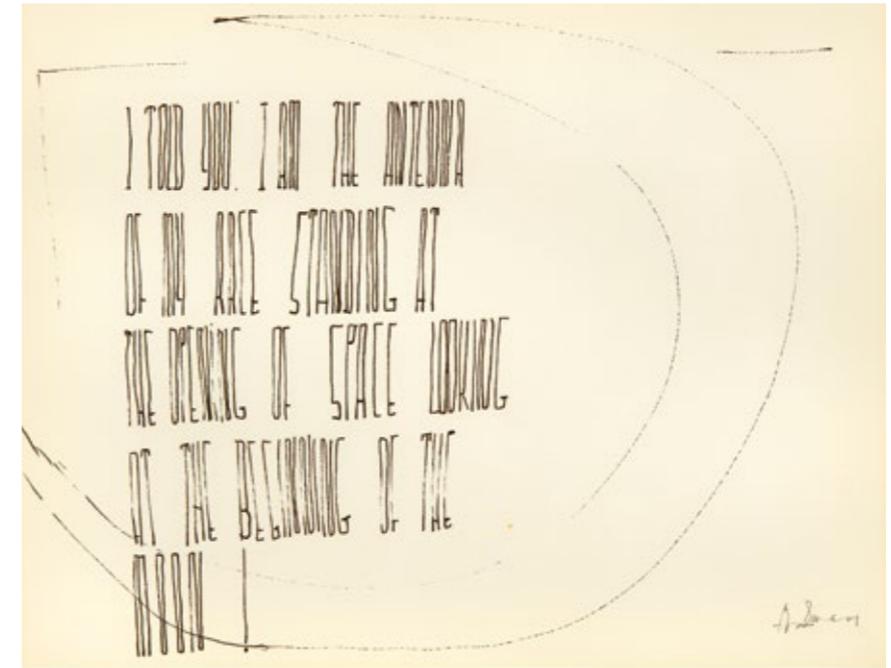
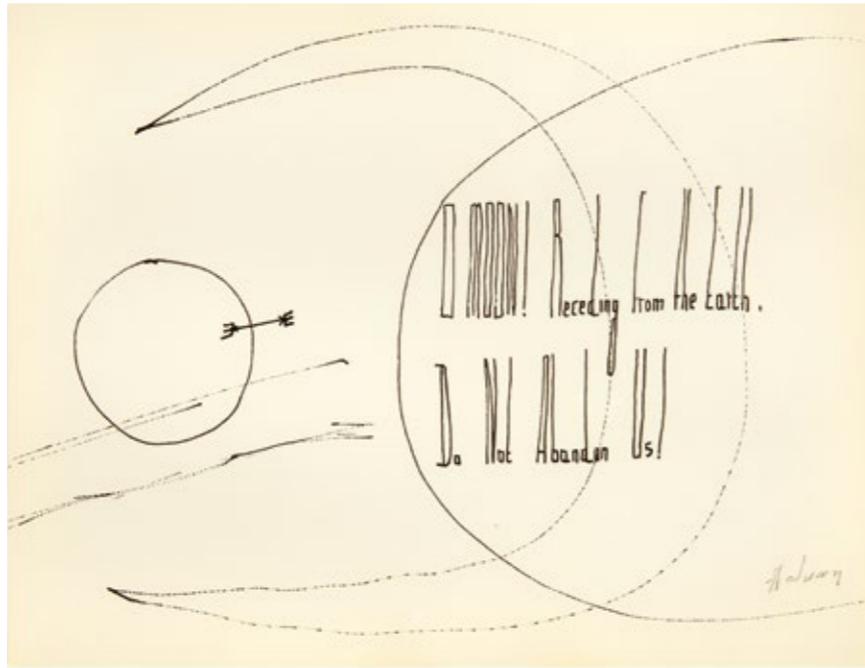
131. Untitled, 1960s
132. Untitled, 1960s



