Press Release

ETEL ADNAN
THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD
2 June – 11 September 2016
Serpentine Sackler Gallery

“Every art is a window into a world that only art can access. You can’t define these worlds. They are epiphanies, visions.” (Etel Adnan)

Serpentine Galleries presents the works of painter, essayist and poet Etel Adnan, who was born in 1925 in Beirut, Lebanon. In her first solo exhibition in a UK public institution, the Serpentine shows work from across her career including paintings, drawings, poetry, film and tapestry.

After studying at the Sorbonne and then Harvard, in the late 1950s Adnan taught philosophy at the University of California and started to paint. While these early works were largely abstract compositions - with squares of colour applied directly from the tube - she was interested in the immediate beauty of colour. Her earliest paintings were suggestive of landscapes and included forms that referenced specific places. In the 1970s she moved to
the area near Mount Tamalpais in California, which became the central subject matter of numerous paintings and poems.

From the 1960s until the present day Adnan has also made tapestries, inspired by the feeling and colour of the Persian rugs of her childhood. Never translating existing paintings into tapestries, she uses specific designs for her textile works. Over the course of the 1960s, Adnan moved away from purely abstract forms and, in 1964, discovered ‘leporellos’, accordion-folded sketchbooks in which she could mix drawing with writing and poetry. Often working in series, her painting continued to move between recognisable and imagined forms, revealing her sensitivity to colour and shape extracted from the environments in which she found herself.

Her writing, too, contains multiple references and responses to the politics and violence in the world around her. From her earliest poem in English, which addressed the Vietnam War, to her award-winning 1978 novel *Sitt Marie-Rose*, she explores the political and personal dimensions of violence and articulates her experience of exile from familiar landscapes and languages.

**Julia Peyton-Jones and Hans Ulrich Obrist, Serpentine Galleries, said:**

“Adnan is one of the greatest artists of our time, and a great inspiration to many artists. For over sixty years – as a painter, poet and the maker of exquisite tapestries – Etel’s work has been underpinned by an intense engagement with the world and with modern history. She is a voice for our times and we are thrilled that she is exhibiting at the Serpentine this summer.”

Adnan's artworks feature in numerous collections, including Centre Pompidou, Paris; Mathaf, Doha, Qatar; Royal Jordanian Museum; Tunis Modern Art Museum; Sursock Museum, Beirut; Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris; British Museum, London; World Bank Collection, Washington D.C.; National Museum for Women in the Arts, Washington D.C. In 2014, Adnan was awarded France's highest cultural honour, the Ordre de Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres.

Adnan has participated in a number of Serpentine events during the past six years including the *On Edgware Road* group exhibition in 2012; the Map Marathon (2010); the Garden Marathon (2011); the Memory Marathon (2012), and the Extinction Marathon (2015).

The summer season at the Serpentine includes the concurrent exhibition of Alex Katz's paintings at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, the Serpentine Pavilion designed by Bjarke Ingels and the Summer Houses designed by Kunlé Adeyemi – NLÉ, Barkow Leibinger, Yona Friedman and Asif Khan, which opens to the public on 10 June, and the Park Nights series of live events.

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**Image Credit:**

ETEL ADNAN

*Mt. Tamalpais 1*, 1983-86

Oil on canvas

35 x 45.5 cm
ETEL ADNAN EXHIBITION SUPPORTED BY

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SFEIR-SEMLER GALLERY, Hamburg/Beirut
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Etel Adnan: The Weight of the World
Serpentine Sackler Gallery
2 June - 11 September 2016
List of Works

*Feux d'Artifice*, 2014
Wool tapestry
148 x 200 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Marée Basse*, 2015
Wool tapestry
200 × 160 cm
The Tulip Collection

*Forêt automnale*, 2015
Wool tapestry
165 × 185 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris
A Window Through a Window, 2016
Wool tapestry
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg/Beirut

Acrobaties Printanières, 1967–70 / 2015
Wool tapestry
160 × 200 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris

Untitled, 1967
Oil on canvas
61 × 61 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana

Untitled, 1968
Oil on canvas
76.5 × 81.5 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana

*Arizona*, 1964–65
Oil on canvas
72.4 × 76 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, 1964–65
Oil on canvas
51 × 51 cm
Courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

*Untitled*, 1965
Oil on canvas
66.5 × 66.5 cm
Private collection, courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris
Untitled, 1969
Oil on canvas
45.5 × 43 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Untitled, 1969
Oil on canvas
53 × 45 cm
Private Collection Andréé Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg

Untitled, c. 1970
Oil on canvas
55 × 46 cm
Private collection, courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris
*Untitled*, 1972
Oil on canvas
65 × 50 cm
Private collection, courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris

*Untitled*, 1972–75
Oil on canvas
65 × 54 cm
Private collection, courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris

*Untitled*, 1980
Oil on canvas
81 × 65 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana
California Coast I, 1982
Oil on canvas
61 × 73.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Untitled, c. 1984–87
Oil on canvas
20 × 25 cm
Private collection

Untitled, 1963–64
Watercolour on paper
37.6 × 45.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Untitled, 1964
Watercolour on paper
37.6 × 45.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, 1964
Watercolour on paper
37.6 × 45.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, 1964
Watercolour on paper
37.6 × 45.5 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, c. 1960s
Watercolour on paper
9.7 × 14.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, c. 1960s
Watercolour on paper
20 × 25.6 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut
San Gimignano 1, 2013
Ink on paper
Closed: 27 × 8.5 cm
Open: 27 × 279 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana

