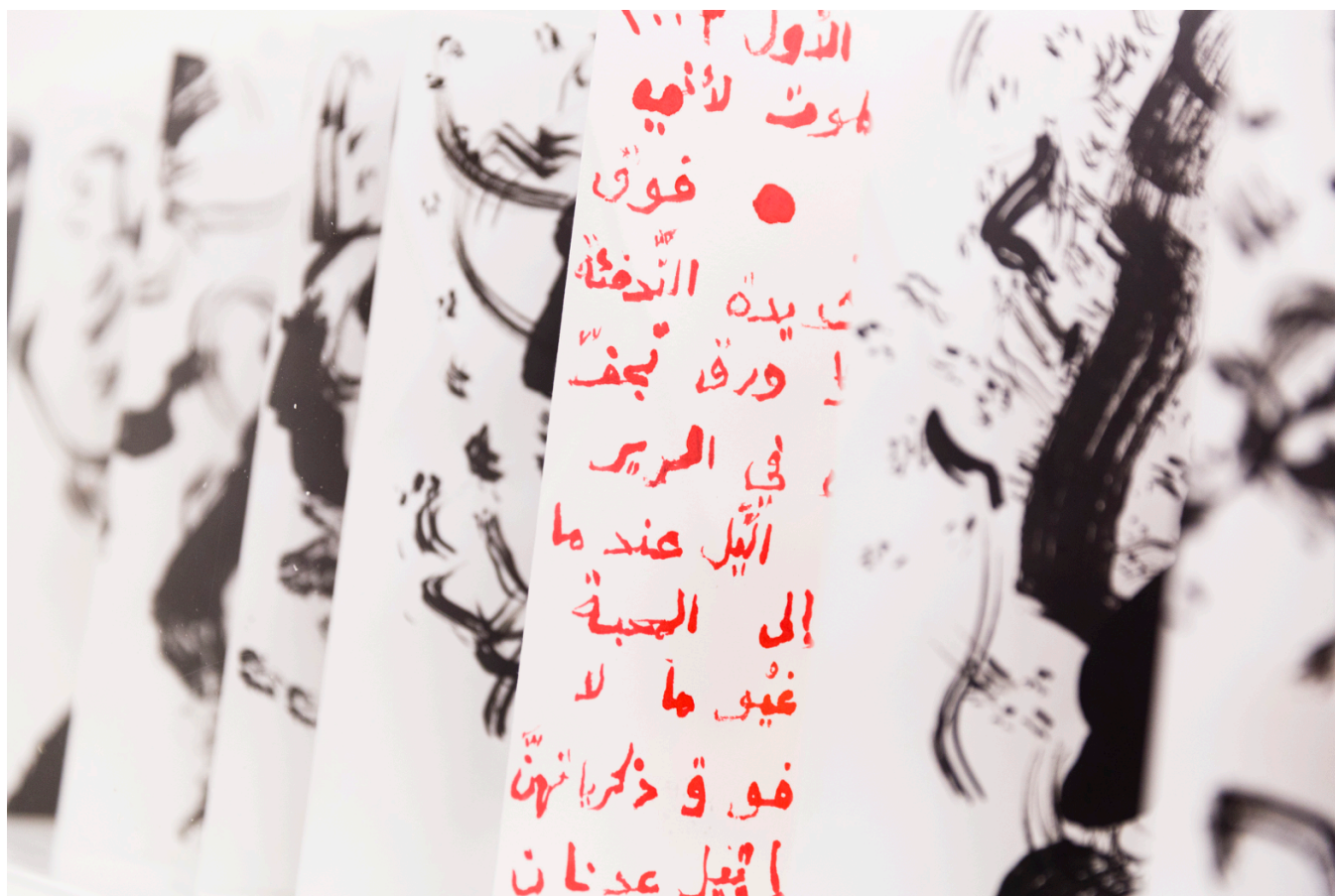


# The Weight of the World Is Too Light: Etel Adnan at Serpentine Sackler Gallery



*The Weight of the World (Installation view). Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London*

*(2 June - 11 September 2016). (Image: © Tristan Fewings/Getty)*

Etel Adnan: [The Weight of the World](#)

Serpentine Sackler Gallery

Jun. 2 - Sept. 11, 2016

**By SHANA BETH MASON, SEPT. 2016**

It's one thing to try and absorb the haunting, minimal surfaces of painters like [Adrian Morris](#), [Rosemarie Castoro](#) or [Agnes Martin](#). But to have such

simplicity border on frail fragments of the real world is another challenge, entirely. Lebanese-born polymath [Etel Adnan](#)'s work is the epitome of reductive technique; no written word, no palette knife-stroke, no frame in a film is wasted or embellished. Her solo exhibition *The Weight of the World* at the Serpentine Gallery's Sackler site is a culmination of nearly fifty years of her explorations into poetry, philosophy, painting, tapestry-making and filmmaking from the early 50's to the present.

Adnan's work is currently experiencing something of a Renaissance moment to wider audiences. Kicking off with a solo project at Galleria Continua's second gallery space in San Gimignano, Tuscany in 2013 (the main space hosted Michelangelo Pistoletto), fragments of Adnan's personal effects and the 73-page manuscript of her 1989 novel *The Arab Apocalypse* made their way into The New Museum's ambitious 2014 group show *Here And Elsewhere* (curated by director Massimiliano Gioni). A solo exhibition at the Museum der Moderne Salzburg, Austria followed soon after, and last year saw two major solo exhibitions at the Irish Museum of Modern Art and the Haus Konstruktiv Zürich, respectively. This autumn, her work will be included in the Barjeel Art Foundation collection presentation at The Whitechapel Gallery (London) and yet another solo exhibition at the venerated Galerie Lelong in Paris.



