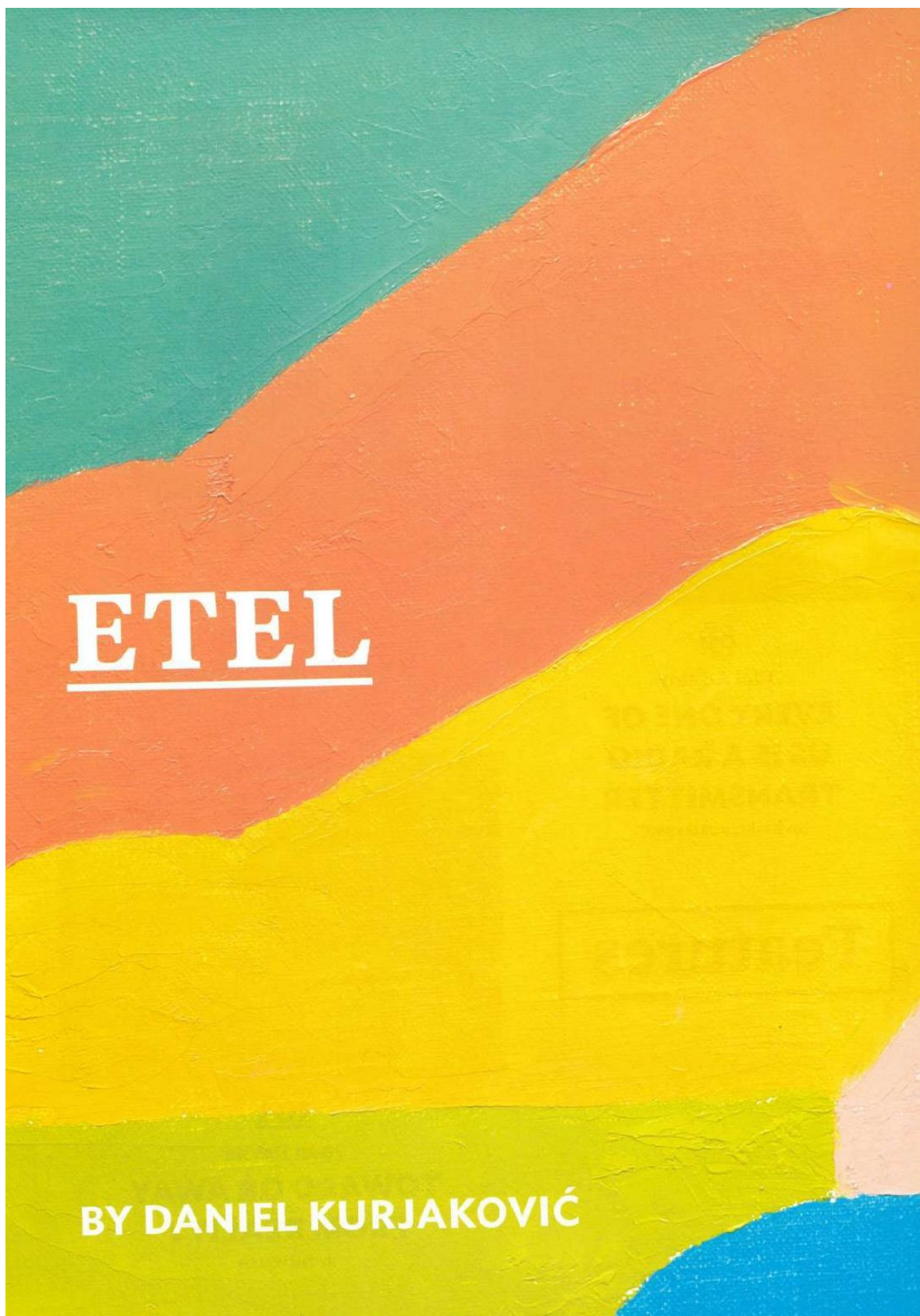


Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York

Art Asia Pacific

Novembre/Décembre 2016





**Every One of Us is
a Radio Transmitter**

ADNAN



Born in 1925, writer, essayist, poet and artist Etel Adnan is a keen observer of geopolitical unrest and, in particular, of imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism. Her literary practice combines observations—sometimes diagnostic, sometimes critical—of the historical and contemporary world with poetic and transcendental meditations. In her prose, the result of her experimentation sustained across the years, one notes the coexistence, and even interdependence, between history and metaphysics. For example, in *The Arab Apocalypse*, a major poem of 1989, there is no poetical contradiction between the politicized voice of the writer and her cosmological articulations and ecstatic and visionary metaphors. The extent of her literary works, her essays and her many artistic collaborations testify to this characteristic.

