

Etel Adnan, Van Gogh Museum review – bold colours blaze from the walls

The Lebanese-American artist, who died last year, celebrated nature in rich, dramatic hues

Richard Holledge JUNE 29 2022



Etel Adnan, 'Landscape' (c1990) © The Estate of Etel Adnan. Private collection (KA Collection, Lebanon)

When Etel Adnan was a girl, she went to the beach in Beirut with her mother. The sun shone, her world seemed a blaze of primary colours against the white of the sand. Those bold colours and the spirit of those happy times radiate from the walls of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam in a retrospective of works by the Lebanese-American artist.

Colour as Language features 78 works by Adnan, who died last year aged 96. The exhibition includes paintings, leporellos (pages decorated and folded concertina-style) and vibrant tapestries, as well as two videos, recorded just before her death, in which she

explains the principles of her work in a way that is both articulate and poignant.

As she says, her paintings are all about colour. “When I started painting, I realised that when I squeezed a paint tube, the colour in front of me was so intense and so pure it looked beautiful and right. I was reluctant to mix it with other colours.” You can see the result in the deceptively simple *California* series, in which her emotional impulse is expressed with direct, simple blocks of blue, red and ochre. Sometimes mountains loom over the landscape, sometimes they seem to be fading into the horizon.

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Adnan was a poet, journalist and novelist before she was a painter. Born in Beirut in 1925 to a Syrian father and a Greek mother, she was educated in French at a school run by nuns before winning a scholarship to the Sorbonne in Paris to study philosophy. In 1955 she headed to the University of California, Berkeley, and from 1958 to 1972 taught philosophy of art in California.

It was not until she was in her thirties that she began to paint bold abstracts in the gleaming colours of her Beirut childhood. As a young woman she had wanted to be an architect, but her mother insisted it was an unsuitable career for her. Her early work, such as "Inca King" (1965), was architectural – her partner, the ceramicist Simone Fattal, recalled how she often began a painting with a red square as if to find the locus on the canvas.

After years of relying on the written word, she began to express herself in her art. Her talents went unrecognised internationally – except for the Lebanese artistic diaspora, for whom she had long been an icon – until 2012, when a collection of her paintings was included in documenta, the five-yearly exhibition in Kassel, Germany. Two years later, White Cube in London staged a show of her work followed by her first retrospective, at the Serpentine Galleries in 2016.

Her distinctive style owes something to the way she painted her works flat on a table and "attacked" the

canvas, laying down the oil straight from the tube in thick, dramatic blocks of colour. The paintings were often completed in one intense session, which added to their vitality. Take her paintings from the window of her home in Sausalito, California, of Mount Tamalpais. She painted this view every day, capturing the changing mood of the mountain in strong reds, blues and mauves as the sun shone, the clouds gathered and the light brightened, flickered and faded.

"That mountain became my best friend," she said. "It was more than just a beautiful mountain: it entered me, existentially, and filled my life. It became a poem around which I orientated myself."

It is tempting to suggest that mountain was a surrogate for those sunny days of her Lebanon childhood; although exile was her choice, she was haunted by the suffering of her country. Perhaps because she was in need of an anchor to the past, she continued to paint her mountain when she returned to live in Paris in the last years of her life.

Van Gogh is not just the host but a guest in Adnan's show: her work shares the gallery space with 10 of his paintings. Curator Sara Tas shows the connection between the two: the passion for colour, their almost metaphysical empathy for the natural world and how that came to be transferred on to the canvas. For Adnan, colour was a direct expression of nature, a way to



Adnan's leporello, 'Journey to Mount Tamalpais (Rihla ilà Jabal Tamalpais)' (2008) © The Estate of Etel Adnan. Musée de l'Institut du monde arabe, Paris (donation of Claude and France Lemand). Photo: Béatrice Hatala

embrace beauty, and she considered Van Gogh the first artist daring enough to apply this in his art. “Van Gogh really liberated colour,” she said. “Because he accepted it as true.”

Adnan referred to Van Gogh’s “The Sower” (1888) and her own “Hot” (c1960), two paintings which could hardly be more different in style – Van Gogh’s earthy, rather gloomy scene of the farmer at dusk; Adnan’s burst of colours plastered on to the canvas, her familiar squares against swirling yellows and bleached pinks. While she was intuitive about her approach to her work, Van Gogh had a more questioning relationship to nature. Adnan says of the two paintings that there is an awareness that nature is “an architect” and it “organises itself and creates lines of force”.

With Adnan, words and paintings were intermingled – “I write what I see, I paint what I am” – and language met illustration in her leporellos, delicate paper concertinas on which she added drawings to illustrate the verses of Arab poets or to lament the turmoil in the Middle East. Because of her upbringing in a European school, she never learnt Arabic properly, so had her English translated into Arabic characters, which she then drew.

One of the most arresting leporellos is “Journey to Mount Tamalpais” (2008), in which a poem in praise of the mountain is set against sketches of it and multicoloured stripes that seem to speak to the rhythms of the day and the changes in the seasons.

The exhibition ends with “The Weight of the World”, a series of small paintings set in a straight line across one gallery wall, each with an orb suspended in space. This is the sun as an expression of the infinite, suggesting the vulnerability of the Earth and the people in it. It’s affecting, calming. There are witty circular yellow seats that mimic the paintings and enhance the effect of tranquility. In fact, the curator invites the viewer to lie down on the carpet and meditate.

Adnan would have approved. In one of the video interviews, she talks about the way she looked at beaches and fields and recognised that “landscape is not separate from our cosmic awareness.”

She said: “We are in nature, we are not alone. Nature is strong and it attracts us. We look for beauty. It makes us happy. It’s not complicated, we need it.”



Lebanese-American artist Etel Adnan
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