

Etel Adnan, the Eternal Voyager, Captured in a New Biography

Author Kaelen Wilson-Goldie reveals the radical power of abstract painter Etel Adnan's life and work in a new book.

[Shirine Saad March 6, 2019](#)



Etel Adnan, "Untitled" (2014), Oil on canvas, 10 ½ x 13 ¾ inches (27 x 35 cm) (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

As we rewrite art history to recognize the contribution and impact of

women from around the world, pointed attention has been dedicated to several bodies of work that reveal, beyond their formal singularity, radical modes of expression. One such artist is [Etel Adnan](#), the 94-year-old Lebanese multimedia artist, writer, poet, and intellectual, whose work was notably shown at [Sfeir-Semler Gallery](#) in Beirut in 2010, Documenta 13 in 2012, and at the Museum of Modern Art in New York's small but seminal exhibition [Making Space](#) in 2017, provoking a widespread infatuation with her life and art. Adnan the rebel, the free-spirit, the eternal voyager, became a myth of her own, a pioneer in Modern and Contemporary Lebanese art and an influence to generations of artists, poets, and intellectuals. Now, [Etel Adnan](#), a new book by art critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie for Lund Humphries's *Contemporary Painters* series, reveals the artist as a shaman and activist, tirelessly absorbing ideas and historical milestones to create a powerfully intimate, quasi-mystical, personal poetic.



Etel Adnan, "Untitled" (2014), Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 ½ inches (30.5 x 24.1 cm) (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

