

Frieze

Juillet / Août 2020

Dossier: ETEL ADNAN – whose work spans abstraction and politics, canvas and script – shuns false dichotomies. In our dire moment, she has words for the soul. With contributions by *Negar Azimi, Omar Berrada, Pablo Larios* and *Joan Retallack* – plus, an excerpt from Adnan's new book, *Shifting the Silence*

The World from rue Madame



A Celebration of Etel Adnan

Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York





Etel Adnan at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1979. Photograph: Simone Fattal



Etel Adnan at Galerie La Roue, Paris, 1977. Photograph: Simone Fattal



Etel Adnan at Mount Tamalpais, c.1980. Photograph: Simone Fattal

Opening page
Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal in their apartment in Paris, 2016. Photograph: Thibault Montamat

Previous page
Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 2019, oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: the artist, Galleria Continua, San Gimignano/Beijing/ Les Moulins/Havana/Rome, Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris/ New York, Steir-Semler Gallery, Beirut/Hamburg, and White Cube, London/ Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION by Pablo Larios

What does the world look like from rue Madame, where the artist Etel Adnan lives in Paris? Is it sun-kissed and static, like a mountain, or does it surge, jubilant, with the thrum of music, laughter, speech? How far are we from flickers of bombs, from Algiers and Beirut, or from the roaring of northern Californian waves?

Few of us – fewer still, under lockdown – will know this view, any more so than the geography of Adnan's life. Memories are figments and no one owns the past. Just as the past passes through us, changing us, Adnan is, herself, now a kind of touchstone – for her many friends, students, readers and viewers. For this celebration of Adnan's life and work, we have solicited words from some of these fellow travellers.

But who is Etel Adnan? It would sound too passive to say that this poet, activist, filmmaker, painter, teacher and writer has 'borne witness' to a near-century of tumult: in 1941, aged just 16, she worked at the French Press Bureau in Beirut as the German army occupied Paris. Yet, she has continued to maintain that fiction and document, art and politics, need not be in conflict. That's the word on rue Madame.

Whatever form they take, the voices and images in Adnan's cosmos are manifold. All art is polyglottic, knotted with inflections, turns, anacoluthons, cul-de-sacs. And, just as there is no single language for any artist, with Adnan – whose work cuts through media – it makes sense to start with the politics of the tongue: language, that split and searing liturgy.

Born in Beirut in 1925, to a Greek Orthodox mother and a Turkish Muslim father, Adnan spoke Greek and Turkish at home – Arabic was forbidden – and, eventually, French and English. Just after the Lebanese Civil War, she published (in French) her novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978), which strings together monologues, news and interviews to tell the story of Marie Rose Boulos, a Lebanese Christian who was kidnapped, tortured and murdered by Christian militiamen in Lebanon after expressing her sympathy for Palestinians.

No language is neutral and, during the Algerian Revolution (1954–62), in protest against French colonial rule, Adnan ceased writing in French. 'I realized that I couldn't write freely in a language that faced me with a deep conflict,' she observed in her 1996 essay 'To Write in a Foreign Language'. Adnan travelled: in Algeria, she discovered the Moroccan radical poetry magazine *Souffles*; in Beirut, she cherished the poems of Adonis and Yusuf el-Khal; in Paris, she studied with philosopher of space Gaston Bachelard; and, in Mexico, she wandered.

But it is northern California, where Adnan spent many years, that remains the bedrock of her paintings. Adnan took to the canvas later in life, in the 1960s, after arriving at the Dominican College in San Rafael to teach philosophy of art. It was there that, urged by a fellow teacher, she discovered: 'I didn't need to use words, but colours and lines. I didn't need to belong to an open form of expression [...] I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic.' Her views of Mount Tamalpais in Marin County – each unique, each alike, with patchworks of conflicting colour – are among the most iconic landscapes of our age.

