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When the poet paints: Etel Adnan – artist profile

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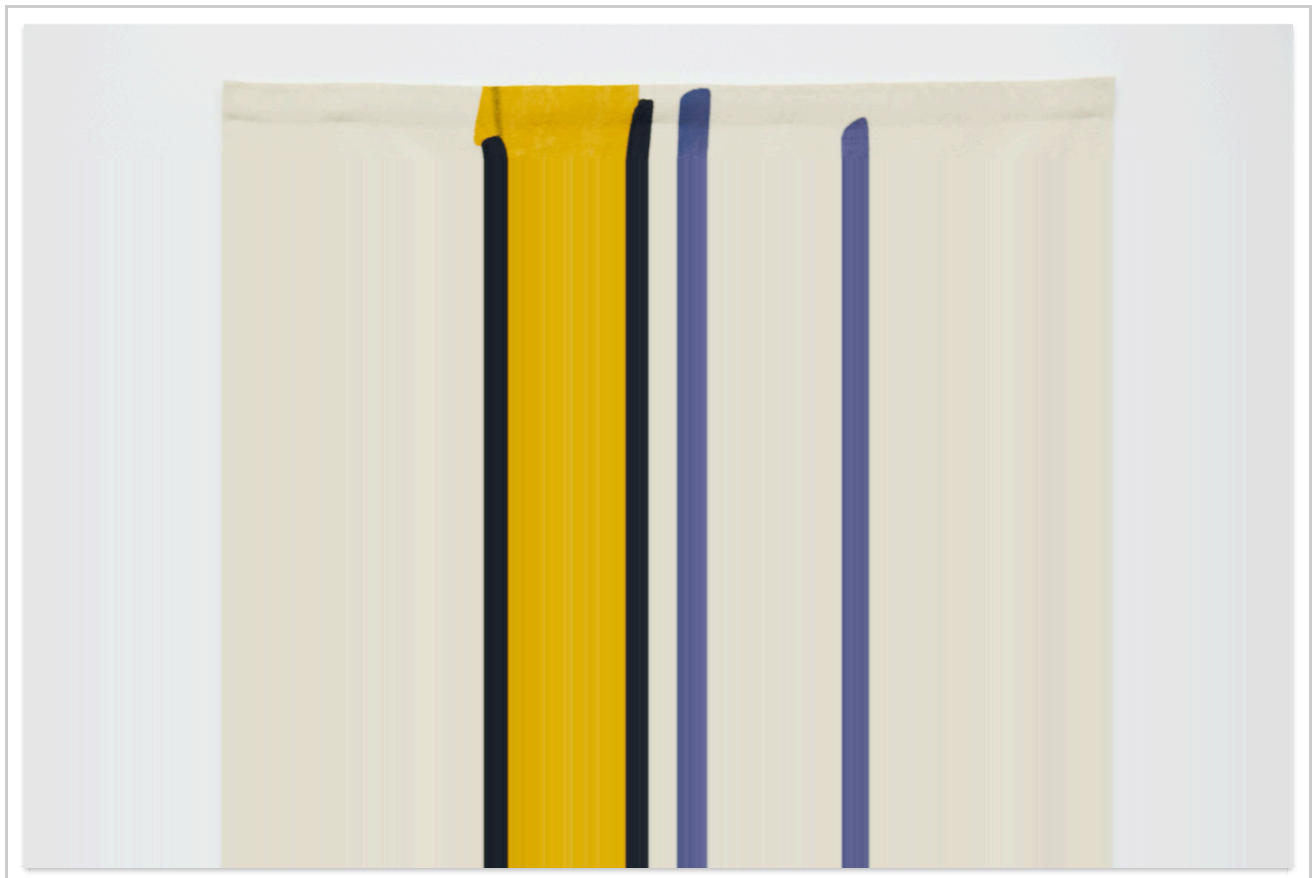


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Hailing from Lebanon, 90-year-old poet, novelist and painter Etel Adnan is one of the most enduring artists of our time.

The artist's current solo exhibition at White Cube in Hong Kong, which follows multiple shows around the globe over the past two years, reveals her influential impact on contemporary art.



Etel Adnan portrait by Patrick Dandy. Image courtesy White Cube.

Etel Adnan (b. 1925, Beirut) is an iconic Lebanese cultural figure who was awarded France's highest cultural honour in 2014, the Ordre de Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. With 11 books of poetry and prose to her name, her writing explores the personal and political dimensions of war, violence and exile. Adnan's seminal novel, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1977), is set before and during the Lebanese Civil War and sharply critiques xenophobia, various elements of Lebanese culture, as well as the horrors and inhumanity of war.

Although she started painting in 1959, Adnan's visual art received international recognition late in her life. Introduced to the global art scene at **Documenta 13** in Kassel, Adnan's simple yet intense abstract paintings sparked a whirlwind tour of her life's works. "**Etel Adnan**", currently on show at **White Cube** in Hong Kong until 29 August 2015, showcases a series of paintings all completed within the last six months.

Inhabiting light and colour

While Adnan's writing is complex and politically charged, her paintings are serene, radiant and uplifting. The exhibition press release observes that her works relate "to the late French landscapes of Russian artist Nicolas de Staël, or the paintings of Paul Klee". Depicting semi-abstract landscapes of mountains and seascapes, the canvases glow with an almost transcendent spirit.

