

The Long Trajectory of Etel Adnan

Six years ago, visitors to the prestigious Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany discovered an 87-year-old artist many of them had never heard of: the Lebanese-American painter [Etel Adnan](#). Displayed in a room of their own were a few dozen of her small, delicate canvases depicting sunsets, seascapes and mountain views in a bright and uplifting color palette. They were a refreshing break from the chaotic and often confusing spectacle of Contemporary art.

The canvases made such an impression that, within a few years, Adnan was getting solo exhibitions at institutions such as the Serpentine Galleries in London and the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, and being represented by blue-chip galleries such as White Cube in London.

Adnan is also a well-known poet and novelist who was long recognized more for her writings than for her art. Born in Beirut and educated at the Sorbonne in Paris, she moved to the United States in the 1950s to continue her studies, and after teaching philosophy of art and aesthetics at Dominican College in San Rafael, California, settled in Sausalito, where she lived for decades. Yet the East has never left her; her leporellos (notebooks folded like an accordion and presented as artworks) are covered with Arabic texts she writes out by hand.

The artist recently opened a show at the [Paul Klee Zentrum](#) in Bern (running to Oct. 7) — a dialogue with Klee, who had his artistic breakthrough visiting Tunisia in 1914. The exhibition juxtaposes her paintings, drawings, and tapestries with works by Klee.

Shortly before the opening, Adnan gave an interview at her Paris home, a large and luminous apartment (located on the Left Bank right above where Albert Camus once lived), with an atelier where she paints her small canvases sitting at a desk, and a living room draped with Oriental carpets and textiles.

Can you speak about your exhibition at the [Paul Klee Zentrum](#) in Bern?

I have had many exhibitions these last six or seven years, but when they asked me to exhibit in Bern, I had goosebumps. I was really surprised, because [Paul Klee](#) had been a very important painter when I started painting in California. I had a feeling that I had almost met him. He was that familiar.

Why is [Paul Klee](#) an important artist to you?

First of all, they are small paintings, so you concentrate to look at them, and there is a sharp sensitivity. Every centimeter is alive. It's not just big splashes. Every corner, each centimeter of the surface is carefully done. He's also a tragic painter. He became a painter just before World War I, and died after having seen World War II start. So this is a man who had what in French we call *inquietude*: a questioning anguish.

There is a *joie de vivre* in the paintings of Klee, and also in your paintings.

What you say is true.

My writing is forceful, but it doesn't express *joie de vivre*, because in my case, words are social, historical, and link me to what's happening in the world — to relations between people and nations that are not always positive. People from our part of the world never have peace. We never even have the dream that peace will happen. So how can you write happy things?

But as a human being, I am also a positive person. I have my positive side, my need to be happy. I love the world. I like a river, I like a mountain, I like a change of a shadow on the floor or a wall. It does surprise people because of my age.

No, it's your nature. The dark part is not so strong.

The dark part is always part of art, but it's also part of the world we experience. The scale of destruction is enormous, and the scale of worry. I think I haven't heard a good piece of news since I was born!

And I grew up with two exiled people. My father was an Ottoman officer, and he saw the end of an empire. My mother was Greek and she saw Smyrna burn: that was her world. She was maybe 24. Her life stopped there. It became her point of reference. These were the real exiles.

How did you start painting in 1960?

I was teaching philosophy, and one of the courses was philosophy of art. The head of the art department told me, "How come you teach art and don't paint?" She gave me a piece of paper — nothing big and serious. She gave me a corner of a room in a nice setting, because the campus was beautiful. And I started teaching." Then I started painting. I felt pleasure or something. I got hooked.

You think of yourself fundamentally as a writer, and yet everyone now knows [Etel Adnan](#) the painter.

I'm not one thing. Today, if you write in a different language, people ask, "Which one do you prefer?" If you have two religions at home, they ask, "Which one are you?" We are many things, and we do different things.

Western culture categorizes. [Paul Klee](#) was a musician and he played in quartets. He gave little concerts. But they will never say he was a musician.

Documenta was an important moment. How did it come about?

I was in Beirut. I had a big show at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery, and I got a phone call from a woman who said, "I am coming to Beirut to see your show, can we have breakfast together?" She was Carolyn [Christov-Bakargiev, the artistic director of Documenta in 2012].

She didn't tell me she was from Documenta. In the middle of breakfast, she said: "I want to invite you to participate." I had never been to Documenta,

although I knew what it was. I was speechless.

What happened afterwards?

Everything — absolutely. I even had to refuse shows, because I can't paint that much anymore. I worked non-stop for five years. Now, for a year, I have been slowing down.

Was it hard for you to work as a painter before 2012? Today the money is pouring in.

Yes, but back then, before Documenta, I didn't make \$3,000 a year. I would sell a painting for \$800, and they wanted me to give them a discount. I didn't live from that. I kept writing. I am considered a fulltime poet. I don't know how I managed to do both.

How do you feel about the treatment of women artists?

They are better off now. It was so ingrained that we wouldn't be recognized, that we lost the need to be recognized. Maybe that helped me: I wasn't in the rat race. I was painting. I didn't consider myself a Sunday painter; I always did my work seriously. But it didn't occur to me that I would sell it better.

How do you feel now?

It depends which now! For the last six years, since Documenta, I can't travel. So sometimes I say: "I am making money just when I can't spend it!" But I can also help some people. I give money to a school that I care for. It's always good to have money if you want to do things. I wish I had a real fortune because of the needs. A million Arab Syrian refugees in Lebanon: I wish I could adopt five families and secure them.

Are you satisfied with your achievements?

Yes, I think I am. I should be. I got recognition. Sometimes I wonder today if I deserve it. I think it's maybe too much.

In literature, I wrote one or two very important things. I wrote a novel on the civil war in Lebanon, "Sitt Marie Rose." And then I wrote "The Arab Apocalypse." These are considered important works of literature.

And it happened casually. I never was a careerist. There are good poets who wanted to make it. I have never been that way. I live day to day.

This interview appears in the July edition of Modern Painters.

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