

Press kit: Etel Adnan. Poetry of Colors

Etel Adnan. Poetry of Colors
April 1 – July 16, 2023
K20

Press conference and preview
Wednesday, March 29, 2023, 11 am, K20

With:

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
- Sébastien Delot, Curator, Director Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne
- Kathrin Beßen, Curator of the Exhibition

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#K20EtelAdnan
#EtelAdnan
#K20

Comprehensive Etel Adnan Exhibition at K20

Born in Beirut, Etel Adnan (1925–2021) was a Lebanese American poet, painter, and philosopher. Her artistic and literary work is characterized by a great and lived exchange between the Arab and Western worlds. The exhibition at K20 presents works from all of her creative periods from the 1960s to 2021, paying tribute to the diversity of Etel Adnan's work, which spans more than six decades: paintings, drawings, tapestries, leporellos, texts, and a large ceramic wall piece.

The work of Adnan, who spent her life between Lebanon, France, and California, combines very different art forms, media, languages, and cultures. After the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), she refused to continue working in French and showed solidarity with Algeria: "I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic." Her political clarity, as well as the close connection between writing and painting, became an essential feature of her oeuvre.

The exhibition presents the artist's work in thematic chapters. These are themes that accompanied Adnan throughout her life and had a strong influence on her work. At the same time, selected chapters provide an in-depth look at Adnan's chosen genres. In this way, not only is a dialogue with other artistic positions of classical modernism made possible, but a reference to Adnan's chosen materials and working methods is also repeatedly established.

These chapters are flanked by films that emerged from Adnan's joint projects with filmmaker friends. They examine aspects of her artistic work, but also her political commitment, experiences of exile and her search for an identity between cultures.

Etel Adnan. Poetry of Colors at K20

Exile

Etel Adnan's story begins in Smyrna, now İzmir, Turkey, where her Greek mother and Syrian father meet. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, they marry and flee to Beirut in 1923. Adnan is born there in 1925. The experience of exile accompanies Adnan throughout her life. Her paintings and literary works are therefore characterized by a special cultural complexity.

Abstraction

It is not until 1960—when Adnan is living in Sausalito near San Francisco and teaching philosophy at the Dominican College of San Rafael—that she begins to paint. Her encounter with the American artist, art professor, and colleague Ann O'Hanlon is decisive. Painting becomes an important means of expression for Adnan, alongside her work as a poet. *"I didn't need to belong to a language-orientated culture, but to an open form of expression."*

Already with her first paintings, such as *Hot* (ca. 1960, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen), Adnan shows a predilection for abstraction. Rectangles and shapes developed from the movement of the palette knife, as well as intense colors and subtle color combinations, determine her compositions. This chapter traces the path from the early works to the final works in 2021. Here, with the help of loans from a private collection, it has also been possible to present paintings from the 1970s.

Nature

Etel Adnan's interest in nature is omnipresent in both her painterly and her lyrical work. In her paintings, this is evident in the motif of Mount Tamalpais, as well as in compositions with elementary forms such as the circle or the square. The few surviving photographs and her video recordings are also dedicated to natural phenomena: *"I feel attracted to the simplest images: the mountain, the Pacific, the birds flying over the mountain, and New York, with the skyscrapers, the light reflected on them."*

Tapestries

The art of carpet weaving is an important medium for Etel Adnan. In 1966, she travels to North Africa, where she visits an art center founded by the architect Ramses Wissa Wassef in Harrania, Egypt. The children of the region are taught to weave tapestries, which they make freely and without a pattern. When she returns to San Francisco, Adnan has some of her designs woven as carpets. She takes classes with the artist Ida Grae, who experiments with vegetable dyes and new forms of weaving. Tapestry is a very elaborate and expensive medium. Adnan's designs are therefore not realized for many years. It is only in the 2010s, when she receives increasing international attention, that she is given the opportunity to realize them in collaboration with the manufactory Les Ateliers Pinton d'Aubusson-Felletin (France).

The Arabic World

"At the time, my head had to cope—and it still has to cope—with a double life: The passionate interest in America and, lying underneath, a strong attachment to the Arab world."

Adnan spends almost her entire life in the United States, in France and, time and again, in Beirut. She is an important voice in the Arab world. She writes against the backdrop of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) and the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), calling for greater political freedom. *"I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic,"* she later wrote about her personal, temporary departure from French and her turn to painting and the medium of the leporello. For her folding books, she is in contact with numerous contemporary Arab poets, whose texts she inscribes in the paper format and combines with drawings or watercolors.

Highlights of the exhibition include the leporellos *Al-Sayyab, Mother and Lost Daughter* (1970) and *Untitled* (1971) from the Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, which are being shown in Europe for the first time.