Born in 1925 in Beirut, Etel Adnan has witnessed the successive waves of

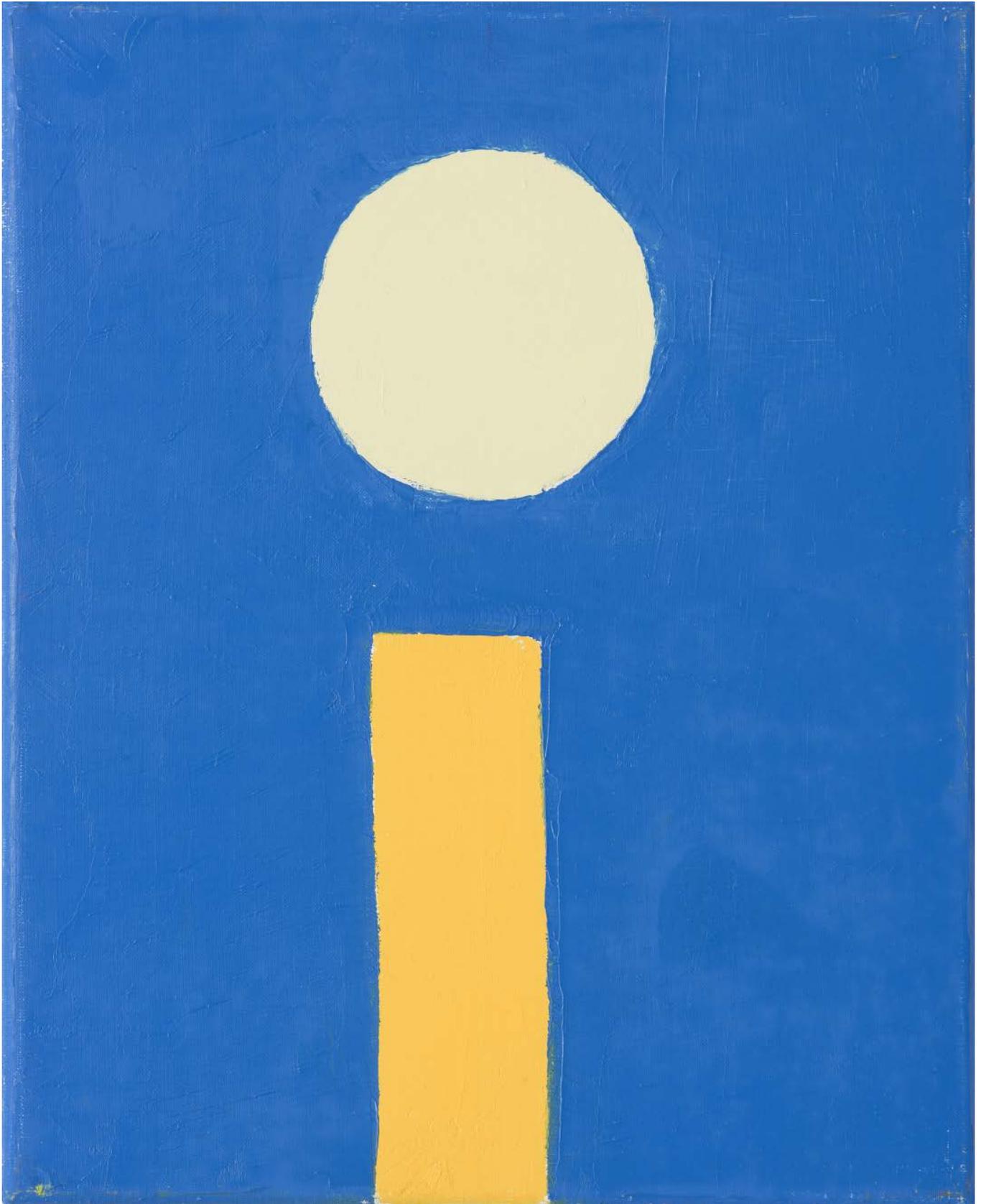
hope and despair that the Mediterranean city has experienced. At the turn of the century, the forgotten capital became a central port, the center of the French-designed Levantine mandate, and a battlefield for global wars. It saw the rise of experimental, intellectual, and artistic movements, influenced by Paris but also rooted in pre-Islamic and Sufi art and thought. Adnan, the daughter of a broken, mixed-culture couple, was a keen student of poetry and philosophy who set out to learn, write, teach, and travel, amassing a rich literary and historical knowledge. Her life was marked by hardship and sadness, but she maintained a candid thirst for the sea, in which she enjoyed losing herself from early childhood, and for knowledge. She traveled to Algeria, where she connected *Souffle* poetry magazine with the budding *Shi'r* movement led by Adonis and Yusuf el-Khal in Beirut; Paris, where she studied with Gaston Bachelard; and The University of California, Berkeley, where she began a doctorate in philosophy in 1955. Then she quit and spent seven months wandering in Mexico. When her mother died in 1958, she settled in a small town north of San Francisco to teach philosophy of art at Dominican College, where Ansel Adams had studied. There, between the misty mountain chains and the vastness of the ocean, she found the uneasy serenity that only exiles know. That is when she began to paint, at the age of 34, encouraged by artist Ann O'Hanlon, who founded the college's art department. She picked up some crayons, oil paint, and a palette knife, and created elemental compositions where squares in primary hues stretched onto mysterious liquid planes, like the open landscapes of California.



Etel Adnan, "Untitled" (2016), Oil on canvas, 10 ½ x 13 ¾ inches (27 x 35 cm) (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

Critics compared the paintings to Nicolas de Staël's bright "paysages." But while Adnan recognized his influence, her references were much broader and rooted in the Middle East, ranging from Saliba Douaihi, Paul Guiragossian, and Saloua Raouda Choucair, whose work has recently similarly experienced a renaissance. The Romantic poets (Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Goethe) and Sufism that marked her youth also imbued a sense of awe, sentimentalism, and sacredness to her work. The compositions, sketched impulsively and speedily, are so many reflections of her spirit and moments of her nomadic life. The incredible sense of calm that the abstract forms radiate, perhaps an attempt to make sense of the upheavals around her, are quasi-spiritual, a total aesthetic experience that the artist has since recreated countless times, with subtle variations, evolving into mountain landscapes and, later, bright circles. The combination of sensual lines and

deep colors also hold a heavy erotic tension, perhaps evoking female bodies or embraces. Most remarkably, Adnan relentlessly pursues the beauty and light in the world around her, even in its darkest times.



Etel Adnan, "Untitled" (2014), Oil on canvas, 12 x 9 ½ inches (30.5 x 24.1 cm) (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

In her 1984 biographical essay on identity and language, "[To Write in a Foreign Language](#)," the artist wrote:

Furiously, I became a painter. I immersed myself in that new language. Abstract art was the equivalent of poetic expression; I didn't need to use words, but colors and lines. I didn't need to belong to a language-oriented culture but to an open form of expression ... My spirit was loose. I understood that one can move in different directions, that the mind, unlike one's body, can go simultaneously in many directions, that I moved not on single planes but within a spherical mental world, and that what we consider to be problems can also be tensions, working in more mysterious ways than we understand.

