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Prophet of a Useless Nation:

Etel Adnan's Apocalyptic Vision for Art

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Art History

by

Gökcan Demirkazık

2021

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Prophet of a Useless Nation:
Etel Adnan's Apocalyptic Vision for Art

by

Gökcan Demirkazik

Master of Arts in Art History
University of California, Los Angeles, 2021
Professor George Baker, Chair

Beirut-born, Lebanese-American poet and visual artist Etel Adnan first rose to international prominence through her literary works on the Lebanese civil wars (officially 1975-1990), such as *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978/1982) and *The Arab Apocalypse* (1980/1989). Although Adnan began practicing painting as a self-taught artist in the 1950s, her visual output was not widely recognized and celebrated until the 21st century. When Adnan finally became a fixture in the international art world, her paintings—mostly bright, colorful landscapes of modest stature—were frequently characterized in opposition to the grim realities and stark language of her earlier writings. Centering on her artist book *The Arab Apocalypse*, this thesis examines the artist's overall approach to meaning-making and the resulting transdisciplinary connections between Adnan's literary and visual mediums. I suggest that a particular “apocalyptic” vision can be identified in

her daily practice of painting Mount Tamalpais in the Bay Area (especially in the 1980s), and I accordingly explore the formal and theoretical resonances between the artist's landscapes and the oeuvres of Paul Cézanne and Paul Klee. As such, I ultimately argue that Adnan's paintings articulate a unique response to the so-called "death of (modernist) painting" in the 20th century.

The thesis of Gökcan Demirkazik is approved.

Zirwat Chowdhury

Miwon Kwon

George Baker, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2021

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Whatever makes mountain rise, and us, with them, makes colors restless and ecstatic.¹

. . . it's not only war that can inspire creativity—overwhelming beauty can also create overwhelming works. For example Monet's Water Lilies triptych is epic. Nature is overwhelming if you really look at it. It's a burst of fantastic energy. It's a sort of positive apocalypse.²

—Etel Adnan

For Etel Adnan, the Apocalypse is a customary affair: even though the ninety-six-year-old artist and author may not get to experience the overpowering beauty of nature firsthand every day, she lives vicariously through her paintings. Adnan does so by encountering and fixing the intensity she associates with the Apocalypse onto the surface of her miniscule, pre-stretched canvases. As Simone Fattal, Adnan's partner and former publisher at the Post-Apollo Press, observes, these paintings take her places:

. . . she is in her room, she sees no mountains or hills from her window. And yet they are on the canvas. She says proudly, "I want to go there." And actually she does go there, and the canvases tell us where she's been, and we share the experience.³

"Apocalypse" may seem too forced a metaphor for her paintings based on their purported transportational power alone; however, it would not be out of place given the way Adnan herself occasionally describes the process that most often results in pleasant landscapes with relatively broad expanses of undifferentiated, bright colors (**Fig. 1 & 2**):

Whatever one's feelings, the moment of painting is always a moment of happiness. The rape of materials is a joy. To break, squeeze, manipulate, transform, build, open, force, make . . . all this is a sport and is a moment of love.⁴

¹ Etel Adnan, *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, in *To look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, eds. Thom Donovan and Brandon Shimoda (Brooklyn and Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2014), vol. I, 329.

² Adnan, quoted in Aimee Dawson, "California landscapes resonate in London," *The Art Newspaper*, June 1, 2016, https://www.sfeir-semmler.com/data/press/Etel%20Adnan%20Press/2016_london_Shows%20&%20Events.pdf.

³ Simone Fattal, "Painting as Pure Energy," in *Etel Adnan: The Weight of the World*, eds. Rebecca Lewin, Melissa Larner, Agnes Gryczkowska (London: Koenig Books and Serpentine Galleries, 2016), 55.

⁴ Adnan, *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, 308. From here onwards, I will be providing parenthetical, in-line citations of this book as *JTMT*.

These words come from her 1986 book *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*—an illustrated text organized around her love for the eponymous Northern California mountain, which the artist identified as “the most important person [she] ever met,” “the very center of [her] being.” (*JTMT*, 293) Mount Tamalpais still regularly appears across Adnan’s canvases, but it is far from being the almost exclusive subject of her painting practice, as it once was for a period in the 1980s. (**Fig. 3**) The artist’s topographic abstractions may be so through that, if any identifying features of the mountain appear at all on canvas, they are usually limited to a pointed peak piercing the sky next to a slightly lower, more rounded hilltop. This is in keeping with—if not dictated by—her painting process: from the moment Adnan took up the medium some time in the 1950s, she has been using a palette knife to apply paint on an unprimed canvas lying flat on her desk. Completed in a single “sitting” of a couple of hours each, the artist’s paintings can be said to be aggressive in their deskilling and streamlining of the painterly gesture, and thus embody Adnan’s conception of painting as an almost self-contained and -propelled, autonomous organism:

Sometimes, while painting, something wild gets unleashed. Something of the process of dreams recurs . . . but with a special kind of violence: a painting is like a territory. All kinds of things happen within its boundary, equal to the discoveries of murders or the creations we have in the world outside. (*JTMT*, 307)

Surprisingly, the artist’s persistent association of painting with violence has received very little critical attention besides a poetically diffuse, metaphysical framing of her paintings as (some variation of) “pure energy.”⁵ On the other hand, unlike the upbeat and jubilant discourse characterizing Adnan’s visual output as idyllic, the discussions around her writing on and around the Lebanese civil wars (which catapulted Adnan into international fame around forty years before her visual works became celebrated worldwide) have, in fact, consistently centered on violence in

⁵ Fattal calls Adnan’s paintings “pure energy . . . a lesson of purity of mind . . . [and] of purpose.” Fattal, “Painting as Pure Energy,” 40.

very concrete ways. For an artist who admits to “c[oming] to painting from poetry,” one may then ask: why has the “violent” side of her destination medium been neglected?⁶

This essay attempts to debunk the prevalent mythology around Etel Adnan as a figure with two antagonistic practices in two separate mediums by returning to her 1980 artist book, *The Arab Apocalypse*.⁷ The parallels between the dismantling of communicative meaning by both text and image stem from the artist’s own personal relationship with language and present a basis for understanding how Adnan’s apocalyptic vision for art may be implemented in the medium of painting. To this end, I contend that Paul Klee and Paul Cézanne provide her with models for thinking about the ontology and erotics of painting, as well as about notions of structure, nature, perception, and even cosmological order. In conclusion, I suggest that her painterly practice is also an argument about the demise of modernist painting and constitutes a quiet celebration. After all, against the strictures and sanctifications of conventional systems of expression, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari write: “life must answer the answer [sic] of death, not by fleeing, but by making flight act and create.”⁸

Language Troubles

In an interview with Obrist, Adnan avers, “the first works, like the first notes in a piece of music, hold everything that one will do in the future.”⁹ If this is true, *The Arab Apocalypse* is one

⁶ Adnan, “Etel Adnan on lightning-strike paintings and words as gestures,” video, 5:01,

<https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/etel-adnan-lightning-strike-paintings-and-words-gestures/>.

⁷ In the only single-author monograph dedicated to the artist, critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie—the most observant of all commentators on Adnan’s art practice, by and large upholds the bipolarity of her visual and literary practice, suggesting the artist’s paintings can be related to violence only in the form of a “call-and-response” dynamic: “[Adnan’s paintings] respond with unabashed beauty to that sense of loss, disappearance, devastation, and destruction.” Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, *Etel Adnan* (London: Lund Humphries, 2018), 26.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 110.

⁹ Adnan, quoted in Andrew Stefan Weiner, “Square, Mountain, Square: Etel Adnan’s Double Signs,” in *The Ninth Page: Etel Adnan’s Journalism 1972-74*, eds. Julian Myers-Szupinska, Heidi Rabben (San Francisco: California College of the Arts and CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2013), 110.

such work with the potential to jointly illuminate the trajectories her painting and writing have followed. Written between February 1975 and August 1976, and published in its original French in 1980, this book-poem—one could also call it an artist book—is by no means “early,” but it is a “first” in one way or another, for having brought Adnan’s own words and images on the same page and put them in public circulation for the first time.¹⁰ Even though it was written and published in the early years of the Lebanese civil wars (officially 1975–1990), around the same time as Adnan’s highly controversial novel *Sitt Marie Rose*, 1978, *The Arab Apocalypse* was not translated into English and published by Fattal’s Post-Apollo Press until 1989. This almost decade-long delay in the translation may be attributed to the artist’s own desire to undertake the translation, but it also notably spans the period in which the landscapes of Mount Tamalpais—and by extension, nature—emerge as the protagonist of Adnan’s paintings, as well as that of *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, after her return to the Bay Area around 1979.¹¹

Similar to the proliferation of Mount Tamalpais on Adnan’s canvases, the sun multiplies across the pages of *The Arab Apocalypse*—its cover alone features three differently shaded roundels in pastel (**Fig. 4**). Especially in the first two poems (**Fig. 5 & 6**, and **Fig. 7 & 8**), the artist mostly dispenses with grammatically sound, full sentences, and qualifies a barrage of “suns” with a range of colors, adjectives, and ethnicities (and, in turn, a host of objects and demonyms with the word “solar”), interjecting them with various other nouns and adjectives. Confusing as this conflicting (over)characterization may be for a celestial body traditionally assumed unique, a grounding theme appears as early as the last line of the second poem: “O sun which tortures the

¹⁰ For dates, see Hilary Plum, “‘I planted the sun in the middle of the sky like a flag’: In and Of Etel Adnan’s *Arab Apocalypse*,” *College Literature* 47.4 (Summer, 2020), 500. Wilson-Goldie notes that Adnan’s first hybrid medium to bring word and image together, her leporellos, initially (and for a long time) included text by other poets and were often given as gifts to the very same poets featured. See Wilson-Goldie, 72.

¹¹ Unlike *The Arab Apocalypse*, *Sitt Marie-Rose* was relatively quickly translated into English by Georgina Kleege and published by The Post-Apollo Press in 1982.

Arab's eye in the Enemy's prison! Sun yellow silence."¹² The association of the sun with violence, oppression, and gore takes place on several collapsible levels: first and foremost, the sun's capacity for direct physical violence is declared through such phrases and lines as "a deicide sun," "the sun is velvet-winged atomic bomb," "the sun leads the children to the slaughterhouse," or "the sun has ripped skins bellies feet and brains."¹³ (AA, 14, 22, 29, 42) Alternatively, the sun may be identified with the legacy and contemporary agents of imperialism, "cutting Syria in two," its "tentacles set[ting] Africa on fire" or as a "camera . . . t[aking] the picture for C.I.A.'s archives," or associated with recent atrocities resulting from the civil strife in Lebanon, "drill[ing] holes in the brain of the Palestinian . . . unit[ing] the Arabs against the Arabs." (AA, 18, 39, 59, 40)

Indeed, as literary scholar Mona Takieddine Amyuni has noted, Adnan erects *The Arab Apocalypse* as an edifice of violence—fifty-nine poems for the fifty-nine bloody days in 1976 of Christian Arab militiamen's siege of Tell Zaatar, a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut.¹⁴ *The Arab Apocalypse* is a book of beginnings and endings: those fifty-nine days, which resulted in Christian forces breaking into the camp on August 12, 1976 at the expense of around 3,000 Palestinian civilians' lives, not only mark the inception of Adnan's artist book, but also, more importantly, the very beginnings of war in collective memory, in addition to the massacres at Quarantina and Damour in January 1976 (Quarantina is mentioned in the book).¹⁵ (AA, 19) Moreover, as Hilary Plum points out, *The Arab Apocalypse* is the "only book-length work Adnan has both authored and translated herself," as well as her "last major work . . . published in French"—two facts of no

¹² Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), 10. I will also be providing parenthetical, in-line citations of this book as AA from here on, unless I am offering additional comments and quotes.

¹³ It should be noted that I am not able to replicate the idiosyncratic spacing between words in certain poems here.

¹⁴ Mona Takieddine Amyuni, "Etel Adnan & Hoda Barakat: De-Centered Perspectives, Subversive Voices," in *Poetry's Voice – Society's Norms: Forms of Interaction between Middle Eastern Writers and their Societies*, eds. Andreas Pflitsch, Barbara Winckler (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2006), 212.

¹⁵ There is still some dispute around the number of casualties at the Tell Zaatar massacre, and to what extent Syria was involved, but I use the figure provided by Plum, itself based on two historical sources. Plum, 500.

small significance.¹⁶ In a 1985 essay titled “To Write in a Foreign Language,” Adnan mentions the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) as a turning point for her thinking about language and its politics, and one of the driving forces behind her decision to leave the French language behind as a medium of communication:

I still considered myself as a French speaking person, even if I was teaching in English. But when I thought seriously about poetry and writing again, I discovered a problem of a political nature. It was during the Algerian war of independence . . . 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.¹⁷

This early realization, however, did not prompt a decisive and final break with French: when the artist returned to Beirut at the beginning of the 1970s, she had to abandon English, and reclaim—“out of necessity”—the first language she learned to write, as she became an editor and columnist at *Al-Safa*, one of two French-language newspapers of the city.¹⁸ (*The Arab Apocalypse* was thus written in French a couple of years later, and so was *Sitt Marie Rose*, after she fled to Paris in order to “wait for things to calm down.” Although the novel was completed later, it was published *earlier*—in Arabic translation in 1977, and in the French original in 1978.) Arguably, English was no less “imperial” in the age of the Vietnam War, and Adnan was abundantly aware of this status—a subject I will turn to later—but, with French, the stakes were extremely personal.

