Sea and Fog: The Art of Etel Adnan

By Nana Asfour October 18, 2012 ARTS & CULTURE

Etel Adnan wasn't there. "It's hard for her to travel these days," Photi told me. Too bad, I thought. She is an iconic Lebanese-American cultural figure and I had hoped to meet her. She was also missing out on the impressive turnout in her honor in New York's Lower East Side.

I had arrived just as the reading had started. The tiny gallery was packed, and I had to squeeze my way through the many bodies. Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, an art critic, was already speaking. I was surprised she was there. She lives in Beirut; I lived there once. So did Etel. Etel and I were both born there, albeit forty-five years apart. And we were both there during the fifteen-year Lebanese Civil War (she, here and there; me, throughout much of its first ten years). Etel wrote the defining novel about that war, in 1978. It's called Sitt Marie Rose and is based on the true story of a woman who was kidnapped and killed by the Christian Phalangists for her support of the Palestinian cause. The Phalangists were one of innumerable militias during the war; they ruled East Beirut, where I, a daughter of two Palestinians, lived. The book was translated into dozens of languages and is regarded as an important contribution to Arab feminism.

Kaelen was holding Etel's new book, Sea and Fog, in her hand. It's a book of prose and poetry that had just been released by Nightboat Books, a small, independent press from Callicoon, New York. It was originally written in English, Etel's first language these days. She penned it in California, where she has been based for decades. (Etel also spends part of the year in Paris.)

At Callicoon Fine Arts, the small, independent gallery where we were standing, Photios Giovanis, the gallery's owner, was showing Etel's paintings. I had never seen Etel's art in person before. Until very recently I didn't even know she was an artist. I only knew her as a writer. As Kaelen spoke, I swiveled left and right, trying to get a glimpse of the works, but there were too many heads in the way. "Whenever I'm hanging out with a group of artists in Lebanon and Etel comes in, everyone is like 'Oh, here's Etel.' She's a very influential figure," Kaelen, said. Kaelen hangs out with Lebanese artists often. She knows the Lebanese art scene very well. She writes about it for publications like Bidoun, Frieze, and Artforum. I don't, in fact, know where Kaelen is from. But she writes great articles about Lebanese art. They almost all have the same theme: Lebanon is an insane, unruly, unstable place—but it has great artists.

It's all true. The people that Kaelen usually writes about are my age; they belong to what's known as the "Post-War Generation." Their work is often über-conceptual and is about the fifteen-year war (1975-1990) that they grew up in. History and memory are recurrent themes. I met many of them when I was going back and forth to Beirut, in the late nineties. I don't go there much these days, but many of them come to New York now; they show their art here so I get to keep up with their work.

I'm not sure how often Kaelen comes to New York. I know her only by name. It's not clear to me if she just happens to be here and could participate in the reading for Etel or if she came especially for this event. But she is certainly a good person to talk about Etel. She can attest to her stature for Lebanese artists, for one thing. She was also just at dOCUMENTA (13) where Etel's paintings were shown and wrote about Etel's participation in that event for Frieze. ("Her work is really at the heart of Beirut's artistic and literary avant-garde (in my opinion)," Kalen later told me.

The works she showed there were, as I could see once the reading finished and the crowd thinned, very similar to the ones she was exhibiting at Calliccoon—small, exhuberant landscape abstractions, made out of a series of colorful, geometric shapes painted with a palette knife. I thought that Etel, who turned eighty-seven recently, only started to paint recently or that her art was only now beginning to gain attention. It's not so, she told me when I contacted her by e-mail (she didn't want to be interviewed by phone). "I am painting since 1959," she wrote. She got her start because someone told her she should practice what she preaches. "[I] was in California, teaching among other courses, one in philosophy of art. So the head of the art department wondered how I can teach such a course without practicing painting. She gave me crayons and bits of paper, and I started doing little works, and she said I didn't need any training, that I was a painter. So I kept going."

Etel said she's been showing her work in Lebanon and elsewhere, "on and off," ever since. But the recent show at the Galerie Sfeir-Semler, an influential gallery that shows the likes of Lebanese-American Walid Raad (who is having a concurrent show at Paula Cooper right now), in Beirut, in 2010, seems to have been a turning point. The "gallery, which has a place in Hamburg and one in Beirut, asked me if I would show there," Etel wrote. "I said yes. Happily." This show led to her being chosen for dOCUMENTA (13). "It happened that Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, director of dOCUMENTA (13), came to Beirut the day before the opening, saw my works, and offered that I join Documenta in 2012. I have to say that I was very very surprised."