When I invited these authors to contribute, they responded with speed and generosity: the writer Negar Azimi noted that 'we could all use some Etel ray of light right now', while director of Dar al-Ma'mûn (a library and residency for artists and translators) Omar Berrada sent a recent photograph of himself with Adnan in Paris. Soon after, we heard the news that Sarah Riggs had won Canada's 2020 Griffin Poetry Prize, one of the world's leading poetry awards, for her translation of Adnan's *Time* (2019). Here, renowned poet Joan Retallack takes a close reading of Adnan's enjambments of thought, word and line.

But it is Adnan's work itself, excerpted here, with which we can begin and end: it contains multitudes about age, travel, mobility, loss. It is a fable of the constriction many of us find ourselves living with today and of how art can serve as eulogy and release ●

Pablo Larios is senior editor of *frieze*. He lives in Berlin, Germany.

Etel Adnan, *Mount Tamalpais*, 1985,
oil on canvas, 1,3 × 1,5 m.
Courtesy: the artist and Surssock
Museum Collection, Beirut



I didn't need to write in French anymore,
I was going to paint in Arabic.

Etel Adnan

Negar Azimi

The Costs of Love

Etel loves Franz Schubert and Umm Kulthum. She loves ice cream and tabouleh and red wine. In Paris, she loves Pizza Chic, a serious restaurant with an embarrassing name. In Beirut, she loves Mount Sannine, the way its pencil edges turn pink at sunset. She loves *Death in Venice* (1971), the moody and sensuous Luchino Visconti film about an ageing composer's infatuation with a dreamy Polish boy. She loves people, including the ones who visit her at home to ply her with question after question after question. She interviews them before they interview her. She listens with electric interest.

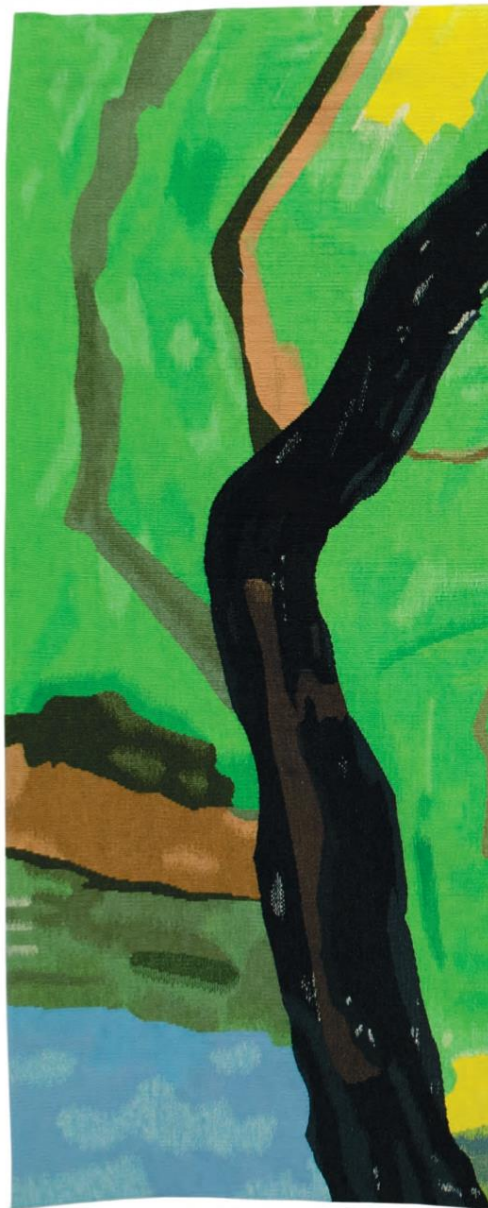
Etel loves to love. She loves the *Venus de Milo* (c.100 BCE). The sight of the love goddess's lusty statue at the Louvre sets her imagination on fire. She loves Marguerite Yourcenar, a writer who once tried to seduce her by depositing a copy of *One Thousand and One Nights* (c.8th century) by young Etel's bedside. She loves the artist Simone Fattal, her partner of over four decades, above all. One thing she does not love, she announces one Christmas Eve, is holidays.