Cities

Adnan is always inspired by the cities she visits and settles in. Beirut, Paris, San Francisco and Berkeley, New York. In her works—her film *Motion*, as well as many drawings and le-porellos—she depicts the city as an ever-changing landscape and an inexhaustible source of inspiration. *Motion* (2012) thus presents everyday moments in short passages, shot in Manhattan, Sausalito, San Francisco, and Yosemite Park.

War

One of the themes that repeatedly preoccupy Etel Adnan and permeate her work is war. The Vietnam War (1955–75) prompted her first political statement. After the United States entered the war, she wrote her first poem in English in 1965. In response to the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), she leaves Beirut. In Paris, in response, she writes one of her most famous texts, the novel *Sitt Marie-Rose*, which is published in France in 1978. The cycle of poems *Arab Apocalypse* follows in 1980. On view in the exhibition is the complete manuscript of the English edition.

Literature

In a separate reading room, Adnan is presented as a poet, novelist, essayist, and journalist. Long before Etel Adnan becomes a painter, she is already a poet. Her earliest childhood memories are associated with writing exercises and playing with formulations. *“Today, I think of these early fabrications as a way of storytelling, brief moments of imaginative thinking.”* Adnan writes about what surrounds and preoccupies her: art, nature, her encounters with other people, the political and social upheavals she witnesses, the war. *“The stories spring from a lived experience; all are autobiographical to some degree, though entirely fictional.”*

Films in the Exhibition

For the first time, the twelve-minute film *Etel and the Moon* (2023) by Marie Valentine Reagan will be shown in an exhibition context. It captures a monologue by Etel Adnan about humanity’s quest into space and her fascination with all things cosmic. In it, Adnan recites parts of her poem “A Funeral March for the First Cosmonaut,” which she wrote in 1968 in response to the death of Yuri Gagarin, and comments on the human condition in general: “If we are not careful, we could disappear. Even before we settle somewhere else.”

Marie Valentine Reagan is an American filmmaker based in Paris. Her collaboration with Etel Adnan over the last five years of the artist’s life has resulted in several projects, including the short film *Etel and the Moon*, as well as works in progress, such as installations and a documentary about Adnan.

Etel Adnan and the artist and filmmaker Joana Hadjithomas met in the late 1990s and realized that both their families shared the same fate. Both had to leave the city of Smyrna, now İzmir. Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige capture this shared ancestral experience in the fifty-minute film *Ismyrna* (2015), which has been screened at many film festivals. Etel Adnan’s origins, her identity between cultures, lie here.

“My mother wanted me to be born in Smyrna at all costs. But I was born in Beirut, yet she registered Smyrna as my birthplace. [...] We lived in two worlds: in Beirut with the Lebanese and the children of Beirut, and we also went back to our own world. We lived in two

worlds that remained separate from each other. You live in a fantasy world, and through it you become who you are. It is a part of who you are."

Etel Adnan and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen

In 2018, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, under the direction of Prof. Dr. Susanne Gaensheimer, was already able to acquire paintings by Adnan, some of which belong to the artist's impressive early oeuvre, such as the painting *Persian* from 1963/64, which influenced the visual appearance of the Düsseldorf exhibition as a whole. These acquisitions fit naturally into the museum's collection, as the artist also refers to the pre-war avant-gardes such as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, who, like Henri Matisse, are part of the initial holdings of the Kunstsammlung.

Adnan's references to these three artists are manifold. For example, during her time teaching philosophy of art in California, Adnan included Kandinsky's text *On the Spiritual in Art* in her teaching. About Paul Klee, whose diaries she read as soon as they were published in English in 1964, she said: "I think Klee was the first painter I fell in love with. He obsessed me. By obsessed, I mean that his paintings put me into a state of ecstasy."

This preoccupation is visible in the form of individual resonances in the exhibition *Etel Adnan. Poetry of Colors*: Selected works from the holdings of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen complement the exhibition. Thus, for the first time, it will be possible to see a work by Henri Matisse in direct proximity to works by Adnan.

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New Acquisitions 2022

In 2022, further acquisitions were made, which are now presented in the exhibition for the first time. These include Etel Adnan's large-format tapestry *Séjour Estival*, the design of which dates back to the 1960s.

Prof. Dr. Susanne Gaensheimer is particularly pleased to have succeeded in acquiring two ceramics by Simone Fattal. Etel Adnan met the artist and art critic met in Beirut in 1972, and they lived together in Paris and California until Etel Adnan's death.