She went to Kassel where she participated in several lectures for the writer's residency program. Around forty of her works were arrayed on the walls of the documenta-Halle gallery and her debut filmmaking effort, Motion (2012), a 90-minute collage of scenes she shot in New York in the 1960s, was also shown there. dOCUMENTA also featured two new books by or about Adnan: The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay, volume six in dOCUMENTA (13)'s slim notebook series and a monograph of Adnan's art with interviews by Christov-Bakargiev and Hans Ulrich Obrist, as well as an entry by sculptor Simone Fattal, Adnan's longtime partner and founder of the avant-garde Post-Apollo Press, based in California. "dOCUMENTA (13) has been an enormous experience," Etel told me. "Something the likes of which I had never witnessed. It was like an art fair, a voyage through the world, and an open university, all this, and more, all at once. Unforgettable."

Etel's paintings have a different sensibility than her writing. Her prose suggests a world of brutality and chaos. Her art has a cheerful, sunny disposition. "Her writing is as fiercely complex and political as her paintings are serenely spare and personal," Kaelen wrote in Frieze. At the reading Kaelen repeated a quote Etel once said about her writing and art. "I write what I see, I paint what I am." To me, she wrote: "My writing and my paintings do not have a direct connection in my mind. But I am sure they influence each other in the measure that everything we do is linked to whatever we are, which includes whatever we have done or are doing. But in general, my writing is involved with history as it is made (but not only) and my painting is very much a reflection of my immense love for the world, the happiness to just be, for nature, and the forces that shape a landscape."

She says that she does not paint regularly. There are periods when she writes, and others when she paints. "I can draw, though, once in a while, when I am involved with a work of writing," she wrote. "Usually, I am a compulsive person, and I need, some times urgently, to paint … Painting is close to poetry, is a kind of poetry expressed visually. It has to be spontaneous, rapid, at least in my case." Arab art has little lineage of its own. Much of the work being made there in the last half century is rooted in Western art movements. When asked about her own influences, Etel says: "I have a great love for some painters in particular: Malevich, Klee, Kandinsky, Delacroix, in contemporaries, Agnes Martin, Polke …"

I had brought up Nicolas de Staël as an obvious point of reference in her work. "I love Nicolas de Staël particularly, and my work can remind people of him," she wrote. "But looked at attentively, our works are not similar at all. There is the fact that he used a palette knife, and so do I for my oil paintings, and the palette knife forces you in a way to apply large sections of color on the canvas. It is the opposite of a brush (which I use for inks and watercolors)." At dOCUMENTA (13) her palette knife was shown in a display case along with a series of objects from Beirut's National Museum, burnt and fused when militiamen in the early 1970s turned the museum into a fighting post.

But one work that Etel has done which is instrumental to fellow Arab artists is drawn from her own heritage: an accordion-like book on which she has hand-written a series of poems in Arabic then added colorful markings on each page. Kaelen said that this work was a thrilling discovery for her. In a Frieze essay about what inspires their art, Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige named Etel as a person they admire. "Among other things, what struck us were Adnan's notebooks made of Japanese paper, the pages of which she fills with writings in Arabic," the husband-wife duo wrote. "The writing resembles pictures, because she copies sentences and poems in a language she has barely mastered and in which, in fact, she does not actually write. This greatly moves us. Her gestures inhabit a language that becomes drawing, like a re-created language that nevertheless refers to an exile within one's territory and, beyond, to a deep interior exile."

Adnan, who, like me, is not fully Lebanese—her father, a Damascus-born Syrian, was a high-ranking official in the Ottoman army; her mother, a Greek, grew up in the city of Smyrna, which was burned in 1922—studied in a French school in Beirut, and French was her mother tongue. In the late 1940s, she went to France and stayed in Paris for about three years. In 1955, she set off to the U.S. where she studied for a spell at Berkeley and Harvard before taking on a job teaching philosophy at the Dominican College of of California in San Rafael. She returned to Beirut in the early seventies to head a cultural journal, left again, but kept coming back even after the Civil War broke out in 1975.

Her writings about Beirut are seminal. "Beirut is humiliated," she wrote in the novel Sitt Marie Rose, which, though published only three years into the war, concisely captures the experience of living there throughout the many years of fighting—for children and adults. "She suffered the defeat; she's the one who lost. She's like a dog with her tail between her legs. She was heedless to the point of folly. She gathered the manners and customs, the flaws and vengeance, the guilt and debauchery of the whole world into her own belly. Now she has thrown it all up, and that vomit fills all her spaces."

I asked Etel about Beirut, our torrid city of birth. I wrote: "What are your impressions of Beirut at the moment, politically and culturally? And what is your current relationship to the city?" She replied: "You ask me about Beirut. That's like opening a world. No answer is possible. It's a place alive in a special way, with great artists and creative young people, it is a hedonistic place, it's full of political tensions, and it is, urbanistically, a disaster. It's solid, yet fragile, rooted in history and yet precarious, adventurous and very conservative … it's supremely interesting, and maddening. Worth a trip." I didn't tell her I was from there. But her words summed up the place accurately, resonantly, and beautifully.