THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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FEATURE

Why the Art World Has Fallen for 90-Year-Old Etel Adnan

The Beirut-born poet, essayist and artist—who found fame late in life with her small-scale paintings and forceful prose—has two simultaneous shows this spring at Galerie Lelong in Paris and New York City

By **NEGAR AZIMI**
Feb. 9, 2015

FOR OVER HALF a century, passionate pilgrims have been drawn to a four-story Belle Epoque building in Paris's elegant sixth arrondissement. Some still come to see the final home of Albert Camus, the Algerian-born absurdist who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957. But today, the most fervent among them come to pay homage to Etel Adnan, an artist and writer whose vitality and curiosity belie her 90 years. Like some Delphic cardigan-wearing yogi, Adnan sits in a poufy red chair with her feet barely grazing the floor below and gives her full attention to her interlocutors. Of mixed Greek and Syrian heritage, she speaks at least five languages, in a stream of ambiguous Mediterranean cadences. Conversation tends to hover around her holy trinity of love, war and poetry—the primary subjects of her nearly dozen books. The arc of Adnan's own life, punctuated by the fall of an empire, affairs of the heart and mind, tectonic political shifts, exiles and returns, is the stuff of Russian novels.

When her guests have left, Adnan retreats to a room in the back of the apartment she shares with her partner, the Syrian-born artist and publisher Simone Fattal—a warm space filled with Persian carpets, history books and all manner of artistic bric-a-brac—to paint. The colorful canvases that have come to be her trademark are semi-abstractions, mostly depicting mountains and sun. When her painting is done, she might sit down to work on any number of projects in progress—a tapestry, a book of poems, a film, an opera. 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," says Hans Ulrich Obrist, the co-director of London's Serpentine Galleries. "Etel is one of the most influential artists of the 21st century."

Adnan's fame has come late in life. In 2012, when she was 87, her small-scale paintings were the star of Documenta, the signature art-world event held every five years in the German town of Kassel. In the past year alone, she has had a string of enviable solo outings at London's White Cube, New York's Callicoon Fine Arts and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar. Her work anchored a floor of the last biennial at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, and this spring, two nearly simultaneous shows of her newest work will open at the New York and Paris locations of Galerie Lelong.

The fact that artistic renown has descended upon a nonagenarian woman who paints tiny abstractions and writes poetry and prose of quiet force and complexity might seem like a historical accident. Today's contemporary art market, after all, places a premium on large, shiny, expensive objects. Adnan's work is the anti-Ozymandias—a corrective to exuberant art-world bling. There is none of the bravado or self-regarding mythologizing of other artists of her stature. And yet, invitations stream in daily for exhibitions, collaborations and symposia. "I am happy it didn't happen any sooner," Adnan says of all the attention, adding, "It's ironic, isn't it, at a time when I can't really use the money."

ETEL ADNAN WAS BORN in 1925 in Beirut to a Greek Christian mother from Smyrna—an ancient city that had lost its name and population in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War—and a Syrian father of Muslim extraction who served as a high-ranking general in the Ottoman army. As the fortunes of that empire turned to dust after World War I, the couple, who spoke to each other in Turkish—a tongue that was native to neither of them—moved to seaside Beirut, itself the capital of a newly created Lebanon, thanks to French and English colonial overlords who had refashioned the region following the Great War. Born here, into this *mille-feuille* of faiths, cultures and languages, Adnan spoke Greek and Turkish at home, Arabic on the street and French at school. "We were taught to think that Paris was the center of the universe," she says.

Though she expressed interest in being an engineer or architect, her mother dissuaded her, as neither was considered a suitable vocation for women. "It was more than a no," she remembers now. Attending Beirut's École des Lettres, she was introduced by a teacher to the work of Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Rilke. By 20, she was writing her first poems in French—they were about the sun and the sea—and would soon win a scholarship to study philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1949. A life steeped in Francophone letters and culture was laid out before her.

But a decade later, after she left France in 1955 to pursue graduate studies at Berkeley and Harvard, the Algerian War tilted her moral register. Like many Arab intellectuals of her generation, Adnan felt a surge of disgust with France's harsh treatment of the colonized populations of the Maghreb. With that came an ambivalence toward what she considered the language of colonial power. "I didn't want to read French or write it; it was like a boycott, a rejection," she says now. The year was 1960, and Adnan was living and teaching in California at a small Catholic school called Dominican College. From then on, she began to paint, occasionally suggesting that she was "painting in Arabic."

"For me, it was a new language, a new world," Adnan says. Encouraged by an art teacher colleague, she began working with a series of accordion-like Japanese books called leporellos, which, when filled up with her vivid colors, symbols and text, evoked poetic *samizdat*. Though her grasp of written Arabic has never been strong—a fact that continues to vex her—she also began transcribing the works of Arab poets such as Mahmoud Darwish and Yusuf al-Khal within these books. "The leporellos are understated, quiet, but so powerful when you unfold them. A bit like Etel," says Andrée Sfeir-Semler, who has exhibited Adnan at her Beirut and Hamburg galleries.