Yet one wonders how her artistic practice—better known to a wider audience since her participation in Documenta 13 (2012) with paintings, drawings, films, tapestries, artist books and objects—is, or is not, conceived and thought of in those terms. To what degree does her artistic practice contribute to the internal dialectic of Etel Adnan? That question deserves to be discussed as her artistic work—paintings and other things—does not appear, at first glance, to be one of directly political iconography. The conversation that follows is intended precisely to better understand how to interpret the work of Adnan, the apparent differences between the political and the metaphysical, and the permeability between these two sides.

It is often noted that the current discourse of contemporary art tends to perpetuate overly simplistic notions or illustrative conceptions of “political” art. In this context, the work of Adnan, who was until recently better known in the literary sphere, deserves special attention. Indeed, her familiarity with the political history of a “polycentric” world and her personal history—marked by her life around the world, full of cross-cultural forms of creativity—open new perspectives on the question of the “political” imagination in art. The different periods of Adnan’s life are more or less publicly known today, but they offer a limited space to explore her particular conception of cosmopolitanism based on the notion of “defeat”—or loss. This conception certainly contains a biographical dimension, but also has the strength of a principle.

It seems to me that not a lot of links have been established yet between your paintings and your writings. I would like to explore with you the forms of contradiction and tension that might exist between these two domains.

I believe that, superficially, in my mind, there is no connection. But everything we do—and I am not talking only about artists—even when we are cooking, reflects who we are. In that sense, there must be a link between my paintings and my writings. For example, many people tell me that often—even in my violent texts—there is a certain kind of poetry or sweetness. It is the same in my paintings. Even when I use very vivid colors, there is a sweetness, a softness, as they say in English. There is, perhaps, a “complementarity.”

For me, colors are raw and innocent. We see how much children love vivid colors, and they paint very well even when they are two-years old. When we see red, we do not necessarily see blood. For me colors are therefore innocent, especially when they directly come from the tube. I work with oil paint. It is a very beautiful material; to such a degree that I love mixing colors in order to discover a new one. I also love, from time to time, not to touch them when they come out of the tube and to use them as they are.

When it comes to words, I believe we cannot detach them from social and political reality. Words and texts belong to the social world. There is also contemporary history. I come from a place constantly at war. Even if during my life I mostly lived in California, surrounded by a superb natural environment, I was never able to cut my links to Lebanon, because it was always troubled. I believe that if there had not been wars there, I would

(Previous spread)

UNTITLED (detail), 2015, oil on canvas, 36 x 46 cm.
Courtesy Galerie Lelong, Paris/New York.

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089, 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 cm.

