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Installation view of **ETEL ADNAN**'s "New Work" at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2018. Photo by Katherine Du Tiel. Courtesy the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

NEW WORK ETEL ADNAN

[WEB REVIEW](#) BY NAZ CUGUOĞLU
SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

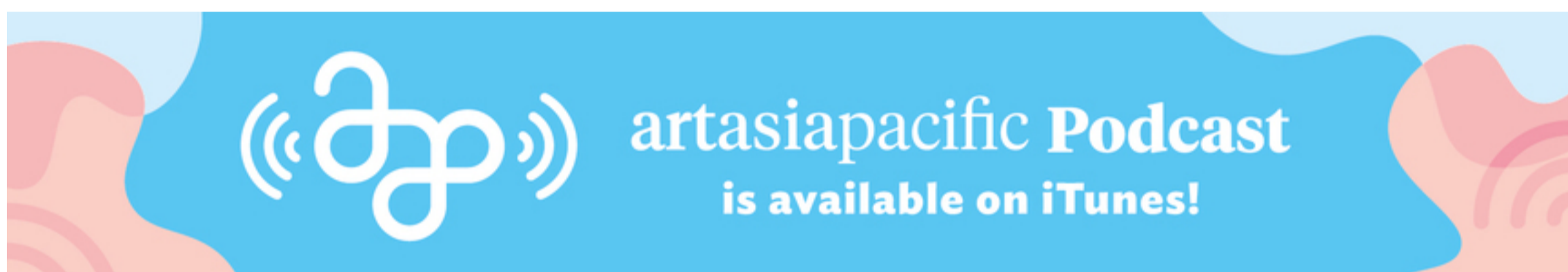
[LEBANON](#) [USA](#)

Presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and curated by Eungie Joo, Etel Adnan's "New Work" marks the Paris-based artist's stateside return. Adnan, who is also a poet and essayist, was born in Beirut in 1925, but spent a significant part of her life in Paris and San Francisco, such that exile became part of her existence. She once said in an interview: "I like the sea and I like the mountains. I am assimilated into Western culture [. . .] but I am also very attached to the Muslim world [. . .] There is a duality in my life as in my thinking." The 16 works in the show demonstrated the significance of visual abstraction to Adnan as a means of respite from language, which she experienced to be restrictive due to her upbringing—she was born to a Greek mother and a Syrian father (a highranking Ottoman officer), educated in French in Lebanon, and exposed to Turkish and Greek at home—as well as her subsequent life between cultures.



ETEL ADNAN, *Explosion Florale*, 1968/2018, hand-woven wool tapestry, 163 × 198 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

Liberated from the dictates of language, through which she struggled to express herself, her compositions offer a generous, poetic space for viewers to navigate freely. Among the exhibits was one of Adnan’s most recent tapestries, titled *Explosion Florale* (1968/2018), which echoed her earliest tapestry design, executed by Hal Painter in the late 1960s. Also on display were abstract paintings of oranges, yellows, greens and blues that reflect the sky of California. These are the palettes apparent at dusk—when melancholia and serenity collide and it is arguably most difficult to be away from home. The compositions in all of these works loosely evoke the movements of tree branches on hillsides, and the rising and setting of the sun. They embody both the transience of life and the steadfast presence of nature.



The untitled paintings also all bear a triangular motif that represents Mount Tamalpais, the subject of Adnan’s lifelong obsession, which began when she moved to Sausalito in California in the 1970s. Not only did she repeatedly draw the mountain from the windows of her home, she used it as a reference point for her philosophical thoughts, as is apparent in her seminal book on the links between nature and art, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986). In the publication, Adnan hints at the almost supernatural attraction that she felt to the mountain, which was not only a hideaway for her, but the center of her orbit, her lover, and the protector of her memories. “The natural pyramidal shape of the mountain became embedded in her whole being,” writes Simone Fattal—Adnan’s partner, sculptor and publisher—in her 2002 essay “On Perception: Etel Adnan’s Visual Art.”

Perhaps it was no coincidence that after viewing Adnan’s show, I felt an earthquake. It was in the middle of the night and when I woke up, I spent hours scouring the news for information about the disaster. There was no trace of it ever happening. No one else had felt it. It had been exactly 24 days after my permanent move from Istanbul to San Francisco. I asked myself: Were Adnan’s images the reason behind my illusory earthquake? What happens when the land beneath us moves? When the earth—containing the cumulative memories of the universe, non-human inhabitants and archeological heritage—shakes, does it bring us closer to “home”?

It is no surprise to me that according to geoscientists, there is a blind thrust fault, lying beneath Mount Tamalpais.



ETEL ADNAN, *Untitled*, 2018, oil on canvas, 58 × 49 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

Etel Adnan’s “*New Work*” is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art until January 6, 2019.

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