

The first time I saw Etel Adnan's visual work was in a series of long Japanese folding books in which she had handwritten poetry with accompanying visual equivalents. Through this form Adnan had quietly effected a revolution in Arabic Calligraphy. She had written out poems by the major contemporary Arab poets, each in a unique way using her own handwriting, not trying to conform to the canons of calligraphy, and had accompanied them with drawings, watercolours, ink and pen work. The books unfolded in front of my eyes as 'readings' of poetry taking place in the parallel world of colour and sensory perception. The poems were brought to life more rapidly than if one followed the words alone. The tenderness of her line brought an immense emotion and empathy to the text and to its reading, so that the moment of this reading became intensely present in the imagination. The drawings and watercolours added a dimension of poignancy and urgency to the text, which was seen by Adnan twice, once as a text and once as an image. The reader was thus given three interpretations: that of the poet, the transcriber and the painter.

Etel Adnan worked in my studio for a few years soon after we met in Beirut, as I had a large studio that could offer her space and freedom. The first time she used it was to draw a tree, in watercolour. This flowering tree was a revelation. I looked at it for a long time and all I could say was that it was a flowering tree. It had a lot in common with the Arab miniature's world. It stood on the page diagonally, its flowers freshly shivering in the outside air, its colours unobtrusive and discreet, almost shy. A young tree.

I invited her to paint in my studio whenever her work at the newspaper *Al-Safa* left her some free time. She would come on the weekends and work. Was it the urgency of time available or her own impatient energy that made her always finish an oil painting in one sitting? I would come later and discover a whole world transcribed on the surface of the canvas. She worked the canvas like a sheet of paper, the canvas laid on the table, using a palette knife instead of a brush. She posed on it squares and masses – with vivid bright stretches of colour. I was startled by the difference from the original tree that I had seen. All the shyness had disappeared. Etel Adnan in oil had an assuredness rarely seen in other painters' works. The world was summoned and summarized on the canvas.

The first two canvasses she painted were titled *Syria* and *Lebanon*. Syria was pink and Lebanon was blue. Syria: a pink sky, or was it earth? – the pink the desert takes on. The Syrian hills are pink in the sunset and early dawn, and the Lebanon mountains are all shades and hues of blue – what with the proximity of the sea! Strong compact squares, hermetic for the amount of intense colour they contained, punctuated their skies and space. One could read the whole *esprit* of a place on one canvas. It was not only that place on that particular day when the sky was grey and some mist was getting in, it was the place the way it will always be, containing as well the very moment that place was portrayed. Adnan said once: "It is not because painting is visual that it is always comprehensible". The visual is a language one has to learn, the way one learns French or Spanish or German.

Adnan started as a pure 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 somewhere on the surface of the canvas. Among these hermetic squares, there was always a red one. It was as if from the red square that all the rest of the composition emerged. Around it the world – its lines of forces, the large picture – organized itself. During a discussion of a show of Adnan's paintings in California, much later, I heard this comment: "It is as if you are seeing this from very far". Indeed, her landscapes are seen from very far – in order to see the whole picture.

It is only with painters that we know how he or she actually sees.

In Adnan's world the landscape rests compressed on a small surface. Only the strong lines, the large undercurrents emerge.

There are no people in Adnan's oils; it is the world she is looking at, the beautiful physical earth with its mountains, hills, rivers and colours. She is a person *in the world*, in the sense Jean-Paul Sartre gave to that expression. Much as she talks about the social aspect of the universe in her writing, she talks about the physical beauty of the universe in her paintings. As she said: "Painting expresses my happy side, the one who is at one with the universe".

We must also say here that she is always at one with her environment. That is how she wrote in the most significant way about Paris, in her essay, *Paris, When It's Naked*, and about cities in *Of Cities @ Women: Letters to Fawwaz*. A recent retrospective was titled *Words and Places*, at the Wattis Center, in San Francisco, in 2013.

Adnan is a colourist. "Les coloristes sont des poètes épiques" (Colourists are epic poets), said Baudelaire. Who better than Adnan to be in that position, as she is already an epic poet in words? There is an epic vision and rendering in these extraordinary canvasses. 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, someone who loved it with passion." She is in love with the beauty of it. She has a need to see colour, and not at all to use the crayon as pen: "I started using oil pastels on their side, as bands of colour, surfaces of colour."

