

Etel Adnan  
by Lisa Robertson



*December From My Window*, 1993, ink and watercolor on paper, 7 1/2 x 100 inches. Images courtesy of the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts.

I took the morning TGV from Poitiers to Paris on January 15th to ask Etel Adnan a question. She was about to receive France's highest cultural honor, the Ordre de Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. Her collected writings are imminent with Nightboat Books, and she has been the late star of Kassel. We have been friends since my time in California, where she lived for some fifty years, before relocating to Paris. We sat in the salon of the sprawling, luminous apartment near Place Saint-Sulpice, which she shares with Simone Fattal, the sculptor and publisher of Post-Apollo Press, Etel comfortable in her uniform of dark cashmere V-neck and tartan slacks, perched on a carpet-spread divan. That the Café de la Mairie at Saint-Sulpice, where I sometimes see Simone, was the favorite café of Doctor Matthew O'Connor, Djuna Barnes's melancholic transvestite sage-femme in *Nightwood*, does not feel irrelevant. In Barnes's novel, Nora pays Dr. Matthew a visit to ask a question—Doctor, what of the night?—in his quite sullied Saint-Sulpice chamber. But here there is no Nordic melancholy. Adnan's small, glowingly pigmented paintings, the presence of drawings and flowers and those tall gilt-framed, slightly tarnished mirrors that crest the marble fireplaces in Paris apartments ensure that in this room color and light have a mouthfeel. And there is the generous and cosmopolitan color of her voice. I wish you could hear it. I recall what Janet Flanner said of the voice of Callas—like a worn velvet that has lost the evenness of its texture—but that's just the surface of it. It's true Etel's voice is time-roughened—she's 89—but also her consonants are place-like. They have space in them for light to play, like the landscapes and cities and squares of her various homes: Sausalito, Beirut, Greece, Paris. Etel Adnan is a poet. She is a philosopher. And she is a painter. In her world, each of these activities gives its images and its movements to the others—whatever an image is.

— Lisa Robertson

**Etel Adnan** So I was telling you about what happened to me after I was invited to Documenta 13 as a painter. Before that, I had little galleries here and there. I was happy because I exhibited enough to feel like a painter. I could work at my own pace, because I also have to take time to write. Anyway, since Documenta . . . Galleries wait for artists to be recognized and then they all solicit the same ones. That happened to me, but I had to say no, because I can't produce. I can paint, but I can't produce. I always have done that, even when I was younger. Visual art is big industry; lots of money moves around, which is okay, it's vital. But it's also a bit of a heartbreak—I wish this had happened, let's say, twenty years ago. It's a nice feeling to have your work appreciated, but it's almost a fashion for women to be recognized late in life. Agnes Martin, for example. It's a trend, but we hope it will change.

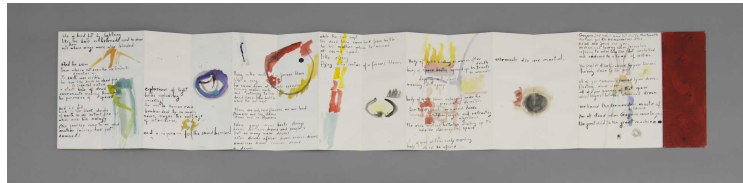
**Lisa Robertson** Do you think survival is what's being rewarded?

**EA** Not necessarily. There are people like Mona Hatoum who got recognition when she was

young. It's possible that in the past, unconsciously, people paid less attention to women's work. Things are changing; there are more and more women curators, and more women gallery owners. It doesn't mean that they will automatically pay more attention to women's work, but it's changing. We can't complain.

LR I've been rereading your books in the past two weeks, three or four of them. I read this beautiful line in *Seasons* this morning: "Women are keepers of their own story therefore they are historians." I put that in relation to images in your work. Lately, I have been thinking a lot about images—about how the image works in Baudelaire, for example. It's not only a visual or optical event, it's happening across all the senses. It's a poly-sensual perceiving.

EA Yes!



LR So I have two questions. One is about the relationship between the image in poetry and the image in painting, and the other one, which might not be related to the first, is about women's images. In an interview with Steve McQueen in *The Guardian* about his film *Twelve Years a Slave*, he said, "Some images have never been seen before. I needed to see them." It resonated for me in relationship to your work. You are making images that have not been seen. Some of that might have to do with the fact that you are making women's images. Do you feel that?