'Every square is a fresh beginning,' she says of her own bright, geometrically inclined paintings. 'Painting is not a shape, but it is a feeling.' This child of the Ottoman Empire loves the state of California, where a mountain named Tamalpais is her best friend. 'How beautiful it is', says this lifelong lover of the sea, 'to arrive to a country by boat.' At 95, Etel is still ravenous for the world. Informed one day about a newfangled thing called Uber, she swipes her index finger across a visitor's iPhone and sends it flying off the table. 'It is difficult to be alive,' she concludes, and we laugh. A woman who never cared for money, she now has more than she could ever wish to spend. 'How ironic,' she says, in her textured Levantine accent.

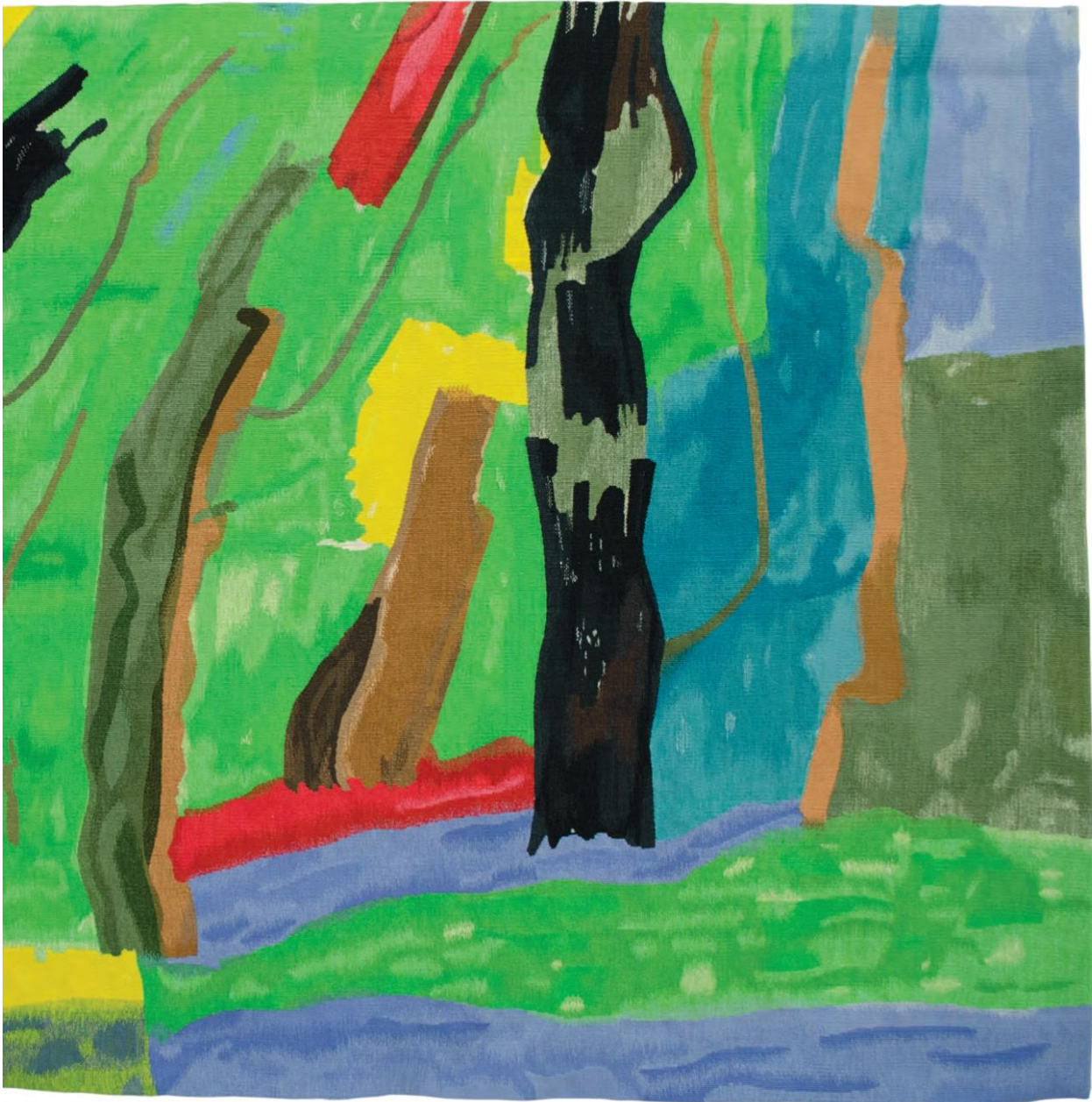
From Los Angeles, where I am marooned in ambiguous 'lockdown', I try to imagine what Etel's take on this wretched moment might be, a moment politicians and pundits liken to wartime. A moment in which we are isolated, masked and muzzled, cut off from so many of our loves. She has thought deeply, profoundly, about wartime, the way it batters the psyche, the ghastly imprints it leaves on the soul. Once upon a time, the Algerian War hardened her against France. The Vietnam War (1955-75) made her a poet. Love, she suggests, requires a different sort of bravery. 'Love in all its forms is the most important matter that we will ever face,' she wrote in *The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay* (2011). 'But also the most dangerous, the most unpredictable, the most maddening.'