Colour contains its own mystery.

In Beirut, she was in love with the sea. It is the sea she could see while walking from her home to school, from school to her place of work. During her childhood the sea in Beirut could be seen from everywhere. All the streets descended toward the sea.

The sea was the subject of her first poem (only published in Arabic), *The Book of the Sea*. In it the Sea and the Sun are forever mating, and forever troubling. Both of these elements were to come

in full force again in her writings, and paintings: *The Arab Apocalypse*, *Sea* and the latest pictures.

Most paintings made in Lebanon contained the effect, the reflection the sea had on its bordering earth and mountain.

One day in 1974, she went to Iraq to attend a Biennale of Arab painting. When she returned she made a very large canvas. The Biennale had taken place in the early spring when the rains are plentiful, and as always in Iraq the mud was overwhelming. The Tigris carried huge amounts of eroded earth. When she came back to Beirut, she painted a large pink river Tigris in the middle of which stood two rafts – two squares – following the flow to the fresh cadmium green banks of the river. (That is her secret, more often than not she will use colour fresh from the tube, as is.) The picture was a Persian miniature in its spirit but needed a large scale to express it. That painting was exhibited at Dar El Fan (a Lebanese cultural centre that existed between 1967 and 1975) along with another big painting of Mount Sannine.

Adnan started painting in California when she was teaching Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art at Dominican College in San Rafael. She started teaching there in 1958. One day on her way to class Adnan met the art teacher Ann O'Hanlon. Ann asked her: "How can you teach Philosophy of Art and not paint yourself?" Adnan heard herself answer: "My mother said I was clumsy". And Ann said: "And you believed her?" This simple question and answer freed her hands and soon, at Ann's invitation, she started using a table by a window in the Art department overlooking a little creek and fig trees. She painted on sample pieces of canvas, leftovers, irrespective of their size and shape.

She found her style immediately. Using a palette knife she applied large bands of colour juxtaposed to each other. Many thought of Nicolas de Staël when looking at these early canvasses; she acknowledges a family spirit. It is as if she and Nicolas de Staël use the same vocabulary. But unlike the work of de Staël, there is no hesitation in her choice of colours and the masses. De Staël returns across an area over and over. At the caesura between masses you will notice the layers and layers of the different colours used, for he almost always leaves traces of them, until he finds the one he will settle on. One can almost read all the different stages. Adnan finds her definitive shape and colour at once. Someone said: "Your painting is decisive". It is the way her whole being is: no hesitation. In the same way there are practically no corrections in her manuscripts. There is no hiatus between the inception and the laying-down on the page. It is all there from the first moment. When she poses her colour on the page, it is the definitive colour. She already mentally mastered her subject and she lands it down. Clear perception, clear execution.

It should also be said that Adnan's 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 – small – in the same way her writing says it all in a few words. I say small for the format is small but they are succinct, which means that although the format is small the scale



is large, monumental often. She lives in a rarefied world, the way monks live on tops of mountains.

When Adnan started making these abstract paintings, Ann O'Hanlon changed her whole philosophy of teaching art. She questioned: "Well, if Etel can paint so perfectly, spontaneously, then anyone can do it". Ann left her job at the college and started workshops at her house, inviting members, teaching that art was just another way of perceiving.

*We all perceive.*

Adnan continued the journey opened by her first encounter with the canvas. She looked up and painted. The essence of painting is this immediacy between the view and the canvas. We all perceive but the best rendering is from the one who does not let his or her ego get in the way. She summarized the large picture in strong masses and rendered its lines of strength. O'Hanlon organized a show at her studio and Professor Pepper, the Aesthetics Professor at Berkeley – with whom she had come to prepare a Ph.D., when she came from Paris – attended and marvelled. Indeed, there is an element of marvel in Adnan's work. It is as if a child discovers the way the world works, and the way to say it for the first time. Baudelaire describes it in this way: "*Le génie est l'enfance retrouvée à volonté*" (Genius is childhood found at will)<sup>1</sup> and when you say childhood, you say for the first time. Therefore, you also say innocence, that is, truthfulness. If one is to understand her writing about her practice of art, which she describes in her book, *Journey to Mount Tamalpaïs*. A work of art cannot be done without a strict adherence to a moral and honest behaviour.

