

صفير زمـلر غاليري
SFEIR-SEMLER GALLERY

Etel Adnan

Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg

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<http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/etel-adnan/>

Articles about Etel Adnan's paintings tend to start with her impressive cultural breadth—with her Christian Greek mother, Muslim Syrian father, and the triangle of her travels. Born in Beirut in 1925, she studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, and later taught at San Rafael College in California, but with unflagging returns to Beirut and Paris. Adnan is a cosmopolitan woman, we learn, but she's not a super-flexible global jetsetter: rather she's loyal to the locations that have a place in her heart.

Most articles about Adnan's paintings proceed at some point to her love for Mount Tamalpais in Marin County, California. Over the years she's painted the mountain repeatedly, dedicated books and poems to it, and she even alluded to it in the small publication of *Notes* for Documenta 13: "You might think that love of nature is harmless," she writes, "but no love is harmless. It can compromise the whole of existence and indeed it does."

In most of the thirty-five or so of Adnan's works currently on show at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Hamburg too, landscapes emerge from the areas painted in colors of varying brightness. And, even though the paintings are untitled, we know that they are still about *that* mountain, Mount Tamalpais, the artist's old love.

Some people are of the opinion that painting should speak for itself—completely, without narrative prostheses. And there are even those who see a special quality in a work's lack of commentary. In the 1970s, this approach led to a particular interest in photography and its influence on art. This is because it cedes "the language of art back to the imposition of things," as Rosalind Krauss explained in her two-part *October* essay "Notes on the Index:

Seventies Art in America" (1977). According to her, the chance of a photographic art exists in its indexical character, its physical connection to the object it portrays, and the accompanying symbolic emptiness. A photograph of a mountain is not a symbol; it's not any old mountain but one particular mountain at a certain moment in time. And without any additional information, there is no narrative, no passion or symbolic meaning.

In her book *Thinking through Painting* (2012), German art critic Isabelle Graw suggested reinterpreting the index in the context of painting. Here the index would not be understood as the sign physically connected with that which it represents (as it is in the case of photography, which is also a physical trace of what it portrays), but as a genuine painterly mark that "creates the suggestion of the absent artist's presence." The implied presence of the artist would be the actual painterly effect, and it is this effect that makes painting so alluring, so charged and problematic even today. It also explains, Graw continues, why we in the art world like to talk about "a Richter" rather than "a painting by Gerhard Richter," as if we were speaking of a quasi-subject that has been affected by the artist.

The ground floor of Sfeir-Semler Gallery brings together seventeen of these quasi-subjects hanging in a precise and balanced arrangement. All of the works are from this year; all depict landscape panoramas in small formats (32 x 41 cm or 30 x 24 cm). It's difficult to say what we'd see and how we'd see them, if we didn't know about Adnan's deep love for Mount Tamalpais and the coast of Beirut. If we didn't know anything else about the multifaceted nature of her personality, that she commutes not only between continents and cultures, but also as an artist, writer, and philosopher between different disciplines. The pictures themselves are hermetic and consistent. Without exception they are variations on one and the same process. The canvas is divided into a clear number of brightly colored areas. The compositions of unmixed, unadulterated colors are balanced and harmonious. Almost always there is a small and sharp area of color somewhere in the painting that stands out from the others—often a small red square. One notes a certain impatience in the paintings at the edges where the colors begin to run into one another or when we occasionally catch a glimpse of canvas or a sketched outline. The oil paint is relatively thick and there are traces of the palette knife.

On the upper floor, where works from 1965 to 2000 are presented, one is quick to see a progression. The earlier works feel airier and more searching, as if abstraction is still undetermined, not yet arrived at. Adnan herself denies the idea of artistic progression. "Sometimes the works you made at the beginning are the best," she recently said in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist. Checking the pictures against her texts, it becomes apparent that her earlier landscapes are in correspondence with her poems, whereas the later work reflects on her prose, raw and angular. The metaphors are simple: not devious, not Baroque, and no detours taken. Adnan strings together lucid sentences, and she does the

same with colors, which she places next to each other in clearly demarcated areas.

It cannot be a coincidence that by choosing to paint Adnan selected a medium, the most prominent quality of which is that the artistic subject always informs the picture. Her simple landscapes interweave in such a productive way with her narratives, with her persistence and passion. And it is probably for this reason that most articles about Adnan's paintings begin here. But, as with many of her own texts—for instance, the solemn speech by Mother Earth in her essay for Documenta—her paintings leave little room for maneuver: one either loves them as absolutely and unconditionally as Adnan loves Mount Tamalpais, or one risks reducing them to a mountain of superficiality—the expansive potential of a landscape shrunk to a mere composition of a landscape, pleasant and trivial. Every artwork has a context, nothing is made *ex nihilo*: it only seems strange if the profundity of a work is largely linked to biographical circumstance. Even in painting.

(Translated from German by Sarah Hull)

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