Adnan returned to Lebanon in 1972, a happy, prolific period where she met Simone Fattal, a Syrian-born painter, sculptor and collage artist and her future partner, and mingled with many of the city's luminaries. But the violent onset of the Lebanese civil war a few years later ended this brief idyll. Witnessing senseless deaths, kidnappings, and monstrous torture, Adnan wrote her pivotal novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, based on the life of Syrian social worker Marie Rose Boulos, who was killed by Christian militia. When several of her friends died, and she was threatened and stripped from her newspaper job, she moved to California with Fattal. There began her love affair with Mount Tamalpais, her own Fuji or Mont Saint-Victoire, which she painted over and over again in endless variations of light, form, and color — some quaint, others turbulent and explosive, her brushstroke calligraphic at times. These canvases were endless expressions of her daily state of mind, of an imagined Eden between sea and mountain.



Etel Adnan, "Untitled" (2015), Oil on canvas, 13 ¾ x 10 ½ inches (35 x 27 cm) (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

“There’s this tension that comes from Beirut being one of her places,” Wilson-Goldie, who spent many years writing about, researching and interviewing Adnan, tells me. “The world is a beautiful place, but also the world is full of horrors, and her paintings hold those two things together. She is dealing with the fact that you have both. The fact that she does it every day, it’s the practice almost like calisthenics — I started to understand her paintings as the exercises of a writer, putting colors together, putting blocks and shapes in an almost violent, cutting way on the canvas. And then I went back to her writing and realized how painterly her writing is — the way she described the sky and the city.”

The author felt a strong connection with Adnan, as a woman and art writer engaged with regional politics and conflict such as the 2006 war. “I felt that I was in her shoes,” she says, “living in Beirut, leaving Beirut, working at a newspaper, feeling that you were a part of an artistic moment, feeling that your desire and sexuality and power as a woman are extremely upfront.”



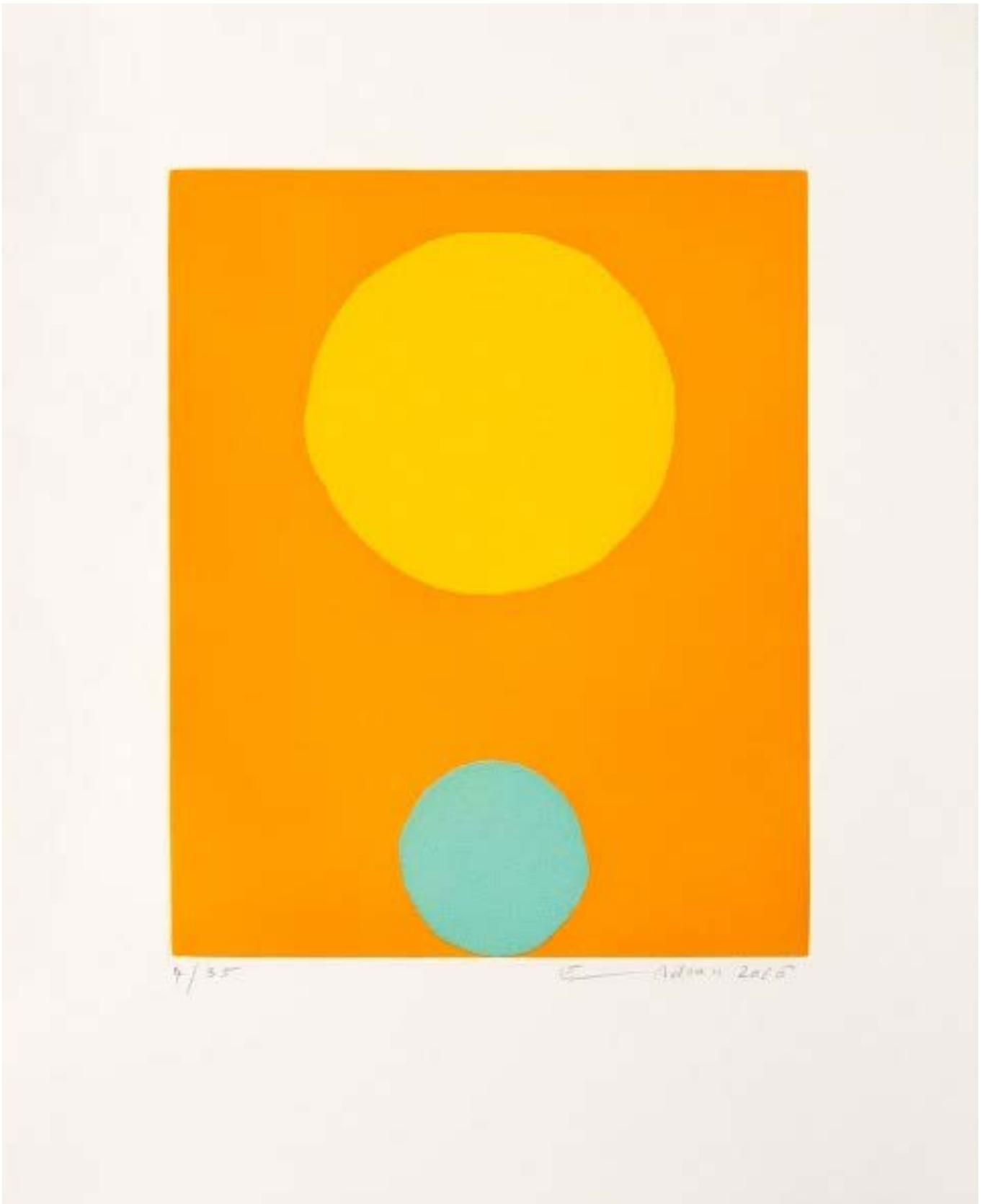
Etel Adnan, "Untitled" (2015), Oil on canvas, 16 ¼ x 13 inches (41 x 33 cm) (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