Ideally she would have liked to create another Bauhaus, to work with a group of artists-artisans, and change the world. She was going to build this ideal in Lebanon, in a village before the war killed a fellow organizer and killed the Lebanon where such a project could have taken place.

She conceives the artist as artisan, too – the artisan of beauty and truth. One enters art as into religion and pledges truthfulness, for without it one cannot produce a work of art.

In Adnan's case I would add that her truthfulness goes beyond, to a subject almost always situated outside herself. It is never her own *état d'âme* that is the subject of her art, but rather the outside world, the challenge of a world-event or a commission: *L'être au monde* using colours and canvas. (This *être au monde* was already defined by Baudelaire. For the artist, for him, the *Homme du monde* was necessarily a man in the world.<sup>2</sup>)

The cosmic in her work started when the Apollo programme took men on the moon and opened this new dimension to the earth-bound mankind, so that the moon lost its status of unattainable good, and the universe became somewhere one could go to. Adnan immediately produced a large series of brush works titled "The Apollo Series". For this series she devised her own colours, making yellows and greens with onions skins and pomegranates, adding these dyes to the commercial



watercolours and ink. She still produces these homemade colours on her table and uses them in her leporellos.

The juxtaposition of squares of colour in Adnan's work means not only that these are the actual colours the earth takes on such and such a day, but that one has to look at what the whole ensemble creates, and the impression these colours are going to have on the viewer. As the Qu'ran says: "He has created for you on earth, things of different colours; in that fact (the different colours) there is a sign for people who want to remember".<sup>3</sup> Therefore, colour is unforgettable and specific. It also gives you joy.

Adnan went on painting, all the while writing notes on her experience and on perception. After her beginning as an abstract colourist, she turned her attention to Mount Tamalpaïs. There in front of her window, everywhere in Marin County, where she was living, walking to Dominican from home, or driving to go to the movies, the mountain was there. It became her point of reference, her home far from home. She looked at and lived with the mountain even after she came back to Beirut. All the time she was painting the mountain, drawing it in oil, watercolour, ink or a combination of all. She made thousands of these drawings. The natural pyramidal shape of the mountain became embedded in her whole being. It became her identity. She could draw it while in Lebanon, at night and at dawn; the mountain was for her the ever-revealing mystery, the ongoing manifestation. I wonder whether in those days she loved someone as much as she loved Mount Tamalpaïs.

Her involvement with the mountain lasted until she published *Journey to Mount Tamalpaïs* (1986). When the book was published, Adnan had been working on the Mountain for twenty-three years. Her philosophical training and her specialization in aesthetics came together in this book. It is a philosophical meditation on her praxis which she wrote over that period, piling up her notes. (The element of time is telling, when we know that she wrote *Sitt Marie Rose*, her novel, in one month!) A meditation on the relationship between Nature and Art, in other words, on the meaning of perception. Through her praxis as a painter Adnan discovered her basic philosophy – we can also call it her credo – that the Universe is One. The relation of her journey into this praxis is that of a student of the meaning of Art. She is also in dialogue with the painters she likes, whose works she toured the world to see — Kandinsky, Klee, Cézanne and Dürer — painters who were also theoreticians and who wrote extensively on painting. She was also teaching writings by painters in her aesthetics classes, believing that these were much more important and more accessible than the dry writings of theoreticians like Hegel or Panofsky. She also included Leonardo's writings, Van Gogh's letters and the journal of Delacroix, to name just a few. Her paintings are conceived in regard to those artists. Those are the correspondents she argues with, on whose work she builds. They are familiar and family. One should also say that going abroad, far from too familiar a place opens up with new sensory information, a new understanding of things. Suddenly someone sees. We can cite Paul Klee in Tunisia, exclaiming: "I am a painter. Colour and Me are One". The crucial travels of Renoir and Marquet and Matisse to North Africa. The trip Dürer, and after him



all the French painters, took to Italy, like Lorrain and Chardin. The settling abroad of most of the contemporary artists. And the coming back of Cézanne to Aix-en-Provence.

