

Etel Adnan: A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun A blue sun

Arab-American artist debuts recent works in first-ever solo exhibition in U.S. museum



Untitled, 2017

Oil on canvas, 13 x 9 1/2 inches (33 x 24 cm)

© Etel Adnan, courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

inspired by this crucial moment in the artist's life, which provokes the consideration of her visual arts practice as an effort of translation — from writing to painting, from French to Arabic — all in pursuit of a pure expression.

NORTH ADAMS, MASSACHUSETTS — In her first ever solo U.S. museum show, internationally acclaimed Arab-American artist Etel Adnan tests the limits of expression in an exhibition of *leporellos*, written texts, and recent works including never-before-seen paintings. *A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun A blue sun* is on view beginning **Saturday, April 7**, with a reception to celebrate the artist and her work on **Saturday, May 26**.

Raised in Lebanon under the French mandate (1923-1946), Adnan was born into a fraught relationship with language. She learned French first — the language of the colonizer — before she knew Arabic, which she learned later, as an adult. Likewise, she began painting long after embarking on a literary and academic career. She is widely recognized for her poetry and prose, which for over sixty years have treated subjects including war, exile, and space travel. In 1958, while wars for independence raged in former French colonies, Adnan sought a mode of expression other than her writing in French. She began to paint and draw, as she says, “in Arabic.” *A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun A blue sun* is

Several of Adnan's *leporellos*, Japanese accordion-fold books that expand lengthwise up to fourteen feet, will be included in the exhibition. Introduced to her by an artist friend who gifted her a *leporello* to complete, Adnan was struck by their resemblance to scrolls, and recognized the possibility of the *leporello* format for experiments in hybrid media. The unique material allowed her to play with narrative form, illustrating the folded surface left to right, or ignoring the intuitive structure of the book to treat the *leporello* as one whole page. An example of the latter will be included in the exhibition, covered evenly in black ink drawings evocative of written marks. In her *leporellos* one also finds Adnan's rare experiments in Arabic.

She began by copying poems by famous Arabic authors; given that the artist does not compose in this language, her original use of Arabic script recalls its historic decorative applications in calligraphy.

The *leporellos* represent the most literal bridge between the artist's literary and visual arts practice. This exhibition suggests the poetic possibility of a similar connection in Adnan's paintings: a dozen paintings, mostly made in the last decade, will comprise the core of the exhibition. The artist has always worked on small canvases, partially because of the way she paints. She places her canvases flush on her desk and bends over them, just as if at work on a manuscript. The paintings are recognizable for their bold formal abstraction, composed of oil paint in vivid colors applied to the canvas confidently with a palette knife, often straight from the tube. Early works were more abstract, related to one another by the presence of a red patch somewhere on the canvas. This acts as what literary theorist Roland Barthes called the *punctum* in photography — the detail that pulls a viewer in irresistibly, and which instantaneously organizes the picture and orients the viewer to it.

Some more recent works, like those on view in this exhibition, swap the patch of red for a sun, indexing the presence of a real-life referent — the landscape. Places dear to Adnan appear in these works, from Mount Tamalpais in northern California to the seaside in Beirut. As she has grown older and unable to travel far from her home in Paris, her abstract landscapes have taken on a fantastic, incandescent quality, charged by the artist's imaginative longing. The paintings are made quickly, nearly unconsciously, summoned as readily as a spoken reply in a native language.

About the Artist

Etel Adnan was born in 1925 in Beirut and received her education in philosophy from the Sorbonne, the University of California, Berkeley; and Harvard. Her visual art has been shown in solo exhibitions at Serpentine Gallery, London, UK (2016); Galerie Lelong, New York, NY (2015); Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar (2015); and Callicoon Fine Arts, New York, NY (2014). Her work has been included in group exhibitions at the Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Rivoli, Italy (2017); the New Museum, New York, NY (2014); and dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, Germany (2012). Her writing has been translated into over 10 languages, put to music, made into operas, and adapted for the screen. She won the Prix de l'Amitié franco-arabe for her 1977 novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, and was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 2014.

Images

High-resolution images are available through this link: <http://bit.ly/EtelAdnanMM>

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