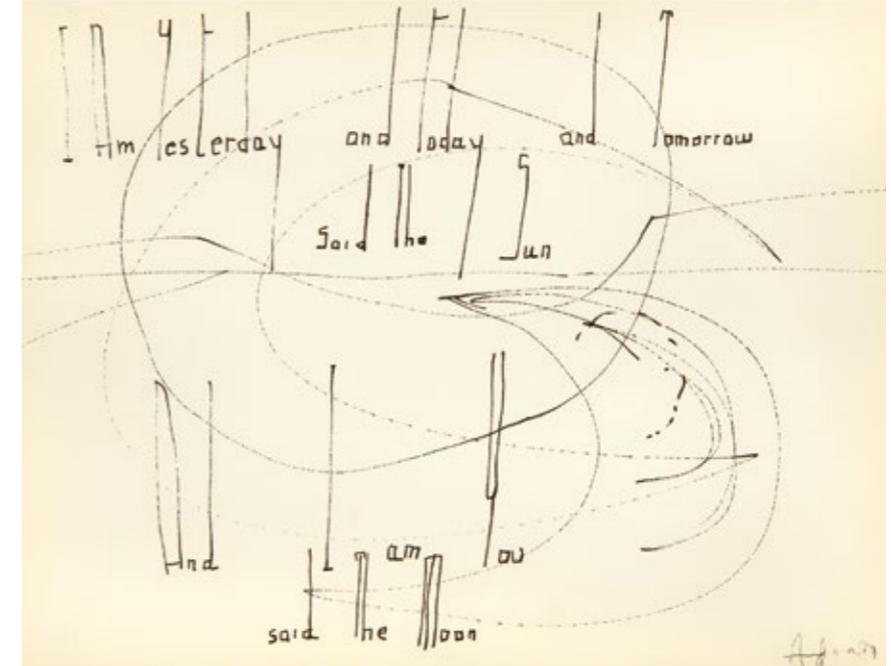
133. Untitled, 1960s
134. Untitled, 1960s



135. Untitled, 1960s



136. O Moon, 1960s
137. O Moon, 1960s



138. O Moon, 1960s
139. O Moon, 1960s

Exhibited Works

Unless noted otherwise, all works listed below will be shown at the venues of the exhibition in Munich and Düsseldorf.

- | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|---|----|---|----|---|----|---|----|---|----|--|----|--|----|---|----|--|
| 1 | Untitled (Sketchbook), 1990 | 15 | Tapestry design, 1969
Marker on paper, 23.3 × 27.2 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 21 | Untitled, 1965
Oil on canvas, 66.5 × 66.5 cm
Irene Panagopoulos Collection (only Düsseldorf) | 29 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 20 × 25 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 36 | Untitled, ca. 1970
Oil on canvas, 46 × 38.2 cm
LaM Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France) | 54 | Untitled, 2017
Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 60 | Untitled, 2020
Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 69 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 25 × 35 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 79 | Untitled, 2012
Oil on canvas, 20.5 × 25 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg |
| 8 | Pen on paper, 37 × 45.5 cm each
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 16 | <i>L'île enchantée</i> (The Enchanted Isle), 1969/2019
Wool tapestry, handwoven at Les Ateliers Pinton, France, 165 × 197 cm
Collection Antoine Nohra, London.
Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 22 | Untitled, 1973
Oil on canvas, 101 × 81 cm
Moderna Museet, Stockholm. Purchase 2014 | 30 | Untitled, 1972–75
Oil on canvas, 65 × 54 cm
Irene Panagopoulos Collection (only Düsseldorf) | 45 | Untitled, 1971
Leporello, watercolor, ink, and pomegranate dye on paper, 18 × 19.7 cm (closed), 18 × 530 cm (open)
Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha (only Düsseldorf) | 52 | <i>Mezza voce [lecture visuelle du texte de Anne-Marie Albiach par Etel Adnan]</i> , 1988
[visual reading of Anne-Marie Albiach's text by Etel Adnan], 1988
Leporello, watercolor, pen and ink on paper, 27.5 × 24 cm (closed), 27.5 × 564 cm (open)
Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris (only Munich) | 61 | Untitled, 2020
Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 70 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut | 80 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 23.6 × 29.7 cm
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München |
| 09 | <i>Mont Tamalpais</i> , 1965
Oil on canvas, 58 × 54 cm
The Estate of Etel Adnan | 17 | <i>Hot</i> , ca. 1960
Oil on canvas, 51 × 40.7 cm
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf | 23 | Untitled, 2012
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes (only Munich) | 31 | Untitled, ca. 1970
Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm
Irene Panagopoulos Collection (only Düsseldorf) | 46 | <i>Al-Sayyab, Al-Umm wa al-Ibnat al-Da'i'a</i> (Al-Sayyab, The Mother and the Lost Daughter), 1970
Leporello, watercolor and ink on Japanese paper, 33 × 25.2 cm (closed), 33 × 612 cm (open)
Paris, Musée de l'Institut du monde arabe, Donation Claude & France Lemand CFL-2018- ADNAN-165 | 53 | Untitled, 2018
Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm
Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut | 62 | Tapestry design, June 21st, 1965
Marker on paper, 25.7 × 22.2 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 71 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 20 × 25 cm
Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut | 81 | Untitled, 2020
Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg |
| 10 | <i>Persian</i> , 1963/64
Oil on canvas, 38.5 × 50.5 cm
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf | 18 | Untitled, 1961
Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 50 × 36 cm
LaM Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France) | 24 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 26.8 × 32.8 cm
Collection Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle – AM 2012-1191 (9) | 32 | Untitled, 1960s
Oil on canvas, 38.2 × 46.4 cm
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, München – Pinakothek der Moderne. 2022 acquired with funds from the Written Art Collection for the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen | 55 | Untitled, 2016
Oil on canvas, 70 × 50 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 63 | Untitled, 1972
Wool tapestry, handwoven by Roger Caron, Beirut, Lebanon, 120 × 80 cm, unique piece
Acquired by Sami Karkabi, Collection Joe and Eliane Zgheib, Beirut. Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 72 | Untitled, 2013
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 82 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 20 × 25 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | | |
| 11 | <i>Roi Inca</i> (Inca King), 1965
Oil on canvas, 52.3 × 57.5 cm
Collection Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle – AM 2017-202 | 19 | Untitled, 1960s/2022
Wool tapestry, handwoven at Les Ateliers Pinton, France, 147 × 202 cm
Saradar Collection, Beirut. Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 25 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 23.5 × 30 cm
Collection Mudam Luxembourg, Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean | 37 | <i>Matinée récréative</i> (Recreational Morning), 1970/2015
Wool tapestry, 3 copies + 1 artist's copy, 1/3, woven at Les Ateliers Pinton, France, 165 × 185 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 47 | Untitled, ca. 1970