I think of her in Paris now, listening to the radio, fiddling with the libretto she has been composing on Marie de' Medici, staring out at a doomy and deserted rue Madame. I envision her trying to make a painting. Failing to make a painting. Trying again. The writer of a book called *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989) is an inveterate optimist. The writer of a book called *The Arab Apocalypse* is a committed sensualist. 'Love is the only salvation I know of.' ●

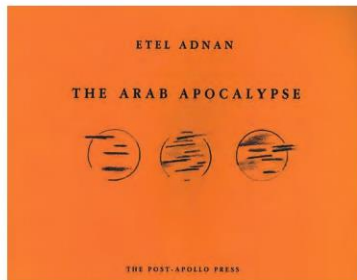
Negar Azimi is a writer and senior editor of *Bidoun*.



Etel Adnan, *Quiétude (Quietness)*, 2017-18, handwoven wool tapestry, 1.4 x 2 m



Love, Etel suggests,
requires a different sort of bravery.

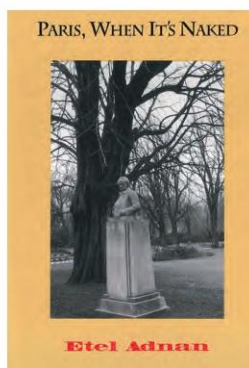


Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, 1989, book cover. Courtesy: The Post-Apollo Press



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, c.1960, watercolour on paper, 27 x 33 cm

A lifetime of eclectic reading has woven books into the very fabric of Etel's thinking.



Etel Adnan, *Paris, When It's Naked*, 1993, book cover. Courtesy: The Post-Apollo Press

Omar Berrada

A Mind That Knows No Borders

Nobody loves the world more cosmically than Etel Adnan. In her essay *The Cost for Love We Are Not Willing to Pay*, she highlights 'two passions that did not concern human beings but that, at turns, took centre stage' in her life: the Mediterranean Sea in Lebanon and Mount Tamalpais in California. Etel's is a love nourished by words, however. Her essay starts with a provocative parallel between philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj, who 'self-sacrificed for their radical commitments', and ends by evoking a cosmopolitan cast of literary figures, including Anna Karenina, Majnun Layla, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Arthur Rimbaud. I would love to read a piece by Etel on her passion for books, although passion may not be the word. Companionship would be more apt, or intimacy – a lifetime of eclectic reading that has woven books and their authors into the very fabric of her thinking. Etel's texts have no footnotes.