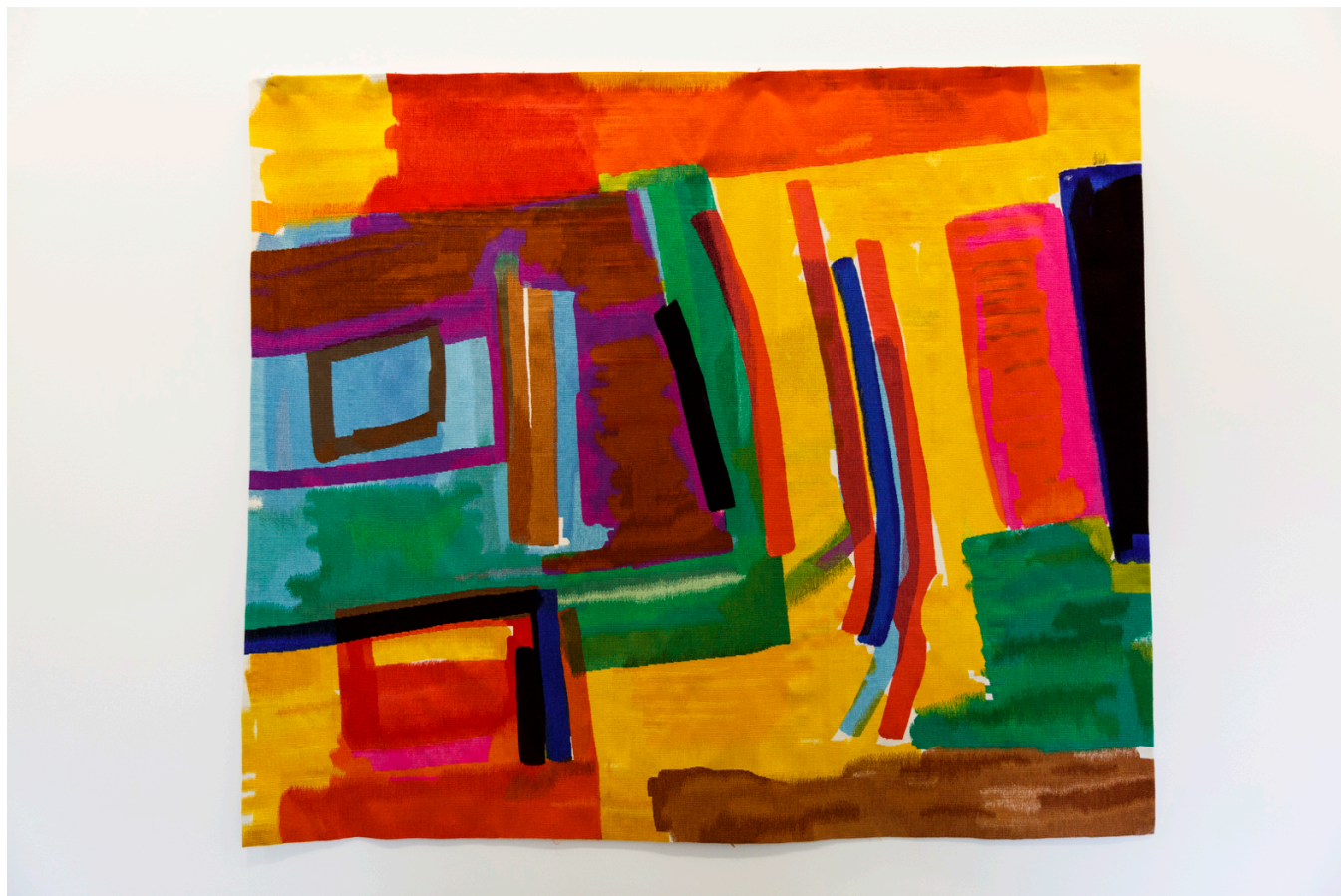
*The Weight of the World (Installation view). Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London (2 June - 11 September 2016). (Image: © Tristan Fewings/Getty)*



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I found that this exhibition, however, did not carry enough of its own impact to do justice to Adnan's lifetime of accomplishments. For a Renaissance woman, highly skilled in multiple art forms (most notably her writing), it would be prudent to present her strongest examples of work irrespective of when they were produced, versus laying out a fully-chronological array without a definitive thesis. The exhibition's title, *The Weight of the World*, is so appropriate to Adnan's life in movement; a witness to the disintegration of her society and culture in Lebanon — adjusting to life in the US, shifting again to study in France, and then only somewhat "settling" in Northern California — should be amplified in a gallery setting. But this presentation was aimless, as no one medium revealed her actual, compelling, creative accomplishments with any kind of agency.



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The first time I had seen Adnan's work was in a tiny exhibition space in San Gimignano. I was completely unaware of her work or her personal history. Within that tiny space, however, I learned that *Sitt Marie Rose* (her first novel, published in English in 1982) and *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989) were hailed as two of the most seminal, contemporary literary works from within the Arab world penned by a woman. I learned that Sausalito would serve as both haven and backdrop for her small, uncomplicated canvases. And in that little space, I garnered more of Adnan's potency as a woman unfettered by merely one interest: a true Renaissance woman.

Within the square white walls of the Serpentine, though, I was unmoved.

**WM**