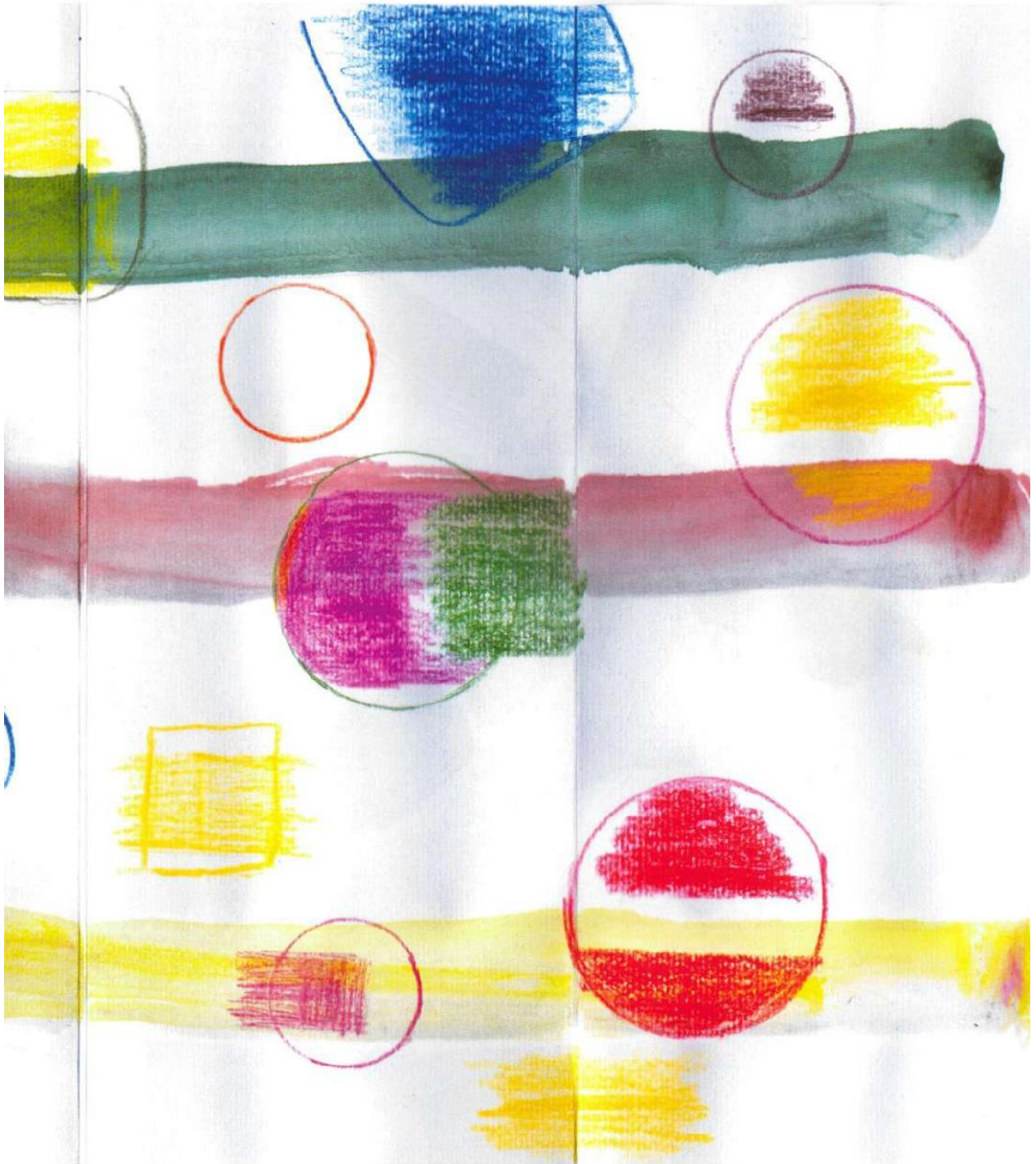
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MOTION / MOTIFS, 2012,
digitized Super-8 films.

(Opposite page)

ISSAM MAHFOUZ (detail), 2013, ink,
watercolor and crayon on paper, leporello closed:
21.5 x 9.3 cm; maximum extension: 540 cm.

Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy the
artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg.





have been much less interested in that part of the world. However, that part of the world has been sad and tragic since I was born.

Do you then believe that terms such as “beauty” or “poetry” take on a different meaning depending upon the person who uses them and their history or cultural inheritance?

Even when somebody lives in a beautiful place, he or she does not think every day of its beauty. Ultimately, after so many years, I’ve noticed that my inner happiness was expressed in my painting. Maybe because colors do not have a precise or singular signification. I am touched by the world. I love the physical world. Ever since my childhood a little stream enchants me. As I was an only daughter, I lived more with things than with people. When I was small, before we relocated, we had a garden and I was talking to the flowers. The external world has always been my life companion. I love the external world. And this is expressed in my paintings.

Very early on, I also loved literature and poetry. My love for poetry was first. My preferred poetry was written by tragic poets: Baudelaire; de Nerval, who committed suicide; Verlaine, who was alcoholic and died young; and Rimbaud, who stopped writing at an early age. Before I reached the age of 32, I would never have thought to become a painter. “Art”—that was Picasso; it was not me.

