

Etel Adnan May Be the World's Greatest Living Colorist

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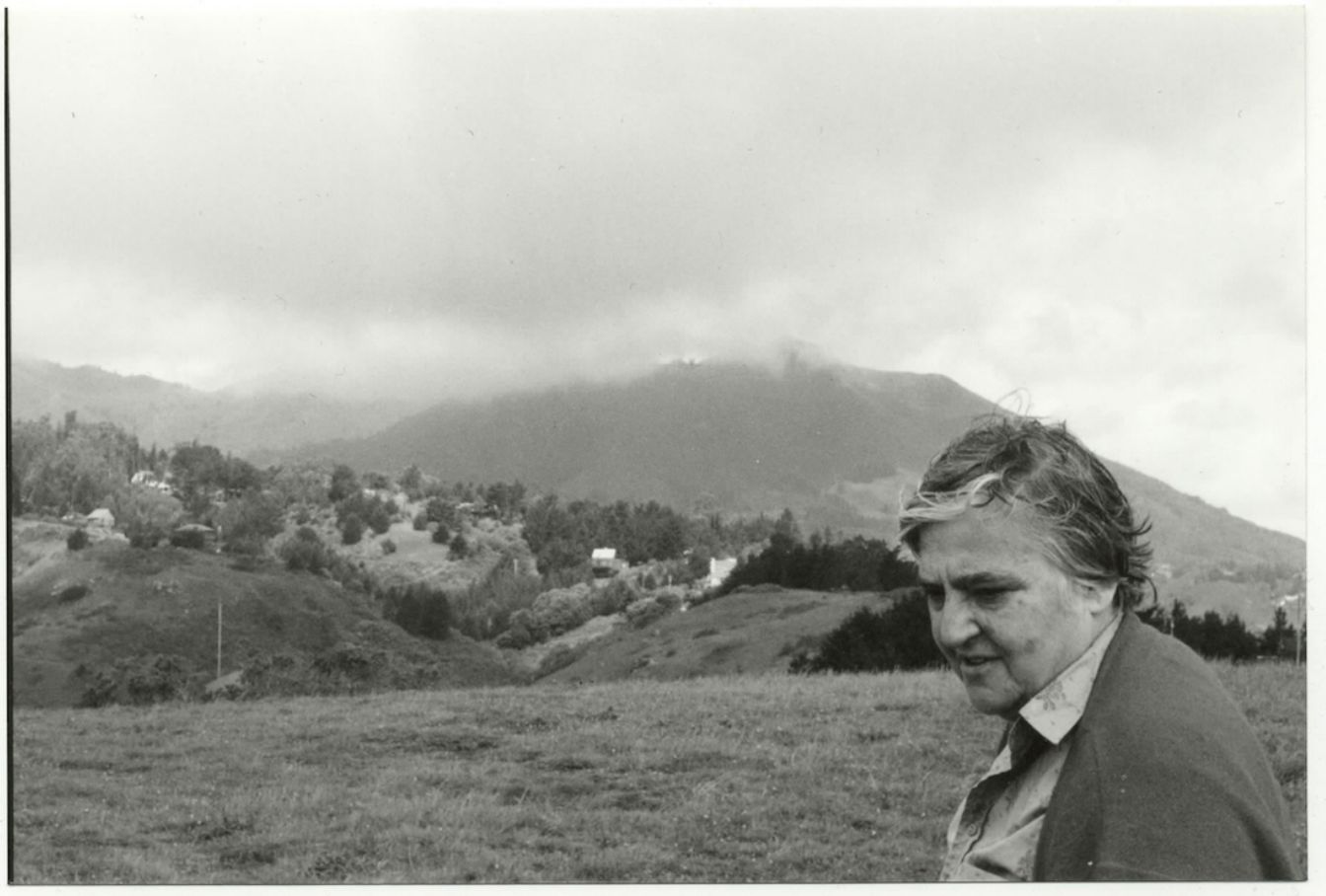


Etel Adnan, Detail from 'Explosion Florale,' 1968/2018. (Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg / Beirut)

One of the most exciting recent developments in art has been the critical and commercial resurgence of female artists in their senior years. Working for decades at the industry's margins or completely outside of its closed system, older women are not only headlining shows and commanding impressive sales, but complicating and enriching established ideas about art.

