

ETEL ADNAN



Jazz, woven in the Aubusson Ateliers, 154 x 176 cm, 1999

Living What is Given

Etel Adnan's inks and watercolors are sketched portraits of bridges – specifically of the rising metal suspensions of New York and the low stone arches of Paris.

The series began ten years ago, when Adnan looked down at New York from the 34th floor of a mid-town skyscraper and saw from the apartment's windows exactly nine bridges. She remembers it as an "indescribable sight, epic and mythical" – a small island of thrusting vertical power linked to a vast, sprawling continent by embracing arms of steel.

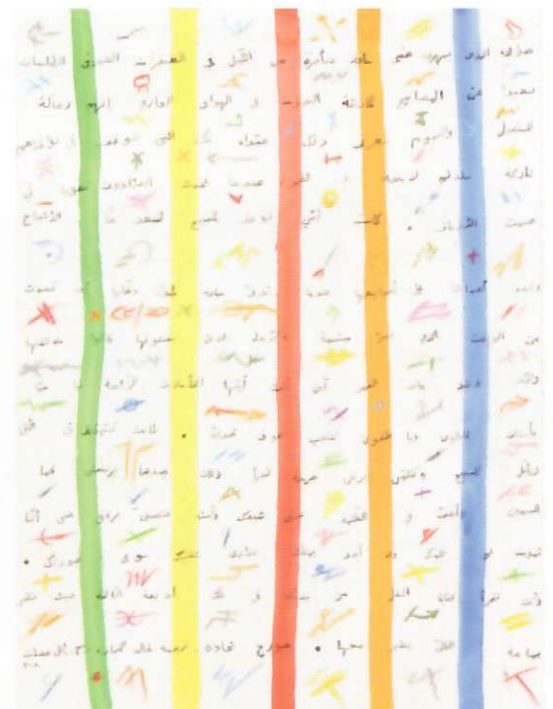
The bridges of Paris project an entirely different image: "They are built of stone," Adnan says, "golden, ancient and astonishingly evocative of the stones of the south Mediterranean... From one river bank to the other, they carry the history of France... Anchoring their feet in the water, they are earthbound and smaller than American



Bridge, ink, 60 x 85 cm, 1990



Untitled, drawings and poems, 46 x 61 cm, 2008



Untitled, drawings and poems, 76 x 57 cm, 2008

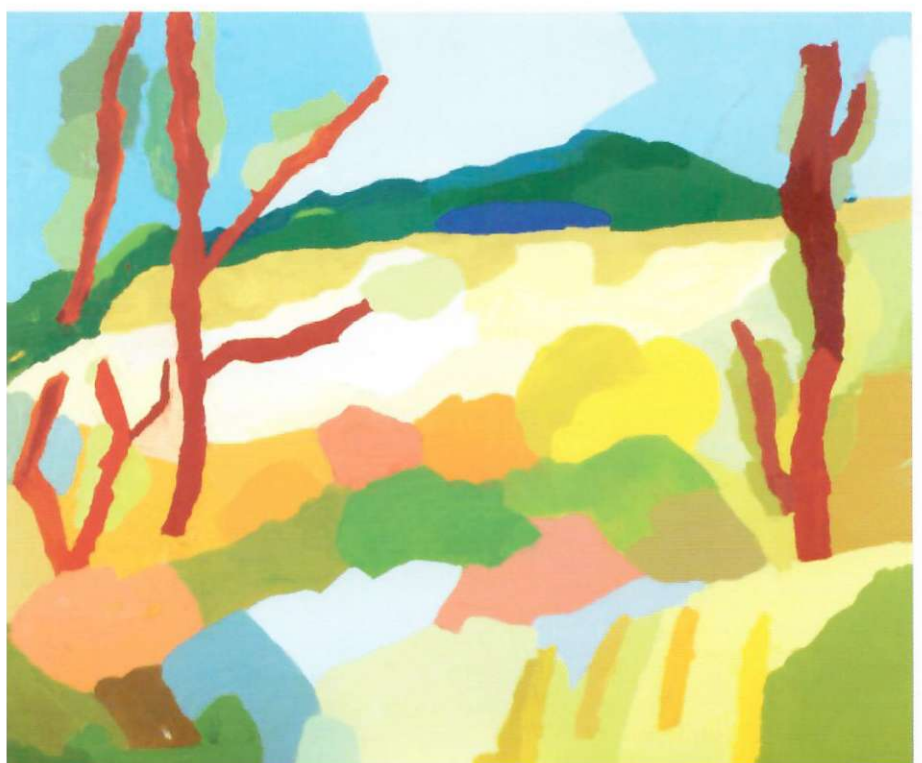
bridges, but bestowed with the grandeur of a historic past."