Oil on canvas, 45.8 × 37.9 cm
LaM Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France) | 54 | Untitled, 2017
Oil on canvas, 55 × 46 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 64 | <i>Eclat de lumière</i> (Burst of Light), 1960s/2021
Wool tapestry, handwoven at Les Ateliers Pinton, France, 150 × 223 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 73 | Untitled, 2019
Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 83 | Untitled, ca. 1980
Oil on canvas, 40.5 × 50.5 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg |
| 12 | Untitled, 1962/63
Oil on canvas, 106 × 64 cm
The Estate of Etel Adnan | 20 | <i>Acrobaties printanières</i> (Springtime Acrobatics), 1967–70/2020
Wool tapestry, 3 copies + 1 artist's copy, copy 3/3, woven at Les Ateliers Pinton, France, 160 × 200 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 26 | Untitled, 2010/11
Oil on canvas, 25.4 × 35.2 cm
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf | 38 | Untitled, 1960s
Ink and wash on paper, 14 × 18.5 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 48 | <i>California</i> , ca. 1960
Oil on canvas, 45 × 64.1 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 56 | Untitled (#181), 2012
Oil on canvas, 32 × 41 cm
Private collection | 74 | Untitled, 2019
Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 84 | Untitled, ca. 1995–2000
Oil on canvas, 22.5 × 30 cm
Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut | | |
| 13 | Untitled, ca. 1960
Oil on canvas, 71 × 38.5 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 27 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Collection Mudam Luxembourg, Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean | 33 | Untitled, 1972
Oil on canvas, 65 × 50 cm
Irene Panagopoulos Collection (only Düsseldorf) | 40 | Untitled, 1960s
Ink and wash on paper, 14 × 18.5 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 49 | <i>Oliveiraie</i> (Olive Grove), 2021/2022
Wool tapestry, handwoven at Les Ateliers Pinton d'Aubusson-Felletin, France, 170 × 200 cm
Private collection, Beirut. Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 65 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 26.8 × 32.8 cm
Collection Centre Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d'art moderne – Centre de création industrielle – AM 2012-1191 (3) | 75 | Untitled, 2019
Oil on canvas, 41 × 33 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 85 | <i>Mont Tamalpais</i> , 1986
Leporello, watercolor on paper, 18 × 19.5 cm (closed), 18 × 400 cm (open)
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. (only Düsseldorf) | | |
| 14 | Tapestry design, 1960s
Marker on paper, 11.9 × 17.1 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 28 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 34 | <i>California</i> , ca. 1968
Handmade wool tapestry, 129.5 × 178.5 cm
Kunsthaus Zürich, 2016 | 41 | Untitled, 1960s
Ink, wash, and pastel on paper, 21.5 × 28 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 50 | <i>Bouyout Al Ankabout</i> (Spider Web), 1967
Leporello, watercolor on Japanese Carnet, 18 × 19.8 cm (closed), 18 × 600 cm (open)
Courtesy of Saradar Collection, Beirut (only Düsseldorf) | 66 | Untitled, 2012
Oil on canvas, 22 × 27 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 76 | Untitled, 2019
Oil on canvas, 41.5 × 32 cm
Collection Mara Burros Sandler, New York. Courtesy Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 86 | Untitled, ca. 1970–73
Watercolor on paper, 10.5 × 24 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | | |
| | | | | 35 | <i>Plants Marina</i> , 2019
Leporello, watercolor on paper, 18.2 × 12.2 cm (closed), 18.2 × 291 cm (open)
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | 42 | Untitled, 1969
Oil on canvas, 53 × 45 cm
Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut | 51 | <i>Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire</i> , 2015
Leporello, watercolor and ink on paper, 27 × 24 cm (closed), 27 × 480 cm (open)
Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, München – Pinakothek der Moderne. 2022 acquired with funds from the Written Art Collection for the Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen | 67 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut | 77 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 20 × 25 cm
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München | 87 | Untitled, ca. 1970–73
Watercolor on paper, 10.5 × 24 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | | |
| | | | | 39 | Untitled, 1960s
Ink and watercolor on beige paper, 23 × 27 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 43 | Untitled, ca. 1965/66
Oil on canvas, 22.3 × 27 cm
Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf | 58 | <i>Satellites 22</i> , 2020
Oil on canvas, 33 × 22 cm
Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co. | 68 | Untitled, 2012
Oil on canvas, 24 × 30 cm
Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes (only Munich) | 78 | Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas, 20.1 × 25.2 cm
Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München | 88 | Untitled, ca. 1970–73
Watercolor on paper, 10.5 × 24 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg | | |

