

Cohen, Alina. *Painter Etel Adnan's Career Didn't Take off until Her Eighties — Now She's an Inspiration to Young Artists*, **Artsy**, June 22, 2018, online.



Art

## Painter Etel Adnan's Career Didn't Take off until Her Eighties—Now She's an Inspiration to Young Artists

● Alina Cohen Jun 22, 2018 12:25 pm



Etel Adnan, 2014. Photo by Patrick Dandy. Courtesy of White Cube.

Ninety-three-year-old Lebanese artist Etel Adnan's lovely, simple compositions argue for the persistence of peaceful landscapes—despite whatever violence pervades the daily news. For over five decades, she's made small-scale paintings of mountains, skies, and water, all rendered in interlocking color blocks. A solid circle often adorns the top of her canvases, representing a sun that shines benevolently on the hills and valleys below. The creamy hues, which she typically applies with a palette knife, further contribute to a sense of lush harmony. The work is easy on the eyes and spirit.

That's not to say that Adnan hasn't engaged with harsh realities. Born in 1925 in Beirut, the artist was immediately attuned to ideas of colonialism and cultural difference: Her father was Syrian, her mother was Greek, and Lebanon was still under French rule. She later wrote in a poem, "This unfinished business of my / childhood / this emerald lake / from my journey's other / side / haunts hierarchies of heavens / ... / Under a combination of pain / and machine-gun fire / flowers disappeared."

The artist studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris and later in the United States at Berkeley and Harvard, quickly applying her beliefs throughout her own revolutionary writing (she's still best known for her poetry). From a teaching post at Dominican College in San Rafael, California (now Dominican University of California), Adnan lent her voice to protesting the French occupation of Algeria, and eventually the Vietnam War. She began painting only in 1958, at the encouragement of an artist colleague, Ann O'Hanlon.



Etel Adnan *Mount Tamalpais*, 1985  
The Sursock Museum

Adnan turned to Mount Tamalpais, not far from San Francisco, for inspiration. The mountain—sometimes rendered jagged, at other times rounder—appears in many of her paintings throughout the decades. She's still painting it today, from memory now, instead of observation. It's no longer just out her window: She's settled into an itinerant Paris-Beirut-California lifestyle with her partner, sculptor Simone Fattal.

O'Hanlon and her husband gave Adnan her first solo show in 1961, at a gallery they'd established in Mill Valley, California. Exhibitions at small venues continued throughout the decade, mostly around the region. Mary Sabbatino, vice president and director of Galerie Lelong & Co. (one of Adnan's New York galleries), describes the artist's work from this period as "brushier," though on the same small scale as her later work. Adnan was also making hand-woven tapestries, always expanding her practice into different media while keeping her themes and her colorful, abstract approach consistent.

In the 1970s, she returned to Lebanon for four years and edited two daily newspapers, *Al Safa* and *L'Orient le Jour*. Civil War broke out in the country in 1975, and Adnan moved back to Paris the next year. Her award-winning novel, *Sitt Marie Rose* (1977), critiques Lebanese society's treatment of women and its religious intolerance. As if she wasn't busy enough, Adnan continued to paint and exhibit, showing work in Beirut and Rabat, Morocco.



Etel Adnan *Kalimat*, 2012  
Sfeir-Semler

In 1977, Adnan also returned to California. She continued to paint Mount Tamalpais, invoking the same subject matter in varied media across thousands of canvases. Often, she included a bright red sun in the form of a square or circle. "The sun gives life, the division between night and day. She comes from Lebanon, a place of so much sunlight," explains Sabbatino. "The sun turns red at sunset and red is the color, for her, of life."

Despite her devotion to her visual art practice, Adnan didn't receive widespread acclaim until Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev saw her work at Beirut's Galerie Sfeir-Semler in 2010. As director of the major international art quinquennial Documenta 13, Christov-Bakargiev was so impressed she offered Adnan a prominent position in the exhibition. The presentation in Kassel featured Adnan's abstract canvases in addition to her *leporellos*—accordion-style folding books that merge the artist's words and drawings.

A slew of major international group exhibitions followed. The New Museum featured her in a 2014 exhibition of art from the Arab world, while the Whitney Museum of American Art included her in its biennial the same year. "She became particularly interesting for me at a moment when our lives have been conditioned by iPhones and computer screens and situations in which language and images are coming closer together," said curator Stuart Comer, who helped select the participants.



Etel Adnan *Le poids du onde 28, 2016*  
Custot Gallery Dubai



Etel Adnan *Untitled...*  
Phillips

The Museum of Modern Art's blockbuster 2017 show "Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction" gave an untitled 1965–66 composition by Adnan a significant position at the entry. If the New Museum had situated the artist within a regional framework, and the Whitney offered a thematic way of viewing her practice, this exhibition placed her within a major, worldwide movement in art history. Adnan's small, delicately rendered canvas became part of a story that included Lee Krasner, Helen Frankenthaler, and Yayoi Kusama.

The market, too, has gradually started appreciating Adnan's work. At Art Basel in Basel this year, Galerie Lelong's booth sold paintings by Adnan for €30,000–€50,000, prints starting at €2,000–€3,000, and tapestries and leporellos for €70,000 and €18,000, respectively.

And the tale of Adnan's career is still evolving. With a show opening later this month, Lelong will further contextualize Adnan's work by placing it alongside that of the ever-experimental Carolee Schneemann and Brazilian painter Ione Saldanha. And this summer, MASS MoCA is giving Adnan a solo presentation that connects her poetry with her art practice.

“I think that we're at the end of hero worship,” says Sabbatino, explaining why artists like Adnan are thankfully receiving their due. “We're looking to expand history, we're looking at women artists, we're looking at artists who were, quote, forgotten.” That's just one of the many narratives in which Adnan plays an integral role. As additional exhibitions reframe and reconsider her practice, the artist's reputation grows for having both a singular aesthetic vision and a crucial position within the international art canon. Her quiet, meditative canvases are finally able to speak for themselves. •

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