Etel Adnan in conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist Autumn 2011

Hans Ulrich Obrist:
I wanted to know what were your first works?

Etel Adnan:
It's hard to tell. I had done some writing, then I became a painter, which means I exhibited some works, and this before writing "seriously." But let me tell you that there is no "progress" in art. Sometimes the best things that one does are the ones that are done first; I don't think that an artist necessarily gets better with time. Also, the first works, like the first notes in a piece of music, hold everything that one will do in the future.

You told me in an interview that we did at the beginning of 2011, that painting expresses a "joie de vivre," whilst writing is a meditation on the tragic aspects of the world.

Yes, absolutely. At least for me. But the state of the soul is the same. I sit down at a table and what will happen depends on the materials. When I have colored ink, and especially tubes of paint, the materials themselves put me in another world. Painting for me addresses itself to the outside world. The world of painting is capable of joy, but it may also concern itself with the sinister side of life. Let's think of Picasso with Guernica, Goya, Géricault... You can express the desperation of the world through painting.

You have said that when the colors come out of the tubes you like the immediate sense of beauty. I wanted to know whether you had a theory of color.

I've read the theory of colors by Albers, or Malevich who had his own theory of color. But it is not color that is wonderful, it is painting. I do not often read theories of color. First of all, I did not go to art school and so I did not learn painting in an art school; therefore, I have no theories. The colors come out of the tubes and bold colors have an impact on me. Sometimes I mix the colors and create new colors one by one, and they inspire me. Colors are innocent, they are the materials, and they guide me.

Do you have a favorite color?

Since the beginning, when I was in front of a canvas and I had no idea of where to go, I painted a red square. And from this red square, I continued. I think, in painting, I have a favorite color, and it is red.

And where does this come from, this love of red? Is it revolution?

No, this association came later. I think that red has an immediate effect. It is compelling. For me, it is the boldest color. The sun is red as well. People tend to paint the sun as yellow, but we do not see a yellow sun. We either see a shining, luminous sun, or, during sunset, we see a red sun.

In your early paintings we always find pure/primary colors. It resembles a little the work of Nicolas de Staël, but it's different.

I find that pure colors are so beautiful that sometimes one does not dare to mix them. One can't make something more beautiful; the beauty is already there. Recently I have thought that there are periods of time in one's life, or even in a year, when one is particularly attached to certain ideas. What I have discovered recently, is that there is art, but that it doesn't always come to you; there are epiphanies. There are moments when art becomes a window onto different worlds. I was at a concert ten days ago, and Pollini played a Beethoven sonata, and although I am not a musician, at the beginning of the piece, all of a sudden, and lasting for a few seconds, I saw that he had opened another world to me, a world not meant for words, but one that only music could reach. It's an unforgettable experience. It is the same in painting, and particularly with abstract art. In fact, every painting is an abstraction. Even a portrait by Rembrandt; on canvas, for example, the face is a flat surface of colors. Every art is a window into a world that only that art form can access. You can't define these worlds. They are epiphanies, visions.

As Baudelaire has already said—his writings were not a representation of nature.

Absolutely. Baudelaire was perhaps the first, and the greatest art critic. He was a great critic. And his writings never become dated.

When we met for the first time you told me that your childhood dream was to become an architect. You mentioned Frank Lloyd Wright and you've just written a wonderful text about Zaha Hadid. Can you tell me about this unrealized childhood dream?

It was my dream from a very young age to be an architect. I find that it is an art form which is very mysterious. There are very few—as in any art form—very few good architects. But architecture is an elevation, a vertical movement, something that comes out of the earth like a tree which grows; cathedrals are forests. There are some very beautiful skyscrapers, such as the first skyscraper in Chicago, which is on the edge of the lake. The architects who built it are Bauhaus people. Architecture contains everything: form, color, social concerns. At the end of the day, it is made so that people live in it, and through it. It is always made for use by man, for human beings. It is a mysterious art form; and it is our habitat. We live with no end within architecture. Even a tent is architecture, even a cave when it is inhabited.

