

On Perception; Etel Adnan's Visual Art Simone Fattal

Etel Adnan started as a purely abstract painter, using large squares compactly juxtaposed or floating on a background, or else smaller squares composing a line either dividing the surface or also floating on the surface of the canvas. It was as if from the red square the rest of the composition emerged. Around it, the world, its lines of forces, organized itself. During a discussion of a show of her paintings in California I heard this comment: "It is as if you are painting from very far." Indeed, the landscape is compressed on a small surface and only the strong lines, the large undercurrents emerge. There are no people in Adnan's oils; it is the world that Adnan is looking at, the beautiful physical earth with its mountains, rivers and colors. She is a person of the world, in the sense Jean-Paul Sartre gave to this expression.

It should be said that her paintings are austere, almost severe. No facile effects, no adornments, no concession to the viewer: a simple statement about a proposed moment. Her paintings are succinct in the same way as her writing. She lives in a rarefied atmosphere the way monks live on top of mountains.

The juxtaposition of squares of color in her work means not only that these are the actual colors the earth takes on such and such a day, but that one has to look at what the whole creates, and the impression these colors are going to produce. This is what will inevitably give to the person who looks at them the feeling that is most *sui generis* to a place and the color that is most unforgettable. As the Qur'an says: "He has created for you on earth things of different colors, so that in that fact there would be a sign for people who want to remember."

Then, she turned her attention to Mount Tamalpais. There, in front of her window, and everywhere she went in Marin County (on San Fran-

cisco's bay), the mountain was there. It became her point of reference, her home far from home. The natural pyramidal shape of the mountain became embedded in her whole being. She could even draw it at night and at dawn. The mountain became the ever-revealing, the on-going manifestation of what she had to capture on canvas and paper.

She could see that pyramidal shape as a cube divided in two, and soon inhabited by spheres. Then, to draw a sphere, she needed lines and the line led her to an innumerable number of water-colors and drawings.

She got involved with the changes of the mountain seen at dusk, for example, when the blue hues invade the whole universe, or seen with rain and clouds... then moved on painting close-ups, details. At the end of the winter, when the mountain is of a deep green, she painted series of green patches which were quite astounding. They often had, here and there, a line of red paint upholding the whole composition.

Adnan's paintings play also the role the old icons used to play for people who were believers. They exude energy and give energy. They grow on you like talismans. They help in living everyday life. More often than not I noticed that people who have one or two of those paintings will keep them in their private room and not in their living rooms as objects of art. The quickness of their making, the fact that they are done in one sitting, their compactness—with nothing diluted or lost—conveys the happiness experienced while painting, the joy of using color. They reflect the praise of the universe, the experiencing of it, the immersion in it. No lamentation nor elegy. Just love.

She is a colorist. "Colorists are epic poets," said Baudelaire. Who better than Adnan would be in that position, as she is already an epic poet

in words? There is an epic vision and rendering in her extraordinary canvases. She is tackling the world, wrestling with it, with love and passion. She told me once: "When I die the universe will have lost its best friend." She's in love with the beauty of it. She has a need to see color and use it as a link to the universe.

In front of her works we realize that painting teaches this lesson: that it is about perception. We are here to perceive and it is exhilarating, for when perception happens it is a manifestation of a perfect fulfillment. But this fulfillment does not last. Some trace of it gets on paper, if we are able to catch it and freeze it. We call the result a drawing.

We also see painting as the pure energy with which one can live one's life—with courage.

But painting goes even further. It is a form of knowledge. We can quote here the painter herself: "But can I ever understand what Cezanne says in Mont Sainte-Victoire, and Hokusai in Mount Fuji if, after thirty years, I don't know what Tamalpaïs means to me beyond the sketches, paintings and writings that involved me with her. I know that the process of painting and writing gives me the implicit certitude of what the Mountain is and of what I see: I perceive a nature proper to her while I work. Tamalpaïs has an autonomy of being. So does a drawing of it. But they are mysteriously related."

Now, let us speak of her work that includes brush, ink, watercolors, crayons and pencils. We can say that Adnan has developed with years a masterly brush stroke that some equate to the

Japanese and Chinese masters. We can speak of the Japanese folding books (Ieporellos) on which she mixed hand written poetry with watercolor patches and lines. The fact that they unfold page after page led her to think that they had to be read this way, page after page, and made her discover what the Chinese tradition knew all along, that writing is drawing.

The "books" are also a way of entering the time element in a painting. One unfolds the scroll as one sees a landscape, or reads a poem, bit by bit, close to real life. They become monumental when, unfolded, they become at times several feet long. They are minimalist and grandiose in the same time. They are also intimate, they do not hang on walls for ever until they lose the impact of their beauty. They can be placed in a drawer and looked at only when the time is ripe for this particular contemplation.

Etel Adnan's art is as innovative as her poetry and fiction, and like these, has had a recognized and wide influence on contemporary Arab art, and beyond.