I first met Etel and her partner, Simone, in January 2002. A dozen writers had gathered for a week-long translation seminar in a 13th-century Cistercian abbey just outside Paris. I was young and hesitant. They were brilliant and welcoming. Then aged 76, Etel had a confoundingly youthful spark in her eyes. She still does. The 9/11 attacks were fresh in our minds and George W. Bush's war in Afghanistan well underway. Etel, Simone and I soon became close. I would visit them at their Paris apartment simply to listen, vicariously immersing myself, through Etel's reminiscences, in 1940s Beirut, 1950s Mexico City or 1960s San Francisco.

Etel, too, was listening. Sometime in 2005, she and I were sitting at a table when, seemingly out of the blue, she asked: 'Have you read Stefania Pandolfo's *Impasse of the Angels*? It's a masterpiece.' Something in her tone made me order it without delay. On the surface, *Impasse of the Angels* (1997) is an ethnography of a small village in the Moroccan Drâa Valley, exploring what it means to be a subject on the margins of postcolonial society. To me, it read like a long, intricate poem where history is told through the voices of the living, where stones and streams also speak, where the author is but a shadow amid a moonlit chorus. I was affected and mesmerized. Someone was speaking from a place inside my soul. I had been somewhat estranged from my homeland, Morocco; *Impasse of the Angels* brought it back as a polyphonic dream, a space of possibility within the ruins of memory. My well-loved copy of Pandolfo's book has accompanied me everywhere since, while the author has become a cherished friend.

Etel already knew, as she did when she recommended books by June Jordan, Jalal Toufic and Fawwaz Traboulsi: singular writers who were her friends, and whose co-existence in her life speaks to a mind that knows no borders, geographical or disciplinary. Life is one. Poetry, art, activism, history are one. As Lisa Robertson writes in *The Baudelaire Fractal* (2020), ardent readers acquire 'the gradual ability,

Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 2018,
watercolour on paper, 29 × 9 cm



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 2015,
oil on canvas, 54 x 45 cm



similar to the learning of a new handcraft, to perceive the threads linking book to book, and so to enter, through reading, a network of relation'. On a deep level, reading builds kinship – between people as well as between books, for 'the text I read seeks through me to another text', as Robertson put it in *Nilling* (2012). Life is a weaving.

Journey to Mount Tamalpais (1986) might be Etel's own masterpiece. Written as a fragmentary love letter to the mountain, it can be read as a statement of poetics, interweaving all of Etel's preoccupations: writing and art, travelling and reading, pleasure and melancholy, memory and outer space, perception and insurrection. It opens with notes on the ocean and the mountain, on painting and the complexities of perception when, seemingly out of the blue: 'On KPFA [radio] George Jackson is speaking. We hear a tape made while he was still alive and in prison. He has many voices blended in one, many accents. He cuts his sentences short, sounding like an Englishman. Then his voice slides between his lips, and his longest word, his most important one, the one pronounced with a long, burning, agonizing, pleading and ever-sure voice, is the word love.'

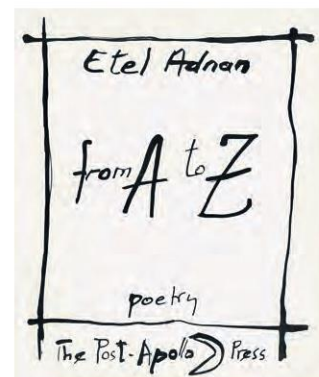
For Etel, life is one.
Poetry, art, activism,
history are one.