To come back to history: I became very conscious of the tragedy of the Middle East from 1955, when I became a student at Berkeley. I was 30. At that time I was living only for today and did not have an acute political consciousness. Some Arab students came to speak to me. There was an association of Arab students from all countries. One of them was Palestinian. It was at that moment I discovered the issue of Palestine. An Iraqi also introduced me to the Arab world. As a child I knew Damascus and its surroundings, Beirut and a little bit of the Lebanese mountains, as we spent a few summers there, but we did not have any property there. Neither my father nor my mother was really from Lebanon.

Were you politicized at that moment?

I was already politicized, as my father and his sister often expressed their sadness to have seen the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. My father went to school with Atatürk. He was an Ottoman officer and although he was from Damascus, he did not support Arab nationalism. The French kicked him out, in the same way as they sidelined all the former Lebanese and Syrian elites to put in their place a new group more beholden to them.

I had a consciousness of history more than of politics—and above all a feeling of loss in history. I was in a house with two refugees: for my mother, Smyrna (Izmir) had disappeared; for my father it was the Ottoman Empire. I therefore absorbed that nostalgia; this sense of loss for our countries. For me this sense of loss has continued ever since. So I could not detach myself from this history even when living in America where I enjoyed the 1960s and ’70s. For me, the voice, the language and literature are all part of history, of tragedy. At that time I suffered from the Algerian War (1954–62), because there was still that dream of independence in the Arab world.

You were distressed to such a point that you stopped expressing yourself in French for a long period.

I could not speak or write in French at that time. Back then, there was a dichotomy between the world of language and history on one side, and the material world on the other side, whose beauty always touched me. I was not divided, because we weren’t suffering from being in the world, but I kept a certain balance thanks to the beauty of the world and my response to this beauty, this complementarity. In fact in one of my most recent poems, “To Be in a Time of War,” I lived through this dichotomy one hundred percent. I saw that America was not destroying Saddam Hussein, but Iraq in its totality.

(Opposite page)

ISSAM MAHFOUZ (detail), 2013, ink, watercolor and crayon on paper, leporello closed: 21.5 x 9.3 cm; maximum extension: 540 cm

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LEDEPART 2013, wool, woven by Ateliers Pinton, Aubusson, 150 x 200 cm.



“There was a dichotomy between the world of language and history, and the material world, whose beauty always touched me.”

Iraq was, however, among all the Arab countries, the one that was working the best. It was a place of exceptional beauty. It was incredible!

It seems to me that your idea of beauty is deeply marked by “defeat.” I think of your writing on Tintoretto and Heiner Müller, in which you talk, at the end, of a possible “resurrection.” To what extent is the resurrection in the background of your work?

I don't know what I would have done if I were not a painter. The fact that I am able to express the beauty of the world certainly helped me to overcome my family's perpetual tragedy. I grew up surrounded by two defeated human beings. Sometimes people ask, “What is art when there is so much unhappiness? How can somebody be painting when the world is burning?” I believe everything has its place. It is not because one is unhappy that happiness does not exist and should not continue. And art includes literature, poetry, tragic art . . . When Picasso painted *Guernica* [in 1937], he was happy because his contribution to the Resistance and the war was to tell people “Look how awful it is!” Already to say that to yourself is consoling. Why not find within a great catastrophe a scrap of personal happiness? I don't think we should feel guilty about that.

No. Maybe even the reverse.

I knew a French guy when I was a student—a friend of a girlfriend—who was a resistance fighter during the occupation of France and who happened to be locked in a dark place, maybe since the beginning, but I don't know for how long. He told me of the importance of the first light that he saw when the door was opened. This man met my friend, a young American girl who had come to France. He fell crazily in love with her when he saw her for the first time. Her car broke down and he stopped to help her. He told her: “The moment I saw you was a moment of resurrection in my life.” He also said he had the same feeling the day somebody opened that door.