San Gimignano 2, 2013
Ink on paper
Closed: 27.3 × 9.2 cm
Open: 27.4 × 279 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana

San Gimignano, 2014
Black resin, alabaster, wood
170 × 180 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana
San Gimignano 5, 2014
Black resin, alabaster, wood
170 × 180 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana

East River Pollution “From Laura’s window”, New York, April 79, 1979
Crayon and pencil on paper
Closed: 21 × 8.3 cm
Open: 20.5 × 240 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Japanese ink on paper
Closed: 16 × 9.1 cm
Open: 15.7 × 198 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut
Motion, 1980-89 / 2012
Super 8, colour film with sound, transferred to DVD
92 minutes
Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut and Galerie Lelong, Paris

Kassaed Bain Chajar (Kassaeed zwischen Räume), 2012
Japanese ink on paper
Closed: 24.5 × 9.2 cm
Open: 24.2 × 504 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Untitled, 1983
Oil on canvas
76 × 91 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana
*Untitled*, date unknown
Watercolour on paper
13.4 × 18.4 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, date unknown
Watercolour on paper
12.7 × 17.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Barga Toscania, August 2010*, 2010
Ink and watercolour on paper
Closed: 17.9 × 12.2 cm
Open: 17.6 × 286 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, date unknown
Watercolour on paper
10.5 × 24 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut
*Untitled*, date unknown
Watercolour on paper
10.5 × 24 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

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Watercolour on paper
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*Untitled*, date unknown
Watercolour on paper
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Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Untitled*, 1983
Oil on canvas
76.5 × 91.5 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana
*Untitled (Mt. Tamalpais)*, c.1995–2000
Oil on canvas
35.5 x 45.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

*Mountain*, 2012
Ink on paper
Closed: 18 x 12 cm
Open: 17.8 x 280 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut
Untitled series, 2014
Oil on canvas
35 × 30 cm
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana
“The Golden Retreat” Poem in Arabic by Issa Makhlouf, date unknown
Ink and watercolour on paper
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut

Mahmoud Darwish, 2013
Ink and watercolour on paper
Closed: 21.5 × 9.3 cm
Open: 21 × 540 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Issam Mahfouz, 2013
Ink, watercolour and crayon on paper
Closed: 21.5 × 9.3 cm
Open: 21 × 540 cm
Collection Nicoletta Fiorucci

Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire, 2015
Ink and watercolour on paper
Closed: 27 × 24 cm
Open: 24 × 480 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut
Untitled series, 2014
Study for le soleil amoureux de la lune 2014
Ceramic
Courtesy of Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing / Les Moulins /Habana
**Untitled, 2015**  
Oil on canvas  
46 × 61.2 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

**Untitled, c.1995–2000**  
Oil on canvas  
40.5 × 50.5 cm  
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

**Untitled, c.1995–2000**  
Oil on canvas  
32 × 41 cm  
Private Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg

**Untitled, 2014**  
Oil on canvas  
23.8 × 30.4 cm  
Private collection
Untitled, c.1995-2000
Oil on canvas
32 × 41 cm
Private Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg

Untitled, 2015
Oil on canvas
27 × 35 cm
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube

Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas
24 × 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas
20 × 25 cm
Collection Maja Hoffmann
Untitled, 2010
Oil on canvas
20 x 25 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Untitled, 2012
Oil on canvas
32 x 41 cm
Private Collection Andrée Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg

Untitled, 2012
Oil on canvas
20.5 x 25 cm
Collection Maja Hoffmann
Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
30.5 × 35 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut

Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
30 × 24.5 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris

Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
30 × 24 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris
Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
30 × 24 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris

Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
30 × 24 cm
Collection Helga Sonanini

Untitled, 2013
Oil on canvas
24 × 30 cm
Van Lierde Collection
untitled, 2015
Oil on canvas
55.2 × 46.4 cm
Collection Maja Hoffmann

untitled, 2016
Oil on canvas
41 × 33 cm
Courtesy of the artist and White Cube
Le poids du monde 1-20, 2016
Oil on canvas
31 × 25 cm
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong, Paris
Etel Adnan is one of the world’s great poets and artists. The energy and magnetism of her work attracted me from my very first encounter with it—in one of her leporello notebooks—and I immediately wanted to know more.

I experienced something very similar on first seeing the work of Paul Klee as a teenager in Switzerland. Adnan once said to me that Klee belongs to the lineage of geniuses for whom a single designation—whether ‘painter’, ‘musician’ or ‘architect’—is too narrow. Every painting by Klee is like an act of discovery, achieved through a process of exploration. ‘Like a boat in the ocean,’ according to Adnan, ‘he was not directing the painting, the painting was telling him... He had the courage to go into the unconscious and to see the terrifying side of human beings. He painted the most paradise-like of gardens and the most strange and total insanity in human beings. He goes in all directions that a mind can go.’ We must pay due attention to Klee’s writing, she said, as we must to the poetry and prose of such polymaths as Leonardo da Vinci, Wassily Kandinsky and Igor Stravinsky.

Adnan herself is a polymath. Her work crosses many dimensions, all united in her first survey exhibition in the UK, which takes place at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery in Summer 2016: cartographies, drawings, films, notebooks, novels, paintings, plays, poems, political journalism, tapestries, teaching, and the recent landscapes painted onto screens that can be folded or extended in space like free-standing drawings.
phenomena are presented as hyper objects, non-tangible things that imperceptibly influence and transform our skins and our souls.