In Lebanon, during the years she spent there from 1972 to 1975, Adnan created a body of work of landscapes focusing on Lebanon. Lebanon's high mountain – Mount Sannine – was never able to replace Mount Tamalpaïs in her work, although she has painted it, and who knows, if she had stayed in Lebanon.

When she was a child, Adnan was asked what she wanted to become when she grew up, and she said she wanted to be an architect. It was a scandal for a woman to even aspire to be an architect, and so she attended the Ecole des Lettres, because it was a night school and she could go there after her daytime job. Her early paintings possessed a solid structure, an inner organization, the vocabulary of an architect: squares and cubes mounted on each other, containing the possibility of matter. I should add that architects relate immediately to her work, and that she still has a passion for architecture.

And so the square made room for the Mountain. The square divided itself into a pyramid, which happened to be the Mountain's form – a pyramid soon inhabited with spheres. To draw a sphere one needs a line, and the line led to an innumerable number of watercolours and drawings of the Mountain. She drew the Mountain, everywhere and all the time. She imagined the essence of it. She saw underneath its surface the number of Indians locked inside. A Mountain of glass. As she writes in *Journey to Mount Tamalpaïs*: "One October night, I dreamed that the whole Mountain was made of glass, with long and rusty streaks of kelp within it. I was lying over it, looking in, and discovering Indians telling me with sign language and impatient gestures that they were imprisoned for centuries".<sup>4</sup>

Adnan reached a moment where she was (not quite) finished with the general shape of the Mountain – seen at dusk, when the blue hues invade the whole universe, seen with rain and clouds. She was able to paint her moving, under the clouds, moving toward the sea. She saw her also as a Powerful Woman. These instances of perception are also related in her text.

So she started painting close-ups, details. It was at the end of the winter when the Mountain is green. This series of green pastures, patches of mountain earth, were quite astounding; they are a harmony of all greens, signed with only a line of red. To uphold the whole composition.

There are only a few of these paintings because she had to stop in order to have the show on the Mountain series at the San Rafael Civic Center. This is where the book, the paintings, the watercolours and the leporellos were exhibited in the gallery of this building designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, one of her heroes. I was especially able to appreciate his design when the show was later taken to Paris. The white cube of the Paris gallery did not convey the same magic. The curved



walls and their rusty colour had enhanced the strong powerful paintings. I must recall here that both openings were great events.

Adnan's paintings play the role the old icons used to play for people who believed. They exude energy and give energy. They grow on you like talismans. They help one live his everyday life. More often than not, I have noticed that people who have Adnan's paintings will keep them in the innermost chambers and not in their living rooms like *objets d'Art*. The quickness of their making, the fact that they are finished in one sitting, i.e., their compactness, their one clear message, with nothing diluted or lost, joins in the happiness experienced while painting, the joy of using colour. They reflect the praise of the universe, the experience of it, immersion in it, participation in its formation. No lamentation, no elegy. Love.

"Do colours have the power to break the time barrier, and carry us into Outer Space, not only those made of miles and distances, but those of the accumulated experience of life since its beginnings or unbeginning?"<sup>5</sup>

"I am sitting as usual in front of Mount Tamalpaïs. I can't get over its deep greens. It is clear, it is empty. My spirit is anguished by colour. Colour is the sign of the existence of life. I feel like believing, being in a state of pure belief, of affirmation. I exist because I see colours. Sometimes, at other moments, it is as if I didn't exist, when colours seem foreign, unreachable, impregnable fortresses. But there is no possession of colour, only the acceptance of its reality. And if there is no possibility for the possession of colour, there is no possession at all. Of whatever it is."<sup>6</sup>

This is the lesson of painting. We are here to perceive, and it is exhilarating, for when perception does happen it is a manifestation and perfect fulfilment. But this fulfilment does not last. Some trace of it gets on the paper, if we are able to catch it and freeze it. Painting as a lesson of purity of mind. Purity of purpose. Painting as an affirmation of life, of its very constitution.

We think in metaphors, for when the body is asleep, the mind works in images. It tells us in images what few people understand and know how to decipher.