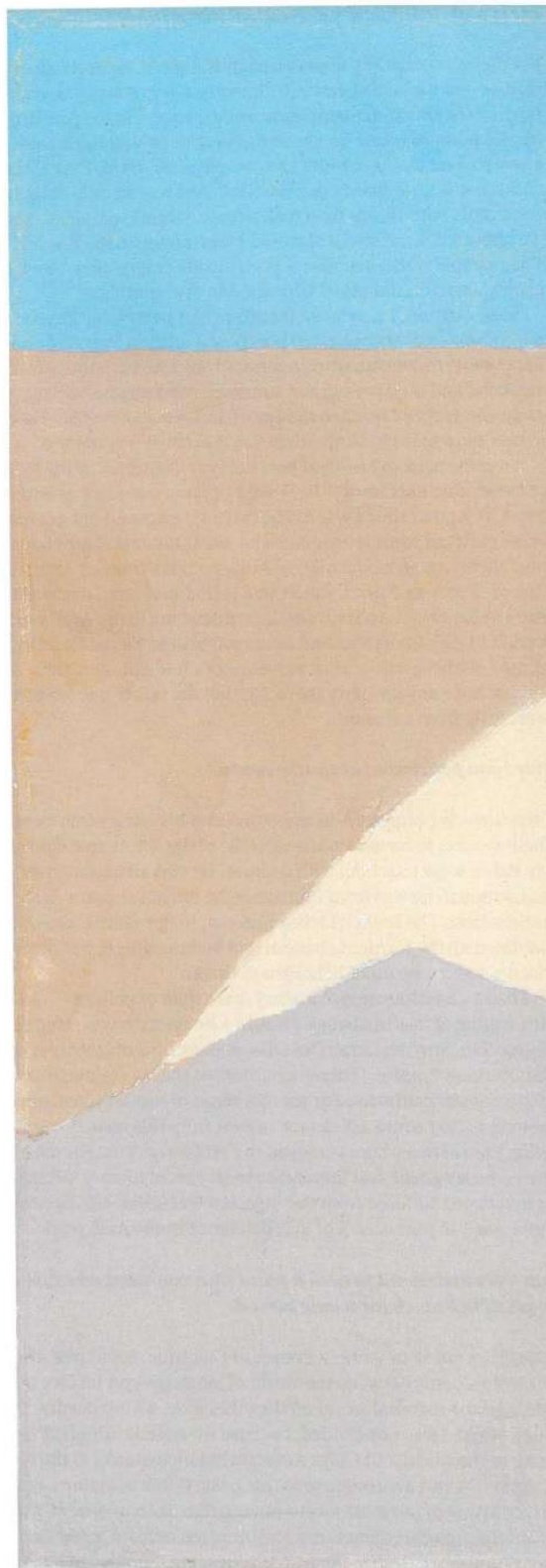
That's beautiful.

The beauty that appeared to him, like the beauty of this young woman, the beauty of that light, the beauty of the world that he was regaining, is a form of resurrection. What is resurrection? It is the nobility of the soul. It's the opening. Resurrection actually exists under this shape. Moreover, that aspect is what I like about Christianity. Resurrection in the Gospel is about forgiveness, interior peace; it is not “going to heaven.” It is what the New Testament is all about. It is to forgive, to forsake vengeance. Resurrection is all about taking the soul out of darkness, out of hopelessness, and showing it a different path. That can be a Tintoretto painting, a piece of music, or it can be to fall in love—most of the time, in fact.

You say that the resurrection is immanent and existential. You evoked the darkness. I would like to ask you a metaphorical question about how the darkness and the places that open to the light are part of your work.

The feeling of resurrection happened to me even at school. At that time, there were only religious schools. I was at the French school, and I was bored when we were being taught the catechism, but not when we were told of the resurrection and angels . . . I've always loved angels. I don't know what it is to believe in God, to be honest, but there is certainly something other than ourselves. I don't believe in hell, but when I wish to believe, I believe in resurrection.

Museums are places where people come to find something else. It is like a library, one goes there to read something. It is not a book depository or a painting depository. We search for a privileged moment in a museum, when something stops us, it brings us to the spirituality of art or to other forms of spirituality. A painting is a visual poem;



UNTITLED (192), 2013, oil on canvas, 35 x 45 cm





it is a spirituality that does not necessarily translate into words. It is in fact better not to translate. Art is made to be experienced; it shouldn't be explained too much. It is another language. A language not made to be linked by words, just as music is in fact. There is body language, conscious or unconscious. Even the way we sleep is a way to say something. Art is therefore a spirituality, and by spirituality I mean the spiritual transformation of being, even for a few seconds, that I call resurrection.

What status can notions such as “openness,” “transcendence” or “spirituality” have in the context of contemporary art? Do you feel the public is receptive to it?

