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PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS ETEL ADNAN

FEATURES: 20/20 BY MAYMANAH FARHAT FROM NOV/DEC 2013

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ETEL ADNAN, *Untitled*, c. 1995–2000, oil on canvas, 45.5 × 54.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg.

It is difficult to pinpoint when the renewed interest in Etel Adnan's work began. By the time curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev invited the Lebanese-American artist and writer to participate in Documenta 13 in June 2012, after coming across a show of her paintings and drawings at Beirut's Sfeir-Semler gallery in 2010, a local celebration of her extensive career was well underway. Earlier that year, two of Adnan's books—the Lebanese Civil War-era novel *Sitt Marie-Rose* (1977) and a collection of prose, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005)—had been reissued by Francophone publisher Tamyras. While Sfeir-Semler's show was on view, related events happened across the city. The Al Madina Theatre, for example, staged an experimental performance by Nagy Souraty, *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Body* (2010), based on Adnan's writings. In conjunction, it held a conference inviting regional artists and thinkers to reflect on Adnan's creative legacy while launching the Etel Adnan Award for Women Playwrights. In October, Sfeir-Semler took her work to Frieze Art Fair in London, where she also participated at the Serpentine Gallery's "Maps Marathon," reading poems from *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989).

In a way, this chain of laudatory events was to be expected given the generative nature of Adnan's creative output and the many successive milestones that have accompanied it over the past 60 years across multiple continents. In the mid-1950s, she left France for the United States after studying philosophy at the Sorbonne. Because she had been educated in French schools while raised in Beirut—where she was born to a Greek mother and a Syrian father in 1925—she feels at home in Paris and has spent frequent stretches of her life there. Once in the US, she pursued graduate studies at Harvard and the University of California, Berkeley, and settled just north of San Francisco in Marin County, where she taught aesthetics in the philosophy department at Dominican College. There she met painter Ann O'Hanlon, who was head of the school's art department and was responsible for nurturing her early experiments in art. This initial interest in painting came at a critical moment in her development as a writer, shortly after she had abandoned writing in French in solidarity with the struggle for Algerian independence, and just before she established a literary voice through anti-Vietnam War activism and its American poetry movement.

When she returned to Beirut in 1972 and was offered the position of culture editor for French newspaper *Al Safa*, and later *L'Orient-Le Jour*, she was on track to becoming one of Lebanon's leading artists. Although short-lived, her tenure as editor and critic

established her place in the Arab world's artistic and intellectual circles, which she has maintained despite periods of absence. Adnan has displayed the same level of intensity in both literature and the visual arts throughout and has exhibited in the region since the early 1970s, making her one of its prominent painters—a fact that was apparently kept secret until recently. Returning to Paris in 1976 after the start of the civil war before settling in California the following year, she penned *Sitt Marie Rose*, which has been translated from French into nearly a dozen languages and is considered a hallmark of feminist literature.

Simply titled “Etel Adnan: Paintings and Drawings,” the Sfeir-Semler show included around 50 canvases and works on paper, many of which were painted in Marin County between 1995 and 2001. The semiabstracted landscapes and delicate accordion artist's books were recognizable to anyone who has followed Lebanese art since it regained its footing in the mid-1990s following the civil war. No new revelations were made, but the exhibition served as a reminder to local audiences of how brilliantly the artist's paintings hold up; they are neither dated nor easily placed, and despite their small scale, tend to overcome even the most barren spaces. In landscapes and seascapes, Adnan paints with marked force in broad brushstrokes and swathes of radiant color, as if channeling the elements that shape her organic subject matter. Her works on paper incorporate text in the tradition of Arabic calligraphy, which privileges stylization and often ventures into abstraction as a reference to the sublime, while retaining the linear orientation of Japanese folding books and drawing inspiration from a rich repository of literary sources.

Sfeir-Semler showcased Adnan's work at the most auspicious time. After more than a decade of overexposure of the so-called postwar generation of Lebanese artists, international viewers appeared eager for an alternative side of Beirut's famed, albeit obscured, art scene. Adnan's retrospective at Documenta 13 featured work dating back to 1959. Thirty-eight paintings were arranged across the four walls of a white-cube space in Kassel. In the center of the room, a midsize, symphonic abstraction woven into a rug was laid on a low pedestal as the centrifugal anchor. News spread quickly, and soon venues across Europe and the US were organizing their own events for Adnan.

The culmination of a whirlwind tour originating in Beirut was the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts' “Words and Places: Etel Adnan,” the first large-scale institutional exhibition of the artist's work, held in April 2013. Alongside her untitled Mount Tamalpais paintings, her painterly studies of Bay Area environs, and a number of *leporellos* (accordion-pleated books), it included selected translations of her mid-1970s *Al Safa* writings, which sought to enrich understandings of her oeuvre within the context of Lebanon's fraught cultural history. Now that her importance in Arab art history is well established, hopefully the next phase of this critical look will include a closer examination of Etel Adnan's contributions to postwar American art with a proper stateside homecoming.

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