More than once over the years, Etel asked if I had read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), adding that it is one of the world's greatest books. A tale of personal renewal mediated by reading, it is also a dream of larger social transformations by way of revolutionary politics. Malcolm X's transgressiveness is legendary. Less often stressed is the force of his love. Revolution is not only the indictment of a given state of things, but the tireless work towards a collective aspiration. What makes the protagonist of Etel's *Sitt Marie Rose* revolutionary is not her betrayal of the clan, but her love for the Palestinians and for the disabled children she cares for in the midst of a civil war. Like Jackson, Marie Rose and Malcolm X were murdered in their prime. Like him, they knew the risks they were taking. There is a cost for love and they were willing to pay it. Etel's work reminds us they did not pay it in vain ●

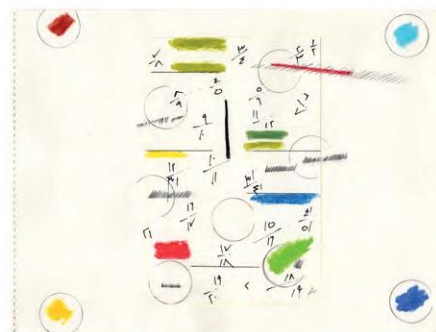
Omar Berrada is a writer, curator and director of Dar al-Ma'mûn, a library and residency for artists and translators in Marrakech, Morocco.



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 1970–73, watercolour on paper, 13 × 18 cm



Etel Adnan, *From A to Z*, 1982, book cover. Courtesy: The Post-Apollo Press



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, from *Album à dessin* (Drawing Album), 1990, crayon, watercolour and pencil on paper, 24 × 31 cm

Etel Adnan

Shifting the Silence

Yes. The shifting, after the return of the tide, and my own. A question rushes out of the stillness, and then advances an inch at a time: has this day ever been before, or has it risen from the shallows, from a line, a sound?

When we name things simply, with words preceding their meaning, a cosmic narration takes place. Does the discovery of origins remove the dust? The horizon's shimmering slows down all other perceptions. It reminds me of a childhood of emptiness which seems to have taken me near the beginnings of space and time.

Now, dark animals roam in the forest, you could touch them. A particular somnolence takes hold of you when the shadows start grooving. Then, the heart creates different beats. You want to touch the leaves, look intensely at each tree. The night falls, already tired, already bare.

The size of the future is not any longer than this alley's. And questions are falling, and failing. But to go by a narrow gully, find the tide at its lowest, watch ducklings follow their mother in search of evening food, is a sure way to some kind of an illumination.

I am wearing the rose colour of Syria's mountains and I wonder why it makes me restless. Often my body feels close to sea creatures, sticky, slimy, unpredictable, more ephemeral than need be. From there I have to proceed, as an avalanche of snow falls. That's what the radio has just said: that entire villages have been made invisible. But they are faraway: the news never covers my immediate environment.

And having more memories than yearnings, searching in unnameable spaces, Sicily's orchards or Lebanon's thinning waters, I reach a land between borders, unclaimed, and stand there, as if I were alone, but the rhythm is missing.

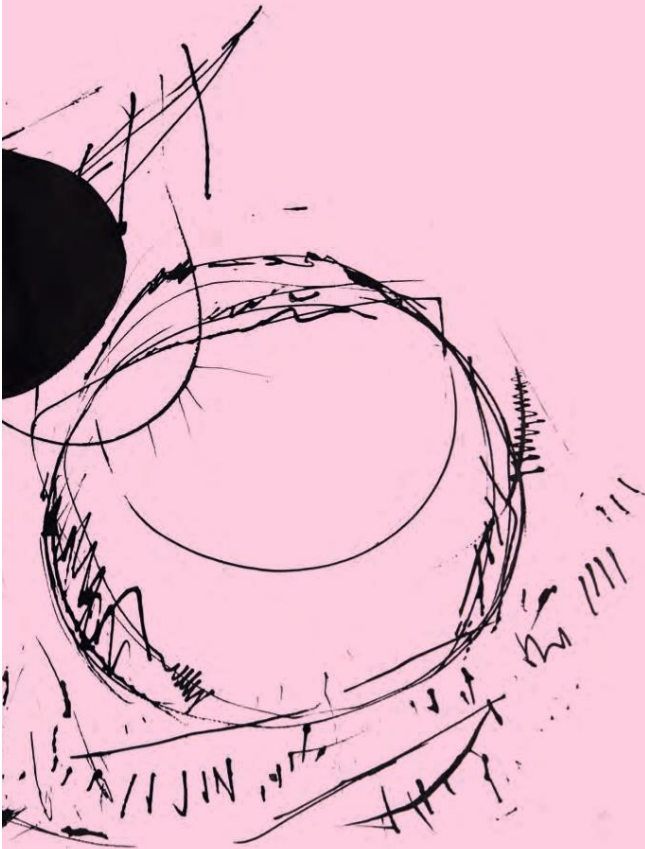
Why, oh why!