89	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 12.7 × 17.5 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	98 <i>The Mount Tamalpais</i> , 1985 Oil on canvas, 125 × 148 cm Courtesy of Nicolas Sursock Museum	117 <i>The War Poems</i> , 1988 Leporello, black pencil and colored pencils on Japanese paper, 21.2 × 16.2 cm (closed), 21.2 × 320 cm (open) LaM Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France)	124 <i>Premier Leporello</i> (First Leporello), 1960s Leporello, ink on paper, 21 × 9 cm (closed), 21 × 280 cm (open) Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	133 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	Not in catalog	Works from Lenbachhaus collection – only on view in Munich	Paul Klee, <i>Rhythmisches strenger und freier</i> (Rhythmical, More Rigorous and Freer), 1930,59 (09) Paste color on paper on cardboard, 47 × 61.5 cm Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München	Works from Kunst- sammlung- Nordrhein- Westfalen collection – only on view in Düsseldorf	Paul Klee, <i>Fragmente der Gegend von weiland</i> (Fragments of the Area from Bygone Days), 1937,70 (M 10) Charcoal and paste colors on paper on cardboard, 65.3 × 47.8 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
90	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 12.7 × 17.5 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	99 Untitled, 2013 Color on canvas, 35 × 45 cm Carré d'Art, Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes (only Munich)	118 <i>East River Pollution, "From Laura's Window"</i> , April 1979 Leporello, pencil on Japanese paper, 21 × 8.3 cm (closed), 21 × 240 cm (open) LaM Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France)	125 <i>Découverte de l'immédiat 56</i> (Discovery of the Immediate 56), 2021 Ink on canvas, 33 × 24 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	134 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	Untitled, 1960s/2022 Wool tapestry, handwoven at Les Ateliers Pinton, France, 150 × 218 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	Wassily Kandinsky, <i>Entwurf zu 'Improvisation 33 (Orient I)'</i> (Study for 'Improvisation (Orient I)', 1913 Watercolor, ink, and black chalk on paper, 24 × 30.3 cm Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München	Paul Klee, <i>Erzengel</i> (Archangel), 1938,82 (G 2) Oil, glue on cotton, on jute, on stretcher, 100 × 65 cm Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, on permanent loan from the Gabriele Münter- und Johannes Eichner-Stiftung, Munich	Paul Klee, <i>braunes Δ rechtw. strebendes Dreieck</i> (Brown Right-Angled Triangle), 1915,71 Watercolor on chalk primer on paper on cardboard, 21.3 × 13.4 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	Paul Klee, <i>ordnendes Kreuz</i> (Ordering Cross), 1937,203 (U 3) Watercolor with glue on paper on cardboard, 21 × 29.7 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
91	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 13.4 × 18.4 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	100 Untitled, 2012 Oil on canvas, 32 × 41 cm Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut	119 <i>Paris Roofs from Jim's Window n°1</i> , 1977 Leporello, charcoal on Japanese paper, 18 × 19.5 cm (closed), 18 × 585 cm (open) Collection Claude & France Lemand, Paris	126 <i>Hyper Espace</i> , 1964 Watercolor on paper, 37.6 × 45.5 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	135 Untitled, 1960s Ink and gouache on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	Untitled (Sketchbook), 1990 Pen and watercolor on paper, 37 × 45.5 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	Wassily Kandinsky, <i>Entwurf zu 'Komposition VII'</i> (Study for 'Composition VII'), 1913 Watercolor, ink on paper, mounted on gray backing paper, 24.9 × 35.2 cm Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München	Gabriele Münter, <i>Abstrakte Studie</i> (Abstract Study), 1915 Oil on cardboard, 44.1 × 33 cm Gabriele Münter- und Johannes Eichner- Stiftung, Munich	Paul Klee, <i>Nach einer Zeichnung aus dem Jahr 1919</i> (After a Drawing from 1919), 1923,94 Oil study and watercolor on paper on cardboard, 20.5 × 27.4 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	Paul Klee, <i>es ringt noch</i> (It Still Struggles), 1937,256 (W 16) Paste tempera over pencil on paper on cardboard, 41.8 × 29.5 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
92	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 10.5 × 24 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	101 Untitled, 2012 Oil on canvas, 32 × 41 cm Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut	120 <i>Hyper Espace</i> , 1964 Watercolor on paper, 20 × 25.6 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	127 <i>Hyper Espace</i> , 1964 Watercolor on paper, 20 × 25.6 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	140 <i>The Arab Apocalypse</i> , manuscript, 1965 Typescript drawn for the English version of <i>The Arab Apocalypse</i> . Typed text on paper, photocopies of pages with handwritten notes and drawings by the artist, 72 pages Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	Untitled, study for the leporello, "Beirut-Sea", ca. 1970 Pastel on notebook paper from Sennelier, 15 parts, 23.5 × 30.3 cm each LaM Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France)	Paul Klee, <i>Nach einer Zeichnung aus dem Jahr 1919</i> (After a Drawing from 1919), 1923,94 Oil study and watercolor on paper on cardboard, 20.5 × 27.4 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	Paul Klee, <i>bunter Blitz</i> (Colorful Lightning), 1927,181 (J 1) Oil paint on canvas on cardboard, nailed to stretcher frame, original frame rails, 50.3 × 33.9 × 1.8 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf		
