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Interview with Etel Adnan

"I React to What is Happening in the World"

Etel Adnan, the grand dame of Middle Eastern literature, is the epitome of cosmopolitanism: throughout her life, she has oscillated between one country, one language, and one genre and another. dOCUMENTA (13) dedicated an entire retrospective to this exceptional poet, writer, and painter. Vera Kern travelled to Kassel to meet the 87-year-old

dOCUMENTA 13 has dedicated a retrospective to you: 87 paintings, two tapestries, a film and a book. What does it mean to you to have a retrospective at dOCUMENTA?

Etel Adnan: I wish it had happened 20 years earlier! It's funny because at the same time I sometimes think maybe it is good it didn't happen before, perhaps because I was not self-conscious enough for such an internationally renowned exhibition.

When you become successful, you're sometimes afraid that you are not that good any more. And it's a kind of consecration that your work is worth being accepted for such an international event. Of course, it's an artist's dream to be at dOCUMENTA. It is the biggest fair in the world and it's not commercial; it is very intellectual and artistic. So it's an honour to be here.

You also contributed a notebook you wrote specially for dOCUMENTA, On Love and the Cost We Are Not Willing to Pay, to the recently launched series "100 Notes, 100 Thoughts". What is the background to this book?

Etel Adnan: The artistic director of dOCUMENTA, Carolyn Cristov-Bakargiev, wanted me to write about my paintings. But I have already written on art. So she asked me – as if it was a private conversation – what interests you? And I said, what strikes me most is that in film and in books, we speak a lot about sex, violence and pornography, but we don't speak of love.

So I wrote about love with no self-censorship. And basically I meant that love is not only for people; it's an energy that is distributed differently. But the hardest love is love for a person; after all, objects obey to you. If you love painting, you are alone with your colour and canvas. But if you love a person, that person has also his own problems.

Some people feel attached to language. Language is also a kind of leitmotif running through your work.

Etel Adnan: My mother was a Greek from Turkey, from Smyrna, now Izmir. And my father was an officer of the Ottoman Empire, born in Damascus. They spoke Turkish with each other, and my mother spoke Greek to me. In Beirut I was surrounded by Arabic; at school we spoke French. But now my working language is English.

Of all these languages, which one would you consider to be most your own?

Etel Adnan: I don't think I have one, to be honest. Because it depends on what I am doing, in which country I am. I bought a little house in Greece, just to hear Greek, to think of my mother's language. When I write, I write mostly in English. And I like the English language because I went to America alone back then and I made myself. It is something that is solely mine; no family.

I like the freedom in the English language. You can express yourself as you like. In French, if you invent, people think you made a mistake. You don't have that problem in the English language. Nobody will ever tell you "that is a mistake". And I love Arabic! I would have loved to be a poet in Arabic. Arabic is a beautiful language.

You have been commuting between languages and places for quite some time – Beirut, Paris, California. In view of your cosmopolitanism, do you feel like a global citizen?

Etel Adnan: I don't know. Global citizenship is coming. But everything you do has a price; it's good in one way. But I am afraid of this global citizenship. Look at art: it is more and more international. If they didn't tell you that I am from Lebanon and even California and you saw my paintings, would you know where they come from? Whatever we gain, we lose something else. And globalization is both good and dangerous.

How does your multicultural background influence your work?

Etel Adnan: When you have such a multicultural background – which is the way of the future – where is your identity? I often ask myself this question. Your identity is a mixture of things. It is your own memory of your background, your family and your own life. Yet in the end you choose how you want to live.

I could have decided to forget and be an American. Or I could have decided to hate America and be an Arab. I could have decided not to be an Arab. But personally, I don't ask myself too many questions about national belonging; identity is like a tree, one day it is happy, one day it loses its leaves, but there is continuity.

You once wrote "Beirut sticks to me like hot wax, even in slumber". After years of living in exile, do you still consider Beirut your home?

Etel Adnan: Beirut becomes my home when it has problems. It is not my only home. I have spent more time in California than in Beirut. I am pretty much American. And I grew up in French schools. But when I read in the newspaper – about the civil war in Lebanon, about the war in Syria – the politics do not allow us to forget.

To be honest, I feel alright in the world. There are certain places that I like best, but I cannot be in both places at the same time: northern California, near San Francisco, and Beirut. Those are my two true homes. And they are beautiful places. Beirut was beautiful. But now they have built urbanism without city planning. They are killing Beirut more than the war with those concrete buildings.

So you consider Beirut and Northern California your home. Is that also why you call yourself an Arab-American writer?

Etel Adnan: I do identify myself as an Arab-American artist. But I do not call myself an American-Arab artist. This is how it works in America. They say Black-American writers, Hispanic-American writers. It's a concept. But I accept that label. I do identify with it. Even though I also feel at home in Europe; Europe is very creative.

Crises have often triggered your creativity. Your work has been influenced by the Algerian War, the Vietnam War, the Lebanese War. How would you describe your art-making process?

Etel Adnan: I react to what is happening in the world or to the place where I am. I don't decide ahead of time what my subject is. I haven't decided about any of my works ahead of time. They always happen by chance.

With your Lebanese background, what is your perspective on the current events in the Arab world?

Etel Adnan: The Arab world has been in the hands of extremely corrupt authoritarian governments. They cannot just disappear; they are structures. Moreover, foreign nations supported them, so it is a double problem. Every country has a national problem, and superpowers have aspirations regarding their territories.

Take Syria, for example, it has had a corrupt government for 40 years and more. It was getting a bit better, but they refuse to reform. And China and Russia are helping the Syrian government, so the poor Syrian people, they can win against their government, but they cannot win easily against China and Russia. So these Arab countries are not free from their own government and not from the outside world. It's tragic.

When you look at what is happening there, do you have the perspective of an outsider?

Etel Adnan: No, I feel concerned. As I say, I am happy in America and I am happy in Europe. But when I see all these problems, I cannot detach my mind totally. I want to, but then the news and the history ... it breaks my heart. For example, there was a beautiful revolution in Egypt, but the military doesn't want to go! We don't know what the Europeans are doing in secret; we don't know. Who is backing the military? We don't really know which country is backing it. So what can the people do? They did their best. So it breaks my heart!

Interview conducted by Vera Kern

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Etel Adnan was born in Beirut in 1925 to a Greek Christian mother and a Muslim Syrian father. She studied philosophy in Paris, Harvard and Berkeley and taught philosophy in California. She now lives as an artist in Paris, Beirut, and in Sausalito, California.

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