Another pivotal moment took place when Adnan moved to Sausalito near San Francisco in the 1970s and discovered the landscape of Mount Tamalpais, which remains the most important encounter of her life. Her obsession with the mountain led to a myriad of paintings and, after decades of intense contemplation, to the seminal book *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (1986), which explores links between nature and art. As Adnan told me, 'Mount Tamalpais became my house. For Cézanne, Sainte Victoire was no longer a mountain. It was an absolute. It was painting.'

Over the course of the 1960s, Adnan started to move away from purely abstract forms. In 1964 she discovered Japanese leporellos, folded books in which she could mix drawing with writing and poetry. She was to develop her writing across many forms, such as reportage, plays, fiction—including her masterpiece and the great novel of the Lebanese Civil War *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) and *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), which addresses the turmoil of war in the Arab world beyond Lebanon and made Adnan one of the world’s leading political writers, as well as a protagonist of the peace movement. Often in her writings, notably in her outstanding recent poetry collections such as *Sea and Fog* (2012) or *Seasons* (2008), natural and meteorological

She was born in 1925 in Beirut. In the late 1950s, after her studies at the Sorbonne and at Harvard, she taught philosophy at the University of California and started to paint. Her earliest works were abstract compositions with squares of colours directly applied from the tube. Often a red square was the pivotal point of the composition. She was interested in the immediate beauty of colour.

During her initial years in California, she also started to make her first colourful abstract tapestries. These works, influenced by an interest in oriental rugs, are a separate dimension of her practice that she has pursued ever since. Never translating her existing paintings into tapestries, she uses specific designs for her textile works, through which she celebrates the vibrancy of the wool.

Over the course of the 1960s, Adnan started to move away from purely abstract forms. In 1964 she discovered Japanese leporellos, folded books in which she could mix drawing with writing and poetry. She was to develop her writing across many forms, such as reportage, plays, fiction—including her masterpiece and the great novel of the Lebanese Civil War *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978) and *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), which addresses the turmoil of war in the Arab world beyond Lebanon and made Adnan one of the world’s leading political writers, as well as a protagonist of the peace movement. Often in her writings, notably in her outstanding recent poetry collections such as *Sea and Fog* (2012) or *Seasons* (2008), natural and meteorological

Another dimension of Adnan’s work, which will play a key role in her show at the Serpentine Galleries, are her 70 film snapshots of the sea, sun and sky, which she started to make in the 1980s with a Super 8 camera. On visits to New York City, she would film what she saw from her window. The bridges, skylines and passing ships that she observed there fed into her drawings and watercolours, which she has made daily ever since she began to draw as her means of expression whilst learning English in America. These New York drawings, made with thick black ink, were soon after followed by a series of drawings of the stone bridges of Paris. As Simone Fattal shows in her writings on Adnan’s visual art practice, published
also in this catalogue, one of these is an echo of Baudelaire’s poem ‘an agonizing sun falling under an arch’.

In addition to all these dimensions, Adnan has also created ceramic wall paintings for public space. Studies for these large-scale works are included in this exhibition, and these works form an important part of her oeuvre. She sees public art as a way to ‘humanize the environment’. In her own words, ‘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.’

Adnan is a great inspiration to many artists. Although she is now in her early nineties, her recent practice still retains great energy, optimism and intensity, and remains among the best work being created in the world today. As Fattal explains, her paintings both ‘exude energy and give energy. They grow on you like talismans... paintings as pure energy with which to live one’s life with courage.’
In the Paris apartment where she lives and works, in a room at the back that she uses for her studio, Etel Adnan keeps two separate desks pushed slightly apart. One desk is for painting, strewn neatly with brushes, palette knives, tins filled with tubes of paint, various trinkets, and a stray roll of toilet paper. A pile of prepared canvases leans against one leg. The other desk is for writing, and sometimes for drawing, scattered with pencils, inkpots, and charcoals. Both desks are wooden. Each surface is considerably worn, the varnish nicked and scratched and lovingly rubbed away by the kind of labour that is returned to and repeated, nearly every day, by an artist who is now in her early nineties.

Adnan, the only child of a Greek mother and a Syrian father, comes from a decidedly mixed background and has lived a distinctly colourful life. Her father was an Ottoman officer from Damascus, and, rather infamously, a classmate of Ataturk. Her paternal grandmother was Albanian. Her mother was born to a poor Greek family in Smyrna, an ancient coastal city known today, in Turkey, as Izmir. Adnan speaks at least five different languages, including an almost forgotten form of Turkish that dates back to the earliest days of the republic and sounds closer to Ottoman than any dialect surviving in the country today. She has often said that she learned Greek at home, French at school, and Arabic in the streets of Beirut. As a teenager, she longed for a career in architecture. Increasingly estranged from her family, she studied literature and philosophy at l’École des
Lettres, a great if also short-lived experiment in progressive education in French-mandate-era Beirut (the school later became, and still is, a research institute on Rue Damas, which splits the city in half). Adnan writes primarily in English, though two of her most famous publications—the novel Sitt Marie Rose (published in 1978) and The Arab Apocalypse (published in 1980), an inventive collection of poems spliced with hand-drawn symbols—were originally composed in French, a language she turned her back on during the Algerian war for independence from France. She came to embrace English at the moment she became an Arab-American poet, writing in verse to protest against the Vietnam War. She has also said that around the same time she composed her first paintings in Arabic.