Yes, of course people are receptive. I believe that even a hardened criminal can live through moments full of questionings, feelings, mysteries—perhaps even more intensely than for the rest of us. Spirituality is not necessarily religious. Spirituality is the feeling that the world is inhabited, that there is something more than just the concrete world and that even a sheet of paper could suddenly begin to talk to us. It is a dialogue with the unknown, the invisible. It is not a rational dialogue. There are no answers and no questions, but there is experience. For example I cannot explain to you what it is to feel cold, but nonetheless we feel cold. Spirituality is the thought that goes toward the mystery, toward the nonrational. It is a thought that wants to overtake itself, that wants to connect itself to other languages, to other realities, without having necessarily to tell you exactly what. If you ask me what spirituality is, I don't know how to respond! It is a desire, a surpassing.



(Top)

Installation view of the exhibition "The Weight of the World" at Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, 2016. Photo by Jerry Hardman-Jones. Courtesy Serpentine Sackler Gallery.

(Bottom)

INKPOTS 1 (detail), 2015, ink on paper, leporello closed: 18 x 12 cm; maximum extension: 294 cm. Courtesy Galerie Lelong, Paris/New York.

I would like to take some time to discuss the role of poetry and philosophy. You wrote in *Écrire Dans Une Langue Étrangère* ("To Write in a Foreign Language") (2015) that philosophy, after Hölderlin and Heidegger, finds its greatest expression in poetry. Did that concept of philosophy influence your painting practice?

Things do not get influenced directly in such a way. If you think poetry is spiritual—precisely because it is an experience—it is something else entirely. Even when you look at a tree, there is something beyond the gaze; that is to say you do not only see the lines, the color or the object, but also a mystery and another life different from yours. You can even see something talking to you. You are aware of the tree's age and of the force that makes it grow. Everything becomes a question without answers. Poetry tells you all that. You are familiar with this kind of thinking. Just as when you look at reality from this angle, you similarly see a painting from this angle.

Everything you learn ultimately influences what you do. One day, my English literature students asked me which program they should choose. (In the American system, there are compulsory programs and elective ones.) Instead of choosing literature, philosophy or foreign literature, I told them, "Do something nonliterary, like chemistry or biology," to increase their perception, to maintain a dialogue. Things influence each other. Painting maybe allowed for more freedom in my poetry, thanks to abstraction, Cubism and juxtaposition of colors. This maybe helped me to loosen my poetry.

And maybe to make poetry also more physical?

Precisely, because painting is very physical, but it can also be deconstructed and freed from the tenuous juxtapositions of the logic of a sentence. It is like talking about a cloud and saying in the next sentence, "I have a headache." Contemporary painting works like that, and I believe that it has influenced poetry more than the other way around. I believe form broke out in painting before it did in poetry. In Russia, the poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov splintered at the same time as painting.

I was just thinking of the Russian avant-garde . . .

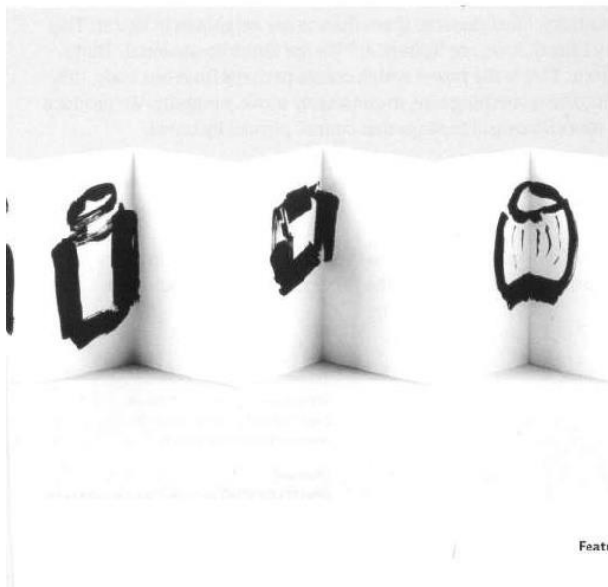
I believe that, in Europe, the burst of poetry came well after the burst of Cubism, of Impressionism, of forms . . . Painting set free all forms of thought.

