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2015.07.24 Fri, by Matthew Wong Translated by: 陈煜峰

# The Poet, Painter and Novelist—Etel Adnan

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## Etel Adnan

**White Cube** (50 Connaught Road Central, Hong Kong), Jun 4—Aug 29, 2015

There is an infinitesimally fine line between poetry and painting; at their best, both seek to bypass the logic of language to enter a realm where sensations and associations can be vividly perceived, but not spoken into the air—human consciousness perfectly distilled to an irreducible essence. The poet, painter and novelist Etel Adnan, who is now in her ninetieth year, has in recent years been celebrated for her intimately scaled yet chromatically complex oil paintings at events such as documenta 13 in 2012 and last year's Whitney Biennial, along with a steady stream of gallery exhibitions across the globe. However, Adnan's arrival in the art world is not a story of unexpected or overnight success. Her semi-abstract paintings of suggested landscapes and architectural vistas, so evocatively charged with their finely calibrated nuances of place and time of day, are aesthetic extensions of a sensibility which has endlessly captured in poetry and prose the existential nature of exile—both geographical and political.



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Born in Beirut in 1925 to a Greek Orthodox mother and Syrian Muslim father, from early youth Adnan experienced a peripatetic movement of speech and thought; she was educated in French at school while speaking Greek and Arabic at home. Adnan composed her first poems when she was 20, which she says were about the sun and the sea. Throughout her adult life, she would move restlessly across the world, from Beirut to France and California, her writings and travels arising as a response to circumstantial factors, and often directly tied to political unrest. Adnan's journey as a painter began in 1960, while she was teaching philosophy at a California college. Unhappy with the French treatment of colonized Arab populations, she renounced writing in the French language and declared that she was "painting in Arabic"....





Etel Adnan Portrait by Patrick Dandy, 2014

This brings us to the present moment, as we move about the two floors of White Cube's Hong Kong space, we take in over twenty of Adnan's paintings, which represent her first solo exhibition in the region. The most immediate impression is that of a quietly assured display of work; despite the modest scale of the paintings, the largest work measuring roughly 16 x 13 inches (all paintings are untitled and completed in 2014–2015), one never senses that the canvasses are being dwarfed by the immaculate white walls and high ceilings of the gallery. The paintings are not installed with any sense of a narrative progression, but rather are hung as elliptical glimpses of settings that feel like landscapes or quiet urban corners revisited many times in the eye of both body and mind; no place is ever the same at two separate points in time. The colors, too, undiluted as if squeezed straight out of a tube and spread evenly on the surface with a palette knife, remarkably never seem to repeat themselves.

At a glance, one might detect a mountain range punctuated by water here, the setting or rising sun emerging from the surface of another canvas, or a cluster of clay houses captured at a moment in the afternoon when the blue sky which hangs above them is just so. Slowing down to look again, we notice that paradox and uncertainty begin to settle in: what is that brown dot looming directly over the sun? Is that blue block in the upper left corner the sky, or someone's balcony? A vertical green rectangle in the sky—signifies what, if not just paint? The longer one looks, the more hesitant one becomes to name the object of looking, and all that one is left with is the act of looking itself—an act which is as necessary as reaching for the nature of the ground one is standing on. Recalling Adnan's nomadic existence and winding odyssey as a writer whose work is inextricably linked with issues of gender, nationality and injustice, one is reminded by her paintings that looking is never a passive act. It is always a political one, in its inexorable movement towards confirming a perceptive truth that ultimately may not be found, but must be searched for and grappled with. As the 17th century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho once wrote in his poem, "The Narrow Road to the Interior": "every day is a journey, and the journey itself home."



Etel Adnan, "Untitled", oil on canvas, 10 5/8 x 13 3/4 in. (27 x 35 cm), 2015, ©the artist. Photo © White Cube (George Darrell) Courtesy White Cube





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