EA Until now at least, a woman's life, her psyche . . . we don't like the word *essence* anymore. As women, of course, we are different from each other as people, but we are also different from men. Or we have been up until now. So we have our own images. We've had little girls' lives, so we carry that. When I grew up in Beirut, there weren't many sports for boys or girls, but certainly girls were aware of being little girls, of being *in*. This idea of the outside and the inside works very strongly in women's lives. In fact, women are rooted somewhere, they are stronger physically. Women are containers—the baby is in their belly; making love is receiving. This container contains hearts and stomachs. Images are, in one way, what we receive, but they are also the tools with which we think. To make images, you think with them, somehow. You mentioned Baudelaire. For Baudelaire, images work not like shapes, but like ideas made visible. He was particularly interested in the encounter between what we call the inner world and the outer world. And poetry deals magnificently with that. It is one of the major definitions of poetry. It addresses that relationship between what we call the subject and the object, which melt in what we call consciousness. Sometimes we transcribe this state of mind into words and call it a poem or a text. The same is true for the other arts. Writing is a very mysterious activity. When you write, you say things that would not have occurred to your mind otherwise. I don't know if the fact that we don't use paper and ink anymore affects writing. On a computer it's a new situation.

LR Do you write on a computer?

EA My poetry is not long. I write in little paragraphs and they pile up, so I do it by hand. But I am more and more obligated to answer letters or emails, so then I use a computer. But to go back to what an image is—

LR That's my real question. (*laughter*)



Etel Adnan, *Afternoon Poem*, 1968, ink and watercolor on paper, 8½ x 96 inches.

EA For example, I look at this table in front of me. Somebody over there, however, may look at it and not see it. Seeing is an activity; it is not passive.

LR The last sentence I read before I got off the metro on my way here was, “Behind an image there’s the image.”

EA There are layers of images—that’s what I meant, very simply. There is thickness. Vision is multidimensional and simultaneous. You can think, see, see beyond: you can do all these things at the same time. Your psyche, your brain catches up. Some people today say that an image is not necessarily a clear figuration of something; it could be like a blurred abstract drawing, like a sliding door.

LR An event in perceiving.

EA Yes, an event. It is a speed that you catch. Images are not still. They are moving things. They come, they go, they disappear, they approach, they recede, and they are not even visual—ultimately they are pure feeling. They’re like something that calls you through a fog or a cloud.

LR So they are immaterial, in a way.

EA That’s it! They are immaterial in essence. But they could be strongly defined, or they could be fleeting, almost like a ghost of things or of feelings going by. So the word *image* is very elastic. It’s a very rich concept. Although we are bombarded with images, our culture is anti-image. We think we don’t like it; it’s not fashionable. That is why Surrealism exists: it intends to amplify the image, to force us to see it. Andy Warhol understood that we are surrounded by so many things, and people, that we do not see them. We are rather blinded by them. So he forced our attention on soup cans and Marilyn Monroe.

On an other level, there are also different clarities. Some things are not meant to be clear; obscurity is their clarity. We should not underestimate obscurity. Obscurity is as rich as luminosity.

LR I was thinking about the way that light moves through your work. There is, for me, a very strong sense of light as being *human* light, spirit. Also, the light of a single day is a human

unit.

**EA** The environment was my life, maybe because I was an only child. I didn't have brothers and sisters to play with, so the light coming in through the window was a great event for me. I played with that instead of playing with other children. It was my companion. Beirut is a very sunny city and there were very few cars when I grew up. That was a blessing, because there were people in the street. I remember trying to walk on my shadow. Shadows and light were two strong entities. In Spain or southern France or Italy shadows are very strong and beautiful—the patterns are very clear. Light is an extraordinary element. It's a being on its own, it's something you look at, and that also you inhabit.

**LR** I wrote down the phrase: "The situation of consciousness in the daylight." The idea of the French Enlightenment and the meaning of *enlightenment* in the sense of 18th-century rationalism is also in your work—

**EA** I went to Catholic schools all my life. There were no other schools in Lebanon. We had religion around all the time. I'm lucky—I never believed in catechism or any of that. I was always a dissident without effort, at a distance from all the things the nuns were saying. I never liked saints. What touched me was their speaking of revelation, even the word itself. That always made sense to me. We owe life to the existence of the sun; therefore light is a very profound part of our makeup. It's spiritual, in the way that even DNA is spiritual. What we call "spirit" is energy. It's the definition of life, in one sense. Light, as an object, as a phenomenon, is magnificent. I am talking to you and the light coming in through the window has already changed. You go on the street and you look at the sky and it tells you what time it is. We are dealing with it constantly, and obscurity is also maybe its own light, because it shows you things. Obscurity is not lack of light. It is a different manifestation of light. It has its own illumination.