While her writings were boldly political, Adnan's abstract forms were not

totally removed from the extreme upheavals of her time. She was violently opposed to the Algerian and Vietnam wars, and was vocal about her dissent. She suffered greatly from the losses of the Lebanese conflicts and believed in politically engaged art and activism. In fact, many read her deceptively candid paintings as reflections on life, war, and love.

“There’s a point where you can read her abstractions allegorically,” explains Wilson-Goldie. “Sometimes I see a beautiful landscape — the shape could be a body — two people in love, two people fighting. The later work with circles could be the sun and moon, two people together. You can extrapolate a political meaning from that and it works.”

Ultimately, looking at her writings, art, and life as a whole, a radical project emerges — an engaged pacifism. “What is consistent throughout her work, her writing and painting,” explains Wilson-Goldie, “is that you can acknowledge the beauty and horror of the world. You can face the fact that violence is happening, see it within us and insist on being non-violent in your writing and your work. I think this is what sets her apart.”



Etel Adnan, "Le Poids du Monde II" (2016), Etching, 19 x 15 inches (48.3 x 38.1 cm) , Edition of 35 with 3 APs (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

Wilson-Goldie's rigorous research, sharp analysis, and delightful writing make the case for the depth and importance of Adnan's life and work. This

book is a fascinating document on Adnan's imagination and mind, but also on artistic movements, from Parisian Modernism to California countercultures. It's an important project on the history of Beirut through the years and its leading intellectuals and artists, including Adnan's partner, the painter Simone Fattal (who has an upcoming [retrospective at MoMA PS1](#) this spring), Janine Rubeiz, Adonis, Mahmoud Darwish, Yusuf al Khal, and others from Beirut's prolific intellectual milieu. More importantly, it corrects Eurocentric and patriarchal views of art history by presenting an artist between East and West, between Sufism and Abstraction, between theory and craft, negotiating cultures and traditions, ultimately finding her voice and making all these places and influences her own.

[*Etel Adnan \(Contemporary Painters Series\)*](#) by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie is out now from Lund Humphries.



Etel Adnan, "Untitled" (2016), Oil on canvas, 13 ¾ x 10 ½ inches (35 x 27 cm) (© Etel Adnan, Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.)

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