93	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 10.5 × 24 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	102 Untitled, 2016 Oil on canvas, 40.5 × 50.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	121 Untitled, 1985-89 Ink on paper, 60 × 74.2 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	128 <i>Beyrouth</i> (Beirut), 1975 Leporello, black pencil on paper, 17.2 × 11.8 cm (closed), 17.2 × 297.3 cm (open) LaM Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut Villeneuve-d'Ascq (France)	141 <i>Apocalypse arabe 1</i> (Arab Apocalypse 1), 1980s Chalk and ink on paper, 33 × 40 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	Tapestry design, 1960s Marker on envelope, 12.3 × 18.9 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	Wassily Kandinsky, <i>Entwurf zu einem Wandbild für Edwin R. Campbell</i> (Study for a Panel for Edwin R. Campbell), 1914 Watercolor, gouache, ink, pencil, 33.4 × 25.1 cm Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München	Paul Klee, <i>Hell dunkel-Studie</i> (<i>Staffelei</i> = <i>lampe</i>) (Chiaroscuro study (<i>Staffelei</i> = <i>lampe</i>)), 1924,23 Watercolor on paper on cardboard, 30.5 × 23 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	Paul Klee, <i>vermessene Felder</i> (Measured Fields), 1929,47 (N 7) Watercolor and pencil on paper on cardboard, 30.4 × 45.8 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	
94	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 11 × 21.9 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	103 Untitled, 2016 Oil on canvas, 24 × 33 cm Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg / Beirut	122 <i>Intrusion de la mémoire 10</i> (Intrusion of Memory 10), 2021 Oil and ink on canvas, 33 × 24 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	129 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	142 <i>Apocalypse arabe 1</i> (Arab Apocalypse 1), 1980s Chalk and ink on paper, 33 × 40 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	<i>Motion</i> , 1980–90/2012 Super 8, color film with sound, transferred to digital 92 min Courtesy the estate of the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	Paul Klee, <i>Früchte auf Rot</i> (Fruits on Red), 1930, 263 (AE 3) Watercolor, brush, pen, compass on silk, 61.2 × 46.2 cm Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, on permanent loan from BayernLB	Paul Klee, <i>Hängeleuchter</i> (Suspended Chandelier), 1927, 47 (N 7) Pen and ink on paper, mounted with glue dots on cardboard, 30.4 × 46.4 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	Paul Klee, <i>Halbkreis zu Winkligem</i> (Semicircle to Angular), 1932,5 (5) Watercolor and gouache on paper on cardboard, 48.2 × 30.1 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	
95	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 12.7 × 17.5 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	104 Untitled, 2015 Oil on canvas, 38 × 46 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	123 <i>Intrusion de la mémoire 9</i> (Intrusion of Memory 9), 2021 Oil and ink on canvas, 41 × 33 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	130 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	132 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	Joana Hadjithomas, Khalil Joreige <i>Ismyrna</i> , 2016 film HD, color, sound, subtitles in English and in German 50 min. Coproduced by Sharja Art Foundation (UAE) and Jeu de Paume (Paris, France) The artists and In Situ - Fabienne Leclerc	Paul Klee, <i>Früchte auf Rot</i> (Fruits on Red), 1930, 263 (AE 3) Watercolor, brush, pen, compass on silk, 61.2 × 46.2 cm Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, on permanent loan from BayernLB	Paul Klee, <i>Gedanken bei Schnee</i> (Thought with Snow), 1933,32 (L 12) Brush on plaster primer on pea tulle on cardboard, mounted on masonite coated with plaster (not by the artist), 45.5 × 46.5 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	Paul Klee, <i>Intérieur rouge, nature morte sur table bleue</i> (Red Interior, Still Life on Blue Table), 1947 Oil on canvas, 116 × 89 cm Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf	
96	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 20.9 × 14.6 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	106 <i>Où est la lumière?</i> – (Where is the light?), 1990 Mixed media on paper, 11 parts, 18 × 26 cm each Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	124 <i>Intrusion de la mémoire 9</i> (Intrusion of Memory 9), 2021 Oil and ink on canvas, 41 × 33 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	131 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	133 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.					
97	Untitled, ca. 1970–73 Watercolor on paper, 8.2 × 12.8 cm Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg	105 Untitled, 2014 Oil on canvas, 32 × 40 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	125 <i>Intrusion de la mémoire 9</i> (Intrusion of Memory 9), 2021 Oil and ink on canvas, 41 × 33 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	132 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.	134 Untitled, 1960s Ink on paper, 27 × 35.5 cm Courtesy Estate of Etel Adnan and Galerie Lelong & Co.					