Before turning to the specifics of how *The Arab Apocalypse* systematically undermines the act of meaning-making through text and image, it is important to acknowledge that this project, as well as Adnan’s broader oeuvre in both mediums, is grounded in a *political* attitude towards language that is itself imbricated in her experience as a former colonial subject. Defining the

¹⁶ Plum, 501–502.

¹⁷ Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” in *To look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, vol. I, 253.

¹⁸ Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” 256.

elementary unit of language as the “order-word,” Deleuze and Guattari accordingly contend that “[l]anguage is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience,” as the production of meaningful signs depends on concordance with “the necessarily social character of enunciation,” what Deleuze and Guattari call *collective assemblages*, i.e. the sum of processes through which words and utterances have been mobilized by everybody else *before*—and to a lesser extent, after—us.¹⁹ In her writings, Adnan returns time and again to the linguistic complications of her cosmopolitan background, the impact of her French-language education at the hands of nuns, and the itinerant *haut fonctionnaire* Gabriel Bounoure’s post-Independence, experimental night school *École supérieure de lettres*. Yet only in a little-cited essay from the 1990s does she unpack most directly and capaciously the tyranny of the French language on a personal and collective level (in Lebanon):

This famous “francophonie,” which is so praised actually in the former colonies was, and still is a political tool, a factor of colonization and alienation. We have been (like in Algeria and Black Africa) separated from our cultural past, **exiled** from our language. . . We didn’t leave our country physically, but just the same, we had left it in its most meaningful dimensions.²⁰

Explaining the prioritization of French as “a **first** language and a language superior to the native Arabic” in the educational sphere, Adnan goes as far to suggest that the “political attitudes” which develop from these circumstances have “contributed to the confusion which fed the Lebanese civil war.”²¹ The irony of writing about a civil war in the language of the former colonizer would not have been lost on Adnan and to this end, the extreme and unimaginable violence directed at Tell Zaatar finds its parallel in the artist’s fervent assault on language and its primary commitment to *conveying* meaning, predetermined *collective assemblages*. In *The Arab Apocalypse*, she

¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” 76—80.

²⁰ Adnan, “Voyage, War, and Exile,” *Al-‘Arabiyya* 28 (1995): 10 (Adnan’s emphasis).

²¹ Adnan, “Voyage, War, and Exile,” 11 (Adnan’s emphasis)

indiscriminately pushes language to its limits, whether it is French or English, as if in a bid to undo “the death sentence... envelop[ed]” by the order-word.²²

Perhaps English triumphed over French for Adnan, because the former did not have the same colonial relationship to *her* personal history—at the very least, English was a language she made a conscious decision to adopt. Indeed, during an interview from 1984, Adnan concedes a certain practicality to this decision: “as I was active in the anti-Vietnam movement in America, I had to write in English.”²³ Her first published poem in English, *The ballad of the lonely knight in present-day America*, appeared in a North Bay publication titled *S-B Gazette* as part of their open-call for anti-war poetry; another early English-language poem, *The Enemy’s Testament*, was anthologized in an anti-war volume.²⁴ Far from being oblivious to the status of English—or as Adnan is wont to call it, “American language”—as another vehicle of U.S. hegemony, her first forays into the language were therefore marked by an attempt to come to terms with the ruinous consequences of American expansionism at home and abroad.

Personal and Mythical Beginnings, Global Connections

American imperialism emphatically remained a recurrent subject and a crucial point of reference for Adnan on the question of what warfare could mean in the expanded field of post-WWII geopolitics, and straddled at least several decades of her writing. In many ways, given its global reach, the so-called *pax americana* was historically and symbolically connected to worldwide phenomena including anti-communist dictatorial regimes and proxy wars for Adnan. As Fattal recalls, when Israeli commandos landed on the beach in Beirut in 1973 with the mission of retaliating against the deadly attack on the Israeli delegation to the 1972 Munich Olympics,

²² Deleuze and Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” 110.

²³ Adnan, quoted in Plum, 514.

²⁴ Adnan, “To Write in a Foreign Language,” 254.

Adnan wrote, on the front page of *Al-Safa*, “I am in Saigon.”²⁵ *The Arab Apocalypse* is peppered with subtle and not-so-subtle references to the international overreach of American politics in places beyond the Middle East such as Guatemala, Angola, and Argentina.²⁶ However, the most prominent avatar of American state-sponsored violence in the book is much closer to “home.” As early as the last line of the first poem, “A Ø Hopi a Red Indian sun an Arab Black Sun a sun yellow and blue,” a rough parallel—if not an equivalence—is established between the figures of the Hopi or the Native American and Arabs.²⁷ (AA, 7) The victims of Europeans’ genocidal expansion across the Americas recur for the rest of the book with even darker and more high-pitched allusions to the violence and humiliation wrought on them in lines such as “a green sun streaked with Indians Ø O massacre in splendor!!” and “the Hopi Indian holding his sexual organ divine pee for funeral oration.” (AA, 13, 15) In this respect, poet and scholar Cole Swensen has also observed Adnan’s sustained attention to the history of decimated, displaced, or oppressed Native American populations both as conducive to explicit parallels with various Arab communities in the Middle East, and as a unique case to unpack in its specificity.²⁸

At this moment and during the decade that follows *The Arab Apocalypse*, the figure of the Native American (or Adnan’s perception thereof) is a major touchstone for not only her writing, but also her painting and view of the world at large. A rudimentary understanding and amalgamation of certain Native American oral traditions provides a powerful foundation of

²⁵ Fattal, “A Few Years in Journalism,” in *The Ninth Page: Etel Adnan’s Journalism 1972–74*, 7.

²⁶ “When Guatemala breaks under the teeth of the Earth they start laughing in Washington.” Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, 37.

²⁷ In my poor attempt to simulate Adnan’s syntax on a word processor, I use the “Ø” symbol to indicate the presence of an in-text drawing. Adnan generally employs the term “Indian” to describe Native American populations.

²⁸ “While immediately recognizing the parallels with Palestinian and Lebanese populations displaced within their own territories and deprived of their language and culture, she was also acutely attuned to the differences, to the unique particulars—of geography, landscape, and immediate history—that define the Native Americans’ plight. It’s a story she has alluded to and incorporated into her broader cultural view in a number of her books, such as *The Indian Never Had A Horse*, and *The Arab Apocalypse*.” Cole Swensen, “Etel Adnan: The Word in and by Exile,” in *To look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, vol. II, 380–381.

symbols to work through and metaphysical—as well as historical—positions to take. In *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, the artist relays a particular origin story of the universe, as told to her by a young woman on the skirts of the mountain:

She told me that the ancestors of the human race had thrown the sun up in the air and that the universe reddened and burned slowly and devoured them . . . volcanoes threw up more suns and more moons (Tamalpais was one of them) and they are still burning somewhere, and that we are searching for them, astronauts are combing space and looking for them, and we shall one day find the hour, the place, and the light. (*JTMT*, 306)

This story, whether it accurately depicts a Native American eschatology or not, brings together a number of significant threads from the earlier book-poem and Adnan’s own life.²⁹ Above all, it provides a ground of interpretation for the interrelated leitmotifs in *The Arab Apocalypse*, including the sun(s), space travel, and loss of indigenous lives and sovereignty. Here, cosmos is characterized as a fierce, menacing entity that wreaks havoc on everything else *by ingestion*, which then culminates in the violent, literally convulsive production of celestial entities as we know of them today. As such, the act of destruction is posited as coterminous with that of creation, forming a continuum one might call life; a bodily activity associated with utter baseness by Western standards instigates what Abrahamic religions have furnished with lofty origin stories in their holy books. Elsewhere in *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, Adnan writes of “the oneness of things,” and this metaphysical stipulation deeply resonates with her description of Mount Tamalpais:

It is the beginning of the chain of these green-coated mountains, guerilla-green mountains, green volcanoes, which give their fire and color to revolutions. Tamalpais is their peaceful kin. It is their starting point. Its peace is needed to understand fire, for nothing can be outside a binary system. (*AA*, 308, 299)

²⁹ In the absence of traceable references to named individuals and communities besides the catch-all terms “Tamal” and “Pawnee Indians,” I am hesitant to concur Adnan provides accurate representations of Native American beliefs and practices; however, their brutal extermination and dispossession of the local population are as relevant for the artist, if not more. As early as the second poem in *The Arab Apocalypse*, the artist bemoans the plight of Native Americans with a “O dead Indians!” Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, 10.

Adnan's use of the word "binary" should not mislead anyone to think that she proposes a Manichean cosmology. On the contrary, it emphasizes the coalescence of presumed polar opposites into a holistic system. This phenomenon of system formation does not always necessitate the simultaneous existence of the two poles on the scene, and may occur in cycles. For instance, taking her cue from the (unfounded) geological myth that Mount Tamalpais was once a volcano, the artist writes: "The mountain slopes converge to the top as if for a tribal gathering. Up there, the open but filled mouth of the volcano speaks back to the sky a tale of past disorder. The fire has left for its own origins: the sun." (*JTMT*, 295) Some pages later, it returns to its "original" state with the aid of light and colors, at least in appearance:

Tamalpais is jungle-green again. Light moves under and through the clouds. Almost horizontally. . . A big gray cloud passes over a huge white one: war and competition in the skies! Among the infinite varieties of blacks, whites, and grays, there are expanses of sulphuric blues. Tamalpais fumes. It is again a volcano. (*JTMT*, 300)

While such cycles make room for momentary change or lasting transformations, a fundamental ontological unity underlies all that happens and all that exists, tacitly allowing everything to be traced back to same disgorging cosmic mouth at the beginning: "The sun and the moon are the same thing. The moon and the sea are the same thing. The sea and the sun are the same thing." (*JTMT*, 303) In this vein, *The Arab Apocalypse* and *Journey To Mount Tamalpais* can also be traced back to Adnan's earliest poem, *Le Livre de la Mer* [The Book of the Sea], c. 1951, which describes an erotic encounter between the (male) sun and the (female) sea.³⁰ Even though the two entities are symbolically characterized along the gender provisions of the French language (*le soleil*, masculine, warrior-like, violent; *la mer*, feminine and frail, etc.) in this very early work, the main subject is constituted by their (ostensibly heterosexual) sexual union. Some of those conventionally gendered qualities do survive in the later works ("the sun is a Syrian king riding a

³⁰ Adnan, "To Write in a Foreign Language," 251.

horse from Homs to Palmyra” vs. “the sea is a belly dilated to receive the still-born”), prompting commentators to gravitate towards the idea that the sun *exclusively* occupies the symbolic seat of aggression and violence and, therefore, embodies the colonizer.³¹ (AA, 9, 51)

As a result, a number of the sun’s attributes, including those that reveal the peculiarities of its brutal demeanor and actions, have gone unaccounted for or have remained understudied in critical analyses. The sun is not only a murderous source of violence, but also quite often a victim to sickness or violence: “a sick sun shin[es] through its agony,” another “has its mouth stitched with barbed wire,” and there is even a “decapitated sun.” (AA, 16, 23, 15) It does not even always conform to a generic masculinity, and thus dabbles in sexual ambiguity; occasionally, the reader catches sight of a “female” or “androgynous sun” (“defeated androgyne androgynous sun clear androgyne”) or a sun that “got dressed became a transvestite undressed disguised.” (AA, 15, 39, 40) These conflicting characterizations are not meant to be resolved. Instead, in order to make the most out of them, one can turn to the frequent descriptions of the sun(s) eating, being vomited or identified with bodily excess, and engaging in some form of sexual activity, for they thematically connect back to cosmological *and* personal beginnings examined earlier, where the emphasis falls on the convergence of all things based on cosmic genealogies and erotics. There is a sun “found . . . fucking,” we witness “a black sun mating a red sun” or “a yellow sun mak[ing] love to Jupiter,” and one rather racy sun has “its phallus decorated with ribbons.” (AA, 14, 16, 36, 41) On the other hand, the gory particularities of “rapacious” suns’ metabolic activities are even more frequently cited: in two different passages, the sun “eats its children”; when that is not enough, the sun’s throat can be “a tunnel which swallows . . . ARMIES.”³² (AA, 29, 30, 20, 62) Despite its might,

³¹ See, for instance, Caroline Seymour-Jorn, “*The Arab Apocalypse* as a Critique of Colonialism and Imperialism,” in *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, eds. Lisa Suhair Majaj, Amal Amireh (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), 38–41.

³² The sun also “drank the victory pissed it out in the Mississippi.” Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, 51.

the sun is—more often than not—being vomited, as opposed to vomiting on its own, underscoring the fact that suns are not the *only* elements endowed with aptitude for (in)digestion. (AA, 13) In one of the poems, the sun appears to be “rotten and eaten by worms [and] floats over Beirut,” which encourages the unidentified speaker to exhort: “eat and vomit the sun eat and vomit the war hear an angel explode.” (AA, 19) Subsequently, Beirut reappears at one point, “eaten by civil war,” as the sun “[takes] the place of the Arab’s eye mouth teeth” in the following poem. (AA, 36, 38) All the while, as befits the title of the book, suns explode or are announced dead, drowned, sunken, and finally, extinguished.