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Sébastien Delot, director of the LaM – Lille métropole musée d'art moderne, art contemporain et art brut, has been enlisted as curator for the exhibition. He accompanied Etel Adnan and her work over many years. Delot curated exhibitions in France and abroad of Alberto Giacometti, Paul Klee, Isamu Noguchi, Guillermo Kuitca, and William Kentridge. He met Etel Adnan in 2002/03. This developed after 2013 into a deep friendship with Adnan and her partner Simone Fattal. This led to the solo exhibition of Etel Adnan at Zentrum Paul Klee in Berne and the Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, curated by Delot. For this first retrospective of the American Lebanese artist in Germany, he has been invited to collaborate with K20 and Lenbachhaus in order to give a rich perception of her oeuvre.

An exhibition of the Lenbachhaus, Munich, and the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, curated by Sébastien Delot, Director of the LaM, Lille Métropole Musée d'art moderne d'art contemporain et d'art brut.

The exhibition is sponsored by the Rudolf-August Oetker-Stiftung.

Media Partner of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen:
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung

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Sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia

Exhibition Catalog

A comprehensive catalog has been published to accompany the exhibition.

Edited by Sébastien Delot, Matthias Mühling, and Susanne Gaensheimer

With contributions by Etel Adnan, Kathrin Beßen, Sébastien Delot, Simone Fattal, Grégoire Prangé, Morad Montazami, Melanie Vietmeier, and Giovanna Zapperi

Separate German and English editions, 208 pages, 34 €

From now on!!!

Free admission for children and teens to both K20 and K21

New opening hours

As of April 1, 2023, there are new opening hours of both K20 and K21:

Tuesday – Sunday, holidays 11:00 am – 6:00 pm

Supporting Program**Opening of the Exhibition****Thursday, March 30, 2023, 7:00 pm****K20**

Speakers:

- Susanne Gaensheimer, Director, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf
- Ina Brandes, Minister of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
- Birgit Sander, Chairwoman, Rudolf-August Oetker-Stiftung
- Sébastien Delot, Curator of the exhibition, Director, LaM, Lille

Sneak Peek – Preview for Young Adults

Thursday, March 30, 2023, 4:00 – 5:30 pm

Free admission with student ID card

Registration required

Düsseldorfer Nacht der Museen

Experience the exhibition with Art Guides: Visitors to the “Night of the Museums” have the opportunity to talk to art historians in the exhibition.
Saturday, April 22, 2023, 7:30 pm – midnight

Guided Tours**The exhibition at a glance****An Overview of the Exhibition**

Sundays and holidays, 3:00 – 4:00 pm

Registration required

For the exhibition *Etel Adnan. Poetry of Colors*, the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen offers for the first time multilingual guided tours in easy-to-understand language, for the deaf, in Arabic, in English, in French, in Turkish and in Ukrainian.

For detailed information on our accompanying program, please visit:**<https://www.kunstsammlung.de/en/calendar/>**

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Exhibition Preview

**Chaïm Soutine
September 2, 2023 – April 14, 2024
K20**

Press Conference: Wednesday, August 30, 2023, 11 am at K20

The Kunstsammlung is dedicating an exhibition to the magnificent work of Chaïm Soutine (1893–1943). His paintings are explosions of color, beautiful and drastic at the same time. He painted pageboys, cooks, altar boys: people who, like him, find themselves on the lowest rung of society. With these, as with the paintings of wavering landscapes and slaughtered animals, he captured the torn attitude to life of an entire epoch.

Soutine grew up in Belarus. In 1913, he moved to Paris. Although the metropolis became his adopted home, Soutine remained an outsider throughout his life, poorly mastering the French language and remaining a stranger to social manners. The overriding theme of the exhibition is emigration and the permanent uprooting of the individual as a consequence of this. This individual as well as social phenomenon spans an arc to the present time, in which rootlessness has become an integral part of the modern attitude to life in the twenty-first century.

Soutine, who had an enormous influence on painting after 1945, is one of the central representatives of classical modernism; in Germany, he is revered in artistic circles.

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**Isaac Julien
September 16, 2023 – February, 2024
K21**

Press Conference: Thursday, September 14, 2023, 11 am at K21

The first survey exhibition in Germany dedicated to work of the British artist and filmmaker Isaac Julien (b. 1960 in London) reveals the breadth of a groundbreaking oeuvre from its emergence in the 1980s to the present. Julien's critical thinking, aimed above all at an intense engagement with the culture and history of colonialism, is expressed in his early films, as well as in the highly aesthetic film images of the major, internationally acclaimed video installations of the last twenty years.

The exhibition is being developed in cooperation with Tate Britain, London, where it will be on view from April 27 to August 20, 2023.

