

# Painting in Arabic: the life and work of the late Lebanese artist Etel Adnan

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Lebanese artist Etel Adnan in her home and studio, Paris. Photo: Stefan Ruiz

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The late Lebanese artist Etel Adnan once said that, "We are used to living in a world of 'either, or', but we are complex beings, multiple beings, diverse beings." Her entire life demonstrated that maxim.

Etel Adnan passed away last month, and is being remembered by the Guggenheim Museum with a solo show with the evocative title "Light's New Measure", running until 10 January. The exhibition celebrates her as one of the most significant artists of our times, as well as conveying to visitors her vision for holistic artistic expression.

In a world of separation which requires individuals to be ever more specialised in just one field, Adnan was an example of how opposite endeavours can ultimately meet. For a start, the saying "either do art, or live" didn't apply to her. She didn't give up a full life to cultivate a rich oeuvre. She had both, and they nurtured each other.

She didn't have to choose between expressing herself through words or images; she dedicated herself to both with the same intensity and outstanding results. The two forms even ended up meeting in beautiful graphic poems, some of which she realised in the form of lepoirellos, the folded horizontal paper that she first discovered in a Japanese shop in San Francisco, where she used to live.

Adnan is a great example for successive generations, in the sense that she didn't feel compelled to choose political engagement over expressing gratitude for the beauty of the world through her art. Being exposed to both in the course of her long life, she felt that happiness and suffering were but two sides of the same coin.



While in her paintings she expressed nothing but joy, faith and the beauty of the natural world and the human spirit, her writing as a journalist and novelist was devoted to highlighting social injustice. She denounced the evils of the wars that she experienced first-hand.

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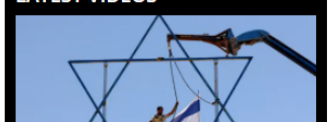
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## Life and art as one

Was her ease in reconciling seemingly opposite approaches a product of her multicultural upbringing? Born in Lebanon to a Greek mother and

Syrian father, Etel Adnan grew up speaking French, Arabic and Greek. As an adult, she lived for extended periods in Lebanon, the United States and France.

She wasn't exposed to art as a child, as in the Lebanon of her youth people didn't hang paintings in their homes. "Back then the aesthetic sense of the Islamic world expressed itself either through architecture or rugs," she said in an interview when she recalled that she used to visit the market with her father, going along with the same sense of wonder and presence that one would harness for a museum visit. This interest in rugs never left her; later on, she realised many pieces of abstract tapestry.

Perhaps due to the lack of exposure to painting as a child, she ended up being hit powerfully by classical paintings when she was first came face to face with them. She was 20 years old when she came in contact with art at the Louvre in Paris with a "beginner's mind". This enabled her to absorb fully the power of the medium.

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In Paris, she studied philosophy at La Sorbonne, but it was only when she moved to San Francisco in 1958 — at the height of the Ginsberg-led poetic renaissance — that she started to paint while working as a professor of philosophy. This, she said later, was a time when modern art was starting to be taken seriously in America, appearing in widely-read magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* in full colour. Museums and galleries started to welcome visitors of all backgrounds. "Going to the museums started becoming fun," she said.



Deeply in love with nature and acknowledging human existence as a part of it, Adnan painted landscapes without human figures. Her art conveys the warmth and connection with the natural universe of a Georgia O'Keefe, but veering towards an even stronger abstraction.

The pure colours of her canvases are squeezed right from the tube in her characteristic method of painting, sitting at her desk with her small canvases laid flat. Her palette exalts the sharp Matisse-like joy of pure colours, while her brushstrokes are clear and confident.

## Socio-political engagement

In her search for the absolute and the eternal in art, the socio-political struggle didn't elude her. Back in Beirut, she published her novel *Sitt Marie-Rose*, based on the life of Marie Rose Boullos, a woman executed by a Christian militia in Beirut. It has been translated into at least ten languages and has had a great influence on Arab literature, becoming a war classic.


What followed was one of her most recognised collection of poems called *The Arab Apocalypse*. This was first published in French in 1980, and talked about the gloomy and violent mood of her home country, Lebanon, in the days just before the civil war. In protest at France's colonial rule in Algeria, she renounced writing in French and declared that she would begin "painting in Arabic".

Travelling regularly to Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, Syria and back to Lebanon throughout her life, she never stopped dealing with the politics of the Middle East in her writing, including the essay collection *Of Cities and Women* (Letters to Fawwaz, 1993) and the poetry collection *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (2005).

Her painting and writing were in constant communication. She spoke about her paintings being a "vertical translation" of her "horizontal" writing, and explained that "I write what I see, paint what I am", to symbolise her expression of the need for simultaneous outer change and inner transformation.

## Paintings that help you live your everyday life


In one interview, Adnan recalled that in her youth the slogan was "to live in the present", a motto that has survived the New Age culture and is now becoming widespread in popular culture. "I



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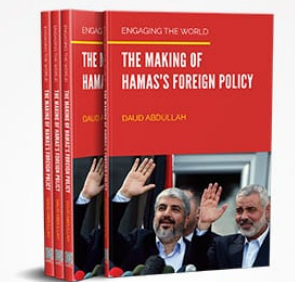
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have always lived in the present," she pointed out. "Only now that I'm older am I encouraged to think back about my past and reflect on life. I'm starting to feel a sense of urgency in regards to my work, because I know my time on this earth is limited."

The works showcased in the Guggenheim show are proof that the spirit within an artistic oeuvre can outlive the artist. Her artwork expressed something bigger than the individual, allowing the public to connect immediately with something within themselves.



Etel Adnan's life keeps on inspiring new generations of artists who don't want to settle on one single mode of artistic expression, one field; one label; but want to traverse categories and boundaries. To the young artist, she recommends boldness, audacity and being able to take risks.

Perhaps the most poignant definition of her work, and the place it can have in people's life, comes from her partner, the artist Simone Fattal, who has described her works as both exuding and giving energy: "They shield you like talismans. They help you live your everyday life."

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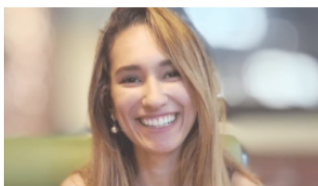


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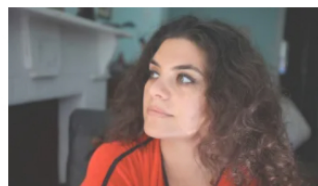
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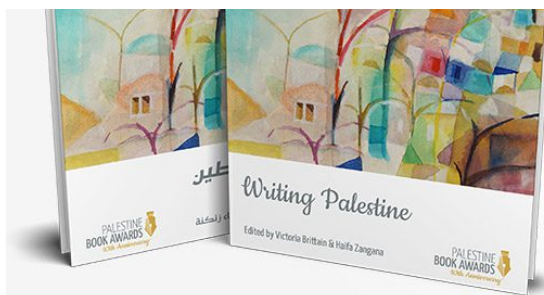


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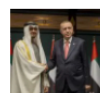
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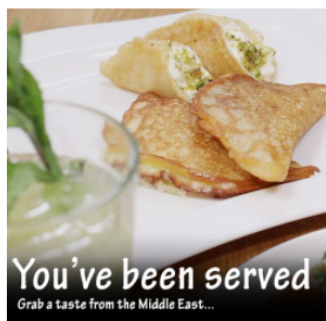
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