Apocalypse as Method

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode writes that the Bible—from its first book Genesis to its last, Apocalypse—offers “a wholly concordant structure, the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end.”³³ The British literary critic argues that humankind has managed to “disconfirm” apocalyptic visions and scenarios without “discrediting” the *idea* of the Apocalypse for millennia. As such, the pattern of (irrationally) rationalizing the disconfirmation of *imminent* apocalypses has acquired ubiquity, transforming cultural understandings of the Apocalypse as something *pending* to the conviction that it is already in-progress, ongoing, *immanent*: “[n]o longer imminent, the End is immanent.”³⁴ Given the perceived proximity (or overlap) with the Last Days, Wallace Stevens’s maxim rings truer than ever: “The imagination is always at the end of an era.”³⁵

³³ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

³⁴ “. . . when we find rational objections to them we indulge our powers of rational censorship in such matters; and when we refuse to be dejected by disconfirmed predictions we are only asserting a permanent need to live by the pattern rather than the fact, as indeed we must.” Kermode, 11-25.

³⁵ Wallace Stevens, quoted in Kermode, 31.

As for the literary reverberations of this attitude towards “the End,” Adnan’s *Arab Apocalypse* has much in common with what the literary critic describes as the loss of “downbeat, tonic-and-dominant finality” in modern literary plotting.³⁶ One cannot point to a single page of the book, where the moment of the titular and *singular* apocalypse has finally arrived: quite the contrary, *many* apocalypses seem to be taking place at all times, which endows the text with a non-narrative, non-developmental homogeneity. In a way, Adnan’s book partakes in Nouveau Roman’s shedding of literary conventions in service of verisimilitude—“sham temporality, sham causality, falsely certain description, clear story,” all done away with—and thus “repeats itself, bisects itself, modifies itself, contradicts itself, without even accumulating enough bulk to constitute a past.”³⁷ However, perhaps even more importantly, her attunement to the politics of language and mediating meaning further allows her to launch an attack on the punishing insufficiency of language as a semiotic *system*—more specifically, its helpless dependence on order-words and collective assemblages during a shattering civil war, when the possibility of collective enunciation has been irretrievably lost. Naturally, such an incursion has to go beyond an endogenous critique launched from *within* the system *against* the system and enlist outside forces for its cause. Adnan does so by turning to drawing.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode also addresses *structurally* apocalyptic visions in the arts—especially that of modernism(s)—which articulate either a revisionist or an antagonistic relationship with tradition. In both, the quintessentially apocalyptic idea of immanence adheres itself to the idea that the artist is self-consciously making art in a transitional period, believing one (artistic) era is coming to a close. Regardless of whether or not the work directly attends to the subject of *Apocalypse*, the former—“traditionalist modernism”—has a predilection for “mythical

³⁶ Kermode, 30.

³⁷ Kermode, 19.

thinking,” and may thematically lean on or formally interpret notions of terror and decadence, with an eye to expediting the apocalyptic redemption and renovation featured in many eschatologies.³⁸ “Schismatic modernism,” on the other hand, proffers an allegedly total and definitive break with tradition, which yields itself to a cult of the new à la Harold Rosenberg.³⁹ Kermode posits that the actual “schism” in this kind of modernism—imagine Samuel Beckett’s works—is to be found in the way artworks address themselves to a more and more specialized audience, and that a complete break with the past is not feasible, so long as some form of intelligibility is sustained.⁴⁰ The literary critic is far from endorsing traditionalist modernism over the schismatic one: in the example of W.B. Yeats, Kermode gestures towards the masking of high-brow systems with the vernacular, which subsequently take on “characteristic colors of violence, a sexual toughness and slang to represent what Yeats took to be a modern reality.”⁴¹ The result is palatability for both the uninitiated, and the specialist audience that is eager to assess the work by and absorb it to the already existing system. The likes of Yeats may thus think they have “transcend[ed] both the fact and the pattern,” but Kermode argues that Yeats’s very systematic, “totalitarian theories of form [were] matched or reflected by totalitarian politics.”⁴²

Is it possible to engage the system without potentially pandering to totalitarian politics? What does it look and sound like, to *unravel tradition* without a wholesale, schismatic rejection of its inheritance? If one is to employ Kermode’s model for Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* would not squarely fit in either category, for the book lets language and symbolism decompose over time and

³⁸ Kermode, 104.

³⁹ Kermode, 102.

⁴⁰ Kermode, 115–116.

⁴¹ “So too in the later plays, which analytic criticism tells us are very systematic, but which Yeats himself declared must conceal their esoteric substance and sound like old songs.” Kermode, 105–106.

⁴² According to the literary critic, Ezra Pound is another “traditionalist modernist,” whose totalitarian aesthetic is correlated with his totalitarian politics. For Kermode’s analysis of the connection between the literary and political outlooks of Yeats and Pound, see Kermode, 106–109.

simmer in their peculiarly semiotic putrefaction. The limited English-language literature on the book has mostly shied away from examining the individual ink drawings in the poems, and instead critics have ascribed them a collective unintelligibility or textually incommunicable immediacy that signals the failure of language to capture and convey the atrocities of the Lebanese civil wars.⁴³ At the other end of the spectrum, one critic, Hilary Plum, notes the recurrence of tattoos as subject in the text, and builds a pseudomorphic parallel between Adnan's drawings and traditional tattoo designs from the Bedouins and the Dom people. Plum's interpretation is nonetheless noteworthy for detecting the "language-like"—occasionally even "ideogrammatic"—aspect of images through "their placement within the poem's syntax [and] the visual simplicity of their symbolization," and the suggestion that "[t]he hybridity of image and text in *The Arab Apocalypse* may point towards the limits of language . . . a distinctive redistribution of language's power."⁴⁴ However, Plum does not take up the asynchronicity (and sometimes even contradictions) among different modes of signification that can be attributed to Adnan's drawings.

To begin with, the drawings straddle being images and (written) annotations, and this condition is most clearly reflected in the diversity of mechanisms through which they signify. When the reader does not perceive them to be altogether abstract or disengaged from the text (**Fig. 9**), these doodle-like inscriptions may present themselves as quasi-icons, metaphoric or elusive symbols, punctuation marks, or even performative signs facilitating the eye's movement along the page. Especially in the first few poems, one can catch a glimpse of in-line drawings directly corresponding to the words that come before and/or after them: a sun, the profile of a Pharaonic boat, a crudely simplified rosace, or a flower (**Fig. 10**). Symbols can, of course, come close to

⁴³ See, for instance, Ammiel Alcalay, "'A Dance of Freedom' in the Worlds of Etel Adnan," in *To look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader*, vol. I, xiii.

⁴⁴ Plum, 508.

iconographic signification and only require more awareness of convention or formal analysis.⁴⁵ To this end, a vortex-shaped, centripetal line may come to stand in for a whirlpool almost like an icon (**Fig. 11**). Or, more suggestively, a black filled-in circle tightly fitted inside a vertically compressed, horizontally elongated circle—a universally recognizable, graphic simplification of an eye—may repeatedly appear in close proximity to the word “sun,” and establish an almost-metaphorical relationship between two spherical entities. Yet these one-to-one correspondences among either group of signs are not at all dependable. In poem XI, Beirut is repeated four times in one line, and the city is connected to a different place each time with the help of a drawn arrow: Hell, sun, Damascus, Venus (**Fig. 12**). Drawings on the line above mimic the same staccato syntax of these correspondences. At first glance, these marks may appear to be hovering roughly above the names of each locale, and therefore be mistaken for an auspicious opportunity to crack Adnan’s visual code; however, a closer look will reveal that the same centripetal vortex that the artist used to denote a whirlpool is now floating above both Hell (once) and Beirut (twice). Not only that but also, the drawing comprising four inwardly slanted, angular lines pops up above (the first) Beirut, as well, in addition to materializing above the arrow in one “correspondence” (instead of coinciding with a location on either side of the arrow). A pseudo-script gently undoes itself the moment it begins to crystallize.

The remaining two categories are no less unstable. When drawings appear in the form of punctuation marks, they take on a number of different valences. Adnan’s use of hand-drawn punctuation marks is most straightforward in a case like poem VI; the exclamation mark at the end

⁴⁵ Here, I try to approximate Charles Sanders Peirce’s distinction between icon and symbol, but, of course, in the context of these tiny line drawings, the forms I designate as icons—due to their very crude likeness vis-à-vis their signifieds—could also be positioned as symbols. Stephen Bann, “Semiotics,” *Grove Art Online*, 2003, accessed April 4, 2021, <https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oa-9781884446054-e-7000077528>.

of the second line amplifies the frenetic telegraphic tone of the line: “One sun in Wichitah Three bulls in Cheyenne STOP my thoughts emerge !” (**Fig. 13**). (AA, 17) In poem IV, on the other hand, the exclamation mark *shifts* the tone of the line from that of a potential query to incredulity: “a sun did you say yellow did you say a sun did you say yellow you didn’t say?!” (**Fig. 14**). (AA, 13) In other places, it might be multiplied and sit in the middle of a sentence that already ends in an exclamation. Several lines later, their rightward inclination is echoed by a trio of marks that could be anything from a semi-colon to an Arabic z [ﺯ] or dh [ﺫ]. A dash furtively appears in poem LVII, subtly connecting the words “Arabs” and “astronomers,” and making them into an irreverent compound noun fashioned after French pluralization rules, as in *marchands-merciers* (**Fig. 15**).⁴⁶ Indeed, Adnan’s hand-drawn punctuation marks assert their function *with* and *against* the semantic load of a sentence. Or else, they float freely, unmoored from the strictures of line spacing, like the blocky question mark in poem XXX (**Fig. 16**).

The drawings in the final category mainly consist of arrow-like forms pointing in one direction or another. Theoretically, these could be grouped with any one of the modes of signification already explored, but they deserve additional attention due to the fact that they perpetuate constant movement both as a theme and a *modus operandi*. For instance, those we have already encountered in poem XI (“Beirut → Hell,” “Beirut → Damascus,” etc.) could be interpreted as symbolizing movement from one to the other or a transformation. Likewise, two very similar sets of upward-pointing, diagonal arrows may indexically evoke the heights of an “ascension” or a “mountain” (**Fig. 17**). In poem II, the arrow in the first line mimes a sun approaching the sea, but in poem X, two arrows briefly prolong the eye’s left-to-right movement along the line, leading nowhere in particular as destination, except perhaps the physical boundaries

⁴⁶ In the French version of the poem, it appears that Adnan did not find it necessary to include a hand-drawn dash. My guess is that Adnan deemed it unnecessary as they almost already read as a compound noun without the dash in French.

of the printed page (**Fig. 18 & 19**). Some of these marks do not even obey the tyrannical one-directionality of the script, and rebel by reversing its course or by hinting at its reversibility through the concurrent use of arrows in either direction (**Fig. 20**).

A Metonymy of Violence: On Movement and Transitivity

On the whole, these performative non-utterances not only further highlight the impossibility of determining meaning according to a single matrix, but they also embody and visibly thematize an idea of movement and transitivity that is also dear to Adnan's visual practice. Following Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings, Galen A. Johnson suggests "[m]ovement can only be understood as the relation of a figure to a ground in terms of 'figural moments'."⁴⁷ According to this definition, movement requires (at least temporary) anchorage in an ultimately mutable reference point, which we can institute "through the act of looking."⁴⁸ Johnson then turns to the French philosopher's attentiveness to moments forcibly deprived of such reference points—an interest the latter shares with Paul Klee, an artist of great significance for Adnan. Here, the notion of movement is sublimated to a systemic consideration. In addition to translating a text by Robert Delaunay on "the idea of light as movement" for publication in *Der Sturm* in 1913, Klee expresses a certain fascination in his diaries with the other artist's medium-traversing imbrication of visual art and music through notions such as "color rhythms": "Delaunay strove to shift the accent in art onto the time element, after the fashion of a fugue, by choosing formats that could not be encompassed in one glance."⁴⁹ For his part, Klee weds the disparate morphologies of writing and painting in numerous works including *Landscape Near Hades*, 1937, and *Death and Fire*, 1940,

⁴⁷ Galen A. Johnson, "On the Origin(s) of Truth in Art: Merleau-Ponty, Klee, Cézanne," *Research in Phenomenology* 43, no. 3 (2013): 490.

⁴⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Johnson, 490. "What gives the status 'moving object' to one part of the visual field, and the status 'background' to another is the manner in which we establish our relations with it through the act of looking."