Annex

Biography Etel Adnan

1925

Etel Adnan was born February 24, 1925, in Beirut, Lebanon, to a Greek mother and a Syrian father. Her father was a former officer in the Ottoman army and had been a classmate of Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, at the military academy. Her parents met in 1913 and were married the same year in Smyrna (present-day Izmir, Turkey), which was also her mother's birthplace. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, they had moved to Beirut in 1923.

1925–39

Adnan's family spoke Turkish at home, and her mother spoke Greek to her. In the Catholic school she attended in what was then a French protectorate (Lebanon did not gain its independence until 1944), the children learned French. Encouraged by her father, she began to learn Arabic, which she heard every day in the streets. She started copying lines of Arabic calligraphy and verses from an old grammar book. It was during these early years that Adnan became fascinated with writing.

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I loved the fact, the act of writing, as far as I can remember. In elementary school we were given words around which to build a sentence. I used to write long paragraphs, enjoying the pen, the ink, the page, and the words coming one after another with a feel of roundness, a comfort for the body and the mind.

1939

When World War II erupted I was in secondary school. I saw the city of Beirut become an internationally important city. The French and British armies had headquarters in it and the cosmopolitan character of the city glittered with a special romanticism for which movies had prepared us. [...] It did not see the real war, but the armies that were tearing the world apart.

1945

Etel Adnan was one of twelve students to be in the first class of the École Supérieures des Lettres, which had been newly created by the writer Gabriel Bounoure under the aegis of the French embassy. It was at this time she wrote her first poems.

I started writing poetry at the age of twenty: it was a long poem that I called "Le Livre de la Mer," "The Book of the Sea," a poem which sees the interrelation between the sun and the sea as a kind of cosmic eroticism.

1949

Adnan received a scholarship for the Sorbonne in Paris, France, where she studied philosophy, notably with the professor of aesthetics Étienne Souriau and the professor of philosophy Gaston Bachelard. She met many students from the US who were interested

in jazz and music in general. Several of them convinced her to continue her studies in Berkeley, California.

1955

Adnan moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and enrolled at the University of California in Berkeley, where she began writing a doctoral thesis in aesthetics, which she never finished. She arrived when the area was buzzing with artistic and political activity and a culture of change. It was a stimulating mixture of the San Francisco Renaissance in poetry, the Beat Generation, counterculture, and the massive student movement.

It was a total subversion of one's own thinking, a little earthquake in a student's life. Going from the Sorbonne to the University of California, in 1955, was like changing planets.

1957

Several Arab poets led by Yusuf al-Khal founded the avant-garde Arab literary magazine "Shi'ir." It printed American and European poems in Arabic translation and was regarded as an experimental laboratory for poetry from all over the world. Etel Adnan published her first poems translated into Arabic in this magazine. Adnan spent a few months in Mexico. It was a critical journey full of profound experiences. She visited Puerto Vallarta, Guadalajara, Mérida, and Mexico City, where she was particularly impressed by the large wall mosaics at the university. Thereafter, she went to Harvard, Massachusetts, for a further year of study.

1958

Adnan became a lecturer in philosophy of art at the Dominican College of San Rafael and moved to Sausalito, a small town north of San Francisco. In her classes, she taught the art theoretical writings of Wassily Kandinsky and other topics. From her apartment, she could see Mount Tamalpais, which would soon become one of the most important subjects of her paintings.

1959

The news of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) was a shock to Adnan.

The morning paper was regularly bringing news of Algerians being killed or news of the atrocities that always seem to accompany large scale violence. I became suddenly, and rather violently, conscious that I had naturally and spontaneously taken sides, that I was emotionally a participant in the war, and I resented having to express myself in French.

Around this time, she met Ann O'Hanlon, an art professor and head of the department of art at her college, who nudged her toward painting and thus a new means of artistic expression.

I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic.

1961

Adnan discovered a new medium: Japanese notebooks that fold out like accordions, called "leporellos."

I like the flow, the apparent lack of boundaries, the river image of these unfolding papers. China and Japan understood long ago that one reads an image the way one reads lines made of words.

These notebooks provided her with the space she needed to rediscover the practice of calligraphy, which links image and writing in many ways.

Year after year, I worked on these long papers, like horizontal scrolls, with my imperfect writing, aware that it was the opposite of classical calligraphy that was at stake.

In the same year, she had her first solo exhibition at the gallery of Ann and Richard O'Hanlon in Mill Valley, California.

1964

Adnan was enthralled with the diaries of the painter Paul Klee, which were published in English this year.