Elsewhere in Adnan's studio, there is a single woven chair and many shelves heaving with books. A small Egyptian tapestry hangs on the wall. Above it is a large, colourful square of Palestinian embroidery, brought from the workshop of a women's empowerment organisation in Beirut. On the writing desk, between the wall and a box adorned with mother of pearl inlay, there is a stack of postcards showing pictures of mountains, a frequent subject of Adnan's painting. And while they are quite different, Adnan's writing and painting—the two tasks carried out on two tables, one preoccupied by politics while the other is given wholly to beauty—they share the same small, intimate scale of a body seated, head and torso bending towards the desk, legs firmly planted or curling under the chair, a reflex that captures the joy and focus of working, and animates the life of Adnan's mind. Virtually all of her paintings are nearly square. Few of them are larger than a decent-sized dictionary. She hangs them above her desk to dry and then stores them in a locker. And while she writes liberally and restlessly across multiple genres and disciplines—poetry and prose as well as plays, essays, documentary scripts, and a libretto for an opera—Adnan insists that her preferred unit of text is the paragraph. She writes everything in parts, composing lines or sentences the size of small index cards and then piling them up in a drawer until they have the critical density and coherence to form a book, an essay, or a collection of poems.

I read Adnan for years before I saw her paintings, drawings, accordion-folded artist's books, tapestries, ceramics, and early Super 8 films. I used to catch sight of her, once in a while, around Beirut, at gallery openings or film festivals or theatre events, before I met her, properly, at a dinner held in her honour, Adnan tiny and smiling, signing copies of a vividly orange book about her work while seated at a restaurant in Kassel during the opening days of dOCUMENTA13. Since then, every so often, we have had occasion to speak by phone, prearranged by email, my questions short and usually vague, her answers long, detailed, reliably surprising, and profoundly lovely about her work. Adnan no longer travels by plane. She always tells me Paris is fine, not her favourite city, but well situated between the two places she loves most, the coast of California and the sea as
seen from Beirut. Sometimes I hear a twinge in her voice when she says these are places she knows she will never see again and can only imagine now. But then again, that same twinge often serves as a sprightly, twinkling preamble to a rollicking discourse on, say, the ability of one person to love another, their lives, and the world around them.

To my considerable regret, I have never actually visited Adnan’s studio in Paris but I know it well from photographs and the short films of visiting artists and curators, in addition to the written and verbal accounts of friends and colleagues who have described it at length. Towards the end of 2015, there was even a recreation of the area where Adnan works, installed for an exhibition in Beirut, about Beirut, taking the city as a psychological space and a place of dreams. While striking to me, and accompanied by Adnan’s stirring poem ‘There’, the installation was not, apparently, to everyone’s liking, not only because it was prematurely funereal but also, and moreover, because it was wrong: there was only one desk. For it is true that the spatial arrangement of her studio says a great deal about who Adnan is as a person, and goes a considerable distance in explaining how the many different facets of her practice fit together and coexist. The closeness of how she works is, in a way, a key to understanding the intimacies of violence that characterise her best writing, the history of her political positions and engagements, and the ways in which her paintings, as well as her later essays on love, are both a solace and an answer to all that is most damaging and destructive in the world.

Adnan’s only novel is also, arguably and to this day, the most provocative book she has ever written. After completing her degree at l’École des Lettres, Adnan left Beirut for Paris, where she attended the Sorbonne and studied with Gaston Bachelard, among others. From there she travelled to the United States and began a doctoral degree at the University of California, Berkeley. By then she was a fitful student. She transferred to Harvard. She spent a year in Mexico. She decided her dissertation wasn’t happening at all. In the 1950s, she began teaching in a small college in San Rafael, California. In the 1960s, she began writing poems. A local magazine found its way, unsolicited, into her mailbox at school. She was impressed with its coverage of the Vietnam War, and at the same time she was distressed by the facts, images, and stories of the war itself. She wrote two poems, in English, agitating against the war and sent them to the magazine, which published them both. Soon Adnan was anthologised in a major volume of American anti-war poetry.

Then, after more than fifteen years of living in the US, Adnan went home. She returned to Beirut in 1972. She became a journalist, writing for the newspapers Al-Safa and L’Orient-Le Jour. And she began, again, to paint. She met the sculptor Simone Fattal, later the founder of the Post-Apollo Press and
Adnan's lifelong partner, who was also painting at the time and writing art criticism for radio. They shared a studio in Achrafieh at the end of what would come to be regarded as the city's golden age. That era came to a close with the start of Lebanon's gruesomely complicated, fifteen-year-long civil war. Once the conflict began, in 1975, Adnan and Fattal stuck it out for two more years. Adnan took a break in Paris, where one day she read in the evening papers a horrific story about a woman she knew. Very quickly, in a feverish bout of writing, that story became the spine of the novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, about a woman, a teacher of deaf-mute children, who joins the Palestinian resistance and takes a Palestinian lover. For that, she is kidnapped and killed by a right-wing Christian militia whose members, including a young man she has known all her life, deem her a traitor to her sect.

The Marie-Rose of Adnan's novel, and the story of her abduction and death, are all quite faithful to the real Marie-Rose Boulos, a social worker who, in the early, explosively violent days of the civil war, was volunteering in the Palestinian refugee camps scattered throughout the country. Like many Lebanese families, Marie-Rose's ancestors were originally from Syria, and they were Christian. Adnan wasn't friends with Marie-Rose but she had met her two or three times. Adnan found her striking and rebellious. She was tremendously upset by what had happened to her and wrote *Sitt Marie Rose* as a gut response. One of the most startling and effective aspects of how Adnan wrote it is the way in which she situated her unnamed, first person narrator, clearly a stand-in for the author, as a close friend of the killers. The men who became Marie-Rose's kidnappers are not depicted as incomprehensible strangers but rather as boys from the neighbourhood, aspiring filmmakers, clowns and show-offs and shy potential lovers, who rush and tumble into a life of violence by degrees, in increments, some eagerly, others more reluctantly.