This is interesting because I sometimes look at your paintings and find that there is something architectural about them.

Yes. I build them. Although I work on a flat surface without an easel, I am building. I construct the canvas. I don't know in advance what I will do. I put my red square and then afterwards perhaps a blue line and this becomes a new ensemble on which I build more. It is absolutely true that a painting is a construction.

So we can really make this comparison from your early interest in architecture and your painting.

Absolutely. One can live without ever having heard music, or having read a poem, but one is placed in architecture, even when one is in the countryside. As I said, even a tent is architecture. The first architecture for a human being is his mother's womb. It's a container from which, as a start, you can't escape.

Simone Fattal writes in her text that you would have liked to create another Bauhaus; to work with a group of artists and artisans and change the world. She says you were going to build this ideal Bauhaus in Lebanon in a village. Then the war killed a fellow organizer and killed the Lebanon where such a project could have taken place. Tell me a bit about your unrealized Bauhaus.

When I was teaching in California, what I really enjoyed and what I learned specifically in the USA, was the value of spontaneity. It's not important to do things nicely, it's important to take the risk of doing them, spontaneously, do them by following one's own rules, and not what somebody else has said. So gra-dually, I started to think I should go back to Beirut, and start a Bauhaus kind of experiment with other artists. I thought I should do this because Arabic culture is a very schizophrenic culture, it has a sense of chaos more than of freedom, and at the same time it is so stiff. It's so full of holes and so controlled by government, society, and family. I thought I would go there and find other artists and shape things around this. This was around 1972, and in 1975 the civil war started, so that "new" Bauhaus hasn't happened yet.

The Bauhaus brings us back to the discussion of architecture.

Decent or beautiful public work is democratic, because even a poor person can walk in a beautiful environment and have his spirit uplifted. We painters do an elitist type of work; nevertheless it has its place because it's intellectual and spiritual. But we badly need public works such as the type of walls that Miró and Artigas built and which are now in the UNESCO building in Paris, things that anybody can enjoy. We should have them in hospitals, in gyms, in schools, we should have some great artistic works, why not, like Dubuffets, in supermarkets, or prison yards...

That reminds me of Le Corbusier, which is interesting because Le Corbusier also had a duality, as you do, of being a visual artist, and also, of course, a great architect and urbanist. Your duality is multi-faceted: Arab or Greek, Muslim or Christian, painter or poet.

You're right. I live under a double sign. Essentially, even when I defend an idea, all of a sudden the opposite of this idea appears to me as equally important. I don't do it on purpose; it comes to me naturally. For example, I like the sea and I like the mountains. I am assimilated into Western culture—my mother was Greek. Christianity, even if it started in the East, became one of the pillars of the West, but I am also very attached to the Muslim world. I understand it from the inside. All in all it is true: there's a duality in my life as in my thinking, and it works because I accept it rather than favoring one side or the other. It's a dialectical movement. I accept that the same things please me and displease me, that something can be true and not true at the same time, that I am one thing and its opposite, and this ad infinitum.

To return to painting, as seen in this text by Simone Fattal—by the way my favorite text on your painting—from the beginning you were an abstract painter. You often focused on red squares, strong lines, etc... organized in a certain way. However, there is also a transition in your work. After a certain point, landscapes enter the paintings. How did this transition from pure abstraction to landscape take place?

This transition took place when I went to live in Sausalito, north of San Francisco. I lived in an apartment which has a big glass wall, and about 10 kilometers beyond that glass there is a mountain. A mountain is not a fixed form, it

changes with the climate, with the time, with the rains, with the season. It is never exactly the same; it changes ceaselessly. I think that Cézanne expresses this phenomenon using the word transitory. Cézanne does not talk about the mountain itself, he speaks about painting. He speaks wonderfully. Over the years, in my case, this dialectic between the fixed and the changing created many of my paintings.

