

Etel Adnan

Haus Konstruktiv, Zurich, Switzerland

BY JÖRG SCHELLER IN **REVIEWS** | 30 MAR 16



Etel Adnan, Untitled, 2013, courtesy: the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery Hamburg / Beirut

When consumer-citizens of the 21st century have a personal meltdown or an identity crisis, they tend to fall into frantic activism. They take out a loan and hurry off to Sri Lanka, where they counteract heavy jet lag with an ayurvedic treatment. They google 'Buddhism' for nights on end and order the complete works of Wilhelm Schmid on Amazon. They download whale songs, and listen to meditation music and autogenic training courses on their smartphones; they read up on the basics of progressive muscle relaxation or book a 'dropout' weekend at the nearest cloister. Absurd enough, but if you happened to see Etel Adnan's exhibition, 'La Joie de Vivre', in Zurich's Haus Konstruktiv, all of that will come across as even more absurd than before. Why, you ask, go through all the bother, when humanity has already developed a reliable meditation and contemplation technique in the modern era: abstract art?

To avoid misunderstandings: the paintings by writer and artist Adnan, who was born in Lebanon in 1925 and lives in Paris, are far from being loaded with healing claims or even New Age 'art therapy'. And that's exactly what makes her so therapeutic, in a good way. Stepping into Adnan's exhibition on the top floor of Haus Konstruktiv is like stepping out of an inner haze. You begin to breathe freely. Small-format paintings in cassette-like frames are mounted in a frieze-like sequence on the walls. The predominantly light colours applied beside each other with a putty knife form compositions that are at times moderately gestural (including Untitled, c.1965-70), but mostly geometrically ordered (including Untitled, 2013). Leporellos of sketches (including Leporello New York, 1990), tapestries (including California, 1977) and a Super 8 film (Motion, 1980-90/2012) complement the exhibition.

Impressions of Californian landscapes underlie the paintings and tapestries; Adnan once taught philosophy in San Rafael. It's as if she whispers to the viewer: 'Calm down! You can be less ambitious. It doesn't always have to be about artistic research with neuropathological added value! Highly charged activist interventions are not the measure of all things!' People everywhere need their little heterotopias,

and they're often symbolic, in which – as Adnan writes in her book, *Mount Tamalpais* (1986) – 'hell' becomes 'folklore of the past' and 'images' emerge as 'equals': 'We make them, but they don't belong to us.'

In the contemporary uproar around 'activism' (Peter Weibel) and inter-, trans- and multidisciplinary, accelerated by educational policy, it is her indirect politesse that makes reserved, poetically dreamy art like that of Adnan relevant again. In an interview that's also on view in the exhibition, the artist, who indeed comes across as directly political in her writing, emphasizes that even her 'abstract poetry' is political: 'We must be happy! Happiness is resistance. I found my own path to being happy'. For her, this path is abstract painting, for which spiritual traditions are indeed an inspiration, rather in the spirit of classical modernity à la Wassily Kandinsky or Paul Klee. But you could also follow Friedrich Schiller's argument that art is something crucial for societal mental hygiene, a playful area between the cruelty of nature and the cruelty of law – an area occupied today by the leisure and wellness industries.

Only in an ostensibly paradoxical way do Adnan's meditative-contemplative miniatures offer reference points, or antidotes, to current problems. Thus, the desolation of her images correlates with recurring anthropocentric-critical themes in her texts, which contemporary supporters of thing theory or actor network theory also push for: 'Images don't differentiate themselves that much from people. They talk to you. [...] Our mind defines things, it separates them from each other. [...] But in reality there are no separations' (Adnan in her book *Gespräche mit meiner Seele, Conversations with My Soul*, 2012). These like these give you an idea of why Adnan was (re)discovered in 2012 at the transhumanist-oriented Documenta 13 – and what contemporary, discursive, diagnostic density even these little, plainly abstract landscapes can evoke.

– Translated by Michael Ladner