‘In every culture,’ Adnan says during one of our phone calls, ‘violence takes special forms. I wanted to understand the young men for whom killing was the ultimate proof of their virility. I was emotionally upset. I was upset by the existence of the war. But I wanted to let them speak. The decision to be violent isn’t always the same. Some young men were drawn in gradually, but the more they fought, the more they were manipulated. I believe they were manipulated, but why was it so easy? Young people speak a lot about memory now. They have turned the war into a mythology. Nobody wants to regret the war, which is bad because it means we can’t move forward. But it is very difficult to accept defeat. To accept responsibility takes a different, mass education and a national consciousness that cannot exist with a tribal consciousness. The transition in Lebanon from the old world to the new world has not been totally done. In a way, we’re still in the nineteenth century under Ottoman rule.’

*Sitt Marie Rose* was quickly translated into Arabic and published in Beirut. Immediately, the novel was banned in Lebanon and
Adnan, who had returned from Paris, started receiving death threats. Fattal sold her house, packed up her studio, and moved to California with Adnan, who had lost her job at the newspaper in the furore over the novel. Fattal never painted again. She did, however, establish an avant-garde publishing house, which keeps a number of Adnan’s books in print. And in time, she returned to art making of her own, albeit of a different kind, creating sculptures and ceramics that are often based on the forms and stories of ancient, mythological figures, from Adam to Astarte.

Of course, the war in Lebanon went on and on for years. The initial shock of *Sitt Marie Rose* eventually subsided. Once, visiting the Asilah Festival in Morocco, Adnan found herself seated next to the brother of Marie-Rose. After the war ended, Adnan returned to Beirut and was attending the opening of an exhibition at Galerie Janine Rubeiz when she met the sister of Marie-Rose. Some time later, she received a phone call from a woman who told her she was the daughter of Marie-Rose, and that it had taken her forty years to build up the courage to get in touch. All of them thanked her. And to this day, university students all over the world (including me at a certain point in the 1990s) still read and debate this short, highly experimental novel that says so much about violence and gender and love.

Adnan published a handful of poetry collections before she wrote her novel. She has since published many more, alongside unclassifiable collections of essays, letters, and various fragmentary texts. In California for the second time, Adnan began painting, again, in earnest. Her language of abstract forms slowly gave way to landscapes: a circle for the sun, a line for the horizon between sea and sky, a triangle for the mountain, Mount Tamalpais, which she drew and painted, over and over, and described as her best friend. She also returned to the art of tapestries, which she had first undertaken in the 1960s when she wanted the feel of the rugs she knew from her childhood beneath her feet. In the book *Paris, When It’s Naked* (1993), Adnan wrestled heroically with her ambivalence for the French capital. In *Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* (1993), she did the same for post-war Beirut, which, at the time, was just entering its controversial reconstruction era, in which many have argued that the war merely continues by other means. Then, at the end of another book, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005), inspired by William H. Gass, Adnan included a powerful, cogent, eighteen-page protest against the war in Iraq, ‘To Be In a Time of War’, composed entirely of paragraph-sized sentence fragments in the infinitive form. The effect is mesmerising, incantatory, and devastating.

For decades, as with her tapestries, Adnan has been making leporellos, delicately folded artist’s books that open to reveal long strips of painting, a New York skyline, a series of ink pots, her own poetry or that of colleagues such as Mahmoud Darwish and Yusuf al-Khal. Last year, she made another that carries a rather more complex text, delving into her own family history,
her father’s proximity to Ataturk and the Armenian genocide, and a red suitcase that she left with a friend and ultimately lost. Titled *Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire*, all of this is cleverly couched in a kind of history lesson. It is also a deliberately, intentionally uncomfortable text about regret, responsibility, and accountability for any number of actions from a show of poor manners to a monstrous crime.

‘You are a part of it,’ Adnan tells me when I ask her about the relationship between her writing and the histories of violence she often takes on as her subjects. ‘We all breathe it. We are all in it. Nobody can say, “I don’t know.” People read or write or paint because it is a necessity. Why do we write? It’s an inner impulse. I feel it so strongly that I cannot choose not to write. It’s history that writes my books. Of course, it’s heart-breaking for me to see the self-destruction of the Arab world. It’s heart-breaking for me to see the destruction of Iraq, the destruction of Libya. All of these things upset me profoundly. Maybe this is why I paint,’ she adds, conjuring an image of her doubled desks. ‘I paint quite seriously but it’s also my inner rest.’
The first time I saw Etel Adnan’s visual work was in a series of long Japanese folding books in which she had quietly effected a revolution in Arabic calligraphy. These books unfolded in front of one’s eyes as ‘readings’ of poetry taking place in the parallel worlds of colour and sensory perception. She had written out poems by the major contemporary Arab poets, each in a unique way, not trying to conform to the canons of calligraphy, and had accompanied them with drawings, watercolours, ink and pen work. The poems were brought to life more rapidly than if one followed the words alone. Also 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.

Adnan worked in my studio for a few years soon after we met in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1972 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 watercolours. This flowering tree was a revelation. I looked at it for a long time. It had a lot in common with the world of Arab miniatures. 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 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 imposed 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. In oil, Adnan had an assuredness rarely seen in other painters’ works. The world was summoned and summarised on the canvas.

