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Artist Transforms Verse Into Visual Poetry

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From a home studio in the Sausalito hills overlooking Mount Tamalpais and the bay, Etel Adnan creates multicolored fusions of poem and paint.

Traditional, handmade Japanese folding-books called makimomo are covered with verse using media such as natural dyes and crayon.

The result – “artist’s books” on exhibit at Sonoma State University’s Ruben Salazar Library – are evocative combinations of poetry and image, tradition and revelation.

It’s an art form that Adnan learned in the early 1960’s from San Francisco painter Rick Barton.

“Once, in China, Barton was drawing a chrysanthemum when a little boy walked by with his father and said, ‘Look, look, this man is writing a flower,’” Adnan says. “it triggered a way of thinking – that handwriting can be a drawing and on the other hand, that drawing can be writing. That little child bridged the gap: They’re the same things.”

Struck by the artistic possibilities, Adnan began using contemporary Arab poetry as a textual element in her own works. Before long, she was interpreting American and French poetry in an effort to synthesize a relationship between the Eastern tradition and Western poetry.

“Sometimes I use my own poetry, but I couldn’t do it all the time. It would be too narcissistic,” Adnan says with a laugh. “What interests me is to respond to someone else’s poetry, but not in words. Instead of writing a poem about a poem or a piece of criticism, the books are a visual reading of the poetry.”

Poets whose work has undergone Adnan’s vibrant, visual rewriting include Duncan McNaughton, Jonathan Skinner, Nazir al Azmeh, Anne-Marie Albiach and Barbara Lesch McCaffry. In one of her early forays with this art form, Adnan translated poet Wendell Berry’s work in honor of slain President Kennedy, “November 3, 1963,” into French and used the structural elements of the folding books to replicate a sense of ceremony.

“A funeral is a procession, and these books are also a procession,” Adnan says. “You go from page to page uninterrupted. You don’t turn the page; the paper unfolds. There is something ceremonial about these books.”

Adnan sometimes creates books that transcend the trappings of the original poem and instead speak to the context in which she experienced the work. It’s a notion that suggests the circumstances in which a poem is perceived can influence how it is appreciated.

“Sometimes I’ll draw the landscape I see from my window, and though in this case Mount Tamalpais has nothing to do with the text, what I am suggesting is that this work has been read in this landscape.”

Adnan’s book maintains an interesting temporal and spatial dynamic. They open in specific sequences, and, like accordions, they change as they unfold and collapse.

“Writing is a journey in the sense of development and the movement through time,” she says. “There is a time element in this format that the single-framed page does not give you. You go with it when you open page after page, fold after fold. There is a rhythm.”

Born in Beirut, Adnan has split her time between the United States and France since 1955. She has been a professor of philosophy newspaper editor, novelist, poet and essayist. In her 70s, she remains and an active feminist.

Her paintings adorn collections the world over, including the British Museum, the Royal Jordanian Museum and the Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington.

Adnan believes in creating art that spurs interaction with the viewer. She says that interaction is important in a culture that inundates people with words and images.

She points out that in Japanese tradition, artworks – like books – remain rolled in scrolls until someone takes the effort to view them.

“It requires a discipline and an act of volition on the part of the reader and the viewer – it’s a concentration of attention and it values the work,” Adnan says. “Otherwise, when you put it on the wall, sometimes you get so used to it, you don’t see it anymore.”

Adnan says her collaborations are “not just between people but between objects. The materials and format used are more than tools. To a point, they condition what you do so that they become co-authors.

“We have to give credit to materials. They’re not just objects. They work with us and we work with them. They give us their energy and possibilities.”