Along with wanting to convey differences in character, Adnan is also motivated by the bridge structure itself as a visual symbol of human exchange and commingling. In each drawing or watercolor, she places compositional emphasis on its sweeping horizontal stretch across water as a symbolic conduit of communication between separate peoples.

Adnan, who is a poet as well as a painter, pursues both arts with equal passion and attainment. She has had 26 solo exhibitions in the States, Europe and the Middle East since 1961. In the early sixties, she began producing what she calls "painted manuscripts," a combination of poetry and images "written" in the pages of long, folded Japanese books. She sees it as a way to present "the interaction of two sensitivities: the one of the poet and the one of the painter who paints a poem."

Her bridge series is, in effect, a collection of visual poems, marked by an economy of expression somewhat similar to that of the Japanese haiku. Working swiftly and without hesitation, she intuitively captures the expansive spirit of the bridge and its urban

surroundings. In a shorthand of quick brushstrokes, applied with the freshness and whimsy of a child, she outlines the arched stones or suspension cables, the skyscrap-



Untitled, oil painting, 71 x 99 cm, 2002

ers or smokestacks, the river barges below and the sun or moon above.

The two large wall hangings included in the exhibition introduce Adnan's talent in tapestry design. Abstract in genre, they center on a lively counterpoint of chromatic contrasts that, in style, is closely related to her work in oils. The one entitled *Jazz* is a dazzling syncopation of luscious color, finely woven

to perfection by the Aubusson Ateliers in France. The other, "summer in California," more subdued in hue and rough in texture, was loomed in San Francisco by artist-weaver Hal Painter. Both pieces are splendid examples of modern tapestry, striking in design and impeccable in execution. ■

The Daily Star, October 24, 1998, exhibition at Gallery Janine Rubeiz



Homage to the Ink Pot, poems and drawings, mixed media on cardboard, 30 × 560 cm, 2007



Born in Lebanon in 1925, Etel Adnan is a painter and a poet. She studied philosophy in Paris, and at Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. Her first show of paintings took place in 1960 in Mill Valley, California. Since then, she has exhibited in Beirut, Amman, Tunis, Morocco, Berlin, Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Paris, London, New York, and Washington, DC – as well as regularly in California.

She wrote many books which were translated into Arabic, French, and German; among them are *Sitt Marie Rose*, *Of Cities and Women*, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country*, and *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, an essay on the relations between art and nature. Adnan is internationally known for her art books (artistic folding books) in which she combined abstract inks and



Etel Adnan is a painter and a writer. Ask her which art form takes precedence in her life and she will respond with careful thought: "I don't know; each provides its own avenue of expression. I need them both."

In painting Adnan for the past several years has been concentrating on a series of "books" – Japanese accordion fold-out books that stretch open for two meters or more and which she fills with watercolor, gouache and ink drawings. The style is a light, airy graphism – as though she were writing spontaneous notes to herself in transparent color. Her previous work in oils was much more painterly, much more textural, dense and opaque in quality, much more formal in composition.

When I suggested that in these "books" she may be searching for a synthesis between writing and painting, Adnan smiled a quiet "no." As she once remarked some years ago: "Painting is something else, a language without a language problem – an unknown, abstract world with endless possibilities. There is in it logic, a truth, a directness guided by intuition that remains elusive in words. If I want to express the spirit of a place, an emotion, an idea, I paint; if I want to describe or comment on it, I write..." ■

The Daily Star, April 17, 1999

watercolor drawings with Arabic poetry. She designed many tapestries, mostly in the sixties and the seventies, and slides of these works are in the permanent files of the Museum for Contemporary Crafts in New York and Los Angeles. Some of her works are part of the collections of the Sursock Museum in Beirut, the Museum of Tunis, the Royal Jordanian Museum, the National Museum for

Women in the Arts, and in the World Bank in Washington, DC. Her group exhibitions have included Art Paris, *Carrousel du Louvre* in 1999 and the ARTUEL (International Contemporary Art Fair) in Beirut in 2000 and 2001; *Glances on Yesterday and Today* in 2005 and *Coup d'Œil au Féminin* in 2007. She participated in the *Pinceaux pour Plumes* exhibition at the Sursock

Museum for the benefit of the Lebanese Foundation of the National Library in 2005. In 2007 she joined the *Art-Paris* Modern Art Fair in Abu Dhabi and also *Art Dubai* in 2009. In 2010 Etel Adnan exhibited at Gallery Sfeir-Semmler in Beirut and was honored at the Madina Theater for a whole week with panel discussions, poetry readings, and film projections.