⁴⁹ Paul Klee, quoted in Johnson, 492.

in order to gesture towards a mode of representation (and existence) *beyond* (Fig. 21 & 22). As if moments before speech formation, the lines that were initially meant to form letters abandon the restrictive matrix of ruled lines, warp, and merge with each other, thus becoming demarcation lines and vessels for marking the outer bounds-cum-interstices of irregular patches of color. This is, indeed, an imperfect union each time, for its constituents tightly shoulder one another but still insist on standing their ground as distinct entities; thanks to this imperfection, the ghost of an iconographic resemblance may flash before the viewer's eye here and there, while in other places on the same support, letters may momentarily flicker in a chaotic jumble as difficult as one's first words. Aware of this fungibility, Michel Foucault contends that Klee poses a fundamental threat to the "sovereignties" of word and image: the artist's works abolish the inescapability of hierarchies for "discourse and figure" in various contexts "by showing the juxtaposition of shapes and the syntax of lines in an uncertain, reversible, floating space (simultaneously page and canvas, plane and volume, map and chronicle)."⁵⁰

Adnan's combination of poetry and drawing in *The Arab Apocalypse* functions in a similar fashion. If a code is "the condition of possibility for all explanation" addressing its adherents collectively, her book is not a wholesale impossibility thereof, but a portrayal of its withering, if not total annihilation, in the face of an inconceivably brutal and complicated civil war.⁵¹ As many have noted, *The Arab Apocalypse* does attribute a sense of futility to the task of expressing the horrors of the war in words, but that futility actually belongs to their business-as-usual mobilization conditioned by and in the service of collective assemblages of enunciation. Adnan consciously models her book after the ethos of "minor literatures" and sends tremors through the ground on

⁵⁰ Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. and ed. James Harkness (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2008), 33.

⁵¹ Deleuze and Guattari, "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics," 77.

which the authoritarianism of the order-word stands. Deleuze offers a definition of “minor literature” as the product of sustained deterritorialization *within* a major language—a project that Franz Kafka undertook with his Prague German by “mak[ing] it ‘wail,’ stretch tensors through all of language, even written language, and draw[ing] from it cries, shouts, pitches, durations, timbres, accents, *intensities*.”⁵² With deterritorialized language,

There is no longer a destination of something by means of a proper name, nor an assignation of metaphors by means of a figurative sense. But like images, the thing no longer forms anything but a sequence of intensive states. . . The thing and other things are no longer anything but intensities overrun by deterritorialized sounds or words that are following their line of escape. . . There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible intensities.⁵³

Adnan’s drawings may be the most prominent force behind the deterritorialization (and thus, “becoming-minor”) of language in *The Arab Apocalypse*, but they are far from being the only one. Not only does the artist materialize intensities and vibrations in print through the frequent use of interpolative exclamations “O!” and “HOU!”, as well as the telegraphic “STOP,” but also, in an attempt to describe the ubiquity of unconscionable violence, she erects *her* apocalyptic edifice of violence in a way that exhausts the symbolic dimension of language (**Fig. 23**). In her essay on *The Arab Apocalypse*, Plum draws attention to how the speaker behind the pronoun “I” shifts positions from “observer . . . to victim . . . to aggressor” and claims this possibility of inhabiting three positions at once makes “[t]he ‘I’ . . . the site where this implication [in violence] and responsibility occur and are confessed.”⁵⁴ Although she may be right about the coincidence and interchangeability of subject-positions that belong to the victim, the perpetrator, and the bystander,

⁵² Deleuze, “Minor Literature,” in *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1993), 152. Deleuze and Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” 104 (my emphasis).

⁵³ Deleuze, “Minor Literature,” 158.

⁵⁴ Plum, 510.

the speaker is not the exclusive nexus of the deterritorializations of roles in the civil war. The sun, too, inhabits all of these subject-positions as the protagonist of *The Arab Apocalypse*, and even the far less recurring figures of the moon, the sea, and the mountain are not typecast and do not end up exclusively metaphorizing a state of being or value.

Starting at the very beginning of the book, Adnan's suns quickly acquire too many attributes to be consolidated in their diversity: they appear in different colors, adopt various ethnicities and nationalities, and engage in a wide array of activities, whereas their adjectival form, "solar" (and much less frequently the word "lunar"), appends itself to an irreconcilable group of nouns, resulting in "a solar sun," "a solar moon," "a solar arrow," "a solar Hopi," "a solar Indian," "a solar Arab," "a solar cord," "a solar craft," "a solar imbecile," "solar council of kings," "a solar bar," "a solar level," "a solar country," "solar star," "solar palm tree," "a solar green," "solar boats," "a noise solar and red," "a solar fool," "solar insanity," "a woman solar," "a solar naked and insane man," and "a solar drug." (AA, 7-16) In the first five poems of the book, Adnan manages to spread the symbolic load of "sun-ness" so wide and thin that the semiotic capacity of the word "solar" becomes eviscerated. In the words of Foucault, this is also "[t]o allow similitudes . . . to multiply of themselves, to be born from their vapor and rise endlessly into an ether where they refer to nothing more than themselves."⁵⁵ According to the French philosopher, similitudes operate on a totally different plane than resemblances, and Adnan's "solar"/figures fall into the former category. Instead of serving representation, they "[develop] in series that have neither beginning nor end, that can be followed in one direction as easily as in another, that obey no hierarchy" and facilitate repetition.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Foucault, 54.

⁵⁶ Foucault, 44.

In Adnan's case, the employment of similitudes is not to be mistaken for an anything-goes attitude; in fact, her permutational (il)logic constitutes another reflection of an otherwise senseless war and the utter transitivity of *its* violence. Just as ethnic groups, which have managed to coexist on the same plot of land for centuries, decimate one another in an endless permutation ("a blue sun receding a Kurd killing an Armenian killing a Palestinian . . . Ø"), violence, insanity, and death engulf everything big and small: "a sun skinned a moon sodomized a brain unhinged a dog electrocuted!!?" (AA, 7-16) Deleuze and Guattari are pick up on the parallel between the "death sentence" of the order-word and actual death: the former, "even if it has been considerably softened, becoming symbolic, initiatory, temporary . . . bring[s] immediate death to those who receive the order, or potential if they do not obey, or a death they must themselves inflict, take elsewhere," while it is through the latter that "a body reaches completion in not only in time but in space, and . . . its lines form a shape."⁵⁷ In their immediacy and instantaneousness, they are both "a pure act [and] a pure transformation," which, in the case of order-word, "fuses with the statement, the sentence."⁵⁸ Demise of the order-word through deterritorialization—or becoming-minor of the major—then hinges on a reckoning with death on some level. The purpose of the minor cannot be

to eliminate death, *but to reduce it or make it a variation of itself*. This movement pushes language to its own limits, while bodies are simultaneously caught up in a movement of metamorphosis of their contents or *a process of exhaustion causing them to reach or overstep the limit of their figures*.⁵⁹

When the half-finished El Murr Tower right in the middle of Downtown becomes occupied by snipers, it finally gives shape to Beirut as a divided city: "ON the city's highest tower they proclaimed the kingdom of DEATH." (AA, 46) In her bid to confront the omnipresence of death

⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics," 107.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics," 108 (my emphasis).

in 1970s Beirut, Adnan also thereby launches herself on death by order-word, but she chooses to fight by metastasizing death both as her main subject and in the breakdown of linguistic structures. A singular astronomical object ceaselessly proliferates, only to define and overreach its physical extremities with apocalyptic concordance: suns die, vomit, and fornicate in chorus.

It is through this metonymy of violence—the constant shuffling and reshuffling of its forms and roles—that things are brought closer to one another. In his essay on Georges Bataille’s short novel *Story of the Eye*, Roland Barthes examines how a sequence of metaphoric relationships likewise consecutively links a number of round objects to each other, including the figure of the Eye, an egg, and testicles. Initially “caught up in the metaphoric chain” of the story, these objects—together with their contents/discharges and attributes—emancipate themselves from reference points, “form a vacillating meaning, and . . . signif[y] in the manner of a vibration which always produces the same sound.”⁶⁰ Similar to minoritarian “intensities overrun by deterritorialized sound or words that are following their line of escape” in Kafka, Bataille brings about “the violation of a signifying limit space. . . permit[ting] on the very level of discourse, a counterdivision of objects, usages, meanings, spaces, and properties, which is eroticism itself.”⁶¹ Deleuze positions the literal and linguistic metamorphoses in the Czech Jewish author’s works as “the contrary of metaphor” and contends that they “[kill] all metaphor, all symbolism, all signification, no less than all designation” in their sobriety.⁶² On the other hand, in Bataille, “weakly saturated” metaphors and symbolism are at surface level retained, but ostensibly “exhausted” through metonymic exchange.⁶³

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye,” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 245.

⁶¹ Barthes, 246.

⁶² Deleuze, “Minor Literature,” 158.

⁶³ “By metonymic exchange, Bataille exhausts a metaphor, doubtless a double metaphor, each chain of which is weakly saturated . . .” Barthes, 246.

Klee and the Metaphysics of Representation

This “metonymic eroticism” is also essentially that of Etel Adnan and forms the basis of her artistic vision, her striving towards “the oneness of things.” “Painters,” Adnan writes, “have a knowledge which goes beyond words. . . [They] have always experienced the oneness of things.” (*JTMT*, 308) One might then ask: why and how can painting be a privileged medium for this pursuit?

Klee’s interconnected theories of art, nature, and perception may be helpful in answering this question; Adnan was intimately familiar with the Swiss artist’s theories, as she preferred teaching with artists’ writings instead of scholarly texts during her time as a lecturer in aesthetics at Dominican College (now Dominican University) in San Rafael.⁶⁴ In a series of lectures later published under the rubric of “Ways of Studying Nature,” Klee calls impressionists “our antipodes of yesterday” and assigns art and artists the task of going beyond outer appearances in the study of nature, of attaining “a sense of totality” by penetrating “the ‘inner being’ of things and world.”⁶⁵ This kind of “inward vision” can, in turn, simultaneously acknowledge both outward appearance and inner structure. There is also a loosely defined, “non-optical” way of nature study for Klee—the “contact through the cosmic bond that descends from above” upon the artist so that they can “rise toward a ‘metaphysical view of the world.’”⁶⁶ This metaphysical search for “a sense of totality” is, in turn, a response to one of the principal conditions of art’s possibility for him: tragedy. According to María del Rosario Acosta López, “[t]he impulse of looking upward and flying towards other possible worlds and dimensions” cannot be possible without tragedy, for Klee’s tragedy is “primarily related to a condition that binds the artist to the earth in order to make the

⁶⁴ Fattal, “Painting as Pure Energy,” 36.

⁶⁵ Klee, quoted and rephrased in Johnson, 483.

⁶⁶ Klee and Johnson in Johnson, 484.

impulse of creation possible.”⁶⁷ One caveat: Klee’s tragic vision refuses to adopt the operatic tonality of mainstream German Romanticism; his “new romanticism” is “a cool romanticism . . . without pathos.”⁶⁸

In making the transitivity of violence the subject and structure of *The Arab Apocalypse*, and thus reducing death to a variation of itself with apocalyptic consistency, Adnan too could be said to respond to tragedy *with* “a sense of totality,” but *without* pathos. After all, the last four lines of the book coolly state: “the sun will extinguish the gods the angels and men/and it will extinguish itself in the midst of its daughters/Matter-Spirit will become the NIGHT/in the night in the night we shall find knowledge love and peace.” (AA, 78) In spite of the prevalence of astronomical bodies and the theme of space travel across its pages, *The Arab Apocalypse* reveals much less of Adnan’s metaphysically inclined, selectively transcendentalist approach to art than the artist’s ruminations on painting and her own paintings of the same period. In *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, Adnan goes as far to proclaim: “Painting landscapes is creating cosmic events.” (JTMT, 310) But is it not counterintuitive to single out *landscape paintings* (of all painting genres!) for eventhood on a cosmic scale over—for instance—another much more temporally defined and capacious medium such as writing?

In order to solve this conundrum, we must take one last detour through Klee’s metaphysical theory of art, particularly as it relates to the interstices of movement, perception, and representation. An essay by the artist from 1920 ascribes the notion of movement a role disconcertingly similar to that of tragedy in the creative act: “The pictorial work springs from movement, it is itself fixated in movement, and it is grasped in movement.”⁶⁹ This formulation of

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Klee, quoted in María del Rosario Acosta López, “Tragic Representation: Paul Klee on Tragedy and Art,” *Research in Phenomenology* 43, no. 3 (2013): 447.

⁶⁹ Klee, quoted in Johnson, 488.

the *visual* work of art as “fixated . . . movement” not only designates movement as a source of origin comparable to tragedy, but it also broadens the notion’s parameters to an operative system and the desired mode of (ap)perception. Just as much as movement has to interface with tragedy at the inception of the creative act, it has to also endlessly counter the fundamental “tragedy of representation; this is to say, the ceaseless quest of pictorial work to present what might only be presented as withdrawal, as what is denied to representation ‘from the very beginning.’”⁷⁰ This much is clear from the teleology Klee sets up for art in a few pithy lines among his Bauhaus-era notes: “To have to become movement, and not to be movement already. Thus there is tragedy at the very beginning and in the process that follows it.”⁷¹ In a sense, the Swiss artist’s words anticipate the collision of tragic and metaphysical figures throughout Adnan’s oeuvre, where movement and speed become a shorthand for auspicious destruction.

Leaving Cézanne’s Doubt on Planet Earth: Paintings/Mountains/Spaceships

Mount Tamalpais is Etel Adnan’s spaceship. She unequivocally tells us so in one of the countless aphorisms in *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*: “Tamalpais is my space-ship.” (*JTMT*, 301)

And, subsequently, the artist insists:

[Paul Klee’s] drawings are mountains regardless of their subject matter. They move counter to gravity, and every dot is pulled toward some edge which is not the frame *but far beyond that*, somewhere behind the sky, and his lines and shapes move in all directions, feeling the pulls, crucifixions, temptations of speed and direction, that a spatial world imprints on us. (*JTMT*, 312, my emphasis)

The lessons Adnan drew from Klee for *The Arab Apocalypse* are also out there in the paintings she made of Tamalpais: movement as both subject and mobility between representational registers, “inward vision” that goes beyond appearances and reveals structure, and a transcendently inclined reckoning with the tragedy at the root of all representation *and* the tragedy of

⁷⁰ Acosta López, 450 (author’s emphasis).