Another war was the inspiration for a first poem written in English just a few years later. As the 20th century's first televised conflict—Vietnam—was raging, "a TV picture," as Adnan puts it, moved her to write. She sent the poem, "The Ballad of the Lonely Knight in Present-Day America," to a small, free California-based journal. "And that is how I became an American poet," she says, with a laugh. Eleven books of poetry and prose would follow, most written in her newly adopted language, English, and a handful written in French. Her style throughout these works, at once politically engaged and

lyrical, moves seamlessly across references as diverse as Charles Mingus and Fra Angelico and the sad fate of the American Indian. Hers is a world where "the dead are coming back in order to fight again / because the living are cowards!" Love—its ecstasy and anguish—is also one of Adnan's favorite subjects. The American poet Cole Swensen has called her work a "poetry of place," but it is, too, given its insistence on universal ideas about a world filled with injustices, a poetry of the moral and political climate of every place. It is also, not unlike her bright paintings, breathtakingly optimistic, free of the world weariness that one might imagine from a similar poetics of witness. Says Obrist, who regularly proffers that Adnan deserves the Nobel Prize in literature: "Her work is the opposite of cynicism. It is pure oxygen in a world full of wars."

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONS | 'For me, [painting] was a new language,' says Adnan, shown at her Parisian home with a 1974 canvas. *PHOTO: JAMES MOLLISON FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

Adnan's most iconic pieces of writing came about in the midst of the civil war that ripped Lebanon apart beginning in the mid-1970s. Having moved back to Beirut in 1972 to steer the culture pages of a new French language daily called *Al Safa,* she was confronted with the brutality of a conflict that separated families, friends and finally, an entire nation. One day, she learned of a Syrian émigré named Marie Rose Boulos, who, for her social work among Palestinian refugees, had been kidnapped and assassinated by a right wing Christian militia—ostensibly for betraying her faith. From there, Sitt Marie Rose was born, a fable-like novella fashioned around Boulos's fate. Completed in one month of feverish writing in 1976, it has become a touchstone for Adnan fans and a classic of Arab letters. "In *Sitt Marie Rose* and elsewhere, Etel's message is: Change the world or go home," the Lebanese historian Fawwaz Traboulsi, an old friend of Adnan's, told me.

Beirut in the 1970s was important to Adnan for another reason: It was where she met Simone Fattal. Seventeen years her junior, uncommonly tall and marked by glamorous Sophia Loren cheekbones, Fattal, a painter and sculptor with a rebellious streak who had recently moved back to Beirut from Paris, called Adnan one day to compliment her on one of her editorials. This particular piece meditated upon the tale of a soldier who had escaped certain death by scribbling enigmatic messages in the sand before his captors. The two went out to dinner soon after and, said Fattal recently, "We've been having dinner ever since."

When the publication of *Sitt Marie Rose* inspired death threats in the late 1970s, Fattal and Adnan, by then inseparable, exiled themselves to seaside Sausalito, California, where Adnan continued her writing and painting and Fattal launched a small publishing house called Post-Apollo Press, which would publish, among other writers, Adnan. Sausalito was also within clear view of California's Mount Tamalpais, the geography that would become pivotal to Adnan's work. The paintings of the mountain she refers to as "my best friend" are deceptively repetitive. And yet, like Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire, Adnan's muse is dynamic, changing, moody. Gazing at these painterly compositions today—a pileup of brush strokes and chiaroscuro textures—one sees the unrealized architect shining through. About her process, which verges on the existential, she adds: "Once I put down a color, I never cover it up. If you are born a musician, why become a banker?"

As members of a close-knit group of artists, Adnan and Fattal stayed in California for more than three decades, until the difficulties of traveling long distances (Adnan has had a bad back for years along with heart problems and can no longer take airplanes) necessitated a change in 2012. And so it was back to Paris—more centrally situated than the West Coast—and to life on the West Bank. "I know I can't go back, but I act as if I can," she says about her beloved California.

ONE BITTERLY COLD Paris evening in February 2014, Adnan was to be honored at a reception at the Arab World Institute with the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, a French government distinction that recognizes contributions to the worlds of art and literature. In typical Etel Adnan mode—wearing her standard uniform of plaid pants and roomy sweater—she turned to Jack Lang, France's dapper former minister of culture, and said, "It is I who should be honoring you!" The crowd, a motley multigenerational mix of French, Arab and American artists and poets, roared with laughter and raised their wineglasses. It was a remarkable moment: The country with notoriously conservative entry rules when it comes to its cultural establishment was feting the Arab artist, poet and activist.

Since then, Adnan has been speaking of taking a break from painting. "It's as if I can't see color anymore," she recently confided about the toll the extraordinary demand for her work has taken. The task of writing a memoir also weighs on her. Her life, after all, has intersected with some of the more colorful characters of the 20th century, from the writer Marguerite Yourcenar, who once tried to gently seduce her with the help of a copy of *One Thousand and One Nights,* to the theater director Robert Wilson, with whom she once collaborated on an opera called *Civil Wars.* Other projects loom too. A new book of poems is "almost done," as is an opera about Marie de' Medici, the Franco-Italian queen whose court was never short of intrigues. Adnan has also very recently realized a decades-long dream of producing large-scale public works with a series of exuberant murals in both Doha and the French commune of Les Moulins. Produced by ceramicists and based on her own designs, the murals represent a riot of circles, rectangles and zigzags in her trademark bright colors. In her words, public art "gives you something you don't even know it is giving you."

On a recent winter evening in Paris, we sat down to have dinner in the kitchen of her apartment. Fattal had cooked a kibbe ground-beef dish with ingredients she had just brought back from Lebanon. As we ate and sipped whiskey, we spoke in three languages of their life in Beirut during the first years of the civil war—the art galleries, the literary journals, the political exiles all drunk on the idea of a revolutionary Third-Worldism. Discussion turned to exhibitions she had during the first years of the fighting—cozy, informal affairs in which people bought friends' paintings for as little as the equivalent of $50 or $100: "I always had a few people who liked what I did, and that was enough," says Adnan, with a wry smile. "I do think I've kept my innocence."