Maymanah Fahrat **writes** in *Art Asia Pacific*:

[Adnan's paintings] are neither dated nor easily placed, and despite their small scale, tend to overcome even the most barren spaces. [...] Adnan paints with marked force in broad brushstrokes and swathes of radiant color, as if channeling the elements that shape her organic subject matter.



Etel Adnan, 'Untitled', 2015, oil on canvas, 27 x 35 cm. Photo by White Cube (George Darrell). Image courtesy the artist and White Cube.

The press release reveals that Adnan “places her canvases flat, laid out on a table, and using a palette knife applies the paint in firm swipes across the picture’s surface.” *Art Radar* spoke with White Cube Artistic Director Susan May, who further explained Adnan’s methods:

Etel’s use of the palette knife allows her to work swiftly and decisively; as soon as the colour is laid onto the canvas, that is a definitive choice. Her practice is one of intuition, revealing her exceptional gift as a colourist.

The radiance of Adnan’s canvases can be traced back to her childhood in Beirut. In an interview with Lisa Robertson at *BOMB Magazine*, Adnan **recalls her early relationship with light**:

I didn’t have any brothers or sisters to play with, so the light coming in through the window was a great event for me. I played with that instead of playing with other children. It was my companion. [...] Light is an extraordinary element. It’s a being on its own, it’s something you

look at, and that also you inhabit.

Images as pure feeling

Adnan's pared down, abstract compositions let the colours speak for themselves, allowing full expression of their emotive potential. The resulting works are a distillation of pure emotion through colour and brush. Adnan said in the *BOMB Magazine* interview:

Images are not still. They are moving things. They come, they go, they disappear, they approach, they recede, and they are not even visual—ultimately they are pure feeling. They're like something that calls you through a fog or a cloud.



Etel Adnan, 'Untitled', 2015, oil on canvas, 27 x 35 cm. Photo by White Cube (George Darrell). Image courtesy the artist and White Cube.

Adnan's paintings of "pure feeling" invite a "poly-sensual" perceiving across all the senses, to borrow Lisa Robertson's

words. Adnan herself said, speaking about the general nature of images:

There are layers of images. [...] There is thickness. Vision is multidimensional and simultaneous. You can think, see, see beyond: you can do all these things at the same time. Your psyche, your brain catches up.



Etel Adnan, 'Untitled', 2014, oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm. Photo by White Cube (George Darrell). Image courtesy the artist and White Cube.

Adnan's notion of the image as "pure feeling" extends beyond mere emotion towards a metaphysical or existential connection with nature. In a TV interview, Adnan was once asked to name the most important person she had ever met; she responded by saying "a mountain". Having painted San Francisco's Mount Tamalpais many times, Adnan wrote in a 1985 art book that combined her watercolours with her prose:

Am I trying to hold some image, to capture some meaning, to assert its presence, to measure myself to its timelessness, to fight, or to accept? [...] Tamalpais has an autonomy of being. So does a drawing of it. But they are mysteriously related.

A powerful memory of place

As May explains, the practices of writing and painting have remained independent for the artist. Many of Adnan's paintings are essentially drawn from memory and her powerful sense of place. May reveals that even though Adnan has left Lebanon for many years,

in [her] palette one can see references to the colours of her native Lebanon, the azure blue of the sea or the dusty pink of the nearby Syrian desert.



Etel Adnan, 'Untitled', 2015, oil on canvas, 27 x 35 cm. Photo by White Cube (George Darrell). Image courtesy the artist and White Cube.

The recent paintings currently on show at White Cube, all created in the last six months, were largely inspired by Adnan's potent sense of place. As Adnan once said,

I am particularly sensitive to places, to wherever I am. Places act on us like the quality of the water affects fish. Places are part of nature, of the bigger picture. We are interrelated. When we contemplate them on their own right they can sometimes change our lives, they can become spiritual experiences.

The happiness to just be

In an interview with *The Brooklyn Rail*, Adnan said that **she painted almost to rebalance herself**, and this is perhaps the biggest difference between her writing and her art. Adnan elaborates in a **conversation with Nana Asfour** for *The Paris Review*:

[...] in general, my writing is involved with history as it is made (but not only) and my painting is very much a reflection of my immense love for the world, the happiness to just be, for nature, and the forces that shape a landscape.



Etel Adnan, 'Untitled', 2014, oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm. Photo by White Cube (George Darrell). Image courtesy the artist and White Cube.

Perhaps it is this inner balance, inspired by painting, that has powered and supported Adnan's astounding achievements and multi-dimensional career. *The Wall Street Journal* **writes**, quoting **Hans-Ulrich Obrist**, Co-director of London's Serpentine Galleries:

Given the uncanny breadth of her art, Adnan is a modern-day inheritor of 20th-century avant-garde movements like Dada and surrealism in which people moved fluidly between writing and art making in one recklessly inventive swoop. It's so rare that you have someone making such important contributions to poetry and art. [...] Etel is one of the most influential artists of the 21st century.

Michele Chan

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