The first two canvases she painted in my studio 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 Lebanese mountains are all shades and hues of blue due to the proximity of the sea. Strong, compact squares, hermetic because of 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 an abstract painter, using large squares compactly juxtaposed or floating on a background, or else with smaller squares composing a line that divided the area of the canvas or floated somewhere across its surface. Among these hermetic squares, there was always a red one. It was as if the rest of the composition emerged from this red square. Around it the world—its lines of forces, the large picture—organised 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 away’. Indeed, her landscapes are seen from very far away, in order to reveal the whole picture.

It is only with painters that we know how he or she actually sees. In Adnan’s world the landscape is compressed on a small surface. Only the strong lines, the large undercurrents emerge.

There are no people in her oil paintings; 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 painting. 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* (The Post-Apollo Press, 1993), and about some cities in general in *Of Cities and Women (Letters to Fawwaz)* (The Post-Apollo Press, 1993). A retrospective at the Wattis Center in San Francisco, in 2013, was titled *Words and Places*.

Adnan is a colourist. ‘Les coloristes sont des poètes épiques’ (colourists are epic poets), said Baudelaire.¹ Who better than Adnan to be described in this way, since she is already an epic poet in words? There is an epic vision and rendering in these 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, 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 towards it. The sea was the subject of her first poem (only published in Arabic), *The Book of The Sea* (c. 1951). In it, the Sea and the Sun are forever mating, and forever wrestling with each other. Both of these elements were to come in full force again in her writings, and paintings: *The Arab Apocalypse*, *Sea*, and the recent pictures. Most paintings she has made in Lebanon contain the reflective effects of the sea on the earth and mountains that border it.

One day in 1974, she went to Iraq to attend a Biennale of Arab painting. It 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 painting, with a 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 paint 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, while 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 de-

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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. Ann organised a show at her studio and Professor Pepper, the Aesthetics Professor at U.C. Berkeley—with whom she had come to prepare a PhD, 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*), and when you say childhood, you mean for the first time. Therefore you also say innocence, which is truthfulness. If one is to understand her writing about the practice of her art, which she describes in her book *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, 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 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 with each other. Many thought of Nicolas de Staël when looking at these early canvases; she acknowledges a family spirit. It is as if she and Nicolas de Staël use the same vocabulary. But unlike in the work of de Staël, there is no hesitation in her choice of colours and their masses. De Staël returns across an area over and over again. In the caesura between masses you can almost read the sequence of layers of colours used, for he almost always leaves traces of them, until he finds the one he will settle on. 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. 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.

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 in the same way her writing is. She says it all in a few words. She lives in a rarefied world the way that monks do on the tops of mountains.

village, before the war killed a fellow organiser 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 l’être au monde was first defined by Baudelaire. The artist was, for him ‘Homme du monde’, a man in the world).³

The concept of the cosmic started to appear in her work when the Apollo programme took men to the moon and opened this new dimension to mankind, so earth-bound up to this point. 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 entitled The Apollo Series. For this series she devised her own colours, making yellows and greens with onion skins and pomegranates, adding these dyes to the commercial watercolours and ink. She still produces these home-made colours on her table and uses them in her leporellos.

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 Tamalpais. There in front of her window, everywhere in Marin County, where she was living, walking to Dominican College 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 returned to Beirut. All the time she was painting the mountain, drawing it in oil, watercolour, ink, or a combination of all of these. 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 an ever-revealing mystery, an ongoing manifestation. I wonder whether in those days she loved someone as much as she loved Mount Tamalpais.

Her involvement with the mountain lasted until she published Journey To Mount Tamalpais in 1986. By the time the book was published, Adnan had been working on the mountain for twenty-three years. Her philosophical training and her specialisation in aesthetics came together in this book. It is a philosophical meditation on the relationship between Nature and Art—in other words, on the meaning of perception—which she wrote over a period of twenty years, piling up her notes. (The element of time is telling, when we know that she wrote the novel Sitt Marie Rose in one month in 1977). Through her praxis as a painter she 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 in dialogue with the painters she likes, whose works she toured the world to see—Kandinsky, Paul 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 Panovsky. She 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. They are the correspondents with whom she argues, on whose work she builds. They are familiar and family.

When abroad, the unfamiliar place opens up new sensory information, a new understanding of things. Suddenly one sees. We can cite Klee in Tunisia, exclaiming: ‘Colour possesses me. I don't have to pursue it. It will possess me always. I know it. That is the meaning of this happy hour: Colour and I are one. I am a painter’⁴; also the crucial travels of Renoir, Marquet and Matisse to North Africa; the trip that Dürer, and after him all the French painters, like Le Lorrain or Gericault, took to Italy, and the coming back of Cézanne to Aix-en-Provence.

In Lebanon, during the years she spent there from 1972–1975, Adnan created a body of work focusing on its landscape. Lebanon’s high mountain, Mount Sannine, was never able to replace Mount Tamalpais in her work, although she has painted it—but 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 organisation, 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 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 Mount Tamalpais everywhere and all the time. She imagined the essence of it. She saw underneath its surface a number of Native Americans locked inside. A mountain of glass. As she writes in Journey To Mount Tamalpais:

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

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Indians telling me with sign language and impatient gestures that they were imprisoned for centuries.5

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 it moving, under the clouds, moving towards the sea. She saw it 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, are quite astounding; they are a harmony of greens, illuminated with only a line of red that upholds 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, and watercolours, and the leporelos 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 taken later to Paris. The white cube of the Paris gallery did not convey the same magic, although both openings were great events. The curved walls in San Rafael and their rusty colour had enhanced the strong powerful paintings.