"I always thought that dreaming was the honour of the human species. The logic of dreams is superior to the one we exercise while awake. In dreams the mind finds at last its courage: it dares what we do not dare. It also creates . . . and it perceives reality beyond our fuzzy interpretations."<sup>7</sup>

"Sometimes while painting, something wild gets unleashed. Something of the process of dreams recurs . . . but with a special kind of violence: a painting is like a territory. All kinds of things happen within its boundary, equal to the discoveries of the murders or the creations we have in the world outside."<sup>8</sup>



Painting as pure energy, with which to live one's life – with courage.

Let us go back to the description of Adnan's paintings. The palette knife makes a thick paste, like the grain of earth. The taste of the land is on the canvas. Grainy, uneven, with accidents, with ups and downs, with more or less colour, more or less substance. She follows the landscapes as it moves:

"Now the clouds are grandiose and turbulent. An autumn storm is coming. Whatever makes mountains rise, and us, with them, makes colour restless and ecstatic. At my right, the Tiburon hills are somberly yellow. They have a strange power in their colour. Is this pale gold on the surface of these hills so extraneous to its own place that it makes my mind jump into the notion of some past I never knew and which still strangely I relate to them? Otherwise why do these dark and light hues of yellowish metal make me think of Louis the XIV, of one of his incursions into Europe, of a particular day of his life, that remains lingering between the known and the unknown, that I see clearly and at the same time cannot pinpoint and give as precise reference. Do colours have the power to break the Time barrier . . .?"<sup>9</sup>

Here we have to say that Adnan has been able to achieve paintings that one can pinpoint to the moment of the day, very precisely. A day in autumn, or late spring, when at the end of the afternoon when it has been raining, and the sky has recovered its brilliance, and the moment is nostalgic yet shining. The hills are shining with clarity, but you feel the wetness and the happiness of renewed freshness.

Painting as knowledge.

"But can I ever understand what Cézanne says in 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."<sup>10</sup>

A visual expression belongs to an order of understanding which bypasses word-language. We have in us autonomous languages for autonomous perceptions. We should not waste time in trying ordinary understanding. We should not worry either. There is no rest in any kind of perception. The fluidity of the mind is of the same family as the fluidity of being. Sometimes they coincide sharply. We call that a revelation. When it involves a privileged 'object' like a particular moment, we call it an illumination.

To see in order to paint. To paint in order to see. Cézanne moves within this circle. With no satisfaction, no resting point.

“Cézanne is a Newtonian machine thrown into an Einsteinian space.” Yes, Nietzsche also: his nine summers in Sils Maria were nine ascensions into the next century. Not a single soul saw the shape of his ideas, because he was a peak visited by a clarity coming from the sun and invisible from below. Mountains are transitions. They are impatient spaceships. Cézanne knows it. His works start with a calm perspective and then, space-bound, attain the velocity of light.<sup>11</sup>

Hers is an Apollonian world, and a Dionysian world at the same time.

Now to the pen. I call pen work everything that does not use the palette knife. That includes the brush, with ink and watercolours, crayons and pencils. Adnan has developed, with years, a mastery brush work that some equate to the Japanese and Chinese masters. During her frequent visits to New York she stayed in an apartment on the 33rd floor overlooking the East River from whose windows she could see six or more bridges. There ensued a whole series of thick black ink drawings of the New York bridges, with barges passing under them or anchored on their pylons. They are on Japanese papers so thin that they are transparent. The contrast between the strong lines of the subject matter and the fragility of the material on which they stand makes one wonder about the materiality of the world. They were the sole object of a beautiful show in Beirut at the Janine Rubeiz Gallery. These bridges and barges, and the constant passing of the latter over the ever incessant movement of the East River, were to become the subject matter of yet another aspect of Etel's work: films. During those years, the late 1970s and 1980s, where her transhumance took her from Paris, to California, and back she always had a Super-8 camera with her, with which she tried to also capture the movement of the water, but also its shimmering, a shimmering close to the illuminations the light provokes over water and glass. Thus the glass skyscrapers around the building where she was staying entered the same search for light and matter that constituted many Super-8 movies made during that period. They were to be edited in 2013, into a film, *Motion*, premiered during Documenta 13 in 2012, where Etel was invited to show her paintings, to be at the same time a writer in residence, give readings and conferences and show the movie.