Once you were asked in an interview who is the most important person you have met in your life, and your answer was that it was actually this mountain, Mount Tamalpaïs. The first thing that interests me about Mount Tamalpaïs is the idea of a certain love and passion for the world. You once told me that you love the universe.

I said to myself once that when I die, the universe will have lost its best friend. I have a great sense of the universe. I do not call this God, rather I have a feeling that we are all linked and that we all participate in something infinite. I believe in the universe and I feel it. It interests me. It's always present.

We have a sense of this particularly in your book "Journey to Mount Tamalpaïs."

Because it is a book about the outside world, about the mountain, about painting. In fact, it is about my vision of the world.

You have always said that painters feel that the world goes together with them.

Yes, I feel that painters are happier and more joyful than writers or poets. They are "bon vivants," there is a laboring element to painting; it is not a bourgeois occupation. One can be a bourgeois writer but one can't be a bourgeois painter. It is a physical job; we are close to laborers. I saw a film on Calder and Calder was a worker! He was great. Giacometti too. He worked with his hands the whole time.

There have always been painters who are obsessed with mountains. For example, Giovanni Segantini, the Swiss painter at the end of the 19th century. He said "voglio vedere le mie montagne,""I want to see my mountains." He lived higher and higher up and when he died he was in his mountain cabin at very high altitude. At the same time there is Cézanne and Hokusai, and you have said that you often think about Cézanne and Hokusai, and their link with mountains and your link with mountains. Where do you see the similarity and differences between Cézanne and Sainte Victoire and Hokusai and Fujiyama and your relationship with Tamalpaïs?

I think it is a question of temperament. Cézanne is solitary. It is his world in his painting. It is a mountain which is a fixed idea. In Hokusai's work there are different characters, and different landscapes—some are softer than others. He turns around the mountain, his points of view keep moving, while in Cézanne's work the mountain is monolithic, and his obsession almost maniacal. The difference is in their characters. The world of Hokusai for me, is Japan, plus the mountain. I am in Japan with his work. With Cézanne I am in front of the Sainte Victoire. There are no people, there is no worked land, it is almost pure geometry.

We have spoken a lot about mountains in art but of course, mountains have an important place in literature as well.

Living with this mountain and working on the subject of this mountain, it does become a world. It becomes a mystical experience. The mountain is unknowable but strong at the same time. For example, I have the feeling that the canvasses I painted have not managed to grasp the essence of Tamalpaïs. I spent more than 20 years of my life doing this. I think in this way, my work is very close to that of Cézanne. For Cézanne, Sainte Victoire was no longer a mountain. It was an absolute. It was painting. Mountaineers always want to go higher, and to see more, and it is not a question of pride or of ego. It is to do with always wanting to go up. From the top one can see this other world. From canvas to canvas dealing with the mountain Cézanne was ascending to painting.

You told me that Paul Klee inspired you and that you sometimes wish that heaven could be a place where you could actually talk to Paul Klee. I was wondering whether you could tell us a little bit about Paul Klee and how he inspired you.

I think that Klee is the first painter I fell in love with. I was obsessed. By obsessed I mean a Paul Klee picture created an ecstatic effect in me. I was inhabited by these paintings. In Kairouan he wrote: "color and I are one." I understood he was speaking of revelation. Klee for me was the whole world of art in one person. A few days ago I saw some Paul Klee's in Dusseldorf, and they had the same magic. They made you communicate with his sensibility. They make you feel that you know his soul more than your own. You forget that you are on this earth, you enter his forever.

Simone Fattal says that you found your painting—your form, your color—immediately. You say that your painting is "decisive." Can you speak about this?

I am someone who is compulsive. I don't paint every day. I am not one of those painters who have a regularity. But suddenly, when I start a series, I am in the world of painting. I take my canvas and I start straight away. I can spend days doing nothing, but if I start a painting, I can't stop until it's finished.