⁷¹ Klee, quoted in Acosta López, 450.

representation. In a small, untitled watercolor executed between 1970 and 1973 (roughly around the time Mount Tamalpais became her preferred subject in painting), we see a mountain peak reduced to a momentary lingering of a thick brush on the surface of paper. Its brief yet deliberate trajectory reads from left to right and, as Wilson-Goldie has observed, a square sun rises above in the manner of a calligraphic (Arabic) diacritical mark (**Fig. 24**).⁷² Yet, in the absence of further spatial articulation, perspectival or otherwise, the mountain's twin peaks soar too close to the sun. They become upward-bound vectors determined to burst out of atmosphere and reunite with the universe that had vomited them in the first place.

“Tamalpais,” Adnan explains, “is for us what San Francisco Mountain in Arizona is for the Hopis: the mountain to whom messages come.” (*JTMT*, 303) In *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, she describes its entrance into her field of vision, as if it were a revelation:

Often coming back from the Richmond Bridge, just when San Quentin is left behind, at a certain curve of the road, there surges an event, there happens a double movement: the lateral movement of the car, to my right, and the vertical movement of the mountain which seems to be rising from the ground. She seems to be rising and filling a configuration that I already know is hers. That's where comes, for me that feeling of latent prophesy with the vision I have of the mountain. (*JTMT*, 299)

The perception of the mountain's ascension against her earthbound—if not tragic—horizontal is not just the main subject of her landscapes, but also of her overall painting practice for the last half-century (**Fig. 25**). At its root, this project evidences the simultaneity of two seemingly contradictory motives: a desire to acknowledge the demystified materiality of modernist painting and a will to find a way beyond and reach cosmic unity. For this purpose, Tamalpais landscapes become the ideal point of departure, as they allow Adnan to adopt Klee's ethos of “working abstractly from nature” (**Fig. 26**).⁷³ These paintings constitute at least a transition *away* from both

⁷² Wilson-Goldie, 103.

⁷³ Klee, quoted in Baumgartner, “Paul Klee: From Structural Analysis and Morphogenesis to Art,” *Research in Phenomenology* 43, no. 3 (2013): 377.

her earliest work (geometric abstractions) and the slightly later quasi-representational paintings such as *The Suez Canal*, 1967 (**Fig. 27 & 28**). In relation to the former, the shift is self-evident and long in the making: the possibility of figurative representation—and thus of transcending the modernist grid eternally damned to fragmentation—rears its head, but announces itself as readily collapsible to pure abstraction, so as not to partake in a naïve fantasy of the representability of the world. Here, Adnan appears to replace Klee’s gridded morphology of hybridizing text and image with an interchangeability of registers *within* the medium of painting between the figurative and the abstract (**Fig. 29**). As for the latter group of paintings, the more recent landscapes are much smaller. The horizon line is either eliminated or pulled so high without any sight of guiding orthogonals that the figure and ground relations retain their ambiguity at the expense of any promise of hierarchical, illusionistic space. In some Tamalpais paintings, the routine presence of broad, horizontal swathes of paint in parts of the mountain may indeed serve as an alternative visual anchor, albeit without the same spatial foothold value (**Fig. 3 & 26**).

This is also the moment when Adnan synthesizes Cézanne’s teachings with her own metaphysics of perception, only to arrive at something he downplayed: color. Similar to Klee, Cézanne’s acute awareness of the tragedy of representation had led him to deterritorialize signs of desire through the constructive brushstroke and produce what Aruna D’Souza calls “Cézanne’s eroticism produced through other means than the body depicted.”⁷⁴ In *Cézanne’s Bathers: Biography and the Erotics of Paint*, D’Souza reminds the reader of the fact that Cézanne’s constructive brushstroke—the extremely self-conscious hallmark of “Cézanne’s doubt,” the inextricability of embodied, contingent perception from the act of painting—first emerged not in

⁷⁴ Aruna D’Souza, *Cézanne’s Bathers: Biography and the Erotics of Paint* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 117.

a painting of Mont Sainte-Victoire, but in one of bathers in 1875–77.⁷⁵ This device participates in the then-emerging general “emphasis on the touch, on texture, and on gesture in modern painting” as a response to both the division of labor in industrial production and to the ontological threat that the invention of photography posed against painting.⁷⁶ Examining a broad range of historical and contemporary critical responses to Cézanne’s work, D’Souza makes a case for why Cézanne’s erotics operate in literal-material terms, as opposed to, for instance, Tamar Garb’s suggestion that the artist proposes a painterly erotics in metaphoric-visual terms, in which “the skin of painting becomes the metaphor of the body’s skin.”⁷⁷

“Mountains,” Adnan writes, “are transitions. They are impatient spaceships. Cézanne knows it. His works start with a calm perspective and then, Space-bound, attain the velocity of light.” (*JTMT*, 333) However evocative her language may be, Adnan’s own take on Cézanne, too, rejects metaphor in favor of an experiential—albeit, metaphysical—performativity. On the other hand, in Adnan’s interpretation, the French painter cannot fully attain “the oneness of things”; his paintings are invariably and very visibly marked by the new pressures the nineteenth century has imposed on the medium. There is something photographic, even detached, in the way she describes Cézanne’s work:

A sense of the tragic is always in the quality of a painter’s glance, in the moment of choice, in the phenomenon called vision. Cézanne was in love not with the mountain (or the gardener, or the apples) but with the moment when his glance settled on them differently than when he was promenading or was involved in a conversation. . . That’s why the glance seems to erase the very object that creates its intensity, the cause of its intensity . . . Cézanne turns light into *an impersonal and cruel prism*. And if we so much like his watercolors, it is because it escapes our direct glance, they slide like mercury under our eyes, because there is between them and us *an invisible object which is both transparent and irreducible*. It can lead you to insanity. (*JTMT*, 333, my emphasis)

⁷⁵ D’Souza, 46.

⁷⁶ Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 231.

⁷⁷ D’Souza, 59.

In other words, Adnan concurs, Cézanne comes very close to promising “the oneness of things,” only to render its actual impossibility more potently felt. In *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, she does provide a definition of perception that embodies this dilemma: “To perceive is to be both objective and subjective. It is to be in the process of becoming one with whatever it is, while also becoming separated from it.”⁷⁸ This definition actually belongs to her colleague, artist Ann O’Hanlon, who encouraged her to take up painting at Dominican College and who founded the Sight & Insight Art Center (now O’Hanlon Center for the Arts) with her husband Richard “Dick” O’Hanlon in the Mill Valley in 1969. Adnan credits the predecessor of this art center—O’Hanlons’ Perception Workshop in the 1960s—with being the milieu where “[p]ainting and perception formed an unbreakable dual concept. They became interchangeable.” (*JTMT*, 310) If perception inevitably entails a degree of separation from the object perceived, whilst allowing a total communion with it, why did Adnan resolve to seek cosmic unity with and through her work? What did it look like in a painting?

“Color,” Adnan stresses, “is the sign of existence of life. I feel like believing, being in a state of pure belief, of affirmation. I exist because I see colors. Sometimes, at other moments, it is as if I didn’t exist, when colors seem foreign, unreachable, impregnable fortresses. But there is no possession of color, only the acceptance of its reality.” (*JTMT*, 329) Colors are the answer for Adnan’s call for “a new sacredness of images.” (*JTMT*, 303) For the artist, they simultaneously extend the faculty of unadulterated immanence (“being transported *there*”) and the possibility of transcendence (“going *beyond*”). Indeed, colors and Mount Tamalpais have some of the same ontological import for Adnan: “We need the mountain in order to be. Or to disappear. When we return from the Sierras we see it on the horizon and we know it is home. Its form is the substance

⁷⁸ O’Hanlon, quoted in Adnan, *Journey To Mount Tamalpais*, 294.

of who we are.” (*JTMT*, 301) However, if Mount Tamalpais is a vector towards transcending the tragedy in and of representation, colors are already up there, in space. Adnan confesses watching footage from outer space and spending “hours, days, years, in front of the television screen” with Ann and Dick O’Hanlon, among others, trying to “figure out the color of outer space, the rockets, the landscapes seen by the astronauts. . .” (*JTMT*, 319) At the time, they appear to have been convinced that its total darkness was home to colors almost no one had ever seen: “When Alexis Leonov returning from outer space declared that he saw more colors in space than on earth I realized that the object of our search is these other colors related to the arts of fire, born out of blackness of outer space. . .” (*JTMT*, 310) But transcendence, she avers, is not the prerogative of most advanced aeronautical sciences or modernist painting; indigenous rock paintings, which Adnan encounters near Cachuma Lake, Santa Barbara are also transcendental “visions”—“depictions of high energies of the mind.” Instead of using rockets, “some people went as far with the sheer power of their mind and the pureness of their heart . . . [and t]hey used ‘Nature’ the way birds use air currents to fly.” (*JTMT*, 304)

In a couple of untitled pastel drawings from around 1970, Adnan seems to echo the artistic guidelines which an unnamed Frenchman presumptuously relayed to local artists in Iraq: “Sublimate your pigments-color into light color . . . resuscitate the form out of the line. Exorcise the shadows . . . as you did in the XIII Century” (**Fig. 30**). (*JTMT*, 311) The shape of a mountain coalesces before one’s eyes almost like an event purely to the patchy rhythm of colors playing off of each other—no outlines, no shadows. The prophetic tone she previously employed to describe her encounters with Mount Tamalpais is now transposed into the “revelation” of colors, or an “illumination” constituted by a mountain. Adnan does not neglect to clarify her specific usage of these two words:

There is no rest in any kind of perception. The fluidity of the mind is one of the same family as the fluidity of being. Sometimes they coincide sharply. We call that a revelation. When it involves a privileged object, like a particular mountain, we call it an illumination. (*JTMT*, 333)

Just as messages from on high came to the Hopi via the conduit of San Francisco Mountains, “the state of pure belief, of affirmation” is only possible for the artist through the mediation of the mountain. “Tamalpais,” she concludes, “is a space-launch and the Tamal Indians knew it: they are still living on it, transformed into trees.” (*JTMT*, 319)

And with that, Adnan resolves to leave “Cézanne’s doubt” behind, on planet Earth. The considerable influence Cézanne exerted over her is not only visible in the drawings, but also across most of Adnan’s early work through the preponderance of a version of the constructive brushstroke (**Fig. 31 & 32**). However, she gradually abandons this device in favor of a more homogenous, flat application of color shorn of painterly gesture or the occasional drama of more sporadic flourishes in the 1980s (**Fig. 33**). While both Adnan and Cézanne seek a leveling of perception and painting, their individual approaches and attitudes towards the act of painting could not be more different from one another. If Cézanne’s painting is infamously characterized by doubt and an infinite reworking of outlines, Adnan’s painting stands out in its extraordinary surety—and not just in relation to Cézanne, but also vis-à-vis other, more contemporary figures she has been compared to, such as Nicolas de Staël.⁷⁹ As several commentators have noted, Adnan works swiftly and decisively on her paintings, completing most of them in a matter of a few hours.⁸⁰ Therefore, her painterly project cannot be captured in a single painting or body of work; Adnan is still interested in proliferating affirmations of her experience, the medium, life through a bottomless permutation

⁷⁹ On this issue, Fattal writes: “But unlike in the work of de Staël, there is no hesitation in her choice of colors and their masses. De Staël returns across an area over and over again. . . . Adnan finds her definitive shape and color at once.” Fattal, “Painting as Pure Energy,” 32.

⁸⁰ Wilson-Goldie, 9.

of colors applied to very similar structures (**Fig. 34 & 35**). The structure and its symbolic load are not irreproachable either, as many modernist recipes are, and a mountain can easily become the sea, or “the square [can be] the passion of the circle” (**Fig. 33, 36, 37**). (*JTMT*, 312) Similar to *The Arab Apocalypse*, the artist’s paintings are marked by the violent transitivity of Deleuzian minorhood, which rejects ossification in all its forms and puts pressure on the limitations of the comfortably entrenched “major literatures.”

A Joyful Vigil for the Death of Modernist Painting

It can hardly be a coincidence that Deleuze and Guattari associate some of the *minor* languages with the realm of color:

[The “parlando” of pop music or “a simple conversation lacking definite pitch”] is perhaps characteristic of secret languages, slangs, jargons, professional languages, nursery rhymes, merchants’ cries to stand out less for their lexical inventions or rhetorical figures than for the way in which they effect continuous variations of the common elements of language. They are *chromatic* languages, close to a musical notation.⁸¹

Further, the “placing-in-variation [of chromatic languages] . . . builds a continuum or medium without beginning or end.”⁸² This is also the locus of Adnan’s apocalyptic painterly practice—“a wholly concordant structure” across decades, “[where] the end is in harmony with the beginning, the middle with beginning and end.”⁸³ Instead of being around the corner, the end is always already immanent, happening, in-progress—like “a positive apocalypse.”

But an apocalypse to what? In *Painting as Model*, Bois unpacks the obsession of modernist painting with its own death by charting the incremental dissolution of its imaginary, real, and symbolic registers by Marcel Duchamp, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Piet Mondrian respectively (among others). For the last stage, Mondrian goes as far to say that, one day, art will

⁸¹ Deleuze and Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” 97.

⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” 94.

⁸³ Kermode, 6.

be rid of its special status in the (Western) society, that there will eventually be no difference between the artists and the non-artists, “for the time will come when, because of life’s changed demands, ‘painting’ will become absorbed in life.”⁸⁴ With her daily painting practice, Adnan allows Mondrian’s telos for the medium to run its full course, but does so in a way that questions the very premises of this telos. Her cosmological views, even the belief that “[p]erception is a laser beam which destroys to assimilate” and amounts to “an exchange of energies,” facilitate the simultaneous implementation and renunciation of the older artist’s vision. (*JTMT*, 314) On one hand, she remains an artist without a masterpiece, the effervescence of her colors held in check by deskilled flatness and the serial sobriety of her mode of production. On the other hand, however exhausted it may be by color permutations and transitivity, the upwardly mobile vector of Mount Tamalpais has survived as one of the very few symbols in her painting, if not, in Fattal’s words, a functional, protective “talismán.”⁸⁵

In another piece on the prematurely cut short career of Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Bois advances the possibility that the artist might have constructed her oeuvre around a notion of “programmatic minorhood.”⁸⁶ Adnan, too, could be thought to participate in “programmatic minorhood,” but with a view to proclaiming *not* the end of all painting, but of modernist painting in particular. She refuses to partake in the Rosenbergian “tradition of the New” that belongs to schismatic modernism, and has no patience for what Kermodé describes as “the skepticism of the clerisy operat[ing] in the person of the reader as a demand for constantly changing, constantly more subtle, relationships between a fiction and the paradigms.”⁸⁷ Nor has she sought refuge in the worldly

⁸⁴ Mondrian, quoted in Bois, *Painting as Model*, 239.

⁸⁵ Fattal, “Painting as Pure Energy,” 39.

⁸⁶ Bois, “Sophie Taeuber-Arp against Greatness,” in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art in, of, and From the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 415.

⁸⁷ Kermodé, 24.

success of a signature style: Adnan's ascent to critical and commercial success comes at the beginning of the twenty-first century, almost five decades after she took up painting in California. In fact, the medium of choice for her revelations—landscape painting—would have been considered grossly outdated for almost a century by the most “advanced” practitioners of contemporary art in the 1970s and 1980s. In this sense, the artist is not unlike the “artisan prophets” in the age of empires,

who assumed the role of the Emperor of the Last Days and led their free-spirited followers in search of the new Jerusalem . . . as a sort of proletarian parallel to the more sophisticated imperialism of the ruling classes in Germany and England.⁸⁸

Indeed, she is too untimely like those prophets to attract a sizeable following, but—being keenly aware of the role of Empire even in the context of her own literary and visual oeuvre—Adnan does not grow tired of reiterating the politics at the heart of her minorhood, and establishes, for instance, the continuity between the deterritorialization of Native American populations and the U.S. ambition in the space race.⁸⁹ “I am the prophet of a useless nation,” the artist declares in *The Arab Apocalypse*, “STOP the base of my brain hurts.” (AA, 41)

Rooted in anticolonial struggles, the politics of Adnan's paintings may not come across as readily as that of her writing, but it nonetheless translates into an important lesson in the politics of form and abstraction. In their essay on minor languages, Deleuze and Guattari also provide suggested uses for minor languages; they implore: “Use the minor language to send the major language racing.”⁹⁰ To this end, based on the example of Kafka, Deleuze further exhorts:

Go always further in the direction of deterritorialization, to the point of sobriety. Since the language is arid, make it vibrate with a new intensity. Oppose a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying

⁸⁸ Kermode, 14.

⁸⁹ For Deleuze's argument on the fundamentally political nature of minorhood, see “Minor Literature,” 153–154.

⁹⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, “November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics,” 105.

usages of it. Arrive at a perfect and unformed expression, a materially intense expression.⁹¹

As such, Adnan bypasses the paradigmatically invaluable novelty of the object by transforming a symbolically loaded medium into a “materially intense,” quotidian ritual that paradoxically situates transcendence in a peculiar, difference-canceling dialectics, i.e. serial permutations of polar opposites such as (pro)creation and destruction, meaning and non-meaning. The artist’s metaphysical world-view and forceful metonymic eroticism in multiple mediums propose a liberating degree of transitivity uncommon in the reductivist, canonical glory of—what Bois calls—“manic mourners” for the death of painting.⁹² In slowly unraveling tradition one or a couple of landscapes per sitting, she lives and relives, tells and retells the Apocalypse at the tail end of modernist painting every day. Yet Adnan’s violently joyous revelations through color project life beyond this End and attest to the fact that another kind of painting, now imbued with “a new sacredness of images,” still lives on.

⁹¹ Deleuze, “Minor Literature,” 155.

⁹² Bois, *Painting as Model*, 242.

Figures

(All works by Etel Adnan, unless otherwise indicated)



Fig. 1 and 2. Untitled paintings from 2013 (left) and 2014 (right). Oil on canvas.



Fig. 3. *Untitled (Sausalito)*, c. 1980. Oil on canvas.

ETEL ADNAN

THE ARAB APOCALYPSE



THE POST-APOLLO PRESS

Fig. 4. Cover of *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan (Sausalito, CA: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989).

I




















A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun
 a  sun A sun  a  blue a  red a  blue
 a blue yellow sun a yellow red sun a blue green sun a
 a yellow boat a yellow sun a  red a  red blue and yellow
 a yellow morning on a green sun a flower flower on a blue blue but
 a yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun
 a  yellow A sun  a small craft  a boat  a  red blue
 a quiet blue sun on a card table a red which is blue and a wheel
 A solar sun a lunar sun a starry sun a nebular sun
 A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun Qorraich runner ran running
 A blue sun before a red sun a green sun before a lunar sun
 A floral sun  a small craft as round as a round sun  A solar moon
 Another sun jealous of Yellow enamoured of Red terrified by Blue horizontal 
 A sun romantic as Yellow jealous as Blue amorous as a cloud
 A frail sun a timid sun  vain sorrowful and bellicose sun
 A Pharaonic  boat an Egyptian sun a solar universe and a universal sun
 A solar arrow crosses the sky An eye dreads the sun the sun is an eye
 A tubular sun haunted by the tubes of the sea  a sun pernicious and vain
 A  Hopi a Red Indian sun an Arab Black Sun a sun yellow and blue

Fig. 5. Poem I, page 7 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.















a solar Hopi a solar Indian reddening a solar Arab darkening 
 a solar cord a musical Greek a rosace  solar a sun in an old sky
 a sun in the room a room  in a  sun rolling on the sky
 a blue sky for a  yellow sun a yellow sky for   a blue sun
 a blue tattoo in the sky a sun tattoed with sins solar sins
 a Bedu sunstruck a  sun-sick and the sea drowing the sea
 a sun alarmed alarming the color yellow the yellow alarming sun moon and sea
 a militant tattoo a militant sun in a warm  universe  a straight sun
 a solar craft under the Nile the Nile crossing a sun the sun laughing
 a solar imbecile a lunar cloud a polar woman a sun ultra brave
 a  sun solar nocturnal fluvial bestial choleric and yellow as yellow
 an egg yolk sun confined to an asylum tearing its skin into lightning
 a solar craft under the Nile the Nile crossing a sun the sun  laughing
 a sunlike and solar tattoo is an Arab eye in the middle of the Milky Way
 A  maddeningly yellow another peacefully green a blue terror O moon!
 A yellow and quiet sun on a quiet and soft horizon next to flowers. Everyday
 A sun victory of the yellow on the green of the green  over the yellow in
 the meadow of tears.

Fig. 6. Poem I, page 8 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.

II

A yellow sun a sun → toward the sea a sun reckless and in love with the sea
 a meritorious lightning-rod going to the heart of a lemon
 a purple sun over a planetary volcano O Mexico! ← bed undone over a ~~SB~~ flower

O moon non solar O woman non Egyptian O royal and solar council of kings!
 X great Inca O ant-like sun and blue ant in front of a red cat!
 giant Hopi hopping on a dinosaur blue green sun bitter misfortune
 war vessel yellow sun peace vessel yellow sun motion
 O boredom's trajectory on the mobile wall →→→ O white hospital!!!
 moon as green as frozen leaf under the avalanche of a solar star ! →→→

a black sun a ● still black black ink black light blue silk tree
 a black tree a palm tree black and inky like a tower the silk of trees
 a yellow sun in an egg and the sea in tears a child as yellow as the sun
 a tattoo on the belly a sun in the rectal extremity an eye → the cut ear of the moon

E a moon atrocious a yellow crime flower on E a bird's wing
 a crime thrice solar toes caressed by the flux red Pacific Ocean
 the sun is a Syrian king riding a horse from Homs to Palmyra open skies preceding

Fig. 7. Poem II, page 9 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.









a sun sunning the bed the bed of a nocturnal river  season!!! 
 a Hopi filled with bitter whiskey a solar bar in the midst of America anthracite
 a sun as androgynous as yellow mixed to blue  red and blue bird
 a yellow sun a purple sun in the purple heat of the wind
 an Indian sun a Hindu sun a Zoroastrian sun a sun for catacombs
 my pain mounting the sun like a racing horse. The field is infinite
 a yellow sun claimed like a melon from Amazonia, O dead Indians! 
 a red sun a black sun a yellow sun a purple sun and nothing else
 O thwarted Arabian moon orgiastic under the rain the wind hou ! hou! the desert
 morning sun solar morning banal morning apotheosis. An angel went by . . .
 sun risen as early as an arm bewitched universe  teapot full of atoms
 a yellow sun in my memory cancer in the heart of the rose the prisoner's cry
 O sun which tortures the Arab's eye in the Enemy's prison! Sun yellow silence. 

Fig. 8. Poem II, page 10 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.

LVI

Sounds of laughter are back on target Sunken suns
 we find strength in carrying flowers to disemboweled corpses
 the sea licks the ballast and the rails of the cosmic train
 demented women stand alone under the moon's noise ERRANCE in the basilica
 bodies buried at the start of the century and momified with salt are digged out
 with their legs thrown apart bodies cry the absence of their sexual parts
 They will not reproduce in the other world will not make love to laurel trees
 I said that this tongue smoking like roast-lamb will disappear
 make tomorrow's men speak in signs collectively
 They threw the Arabic language to the garbage toads took it up
 Rivers will be abundant but solitary the mountains too
 eclipses will descend on earth to eat grass wisely
 a plate and fried eggs for the prophet's assassin
 from valley to valley under the subterranean sand we'll wait
 Spring will refuse to come Earth will not have seasons anymore



75

Fig. 9. Poem LVI, page 75 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.






A yellow sun A frail sun a timid sun
 a  sun A Pharaonic  boat
 ical Greek a rosace  lemon
 a room  in a  flower

Fig. 10. Selected details from *The Arab Apocalypse*.




a bestial sun crawls on my backbone and gnaws at my neck. Its hair . . .
 Its hair is falling  Outside fascism dressed in green masturbates its guns
 O backfired adventure! I saw Beirut-the-fool write with blood Death to the moon!
 A rocket shatters the house. Bullets fly. They rip up a store. They stampede a cat
 I took the sun by the tail and threw it in the river. Explosion. BOOM . . .
 Beirut syphilis carrying whore the sun is contaminated by the city
 a blue sun receding a Kurd killing an Armenian an Armenian killing a Palestinian
 the solar wheel of Syrian races O insane nomads drinkers of dust
 a hydrophilic sun a hilarious yellow sun red and vain red sun
 Beirut-the-Mean a Party drunk with petroleum militia in whirlpools 
 a sun in a belly full of vegetables a system of fat tuberculosis a sun which is SOFT
 the eucalyptus are in bloom. the Arabs are under the ground. the Americans on the moon.
 the sun has eaten its children  I myself was a morning blessed with bliss.

Fig. 11. Poem VII, page 20 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.

A yellow sun a mad sun a quiet sun a red sun (11) a a
 Helios sun moon reduced to a sun between two rocks BOUM BOUM BOUME !
 A solar wind pulls your teeth Hou ! Hou ! the future is a wind
 a young boat on the wrinkles of the sea in the sun's eye VOYEUR !
 the solar wind blows at 500 miles per second ! HOULA ! ! !
 interplanetary circular dust accompanies the traveling whirling sun
 the sun revolves in twenty-seven days and its pain affects me
 I hurt at the sun's belly (11) the sun hurts at my belly O my love!
 I love a yellow sun you love a blue sun he loves a red sun
 the sun plays STOP the sun cries STOP the sun falls asleep STOP
 A maddeningly yellow a wart on my nose (11) satellites
 the sun waits for SOYOUZ the sun waits for APOLLO the sun is GARGARIN
 Malevich's red sun followed his funeral convoy all the way to BEIRUT
 Beirut — Hell Beirut — sun Beirut — Damascus Beirut — Venus

Fig. 12. Poem XI, page 27 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.