She then made a corresponding series of the stone bridges of Paris: smaller, more squarish, closer to the water and to the people, always used, always crossed. One of them is an echo of Baudelaire's poem “Le Soleil moribond s'endormir sous une arche”. Indeed, we see the sun setting in the middle of the arch. One can still live the experience as one walks by the Seine's banks at sunset. The New York bridges are different: hardly walked on, or by rising higher in their metallic structures, belonging more to the pure realm of structure, being only lines.

In the Japanese folding books colour comes back, also writing.

The Japanese folding books were given to her by an artist who used to sit in San Francisco and draw the faces of the people around him for days on end. She met him in one of these cafés, The Buena Vista, and after a few encounters he gave her one book that he had started and told her: “This is yours to continue.”

Unlike a drawing which one sees all at once on a page in one glance, these leporellos, as they are also called, were closer to being read, slowly. The fact that they unfold page after page led her to think that they had to be read in this way, page after page, that they were closer to traditional writing than drawing. In fact, she was discovering all along what the Chinese tradition knew all along: *that writing is drawing*. They were also very cinematic in their essence. One can see one image after another, there is a development, a *narrative*, and for she who had loved the movies passionately ever since her childhood, for she was one of the few children to be taken to the movies in Beirut, to see the Great Greta Garbo films that stayed forever in her imagination. Film was one of the arts she included in her teaching at Dominican College, taking her students to Berkeley to see the legendary Pauline Kael's movie sessions in an underground garage in the 1960s.

With the leporello in hand, she immediately thought of poetry. She missed Beirut and the Arab world; also the Algerian war of independence was raging. She embarked on the project of putting the great contemporary Arab poets into drawings. It was for her an artistic discovery and a political statement.

Using her own handwriting, she wrote each poem in a very legible way, giving it a visual equivalent, each time, evoking a totally different feeling, using watercolours, crayons, inks, pen, pencil and brush. Sometimes the poem was accompanied by the landscape in which it had been read; other times, by signs, numbers and geometrical symbols. Each book is unique. She showed the greatest invention in this innovative endeavour. These manuscripts are an anthology of contemporary poetry. She first started with Arab poets — Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Yusuf al-Khal, Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, Buland al Haidari, Fadhil al Azzawi, Georges Shehadé, Thérèse Awad, Samia Tutungi to name only a few; sometimes she worked on her own poetry. Later she added American and French poets, among these Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud, Guillevic, Barbara Guest, Lyn Hejinian, Wendell Berry, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Duncan Mc Naughton and many others.

She never made a manuscript of an ancient poet's work. She never wanted to just make a beautiful book. These manuscripts are political in the sense that they represent poets who are alive, working today, in the here and now. Most of the time she gave the 'book' to the poet, wanting him or her to see himself or herself read in this special way. These are responses to a living text. She was a translator of a score. She saw the manuscript as a collaborative work.

Again, I repeat, these books are also a way of entering the element of time in a painting. One unfolds the scroll as one sees the landscape or the poem, bit by bit, and it is therefore closer to the real way these things happen to one in real life. You look at a landscape page after page, you look again and the colour has changed, the clouds have moved, the boat has left the harbour. The whole remains in your mind in a composite image; the scroll keeps the different moments alive, and allows you to read the composite images in their different stages, or in a totally different combination. You open the scroll on page one. You follow the sequence on page two. But if you



open page one and put it face to face with page seven, they are also a perfect sequence. Is it a chance happening? It cannot be, for it never fails: in all of these books the pages work together in every combination possible. It just tells us how the inner clock of Etel Adnan combines and absorbs the perfect unity of all the elements.

These books are monumental works; they unfold to become, at times, several feet long, and yet can be transported in one's pocket. They are wonderfully modern in this way. This is the particular genius of Asia: these books are minimalist and grandiose at the same time. They are also intimate and unobtrusive. They do not sit on your walls forever until they lose the impact of their beauty. They can be placed in a drawer and looked at only when the time is right for this particular contemplation. These books are her greatest contribution to contemporary visual arts. They are in many collections and institutions, notably the British Museum. They are the ones to have been noticed first by curators in England, which led the Institut du Monde Arabe to acquire the big *Zikr* before the Institut had even opened its doors. The Bibliothèque nationale de France included them in their beautiful exhibit in 2003, choosing her work to go on the *tirés à part*, the brochures, announcing and publicizing the event.

