

MONICA DE CARDENAS



Etel Adnan, *Untitled #251*, 2016, oil on canvas, 15 × 18"

Etel Adnan

SFEIR-SEMLER GALLERY | HAMBURG

The simplicity of Etel Adnan's paintings conceals the complex experiences of the artist's remarkable life. Born in Lebanon in 1925 to a Greek mother and a Syrian father, Adnan grew up amid multiple cultures, languages, nationalities, and religions. In 1949 she went to Paris to study philosophy at the Sorbonne; she continued her studies at the University of California, Berkeley, starting in 1955. She taught philosophy at Dominican College in San Rafael, California, from 1958 to 1972, during which time she also started painting and writing poetry. Then she returned to Beirut, where from 1972 to 1976 she worked as the arts editor for two newspapers—hoping, as she put it, to make her own contribution to her country's cultural awakening. In 1978 her novel *Sitt Marie Rose* was published in Paris and received the Prix de l'Amitié Franco-Arabe. She returned to California in 1979, but today lives in Paris and Beirut.

Thus an unusually cosmopolitan spirit informs Adnan's work as an artist, writer, poet, and philosopher, and it is probably just this interconnection of different forms of artistic expression—between words and images, philosophically trained thought and raw expression, a broad range of cultural references and a politically alert critical consciousness—that lends her work its depth and complexity. Even when her painting appears to be a simple celebration of beauty, she avoids indulging in mere aesthetic formalism. Adnan's work is political in the most profoundly humanist sense of the word; her pictures invoke happiness as beauty, simplicity, and a feeling for nature—for her, "happiness is resistance." Adnan emphasizes that art's political dimension lies in its power of assertion. "For me, even my geometric or lyrical paintings are political," she says. "Art is political even when it decides not to be."

Her exhibition in Hamburg presented new pieces, bringing together very different types of work, but with a focus on painting: Sixteen were on display, all *Untitled*, 2016. The show also included several drawings, three new large-format Aubusson tapestries, and the video *Motion*, 1980–90/2012, which Adnan originally shot on 8 mm, as well as two leporellos, paper works folded concertina style: *Mahmoud Darwish*, 2013, and *Family Memoirs on the End of the Ottoman Empire*, 2015. These works, similar to painted books, evoke a symbiosis between the written word (in ink) and painterly visual elements (in watercolor).

The paintings, almost all small-format and painted with a rigorous two-dimensionality, are notable for their stark chromatic contrasts combined with subtle distinctions. They can just as easily be read as nonrepresentational abstractions as basic representations of nature; in essence, though, they deal with a concentrated form of emotion: It is not an image of nature that Adnan aims to capture, but the feeling of it. Underlying her paintings there is always a reference to a specific landscape; for instance, her recurrent mountain motif comes from the view from her window of Mount Tamalpais, north of San Francisco, which has been an enduring source of inspiration for the artist for many years. Adnan arranges her paintings' monochrome hues areas in rigorous juxtaposition, with no overpainting, no blurred borders. The paint, always applied with a palette knife, glows with iridescent clarity. Adnan stages encounters between hues, and no single tone, no matter how similar it is to another, appears twice in the same picture. Ultimately this concentration on contrasts between flat color fields has a lyrical value: "Basically," she's said of her paintings, "they are visual poems."

—Jens Asthoff, February 2017

Translated from German by Nathaniel McBride.

ARTFORUM