VI

Sun of Wichitah! burns the single corn stalk in Wichitah! The mayor's phallus
 One sun in Wichitah Three bulls in Cheyenne STOP my thoughts emerge !
 O disaster STOP O sun STOP O bliss STOP STOP a broken engine
 an eye rounded and yellowed by the prison STOP San Quentin streams under the sun
 a solar boat a palm tree in the refrigerator and the Cordillera under my arm

Voyage to the hollow of a valley in the center ☞☞ of my memory ☉ sulfuric burns

I tell the sun's story it answers I decode it sends new messages ● I decode

from the center of the sun a tree sends a message BZZ BZZ BZZ BZZZZ a cancer grows


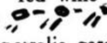

On its neck the tree carries cancer but a solar cancer solar baby ●
 A yellow sun crammed in a boat ☞ a vessel with melon-soft belly a kiss


Lagoon La Paz the Sea of Cortez blue ink on a rock. Sharp-edged is the ocean
 The sea is green so is the mother with tooth-ache and amputation. Artaud-Torture




A sun from Diarbekyr a gully under the ramparts and sonorous boats
 a sun from Mardin and the spring exploded O the purple velvet of the hills!
 a Turkish sun an Arab sun a Kurdish sun a Hindu-owlish sun



Fig. 13. Poem VI, page 17 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.





IV

A yellow sun  in the gully red wine blood zebra stripes in the solar sky!!!
 a green sun streaked with Indians  O massacre in splendor!!
 overheated sun furnace voyage in petrolic gardens O slumber!
 a solar level a solar country a solar tribe sshu  a valley's flank

 a yellow world a blue sun a yellow sun eternal vertigo in my hand
 a nilotic sluice stopping the sun the moon terrified  O crushed legend???!

 a sun ??? yellow ??? a ??? sun ??? green ??? a ? boat ? blue and pink 
 solar star on the forehead and the moon for an eye  pharaoh's tomb
 O fear O pain spinal cord plundered by the conquest
 Solar palm tree immense cancer on a milky way  the Constellations of Sorrow

 a yellow sun over Mexico trembles. Mexico trembles.  sleeps the sun
 a green sun and a solar green the slowness of the solar boats along your arm
 a world  I rolled as grass ate the slug my flowers are cut
 a Nubian nubile spring rape of almond trees in no-flowers. Diaphanous flowers.
 an Arab tortured mutilated vomits the sun hangs from his feet. Meticulously.

 a yellow sun  a blue sun  a purple sun  a green sun
 a Jerusalem the Lord's house of shame a calcinated Jerusalem  Jerusalem of glass!

 a sun did you say yellow did you say a sun did you say yellow you didn't say?!

Fig. 14. Poem IV, page 13 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.

LVII

the sun has sulfuric dreams is growing a dark horn
 his mouth painted with lime an Arab drinks the horse's water
 the sun gets lost in dunes the world is in darkness
 the monkey in the coconut tree wears ties and pants government officials too
 hasn't the sea told you that its power doesn't work anymore?
 a fish dies in the belly of another fish also dying on Arabia's map
 amputated they had to cross the desert on the naked bones of their legs
 and above all had to avoid crying like puppies newly born
 the sun has burned the lips of the poets these smile with their teeth
 roses went mad they bleed in public places
 killers are condemned to praise the beauty of the sea
 sons make their beloved mothers pregnant twirling suns
 during the whole length of the war we saw the sun go for mountain walks
 it distributed books to the blind guns to the one-armed men
 in the cellars it drank the acid wine of the Bekaa STOP
 it jammed the trails of the Milky Way
 the Arabs—astronomers follow the wrong stars and when night falls
 they say: here is the beginning the day and the victory


76


Fig. 15. Poem LVII, page 76 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.


XXX


Rider of clouds ☉ sun Syrian worker ☀ proto sinaitic
What a purple and violent abyss broke loose on the Primordial land of Syria?
What an ancestral love out of the infinite and the universe had to reside in your belly?
I smothered the sun with an iron bar disfigured its words tore its face
And mine. Big black holes. Quasars ! the others' death in Beirut SHHHH
the sun is on its way to extinction. STOP splinters from shells or solar splinters?
Little pieces of death Pieces of Osiris' body dispersed while Great Isis is absent HOU !
Great Isis is absent STOP I am the root that her tomb crushed STOP
My planet-like face is pockmarked by miserable particles of lead
my grandfather is giving a last battle in an abyss inhabited by bats
In the land of Adonis raspberries bleed as much as we do.
a yellow sun a yellow sun a yellow sun a yellow sun
the sea quivers under its mobile corpses ☀ man is slaughtered more than sheep
Baal-Sun Thunder and black rain the sea gave birth to snakes
lightning breaks through the city's towers electricity oozes from our eyes
How can we exorcise malediction when we ourselves are cursed? ?
What to do with the sun when it hides behind tear gas?
Drink it. Drink it in little sips so that tenderness resembles hell.


Fig. 16. Poem XXX, page 49 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.

a sun yellow green sleepwalker  a sleepwalker stricken with sleep

an open space a number a woman crucified with flowers. One and one to nothing.
 The moon left Amazonia an Inca licking her feet the sun watching
 a corpse carried straight up through jungles O school for snakes charming the charmer! 



A yellow sun rising and murdered  tooth-ache a tree white and in bloom


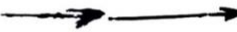
The sun is my dispersed childhood's tree  sunset with no morning no night. BLACK.

A blue sun streaked with purple lonely lonely  more than widowed. Lone.

O moaning HOU HOU HOU like wind in the belly HOU HOU HOU HOU HOU MORE THAN
 WIDOWED

sun-telephone. Sun thick tomb's silence telephone silence. SPIDER.



a drugged morphine-craving sun  the ascension of the mountain  the distance from the sea


a solar drug an open mushroom a mushrooming sun a red drug
 a black sun mating a red sun  black radar in your black eye. SPIDER 

a sun weary of rolling a sun tossed away a sick sun shining through its agony.


Fig. 17. Poem V, page 16 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.



X

A pink dove shattered a human face  A solar hair in its beak
a yellow sun stop a green sun stop a blue sun stop
I asked the sun not to dismantle my body unified for ever
the sun is bawling its heat. Bawling its pain  The sound of plants STOP
a yellow sun a vociferous sun a blue sun a sun oozing its electrodes

a crazy sun a yellow sun a palm tree blinking in the sun's eye
a sun-ambulance carries Christ to the insane asylum  Close to the monkeys


a yellow sun hates the color green a green sun hating plants Hou !!!
the sun swings from one universe to another STOP the sun swings from one universe to another

My right eye is a sun my left eye is a sun my ears two suns
my nostrils two suns  I have the sun on my forehead STOP

my feet are two suns STOP EACH FINGER is a sun
a sun at each toe STOP a sun in the arms in the anus in the neck
my feet two suns my ears two suns my nostrils two suns
and this sun at the mouth cancer until the end of the stars  

25

Fig. 18. Poem X, page 25 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.

my belly is a sun  a sun is a system which starts at the heart
 a sun is this milky way which runs out of my mouth whirling sun
~~the sun~~ the sun bawls its heat the sun bawls its light the sun is LUCIFER
 I WANT HIM TO BE DEAF AND DEAD HORIZONTAL AS A FELLED FOREST

a pink dove breaks the cloud through and through the sun was waiting
 a sun O ship ~~the~~ a sun O silence ~~the~~ a sun O copper

CHE GUEVARA HAS BECOME A BUSH WITH WHITE SAP
 THE PACIFIC HAS BECOME A LAKE OF BLOOD STOP
 I AM THE SOLAR-BELLIED INDIAN WHO PLUNGES BEIRUT IN A BATH OF LIGHT
 DEAD IS THE BODY THAT THE SHADOWS CARRY UNDERGROUND

Fig. 19. Poem X, page 26 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.










astral television  thundering ball kissing a worm purple sun and . . .
 A green sun on the Meadow of Tears  sun in my pocket wretched pocket sun
 a yellow sun a dust noise point point point a point and a blue circle
 O fear O pain sun settled in my head and eyes of toys
 a sun glacial nocturnal gardenal pentothal dialectical and Yemenite
 Yemen yellow like pollen from the Yemen and snow from the Sierra. The day's death
 a yellow sun  colorless vertigo  the sun eating almond trees
 a solar palm museums sarcophagi and rot the sea is widowed. Yes.
 a tearful sun doped with roses swims in nebulae now
~~+~~ green and purple destroy bone marrow in an inkpot ~~eye~~ crushed horizon
 a universe waiting solar sun knocking at the door eating its own words
 a decide sun. There is a rallye in yellow chaos 
 a sun lying on the highway a sheriff checking its heart. Have a good laugh.
 ??? when the bordello opened its door    they found the sun fucking
 a yellow sun yawns over Beirut and Paris is dying and New York is fainting. O unsewn Time!

Fig. 20. Poem IV, page 14 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.



Fig. 21. Paul Klee, *Landscape Near Hades*, 1937. Pastel on canvas mounted on jute burlap. Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY.

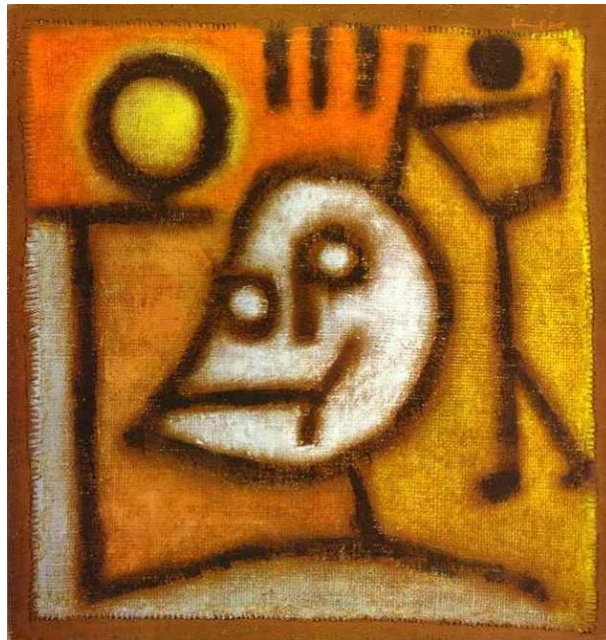



Fig. 22. Klee, *Death and Fire*, 1940. Oil and colored paste on burlap. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

VIII

The sun a pool of blood. A corpse lying in the sun HOU ! HOU !
 A yellow sun the ocean is a balloon deflating its vomit
 an adolescent died on the surface of the horizon. How blue is the sea !
 an anemic sun loses a tooth a day STOP the war
 the war laid its flowers under tombs. Red for the unspilled blood
 the war sprouted like a cactus between my toes  It's five o'clock




Treason floats down the smooth surface of the Euphrates like a woman
 the sun's fingers are sawed and the moon is patient. I'm leaving.
 a sun tattooed with lies spilling over your legs
 Who prevents us from kissing? A dead snake in the sun.
 a solar sun a solar moon a solar river and that's all
 a funeral sun carried over a headless body a Kurd watching
 despicable Arabian sun triumphant Arabian sun  vanquished sun
 a sun as lonesome as a fish with no baggage  a train
 the Arabian sun of suffering whales planetary journeys
 I begged for a machine-gun and was given a flower  poisoned
 a yellow sun a blue and purple sun lying in a pool of blood

Fig. 23. Poem VIII, page 21 from *The Arab Apocalypse* by Etel Adnan, 1975–1980/1989.



Fig. 24. *Untitled*, c. 1970–1973. Watercolor on paper.



Fig. 25. *Untitled*, 2016. Oil on canvas. MudAM Luxembourg.



Fig. 26. *Untitled*, 1985. Oil on canvas. Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.



Fig. 27. *Untitled*, 1965–1970. Oil on canvas. Private collection.