We have to cite here a beautiful exhibition, which came as a surprise to her in 1979. A fellow poet asked Etel to lend one of her leporellos for an exhibit. She did, asking no questions. Then came the invitation to the opening, which took place in a beautiful castle in Burgundy, France. When she arrived in the castle of Ancy-le-Franc, happy was the surprise to find herself in the most unexpected company. Here with Etel's drawings were the works of Victor Hugo, George Sand, Arthur Rimbaud, Marcel Proust and many other luminaries. The catalogue of this wonderful exhibit, *Dessins d'écrivains*, should still be available. Attending the opening was Roberte for whom Pierre Klossowski wrote *Roberte, ce soir!*

A retrospective of Henry Miller's paintings was shown in the adjacent space.

Lately, she has been using them more for black ink and pen work depicting gardens, parks (notably the beautiful park in Kassel) which she did while in residence there. She actually had started way before drawing her own park in Point Reyes, California, where she set up her studio after the completion of the Mount Tamalpais period. And where she painted new hills and rivers, with a whole different palette.

In these landscapes she no longer used compact, tense masses of colour, but recognizable hills and rivers. The landscape was nearer to what we expect to find on a canvas titled *Landscape*. It was still made of stretches of colour, but the point of view had become nearer to the subject.

The square has little by little disappeared. It is as if these squares have opened up and one could see what each of them contained.

In 2010 came the invitation to exhibit at Documenta 13, in Kassel. It had been a few years since Etel had painted again. She thus started these most recent paintings, in preparation for the event in June 2010. Being in Beirut, and living in an apartment near the sea, where she could see the sun set every evening, the setting sun invaded the canvas. A sun going deep into the sea. The sea, her first love and her first subject in poetry, as we have already said, prevailed. The sun and the sea are her two dear elements, living in her imagination since that first poem, written in the same city (and never published), two elements in her psyche making love to each other forever and ever. One entering the other, and the other emerging from the one, in an eternal and immutable ballet of love, movement and colour. A subject cosmic in its dimensions, and impact, did not end after Etel left Beirut for Paris. There she went on producing her small paintings, going more and more deeply into more and more cosmic dimensions. A cosmos of her own imagination; sometimes, I would say often, two suns occupy the space. You cannot tell which one is rising, where, and which one is setting. Where are they going? While the universe in its totality is apprehended, and the planets are coming back and back we witness in some canvasses a slow accumulation of hills, foreboding in their aspect and colour, with no apparent link to real landscape, to anything *déjà vu*. Unless one imagines that these formations can be seen on the moon. For indeed the space with all its manifestations, known and unknown, is present in her psyche.

I asked her lately about her most recent works: "What are these landscapes for you?" She replied: "I want to be there, I want to go outdoors. I could never climb mountains, because of my back pains. They are the places I miss."

They are the places she sees. This is how she sees the world. As she sees it, as it is, as it should be. They are the places she resides in.

These are exact mental landscapes. These landscapes – she actually sees.

Therefore, they exist. As real as fiction, or more real than fiction.

Or fiction more real than real.

Therefore, we could say that the painting has become freer, bolder, more imaginative. California is now far. She can't travel there, so California has grown, or one can say it has been replaced, by the cosmos. The cosmos has always been present, but now she really depicts its wild bold hills piled up on each other, or next to each other. The element of playfulness is also ever more present. Or is it because the Mountain has taken flight, and started to soar?

These shapes are more like an imagination left to itself, to express feelings and thoughts. Although I could say at the same time that her perception of things real has augmented. I do not see any contradiction there. Some paintings have the precision of a photograph. One could give the time of

day, I would say for instance that one is in front of a moment where she tells you that it has been raining and that the hills at that moment are under the sun which has shone again to illuminate them with accrued light, before sunset.

It is already rare to have paintings depicting the night, but even more when you can tell the exact moment of day, or afternoon. This enormous care for and attention to things happening around her increases all the time, as her love for things is forever greater. She is linked to her environment in all its dimensions.

She shares an intimacy with the cosmos. The way she shares an intimacy with her pen and brush. She inhabits the climate, not a house. It is, as she says, what envelops us. She is also in the here and now.