There are never any corrections?

This is my difference with Nicolas de Staël. I paint a color and the rest follows. I never return to what I have just done.

How long does it take for you to paint a canvas?

It takes about 2 hours. But that doesn't mean that I do it every day. And I have to say that my canvases are never too large.

And there are never preparatory drawings or sketches?

No, never.

When you travel, for example right now we are in a hotel room in London, tomorrow there is the Serpentine Marathon, earlier this week we had a conversation at the Bidoun event etc. In a week like this, do you draw?

In general, no. Although sometimes I used to use the folding Japanese drawing books, which take up no space in one's luggage, and I only need a paintbrush and an inkwell, so I did use to draw in hotels. But I did it randomly. When I pack my bags I don't think of packing inkwells. I once made a painting in an airport, because there was a 5 hour delay, and it happened that I had some aquarelles and a brush in my bag because I was returning

from my own summer house. And so I drew a whole landscape on a huge scroll-like paper in the airport.

And this drawing still exists?

I think so.

Tell me about these Japanese drawing books. In 1964, you did your first notebook, where you basically actually invented an extraordinary new format for your work, where you bring together the poetry and the painting. Can you tell us a little bit about this form of book eminence, and how in 1964 you did the first notebook on a poet from Iraq, Badr Shakir al Sayyab, who is one of your great heroes.

Around 1964, I discovered these Japanese "books" which fold like an accordion, in whose pages the Japanese painters mixed drawings with writings and poems. They don't do it anymore, I don't think; I don't hear of any contemporary Japanese artists working in that format. I found some "books" like that in a store in San Francisco; people used to buy them, and glue family photographs. When I saw that format I thought it was a good way to get out of the page as a square or a rectangle; it was like writing a river.

When I asked you which magazine published your poetry for the first time, you told me that it was actually a pamphlet. Can you tell us about this first publication?

Besides the hard working, serious, literary or art magazines, which are very few, there are also sometimes miraculous little publications. In about 1963, there was the Vietnam War. I was in California, and I saw a magazine which was simply 2 pages of a newspaper folded, and distributed freely for no money. The guy was an anti-war activist working for City Hall and he used the printing machines of his office to subvert the whole establishment. I was so happy to see this. So I sent him a poem, the first one I wrote in English, which I had written on my typewriter. In response, I received a torn piece of paper saying he accepted my submission. So I became an American poet that way! So these little, extremely ephemeral magazines, are extremely important. Just because it is ephemeral doesn't mean it is unimportant. Magazines like this one play a subversive role in culture.

You will be exhibiting at Documenta, which is one of the biggest art exhibitions in the world. You have already released a notebook for Documenta which is number 6 notebook in their series, which was an exquisite text on the subject of love.

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, from dOCUMENTA (13), asked me to write about my painting. I told her that I can't write about painting as I had already written "Journey to Mount Tamalpaïs" and that that was enough. She was very subtle about it. She said to me, "ok then, what interests you these days?" and, as I have been telling you, today I am interested in the "other" worlds that art can allow one to access. However, at that time, when she asked me to write, I was interested in the fact that in the cultural world, people were talking about sexuality and violence, but no one was talking about love. We have lost that word. Love, like everything else, requires a price to be paid, and it is not at all easy. It can provoke a complete upheaval. And Carolyn said to me: "Write about that." The world, in a broad sense, is love, and we have everything except love stories. It is a strange situation. We live in a hedonistic society, but without joy. A joyless hedonistic society—it's a contradiction.

You wrote that Tolstoy, in 1873, on the 5th of November wrote in his diary that love is the most dangerous thing.

Tolstoy wrote "Anna Karenina." Tolstoy's last book was "Redemption," an extraordinary book, which we unfortunately don't read nearly as much as we read his other books. It is a book about love: it is about a man who has raped a woman and feels guilty. He was missing love. It is an extraordinary work. Love is subversive, it is terrifying, it changes everything. We are beings who are obsessed by the search for comforts, and by our careers, and consider love as a potential disturbance or a complete upheaval.