Among them is the Paris-based 93-year-old Lebanese writer and artist Etel Adnan. Regarded as something of a cult icon for her imagistic, politically trenchant novels and poetry, Adnan has found latter-day recognition for her earthy abstract expressionist paintings. Beginning in the 1950s with the encouragement of Ann O'Hanlon, the former art

department head at Dominican College (now Dominican University of California), Adnan developed a unique visual vocabulary that pits swatches of paint against one another to form color fields suggestive of Northern California landscapes. Her most enduring subject is Mount Tamalpais.



Etel Adnan on Mount Tamalpais, California. (Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg / Beirut)

At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, [*New Work: Etel Adnan*](#) endeavors to prove just how vital an artist Adnan continues to be. Comprising recently-made pieces that include oil paintings and a tapestry based on a drawing from 1968, *New Work* is an impressive flex of creative muscle that makes a solid case for Adnan as one of the greatest living colorists.



Etel Adnan, 'Untitled,' 2018. (Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg / Beirut)

Using a palette knife rather than a brush, she approaches the canvas with deftness and care, sectioning her work into structured but fluidly interlocking shapes of complimentary color. The best paintings in the show follow a similar motif, a loose T-like jolt of pigment carving the surface into pools of warm color.

Depending on her palette, Adnan can conjure lakes, deserts, mountains and forests in the common space between two similar hues. Even more interesting is how she can make one color take on a different resonance when paired against other contrasting shades—the same yellow that breathes with blue dulls against cells of olive and brown.

Elsewhere Adnan litters her fields of color with a bevy of familiar shapes: lunar circles, cragged mountains and triumphant squares. Some paintings

are bisected by these figures, achieving a similar effect to the T-shaped works, in which every tone converses harmoniously with its fellows. Perhaps there's such a thing as too much harmony, however; in some of these "shape" paintings, Adnan's flirtation with too-similar colors neutralize rather than excite.



Etel Adnan, Installation view of 'New Work,' 2018. (Photo: Katherine Du Tiel; Courtesy SFMOMA)

The exhibit's showstopping pieces are two tapestries conceived at the same time but executed decades apart. *Untitled* from 1968 is a Kandinsky-like flurry of blues, yellows and greens against a crimson red backdrop. It buzzes with energy against the wall but loses its cohesion in the thrum of its own busyness.

But *Explosion Florale* (1968/2018) never dulls. A smattering of pink, green and yellow against royal blue and purple, its economy animates its title;

simple colors achieve the look of a rose undone by a shotgun. *Explosion Florale* is the only trace of retrospection in this otherwise all-new show, a glimpse of the path Adnan followed to become the artist she is now.

As the curator Barbara Haskell observed in Anna Louie Sussman's [essential article](#) on the recent popularity of older women artists, "there's been a lopsided focus on the white male experience" throughout museums, colleges and the whole of art history. The revelations contained in works by artists like Adnan, [Carol Rama](#), [Carmen Herrera](#), [Rose Wylie](#), [Sheila Hicks](#), [Geta Brătescu](#) and [Phyllida Barlow](#) expand that focus into a clear-eyed panorama—passing comment on the world as we know it and offering entry into private worlds art-viewing audiences rarely get to see.



Etel Adnan, 'Untitled,' 2018. (Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg / Beirut)

The rise of older women artists has largely been possible thanks to a growing infrastructure of curators, collectors, gallerists and writers that recognize the ubiquity of white, male, Euro-centric art and the unexplored richness of the work that exists—and has long existed—outside the canon. But their more recent success would also not be possible without a public interested in diverse voices (as well as a public interested in identifying and worshiping heroes who "nevertheless persisted"). While the fact that these women are getting such a late due does warrant a cynical response, that response misses the positive shifts implicit in their success. From top to bottom, the world is becoming the audience they have deserved all along.

The show notes that accompany *New Work* state that Adnan “ruptures the void of a white canvas” by painting a red square while referencing Kazimir Malevich's [1915 painting](#). But what the show also makes apparent is that Etel Adnan’s power is in a class of its own—that it stakes a claim on greatness unmentioned in male-dominated art histories. Perhaps in the very near future these same notes will read “alluding to the work by the great Etel Adnan.”



'New Work: Etel Adnan' is on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through Jan. 6, 2019. [Details here.](#)

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