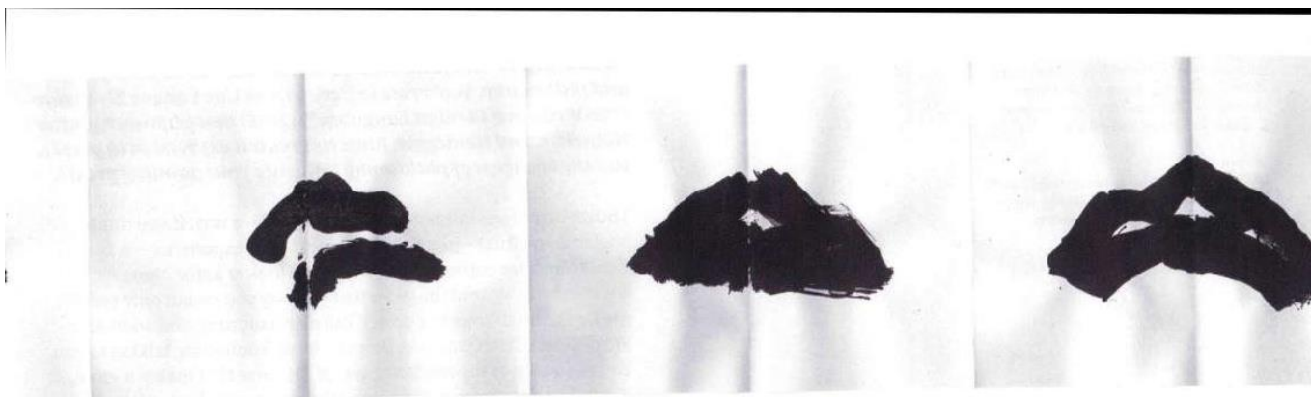
Even if your thoughts and your work are marked by geography and by history, you were never tempted by the forms of activist expression, politics or social matters directly.

I am not interested in theories. They make me tired. I don't say they don't exist, but they are not for me. My work would lose something in terms of impact.

Could we say then that your work is motivated by "experimentation"? As a way to experiment with "being in language" or "being in color"?

Whenever I begin a work, I am curious. I ask myself, "What am I going to do?" I have a very strong relationship with the presence of a mountain. I believe, in fact, that it has helped me to not feel like an exile. This attracted me, and from the moment that I am attracted to something, it keeps me engaged. This can be bridged by the fact that we are never sure that what we have made conforms to reality. The mountain I paint is Mount Tamalpais. We will never know if I love Mount Tamalpais; nevertheless I get closer to it when I work. This opened for me a world within a world: a private relation, experienced like a passion, in the same way of one in love with a person without that person's knowing it. It is invisible, it is personal.





Painting, writing and even living are all about experimenting. Art should not be something too different from life. It is not fair to other people who are not artists and it is not fair in itself. When you see in videos kittens or little calves coming to life, we realize that they are moving, that they are leaving their mother and they are curious. To experiment is really to follow up on curiosity, to go forward. When a little child experiences walking for the first time, he is trying out many things for the first time: his own body, the concept of balance, the small holes and hidden places in the house. An artist is not so different. She is a human being like many others but she finds a more specific way to express herself. Even a ski champion experiences some incredible aesthetic moments. He is an artist in his own way.

On the question of your relationship to the landscape, you say in your essay "Voyage au Mont Tamalpaïs" that "geographical places transform into spiritual concepts." In *Écrire Dans Une Langue Étrangère*, you speak in a similar manner when describing the 1960s and this time of discovering an internal world. I quote you: "My mind was open, I understood that it was possible to move in different directions, that the spirit, unlike the body, is able to move at the same time in multiple dimensions, that I could travel not only on multiple planes but also within a spherical mental world."

I came to the conclusion that relative identities don't exist. I can very well say that I am Lebanese. I have a Lebanese passport. My parents were not Lebanese, but this was not important as they were very close to Lebanon. If identities were strong, there would not be any civilization. There would be only some small local cultures. What is civilization? These are things that come from everywhere, which become like tapestries or constructions. When I think of Native Americans, it does not occur to me that I am not Native American. To the contrary, I feel closer to them than to my neighbors in Beirut. This is why I say that we are "spherical." We are multidimensional. That's the spirit. This is the power which comes perhaps from our body, this power to be something else, to constantly move, mentally. We produce even more ideas and feelings that cannot physically travel.