I miss the cosmic energy of ancient Greece. They loved their gods to whom everything was given save the supreme power. Free, none of them were in the absolute sense, only Zeus was, though his arbitrariness was often looked at with a critical eye. Prometheus was chained because he rebelled, and Io was condemned to suffer an opposite but equally radical punishment, to turn and turn and never rest. There was a raw cruelty to their world, but I miss them, just the same.

Top
Etel Adnan, *Untitled*,
1970-73, watercolour
on paper, 21 x 15 cm

Bottom
Etel Adnan, *Hyper
Espace (Hyper Space)*,
1964, watercolour on
paper, 38 x 46 cm

Dreams lack any power of
decision, but come
in bunches, flood the spirit,
shake the bones.



To put one's feet on the rocks of Delphi is worth damnation. And to Sikiyonou the offerings for the oracle are still coming. For me, the pain of dying is going to be the impossibility of visiting that site one more time.

When you have no way to go anywhere, what do you do? Of course, nothing. But that's no answer. We let so many replies go unformulated, as a liberation of sorts, so many tides uselessly advance, so many desires are buried (the mind gets tired too). In the middle of the night I measure the cold outside, the silence.

To speak Greek is to use most of Aristotle's own words. But I rely on Eschylus. He reminds me of the mystics from Bukhara. He placed Prometheus on Mount Aetna, linking him to Empedocles. How can one live away from their circle?

But, returning to my condition, if I had to choose a place to spend the night, what would it be? At this point, I will turn my back and go into my room. The major part of the beauty of the world I will ignore, if not all.

There are so many islands I dreamed of visiting, where have they gone? They're probably lying where they have always been. Do they possess a consciousness all of their own? I would think so. They are probably like the peacock who recognized me after all the years I had been absent, when he made a loud sound, of a kind I had never heard, and made me joyful. He stirred a kinship between us.

That was at the end of a game for a world championship, a European football game. England against Colombia; the British team playing war, the South Americans playing for the fun of it, always the same story. The peacock followed the excitement, it was late at night and he couldn't sleep.

My thoughts drip, not unlike the faucet. They don't let me know what they're about. Other ones follow, strangers equally.

The daylight is getting dim. We're not in winter, no, we're somewhere in early July. The sunset will happen soon. Then it will disappear too.

Dreams lack any power of decision, but come in bunches, flood the spirit, shake the bones. They favour love-making while we refuse what we yearn for. Watching sunset after sunset doesn't heat the house.

Watching the hours go by doesn't help either. Thus, we're cornered. I leave my door open, pretending it's because of my difficulty breathing, but nothing is true. Better to admit that with the passing of days we know less about just everything. Let's let things roll their own ways, whenever they have some.

I am not used to asking for help, but on what kind of a ground am I standing? An incantation puts me to rest, at last, in undue hours. With eyes swollen we try to see the here, and the overthere, never sure, always dissatisfied. Let's wait even when we don't know what for, a faint line on the horizon always more welcome than this void.

We have lost the liturgies under the wars, the bombings, the fires we went through. Some of us didn't survive, and they were many. The Greeks had their exuberant gods, the sunrise over Mount Olympus. The Canaanites had Mount Sannin. We have our own private mountains, but are they already too tired from waiting for us? I have no roads to them, no wires. In their splendour let them be ●

Excerpt from *Shifting the Silence*, which will be published by Nightboat Books in September.