Fig. 28. *The Suez Canal*, 1967. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

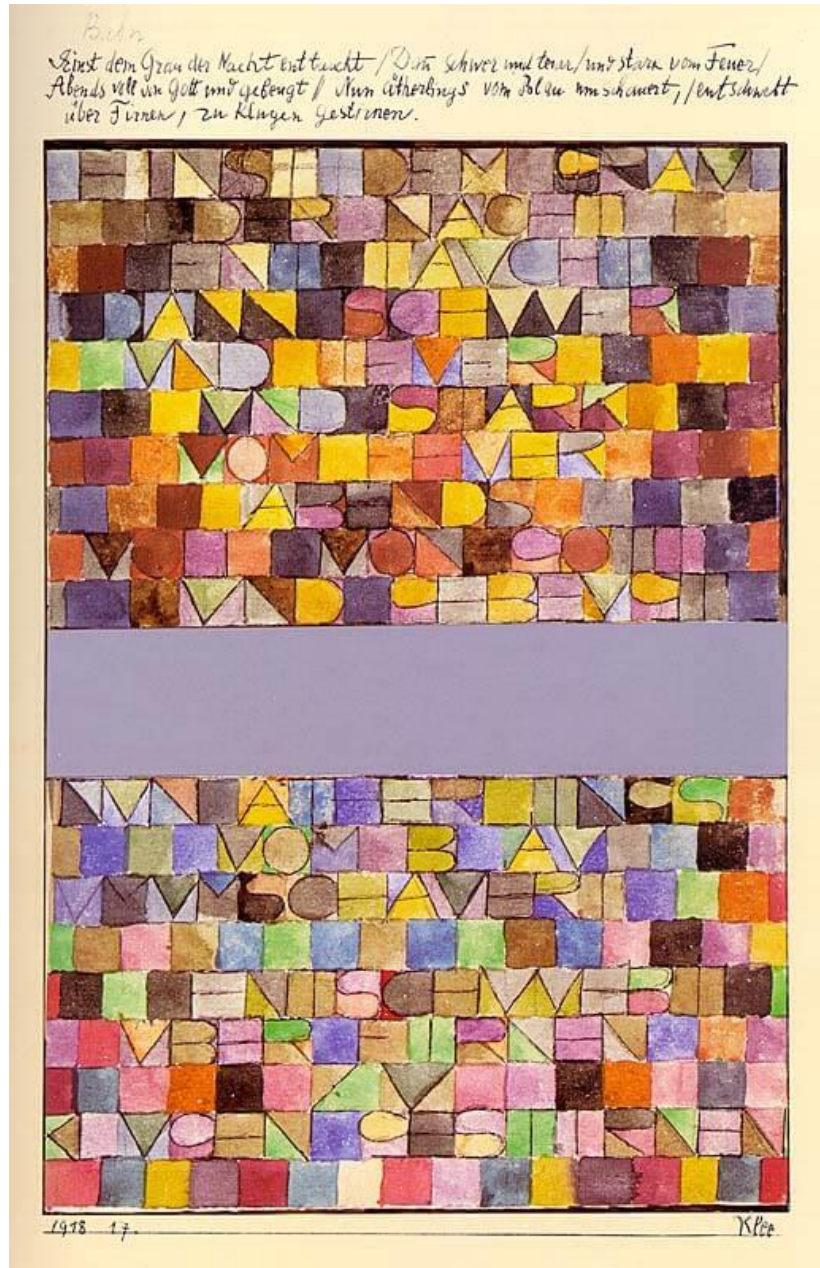


Fig. 29. Klee, *Once emerged from the gray of the night...*, 1918. Watercolor on paper. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

SKIES STREAKED WITH RED FIRE



Fig. 30. *Untitled*, c. 1970. Pastel on paper.

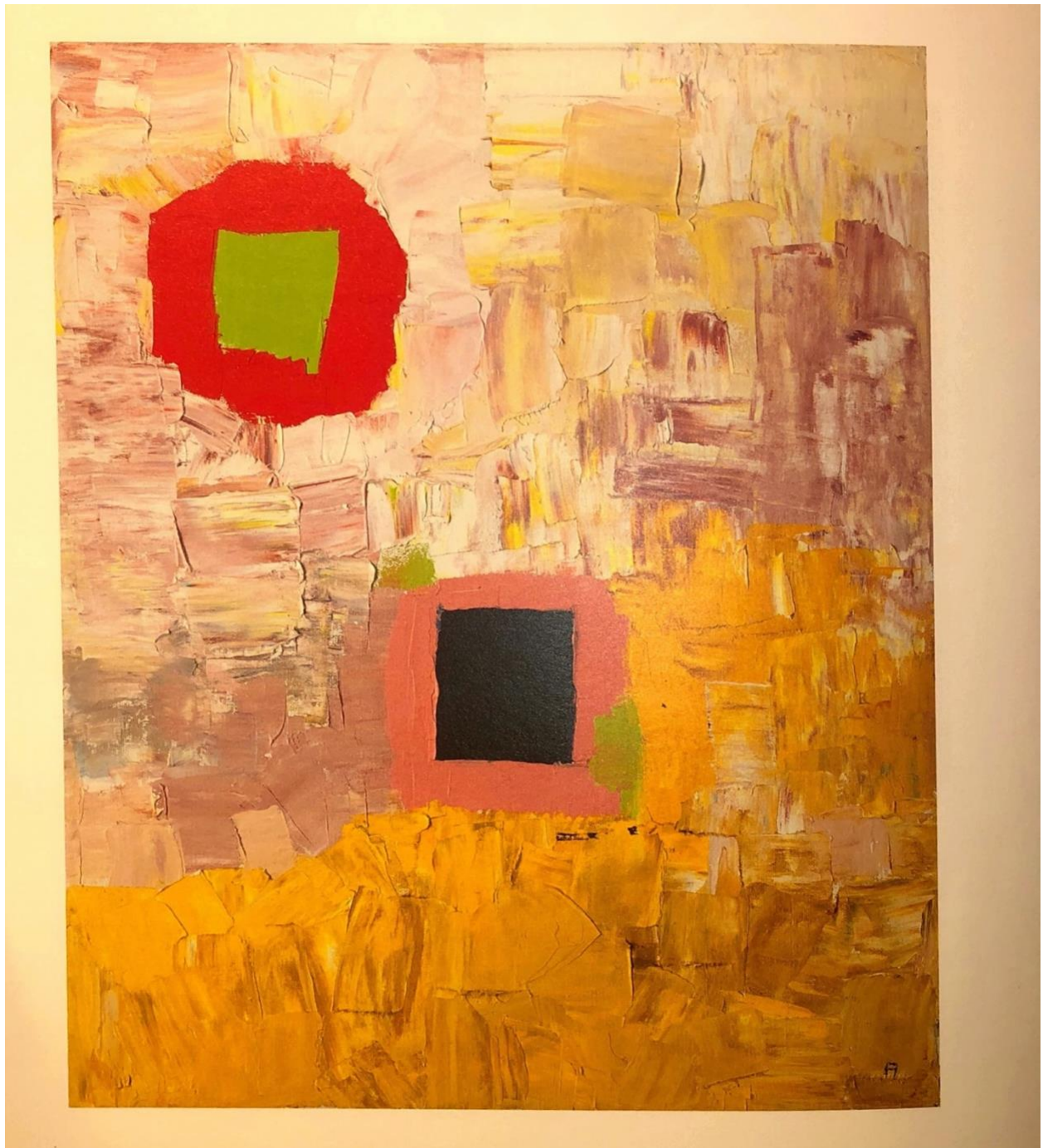


Fig. 31. *Hot*, c. 1960. Oil on canvas. Private collection.



Fig. 32. *Untitled*, c. 1970. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

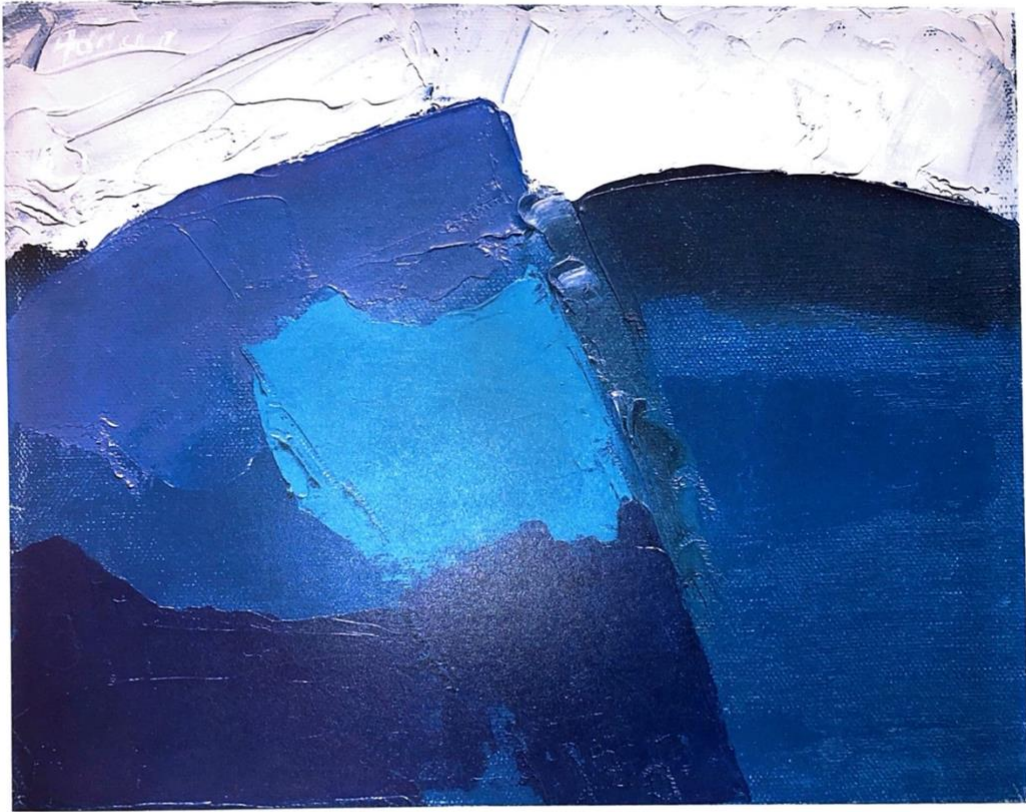


Fig. 33. *Untitled*, c. 1980. Oil on canvas. Private collection.



Fig. 34. *Untitled*, c. 1995–2000. Oil on canvas. Private collection.

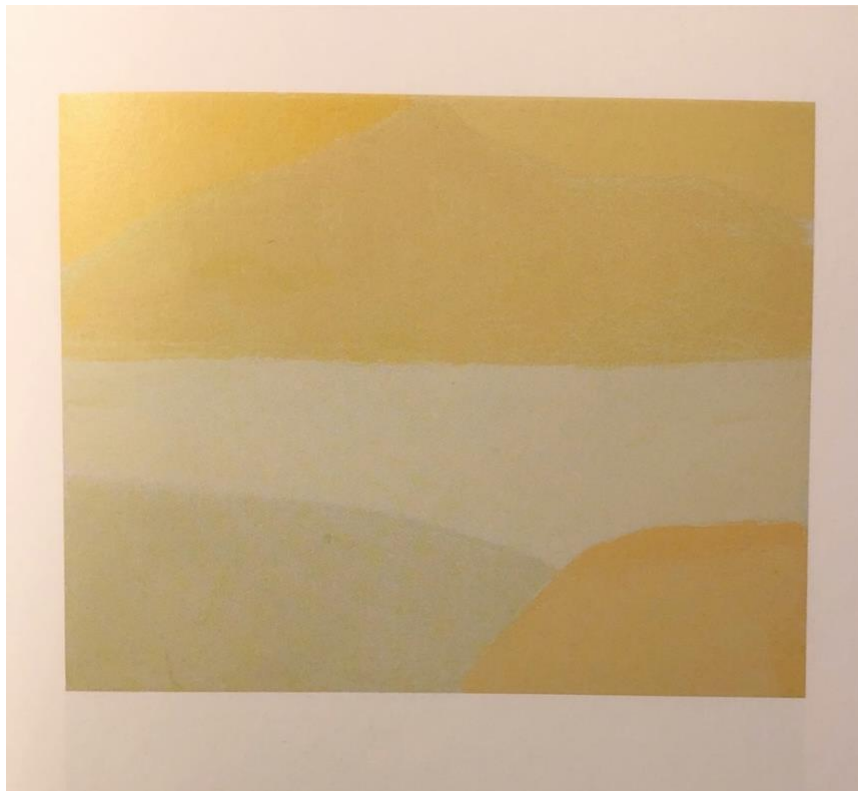


Fig. 35. *Untitled*, 2014. Oil on canvas. Private collection.



Fig. 36. *Untitled*, 2015. Oil on canvas.

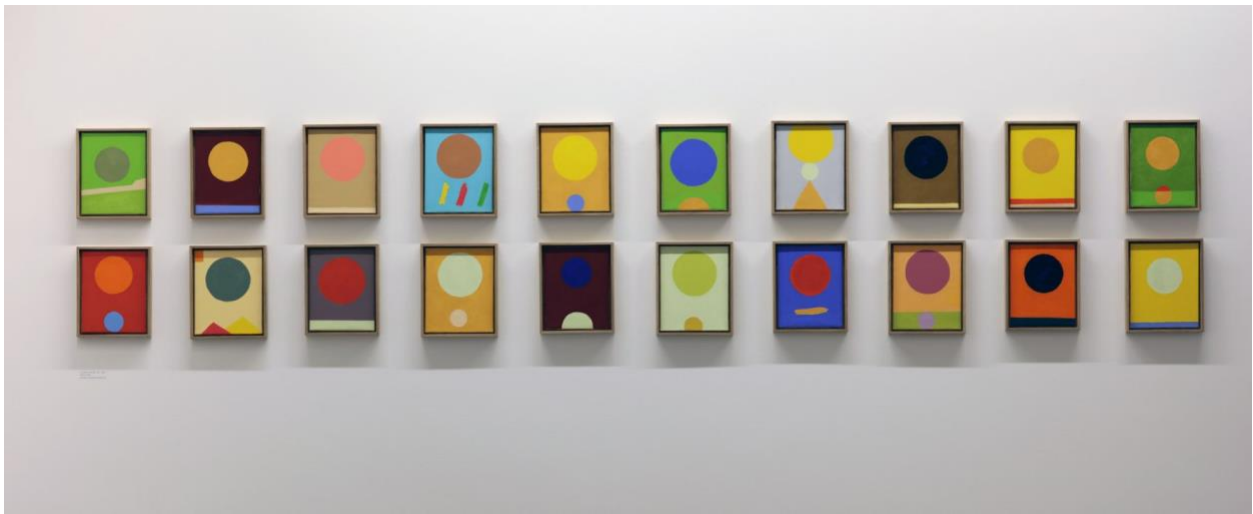


Fig. 37. Installation view from *Etel Adnan: Weight of the World*, Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London. June 2–September 11, 2016. Photograph: Jerry Hardman-Jones.

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