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pp. 64 (Detail of cat. 3), 92, 93, 101, 102/103, 106/107, 112 top, 115, 122, 131 top, 140/141, 145–147, 154/155, 156 bottom, 157–161, 164–167, 170, 171, 174, 175, 176 bottom, 181 left, 184, 185, 191, 200: Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Beirut / Hamburg
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Wool tapestry, handwoven at Les Ateliers Pinton, France, 150 × 223 cm
Courtesy the estate of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg

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Curator: Sébastien Delot, Director LaM, Lille métropole musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut
Curator Lenbachhaus: Melanie Vietmeier
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Conservation: Daniel Oggenfuss, Franziska Motz
Organization: Stefan Kaltenbach, Karola Rattner
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Library: Adrian Djukic

Photo Studio: Simone Gänsheimer, Ernst Jank, Lukas Schramm
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Graphic Design: Doris Würgert
Exhibition Design: Philipp Nitsche, Bekim Llallosi
Light Design: Philippe Collet, Paris

Team Lenbachhaus

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Heads of Collections: Karin Althaus, Eva Huttenlauch, Melanie Vietmeier
Curator of Contemporary Art: Stephanie Weber
Associate Curator: Susanne Böller
Associate Curator financed through the UKRAINE Funding Line at the Ernst von Siemens Foundation for the Arts (ESVK) and the Hermann Reemtsma Stiftung: Oksana Oliinyk
Curatorial Trainee: Dierk Höhne
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Education and Outreach Trainee: N. N.
Photography: Simone Gänsheimer, Ernst Jank, Lukas Schramm

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Director LaM,
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musée d'art moderne,
d'art contemporain
et d'art brut
Project coordination:
Anke Großmann
Lighting and Media:
Marcus Trägerner
(Head of Department)

Team KINDL – Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin

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Administrative Director:
Georg Lehmann
Project Management,
Curator:
Magdalena Mai
Communication:
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