EIHEL ADNAN is a poet, essayist and artist. In May, Sarah Riggs won the 2020 Griffin Poetry Prize for her translation of Adnan's *Time* (2019). Adnan lives in Paris, France.



Joan Retallack

Etel Adnan / Glances

1. Grave & Humorous Puzzles

I-5

...

mobil-mobilized by (bye)
money. Incurable propositions.
(Etel Adnan, *In/somnia*, 2002)

Adnan once noted that a poet friend 'opens up ideas like landscapes open up, and poems too'. She might have said the same of herself. With a reader's playful scrutiny, two short lines, seven words, beginning with 'mobil-mobilized', open up a semantic landscape ready to yield grave and humorous detail. Oil and gas giant (Exxon)mobil mobilized by money? Of course. But '(bye)'? With that oddity, phonemic and letteristic logics begin to perform a humorous stretch towards historical horizons: the shortened form of *goodbye*, itself a contraction of *God be with ye*, on the way to *bye into*, *bye to all that*, *bye-bye!*, *bye-bye baby*, *bye-bye birdie* (oil spill).

Which is not to say that Adnan had precisely this unspooling in mind. But her knowledge-embedded linguistic intuitions and intentional wordplay excite a reader's love of collaborative *poesis*. *In/somnia* reminds that all reading – not always so piquantly – is an act of *poesis*. Adnan's numbered fragments invite it. As does the startling phrase 'incurable propositions'. Its near-paradoxical ambiguity spans stubborn meanness – misogynist, racist, demagogic – as well as unwelcome truths, such as this one from 'Celestial City' (2009): 'In many of the unvisited latitudes / men women and children keep asking: / is America so fatalistic as to stage / killing fields all over this planet?'

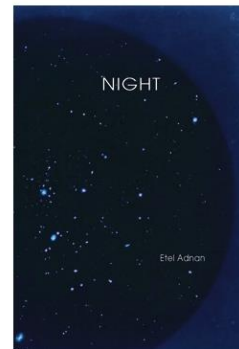
2. Grave & Humorous Horizons

a yellow sun a black sun a red sun a white sun
the sun moves in our eyes the sun is an Arab corpse.
(*The Arab Apocalypse*, 1989)

Adnan's poetry negotiates desire for beauty, humour, happiness on the all-too-durable edge of lived and anticipated catastrophe. *The Arab Apocalypse* enacts a visceral need for witness, protest, lament, rage as woman, global citizen, poet, visual artist. Inked-in hieroglyphs annotate textual residues of disaster – non-stop wars, betrayals, the Nakba. The marks – ornamental and scarring – register linguistically inexpressible emotion, multiply the semiotic import of ancient landscapes (textual, earthen) with eternally desecrated horizons. In the broad scope of Adnan's visual art, there has emerged another side of the apocalyptic horizon. In recent work, elemental landscapes assert immutable presence: unbudgeable mountain terrain, monochromatic skies free of portent, suns improbably buoyant in their yellow, red, blue, white, circular, square, rectangular nearness. These are scenes of painterly elation brought on by full-saturation colour and an uncannily monumental scale unimpeded by the small canvases Adnan favours. Profound humour metamorphoses gravity into untethered joy.

After all, 'The sea and the horizon / are just making waves. Yosemite Valley occupies the same / mental space as a corn muffin.'
(*Night*, 2016) **END**

Joan Retallack is a poet. Her book *BOSCH'D: Fables, Moral Tales & Other Awkward Constructions* was published by Litmus Press in April.



Etel Adnan, *Night*, 2016, book cover. Courtesy: Nightboat Books

In Adnan's art,
there has emerged
another side
of the apocalyptic
horizon.



Etel Adnan in New York, c.1980. Photograph: Simone Fattal

Opposite page
Etel Adnan,
San Gimignano 4,
2014, black resin,
alabaster, wood,
1.7 x 1.8 m