For Etel her personal history is not to be dissociated from the general wellbeing. The cosmos and her are one. In its social history as well. She is linked to the political, visual and social elements in a same movement. A few days ago, she was wakened by a nightmare, or by a dream she took for a nightmare. She said she had seen a bomb turning a huge building in Beirut upside down all over her. Then she went to the café only to see the replay of the real event on television. She had lived that event in her being as surely from a few thousand kilometres away as surely as if she had been right there. This kind of belonging to the world and living it all the time is the way she lives and holds the world in her heart.

Sometimes of course the Mountain comes back to haunt her. She says she can draw the Mountain with her eyes closed. This Mountain comes back with increased love, and movement. Indeed the *Journey to Mount Tamalpaïs* has just been published in France, and as for each different edition, Etel has made new drawings for the edition. The new ink drawings are faster and more abstract than before, if possible especially the ones she made for the *tirage de tête*, watercolours to accompany the first numbered copies. In one painting of the Mountain, a big canvas (big when compared to the small format which has become her latest trademark), one sees the Mountain moving just the way she describes her in her writing. Moving, and moved, by the clouds drawing her.

At the same time I can say that in the leporellos, which are only in black ink, her masterly brush has acquired an even greater assuredness and boldness. I want to cite especially the ones she made in Kassel of the park there, and in San Gimignano, most recently, of the towers.

The drawings: signs, emblems, numbers, inkpots, flowers, portraits. The Mountain, the garden, the trees, the numbers and the letters.

The invention is forever infinite, and the combination of those elements put together or not is infinite. The imagination, the inventiveness and the strength.



The social. Etel never forgets the duty she gives herself to the social, and the general. Thus she is the one who has organized the first ever comprehensive exhibit of Arab Art in Paris, at the Espace Cardin, in 1978. She convinced the then Director of the Espace to give the group of painters she was representing the place for free, as it was usually lent for quite a large sum. She argued that the show was going to be so greatly mentioned and written about in Arabic magazines that were being published in Paris at the beginning of the Civil War in Lebanon, in the mid-1970s, that the centre was convinced to go ahead with the show, free of charge! These magazines had migrated to Paris, with their staff and their readership! The Espace was given; the show, superb. Indeed, all the artists which had been part of this event became successful and important: Rachid Koraïchi, Rachid Kimoun, Ben Bella, myself and a number of other painters from every Arab country. In it Etel had exhibited the *Zikr*, already mentioned, which is the property of the Institut du Monde Arabe. This experience led Rachid Kureichi to organize a similar event, this time in the Tunis Medina for the benefit of Save the Medina Association. Etel's work was used as a poster for the exhibit and her images were all over the town of Tunis, which had an enormous influence on young Tunisian artists, who saw the possibility of simplifying calligraphy for the first time. The critic and researcher Sonia Mejcher Atassi, whose work is specifically about artist's books, told Etel that all the younger artists refer to her work as their model and reference.

She was also an enormous help for organizing the first Women Artists exhibit that toured the US in 1993: *Forces of Change: Women Artists from the Arab World*.

A last word about Etel Adnan's visual work should be about her tapestry designs. Etel worked with the renowned tapestry artist Ida Grae. She wove and dyed wool herself. She also wrote on the subject, *Notes on Weaving*, a text that was published in a literary magazine in Lebanon, *Les Cahiers de l'Oronte*. Her designs are exclusively made for tapestry. There we find again the use of vivid colours and large areas of single colours. They are thoroughly contemporary. Some of her tapestries are in public spaces, others in private collections. She has a file at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York, a file opened for her by the founder of America House herself, Mrs Vanderbilt Webb, who also acquired one for herself. Her work is on file at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All of her tapestries are monumental, excessively colourful. But in contrast with the paintings, each stretch of colour is impregnated with a number of other shades of colour in order to make the wool vibrate. A number of them have been made recently by an atelier in Aubusson, France, certainly one of the best in the world, where a centuries-old tradition has been kept alive. They are shown here in Mathaf for the first time.

For Mathaf as well, she devised two monumental ceramic walls, which will stay in open space with their strong vivid colours. With that project a most important wish was fulfilled – to see her work in a public space, outdoors, to be shared by all. For her, Public Art is the most important of all aspects of Art.