1965

After the United States entered the Vietnam War (1955–1975) in 1964, it became a hotly debated issue there, as in other places, and the social climate turned explosive. Many intellectuals became involved and reacted to the events through their works, taking a stance against the war.

Adnan voiced her political views for the first time and wrote her first poem in English in 1965.

Poets wrote against the war [...] I came home, put a sheet of paper in my typewriter and, almost as if not paying attention to what I was doing, wrote a poem: "The ballad of the lonely knight in present-day America" [...] I was a poet in the English language! I wrote some other poems, dictated by emotions and events, and I felt part of an immense movement of American poets at a time when poetry seemed to grow in that country like music and grass.

1966

"Moonshots," Adnan's first collection of poems, was published this year. She took a one-semester sabbatical and traveled extensively to Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, and Egypt. In Egypt, she discovered the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Center in Harrania, founded in 1951, where children are taught the art of weaving.

1967

During her travels, Adnan met a master weaver from Tunisia. After she returned to San Francisco, she sent him two designs that he executed, thereby creating Adnan's first tapestries. Around the same time, Adnan also met Hal Painter, who was one of the few weavers in San Francisco and who later founded the American Tapestry Alliance. They decided to collaborate and he agreed to weave several of her designs.

1968

The Dominican College of San Rafael hired Ida Grae, who was known for her research in new forms of weaving and the use of plant-based dyes for wool. Adnan took her classes with great interest and later wrote about her new passion in letters.

1972

Due to health reasons, Adnan left the US and moved back to Beirut. There, the editor-in-chief of the new French-language daily paper “al-Safa” asked her to take charge of its culture section. She covered the jazz scene, pop music, literature, cinema, theater, and art. When the newspaper folded two years later, Adnan went to “L’Orient-le Jour,” a major newspaper in Beirut.

She met the artist and art critic Simone Fattal, who became her partner.

1975

While Adnan was living in Beirut, the Lebanese civil war broke out after many years of political unrest and conflicts.

People’s lives exploded with the buildings and, like the pieces of the destroyed buildings, they went in all directions. [...] French-speaking Lebanese went to Paris [...]. I went to Paris two years after the war started, not to stay indefinitely, but to wait for things to calm down in Lebanon.

1978

Adnan’s novel “Sitt Marie Rose” was published. It had been authored in 1977 in Paris in reaction to one of the many tragic deaths mourned daily in Lebanon during the civil war. Written in French, the book was translated into Arabic and released in Beirut before the French edition was published. The novel was translated into ten languages and became a classic of antiwar literature. It was also adapted for the stage and debuted in 2009 at Düsseldorf’s Forum Freies Theater. Adnan received the Amitié Franco-Arabe Prize for “Sitt Marie Rose.”

The novel made Adnan the target of numerous death threats, and she decided to leave Lebanon for good. She returned to the US, which became her base for observing and commenting on crises in the world. She devoted her life entirely to painting and writing from this time forward.

1980

Adnan published “The Arab Apocalypse,” a haunting work in which she combined writing with drawings of signs.

In ‘The Arab Apocalypse,’ the signs are my excess of emotions. I cannot say more. I wrote by hand, and, here and there, I put a word, and I made a little drawing, a sign. I kept those signs for the printed book.

1984

At the request of the theater director and artist Robert Wilson, Adnan wrote the libretto for the French part of “the CIVIL warS: a tree is best measured when it is down,” a six-part, multilingual opera devoted to the American Civil War. The music for the French part was composed by Gavin Bryars.

1985–2010

Etel Adnan published many books of essays and poems and exhibited her paintings all over the world. She became a highly respected, independent voice in discussions about political and feminist issues.

2010

The Al Madina Theatre in Beirut organized a major tribute to Etel Adnan. On this occasion, it announced the foundation of the Etel Adnan Award for Women Playwrights for the promotion of women writers in the Arab world.

That same year, Adnan received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Radius of Arab American Writers (RAWI).

2012

Adnan's participation in dOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany, marked the beginning of international recognition of her painting. That same year, she moved to Paris permanently.

2017

The Etel Adnan Poetry Prize, established by the University of Arkansas Press and RAWI, was awarded for the first time.

2021

On November 14, Etel Adnan died in her home in Paris at the age of 96.

All quotes by Etel Adnan in the biography and the exhibition texts are taken from her publications "Growing Up to Be a Woman Writer in Lebanon,"

"To Write in a Foreign Language," "Journey to Mount Tamalpais," "Paris, When It's Naked," "Voyage, War and Exile," "To Be in a Time of War," "Life is a Weaving," and as well as from Hans Ulrich Obrist's "Conversation with Etel Adnan," and the film "Ismyrna" by Jovana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige.