

The Brooklyn Rail
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Etel Adnan: *Light's New Measure*

By Dina A. Ramadan



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches. Collection of Karen E. Wagner and David L. Caplan, New York. © Etel Adnan.

Etel Adnan's life has been marked by constant movement: across oceans and continents, between languages, both literal and artistic. Born in Beirut in 1925, during the French Mandate, Adnan left Lebanon to pursue higher education, first at the Sorbonne and then Harvard University, before settling in California in 1955 where she enrolled in the Philosophy PhD program at the University of California, Berkeley. A creative polyglot, she has produced paintings, drawings, tapestries, multiple volumes of poetry and essays, and *Sitt Marie-Rose* (1977), one of the most important novels about the Lebanese civil war, in a career spanning over six decades.

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Light's New Measure borrows its title from a poem in the 2012 collection *Sea and Fog*, gesturing to the dialogue between Adnan's artwork and her poetry. Indeed, it would be impossible to think about her art practice as separate from her literary pursuits, especially since a persistent struggle with language(s) frames her experience of both the literary and visual. By the time she began painting in the late 1950s, Adnan was already becoming a recognized poet. Uncomfortable with her choice to write in French, in light of the Algerians' continued struggle for independence—she would eventually develop her literary voice in English—she has often spoken of abstract painting as her entry point into her native Arabic, a liberation from the colonial tongue. As a French-educated child, Adnan learned to reproduce the Arabic alphabet as a series of signs, drawn rather than written, developing a relationship to the language that was largely visual. When she began experimenting with leporellos in the mid-1960s, she immediately realized her desire to transcribe Arabic poetry, beginning with the Iraqi modernist Badr Shakir al-Sayyab into these folding books.



Installation view: *Etel Adnan: Light's New Measure*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2021–22. Photo: David Heald. © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2021.

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Late Afternoon Poem (1968) and *Funeral March for the First Cosmonaut* (1968) reveal the possibilities Adnan recognized in this format. Small, compact, and portable, these accordion books unravel into expansive, almost unruly narratives that stretch out up to nine feet. Illustrations in ink, watercolor, and gouache are interrupted by the poet's handwriting in an endless dance between words and images. Written at a moment of precarious hope, the poems reflect Adnan's political engagement and commitment to the fight for freedom, even while the accompanying images might appear more ambiguous. The interest in space travel and the celestial as holding such liberatory promise continues as a constant thread in the artist's work.

In an untitled 2010 series—Adnan often prefers not to direct her viewer through appellations—a bold disk hangs in the center of each canvas, suspended against a luminous background, divided by forceful lines that suggest a horizon. But this naturescape is never fully articulated; instead, we are invited to view this as an emotional rather than a figurative landscape, an experimentation in line and color. Adnan's paintings feel immediate in their energy, exploding onto the canvas in a single sitting, thick layers of paint applied directly from the tube. Much like her poetry, they are emotive and experiential, studies of the potential of color and its emotional agency, explorations of its ability to move past the limitations of meaning. Even when the works flirt with figuration, they linger outside its confines. Adnan's landscapes are maps of a layered interiority created through an intimate relationship between colors pushing up against each other, almost insisting on inhabiting the same space. With time these bodies of color appear to become clearer, more discreet, and yet the relationships between them remain nuanced.



Etel Adnan, *Untitled*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 30 x 29 inches. Private collection. © Etel Adnan.

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With the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975, Adnan began to understand exile as “the violent and involuntary loss of all the living symbols of one’s identity ... a dispossession with no recourse.”¹ Upon returning to California in 1977, she embarked on a lifelong relationship with Mount Tamalpais, her “best friend,” who emerges as a frequent and recurring subject in her painting, tapestry, and writing, the subject of a 1986 love letter, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*. In the face of loss, exile, and displacement, this landmark is grounding, a site of permanence and memory. However, it is also constantly transforming, shape shifting as the artist reinterprets her relationship to it, even today, reproducing it from memory in her Parisian apartment. At times, we experience it with reassuring clarity and strength; other times, it is unpredictable and confusing.

Light’s New Measure reflects the expansive range of Adnan’s prolific career. Yet there is something curatorially underwhelming about the exhibition. The subtle economy of the smaller works is compromised by the space. The video pieces by and about the artist are easy to miss and difficult to hear. Displayed on the lower levels of the rotunda, *Light’s New Measure* is intended to be in dialogue with *Vasily Kandinsky: Around the Circle above*. This pairing is promising, Kandinsky being an artist Adnan has long admired. However, it is ultimately a missed opportunity, gestured to but not fully explored. So too is the lack of a catalogue or any real documentation to accompany Adnan’s first major New York museum show. Nevertheless, Adnan’s luminous landscapes, in their various incarnations, radiate a sense of hope and renewal, a captivating testament to a lifetime spent in endless artistic exploration.

1. Etel Adnan, “Voyage, War, Exile,” *Al-'Arabiyya*, 1995, Vol. 28 (1995), 8.