Adnan’s paintings play the role the old icons used to play for people who believed. They exude energy and give energy. They shield you like talismans. They help you live your everyday life. I have noticed that people who have her paintings will more often than not keep them in their 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, their compactness, their one clear message, with nothing diluted or lost, convey the happiness experienced while painting them, the joy of using colour. They reflect 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?6

I am sitting as usual in front of Mount Tamalpais. 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.7

6 Ibid., p. 52.
7 Ibid., p. 51.
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 XIVth, 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...

Adnan has been able to achieve paintings that one can pinpoint to the moment of the day, very precisely. A day in the autumn, or late spring, at the end of the afternoon when it has

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8 Etel Adnan, 1986, p. 23.
10 Ibid., p. 52.
been raining, 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 the renewed freshness.

Painting as knowledge.

But can I ever understand what Cézanne says in Mont Sainte-Victoire, and Hokusai in Mount Fuji, if after thirty years, I don’t know what Tamalpais 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. Tamalpais has an autonomy of being. So does a drawing of it. But they are mysteriously related.\textsuperscript{11}

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.\textsuperscript{12}

To see in order to paint. To paint in order to see. Cézanne moves within this circle. With no satisfaction, no resting point. Bobby said: “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.\textsuperscript{13}

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

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Now to the pen. I call pen work everything that does not use the palette knife, which includes the brush, with ink and watercolours, crayons and pencils. Over the years, Adnan has developed a masterly 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

\textsuperscript{11} Etel Adnan, 1996, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 55.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 57.
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 was to become the subject matter of yet another aspect of Etel’s work: films. During those years, the late seventies and eighties, when 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, the shimmering that light provokes over water and glass. Thus the glass skyscrapers around the building where she was staying entered the same research into light and matter that was the subject matter of a great amount of the Super 8 movies shot during that period. They were to be edited into the film *Motion* (2012) that premiered during dOCUMENTA13 in 2012, where Adnan was invited to show her paintings, and to be at the same time a writer-in-residence, giving readings, conferences, and showing 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, continuously. 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 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*. 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 60’s.
Once the leporello was in her 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 Darwich, Buland al-Haidari, Fadhil al-Azzawi, Georges Schehadé, Thérèse Awwad, Samia Tutungi to name only a few; sometimes she worked on her own poetry. Later she added American and French poets, among those Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud, Guillevic, Barbara Guest, Lyn Hejinian, Wendell Berry, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Duncan McNaughton, 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. They were responses to a living text. She was a translator of a score. She saw the manuscript as a collaborative work.

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 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 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 the page one and put it face to face with page seven, they are also a perfect sequence. Is it a chance occurrence? 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.

The leporellos 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: they 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. 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 they own, before the Institut had even opened its doors. The Bibliothèque Nationale included them in their beautiful exhibit in 2003, L’Art Du Livre Arabe, choosing her work to go on the brochures announcing and publicising the event. An exhibition in 1979 that came as a surprise to Adnan was titled Dessins d’Ecrivains. A fellow poet asked Etel to lend one of her leporelos. She did, asking no questions. Then came the invitation to the opening, which took place in the beautiful castle of Ancy-le-Franc in Burgundy, France. When she arrived she found herself in the most unexpected company. Here with Etel’s drawings were the works of Victor Hugo, George Sand, Rimbaud, Proust, and many other luminaries.

Adnan has also worked on tapestry and ceramic designs. She worked with the renowned tapestry artist Ida Grae. She wove and dyed wool herself. She also wrote ‘Notes on Weaving’, a text that was published in a literary magazine in Lebanon, Les Cahiers de l’Oronte, and which has just been republished by Galerie Lelong in Paris. Her designs are exclusively made for tapestry. In them we find again the use of vivid colours and large areas of single colours. 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. During her retrospective at Mathaf (the Arab Museum of Modern Art) in Doha Quatar, in 2014, two monumental ceramic walls in strong vivid colours were installed in the gardens of the Women’s University; they will remain on view in the open air. With that project a most important wish was fulfilled, to see her work in a public space, outdoors, to be shared by all. For to her public art is the most important of all aspects of art.

Lately, she has been using these leporellos more for black ink and pen work depicting gardens, parks, (notably the beautiful park in Kassel) which she did while in residence there. She had actually started way before drawing her own park in Point Reyes, California, where she had 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 recognisable hills and rivers. The result was nearer to what we expect to find on a canvas entitled ‘Landscape’. It was still made of stretches of colour, but the point of view had become nearer to the subject. The square had disappeared little by little. It is as if these squares had opened up and one could see what each of them contained. Here we can say that with time, she had moved closer to painters like Arthur Dove, and Milton Avery.

The invitation to exhibit at dOCUMENTA13 came in 2010. It had been a few years since Etel had painted. 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, 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 for ever and ever. One entering the other, and the other emerging from the one, in an eternal and immutable ballet of love, movement, and colour.

This subject, cosmic in its dimensions and impact, did not end after Etel left Beirut for Paris. There she went on producing small paintings, going more and more deeply into a cosmos of her own imagination; sometimes, 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 moving towards and away from us on their orbits, we witness in some canvases 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.

I asked her recently about her most recent works: ‘What are these landscapes for you?’ ‘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.’ 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.

As a result, Adnan’s painting has become freer, bolder, even more imaginative. California is now too far away. She can’t travel there, so California has grown in significance. Its importance in her imagination is equivalent to the cosmos. The cosmos has always been present, but now she really paints it.
Etel Adnan’s paintings ask the question: What is painting?