It is also unpredictable. At the end of the text, you say that love is the most unpredictable and dangerous thing but that perhaps it is also the only salvation.

I think so. Love is the only true paradise. Even love of painting—love itself is the only paradise.

Tell me a little bit more about Documenta—what will you be showing?

I had used in the '80s and '90s a super-8 camera. Carolyn encouraged me to edit the films and said we could project them at Documenta.

How many films of yours exist?

I did about 70 very short Super-8 films. It adds up to about 2 hours I think.

And what is on these Super-8 films?

I know that I was drawn to a few basic images: the mountain, the ocean (the Pacific ocean), birds flying above the mountain, then New York city, some of its tall buildings and the light reflections on them. First of all, I had access to the 34th floor of an apartment in New York and could see more than seven bridges... I filmed boats that go up and down the East River, transporting all kinds of things, even garbage. I filmed many extraordinary sunsets, when the whole sky was like in flames... I remember also that I did a series on the waterfalls of Yosemite Valley. I will name the edited film "Again, and again" as that's what's all about. Sometimes I filmed the sun with my eye half-closed, but I did it. Of course, at Documenta I will show essentially paintings. Many paintings.

At Mount Tamalpaïs as well, you filmed fog.

I love fog. The arrival of fog is the coming of a new living being, the entering in the world of an extraordinary event.

You next poetry book is in fact about fog. Can you tell me a bit about it?

In Sausalito, around San Francisco, each summer, there is an amazing phenomenon which has to do with fog. It is dramatic. Every afternoon at about 5 o' clock, from across the Pacific Ocean comes the fog and it engulfs the whole area. I have only seen this kind of fog there, in the San Francisco area. In London the fog comes in winter, and I wonder if it has the same impact that it used to have on the people. In Paris, there is very rarely any fog. But there, in that part of California that I know, every July and August, due to the evaporation, but also to the collision of the Pacific cold air with the very hot air inland, there is fog. Waves of fog that advance like a whole sea. It is not something static, it arrives like a horizontal cascade. This fog has pathways. It is stopped by the mountain, and by hills in the East, but it pours into other places and even forms a huge curtain that isolates San Francisco from its surroundings.

It is like watching a play in a cosmic theatre, and every day it closes in, until nightfall.

It is cinematic.

Exactly. It is cinema. We expect it at a certain time, we wait for it, and it comes. And it moves.

You also told me about dreams and the importance of dreams for your work. So I thought maybe towards the end of the conversation we should talk about dreams.

A work of art, in a way, is a frozen dream. In dreams at night we are not scared and the mental world escapes our control and all kinds of things happen, nightmares happen. We have a kind of a freedom of thinking that we don't use as much during the day. There are discoveries; I think dreams are visits to other worlds. Other worlds exist, art opens them up, but not as easily as we think. These moments come and they go but you remember them and that is very close to the way that dreams function—they open up worlds.

On the question of the dream I was wondering whether you have a dream, maybe a dream project? You have written so many books and you have done so many visual artworks, I was wondering whether there was a project which has been too big to realize, too small to be realized, censored, etc.

I wish to participate in a public project of art, design a wall, cover walls with designs rendered in ceramic, do something of that kind. I want to do things that will humanize the environment.

And one very last question and this is the Rainer Maria Rilke question. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a wonderful book about advice to a young poet. You inspire so many young artists and I was wondering what in 2011 would be your advice to a young artist.

My advice would be that they just "do" and by doing find out what they want to do. When I was a child I thought that Picasso was there, and I was here, and I couldn't touch a pencil, but you are not born a Picasso, you become a Picasso. Or you become a bad painter—it doesn't matter. My advice is: don't be afraid. And that's all.

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