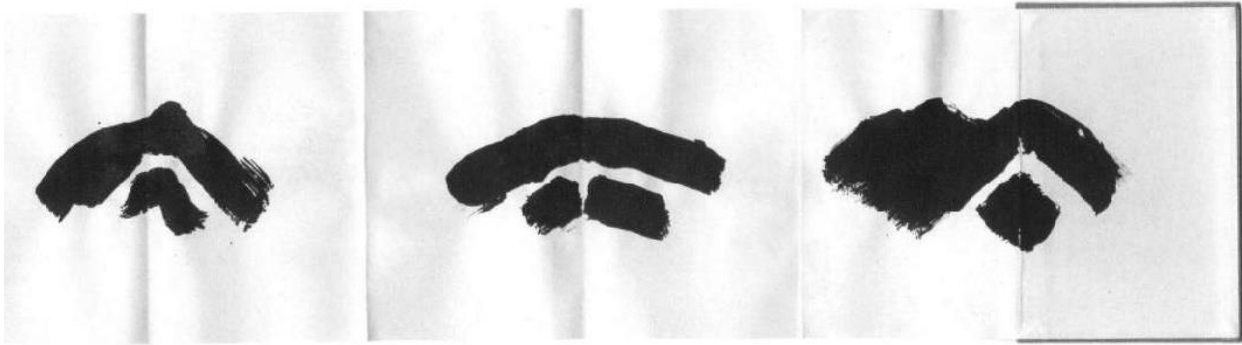
How is your work related to, or originating from, this conception of spherical space?

My way of working is opposite to Proust's approach. I go in every direction. No book resembles the previous one. I never know in



(Top)
MOUNTAIN (detail), 2012, ink on paper, leporello closed: 18 x 12 cm; maximum extension: 280 cm.

(Bottom)
UNTITLED (174), 2012, oil on canvas, 27 x 35 cm.



**“Art is a spirituality,
and by spirituality
I mean the spiritual
transformation of being,
that I call resurrection.”**

advance if after having written a book, I would go on to write another one or what it is going to be. We can keep for ourselves a guiding principle, while traveling. For me the guiding principle lies in the fact that the mind exists. The world comes and I “go.” And I do the same with my painting as well. Everything influences us!

My paintings are not “Arab” in an Islamic sense. In fact, we are no longer in the Islamic world. They themselves were contemporary to their world. Today, nobody is protected from other cultures. There are closed countries. Even the Bedouins have tapes, radios, televisions. They are not “purely” Bedouins, as they were in the 19th century. In fact, they were not even at that time; even as they traveled across regions; even in Arabia. It is therefore a false myth to say that they were isolated and all alone in the desert.

We all live in a spherical world where things come to us. Every one of us is a radio transmitter that broadcasts and receives. We receive energies and we produce them. We are synthesizers. Things do not remain the way they came—they transform themselves. Two people, even in Lebanon, who discover something “unknown,” will not react in the same way. Thus, this is not the object, but the combination of “me” and the “other,” which creates identity and knowledge.

It seems that there are some particular links between your observations, geopolitical analyses and painting practice. Despite the immediate impression, “Voyage au Mont Tamalpaïs” departs quickly from a purely phenomenological frame to deal with an often-tragic reality—the word “prison” appears several times and atrocities are sometimes suggested.

Precisely. The landscape is the “counter-prison.” It’s liberty, escape, the discovery of a world. Habits and daily life close our world and transform it into a prison. The love of landscape is closely linked to the love of liberty, in an existential, nonpolitical way. This is the mental territory. Animals such as lions, tigers and elephants need more space than where they live. Even if they cannot see the space, their antennae reveal its existence. A human being may be living in a 15-square-meter room, but psychologically he needs more space.

On this subject I would like to quote you again: “I feel like I am a prisoner of the universe to which we belong, and I think there could be a ‘counter-universe,’ but it still would be a universe and so on. There is no way out of that question.”

According to our definition of the universe, it is impossible to leave the universe. If the universe is “everything” we must be always inside “everything.” 🌐

TRANSLATED BY PATRICK GILLOT

The first edition of this interview was published in French in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, Editions du Centre Pompidou no. 136 (July/Aug. 2016).

See our website for Arabic and Chinese versions of this article.

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