Etel Adnan sits at her table, puts down a small surface of canvas, well stretched on a wooden frame, and starts mixing colour. She does not always start, as she used to do, with a red square, a mark that helped her begin organising the space around it. She does not need this any more. She is much freer. She sees these vast expansions of landscapes, mountains, rivers and plains. She wants to go there, and so she does.

In what way can we say that she sees these places? She does not imagine them; she is in them. She sees them. Therefore painting is a simple tool for moving around, travelling and seeing. Imagining. Painting comes first, then the imagination. Is seeing imagining? Do we want to express the world as we see it, or do we create the world we want to see?

There is a deep movement, a geyser, which pushes you towards the pencil and the colour. It is a mystery.

It is a gesture that preceded writing, as we see it in the prehistoric grottos. Men and women drew the world around them, or as they thought they needed to. What is this need? Let us examine the prehistoric paintings. A marvellous world in movement. Bison, horses running. The need to run, to move; I guess that it was very difficult to move 35,000 years ago. The world was a threat, a constant threat: animals ready to attack, the very cold climate, rare food that one had to run after. To create. Few vegetables. Man was constantly assessing what he could eat; in order to find vegetables, he had to try and experiment.

The only thing he loved was these animals, running. Companions, enemies. To be tamed, to be won over. He saw them, he lived with them. They took him places. How did he get underground? Once he was in a relatively safe place he started drawing. Drawing is recollecting, is calling. Calling to life, and rescue. He drew masterfully, reproducing his world outside, an ode to his environment.

A hand drawn on the wall. One of a woman. I am here, this is me. This is where I lived and thought. This is what I think. What I see and love. Etel Adnan does the same. In one of her earlier leporellos she puts her hand down and draws its contours, a mark. She marks. This is me, this is where I am. I am happy to be here. She draws practically every morning when she is in a period of painting. For she is also a writer and when she writes, she puts away with extreme sadness the tubes of colour. But when she spreads them on her table, she is very happy again. She places on the table a crystal paper on which one mixes colours. This is the enjoyable part. This paper is in a form of a palette, white and translucent, helps her in its fragility not to take the action too seriously. It is indeed a playful action. She is free to proceed to wherever she wants to go. There are whole sections of paintings that are a playful action.
But it is also a very serious endeavour. How can I explain the seriousness, since we have just said that it is a playful action? Once she has decided to go ahead with a painting, then she enters the very serious world of the putting down of a universe, exactly as she should put it down. This world, which did not exist a second ago, is going to get very serious and achieve its very existence. An existence that will be even more alive and exact than what we see, and what has produced it, what has been its pretext. The mind proceeds by mixing together; exactly in the same way that Adnan mixes her colours, the mind mixes all these images that it has seen. They go ‘somewhere’ in the imagination, i.e. an imaginative world, for the imagination is not the faculty we think it is: thinking something that does not exist. No, it is creating something that has a bigger life and a truer life than the one we see in the everyday, in the apparent world, the world we take for the ultimate reality. For painting produces a world that is more real than the one we see; it gives us the essence of it, its substance and core. It gives us its significance and finality. What is beauty, why beauty, what is a colour? What is a hill or a bison? It gives us the translation of it in another dimension. The painting is a translation that the vision brings to the paper, its existence in a parallel world. This parallel world explains the first world. We call it art, for we don’t know what it means, really.

It starts with a need to do it. The need does not explain itself, it surges and takes one over. Irresistible. No explanation. I am possessed suddenly by the urge of the surge. For suddenly I have understood something and it is my duty to put it down, first for me, for I am in my urgency, then when it is over, and I have done it, I realise it is important and it should be seen by many other persons. The thread of thought takes you by the hand, the thread of Ariadne takes you into the labyrinth. It takes you from discovery to discovery.

The discovery is a recognition of what you have in mind. Suddenly you see what is there buried in your mind, for the hand has made it appear. There is a mixing up, there is superposition of what is in the mind and what is made by the hand; one has imprinted on the other. It is the result of two worlds. I already said it is a translation, like Charles Baudelaire translating Edgar Allan Poe. The reading of the final text makes you hear the voices of Baudelaire and of Poe together at the same time. You distinctly hear both. And not one. Do you see both? Of course.

To go back to Etel Adnan’s universe: she is in her room, she sees no mountain or hills from her window. And yet here they are on the canvas. She says proudly, ‘I want to go there.’ And actually she does go there, and the canvases tell us where she’s been, and we share the experience.

My first teacher/painter friend started by telling me: painting is about solving a problem. You put down an equation, i.e. a few lines, blue, red or yellow. Then you have to make a painting out
of it. What is a painting? A surface organised into a coherent whole that tells you something about something.

I would argue that painting is not about producing a coherent whole. It is about finding something to tell the world that has not been there before. For the bison on the walls of the grottos are not the bison running outside in the dark. They proceed from another reality. The reality of the mountain on the canvas, the way I put it down in my own paintings.

This moment I tried to talk about, the setting of the sun over Mount Sannine, which I have tried to render over and over again, tells me more about myself looking at this wondrous phenomenon than all my souvenirs of these hours of contemplation. It tells me how I was, how I looked, how I loved, and how I wanted the world to love this moment of adoration of the universe. It speaks about both of us. The mountain and me. And therefore it speaks about both of us at the same time. Man inside his universe.

A painting by Etel Adnan not only tells us about the universe at that particular time and day, but the way she was feeling at that particular time and day, the tenderness felt and experienced, or the anger.

This is what Etel Adnan’s painting has taught us to understand. To hear both the voice of the universe and man inside it. At the same time.