**LR** You call it the "Palace of Night."

**EA** That comes from Joanne Kyger. She wrote, on what I call a little floating paper, a folded page, a piece titled "Night Palace." That poem turned out to, at that point, change my life, in a way. Joanne practices Zen Buddhism, therefore she is in relation to spirituality. The poem opened up infinity for me—it was actually a revelation. The universe makes sense as infinity, not as a continuation of objects. I don't know Buddhism, but I suppose, in one way, that it considers everything to be spiritual. To look at an object is a spiritual activity; it is not mechanical. The object is not there, you see. The object is only there when your mind meets it. In that sense you can say everything is spiritual.

Joanne lives in Bolinas, by the ocean, and in that area there is a night palace: this little provincial structure where they give parties and events and sometimes speeches. There is a night palace in that part of Marin County. It recurs in my memory now—it is like a lighthouse. It is a shining structure that floats in my head. I see the windows; the lights are colorful; it's dusk. You go and come back and it is there. It's a thereness, and it comes from Joanne's poem. Maybe I can find that poem. It's one paragraph; that's all it is. Voilà! I will read it.

"The best thing about the past  
is that it's over"  
when you die.

You wake up

from the dream

that's your life.

Then you grow up

and get to be post human  
in a past that keeps happening  
ahead of you.

LR It's beautiful! It floats immediately.

EA It's a long poem but the first part is called "Night Palace" and she wrote it in 2003.

LR So do you write at nighttime or only in the day?

EA I don't write at regular times. People have their own ways. I know somebody who has an office and goes there every morning to write. And he's not a novelist. I could understand that for a novelist, but a poet? I write when I have the urge to spit out something. Why do I write it and sometimes let it go? Before I go to sleep, it seems to me that my mind takes off. But I'm too lazy; I never have a pencil and paper. Maybe for ten times in my life I got up in the middle of the night and wrote something. So I don't know when I write, it piles up.

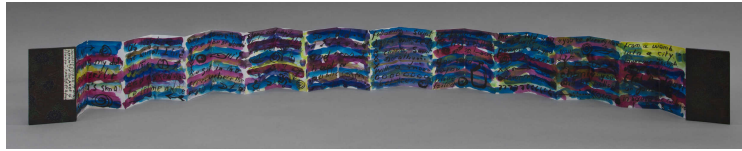
LR What about your choice to write in English?

EA Well, in 1955 I was a student in philosophy at Berkeley. I stayed there a year and a half and then I took a semester off and went to Mexico. When I returned, I went to Harvard for a year. By the end of that year I was financially broke, and tired of being a student. So I never finished my PhD. I found a teaching job at Dominican College and they asked me to teach French. I didn't want to—it would have marginalized me to teach French and, also, I was really interested in philosophy. So I taught in English. I started teaching in October of 1958. One day, in the middle of the '60s, while the Vietnam War was going on, I found in my college mailbox a free magazine folded like a newspaper. At the time they used to cover the war more thoroughly than they do now. It was very upsetting to see these American soldiers burning straw roofs and the Vietnamese people coming out like scared animals. So I saw this paper and I sat at my little table with my typing machine and wrote my first two poems in English. I sent them to the *S-B Gazette* (a pun and abbreviation for the *Sausalito-Belvedere Gazette*), and I got a handwritten note scribbled in pencil that said, "Muchly accepted." So I thought, Well, I am an American poet.

Walter Lowenfels, a famous activist and leftist—he'd even been jailed—published one of those poems, "The Enemy's Testament," in the first important anti-war anthology, *Where Is Vietnam?* My poem, in alphabetical order, was the first. That's how I started writing in English. I was exhilarated. My parents had disappeared, I was on my own—this was a new language, a new life, a new world. I really loved America. I was very aware that it'd had very dark periods, but when you love something, it does not mean you cannot see what's tragic in its history. I loved it and still do. The '60s in America, I thought the world was going to be that way forever. It was such a creative decade.

Two important works, *Sitt Marie Rose* and *The Arab Apocalypse*, I wrote in French, but *The Apocalypse* I translated myself, so it makes it an original. *Sitt Marie Rose* was translated by a good friend of mine, Georgina Kleege, who now teaches in the English Department of UC Berkeley and is also a writer. On occasion somebody asks me for a text in French, so I find out

that I am a bit embarrassed because I don't have this sense of belonging that I have with English. By now there's a lifetime of history behind my writing in English and my being part of what they call "Arab-American literature." I have a bit of a French accent, but my mind is not really French. I don't feel like a French person. I am at ease with things French, I know France inside out, but I feel more *with it* in the United States.



*I Was Appointed the Poet of Heaven*, 1983, ink and watercolor on paper, 6 1/4 x 77 inches.

LR One of the things I really appreciate in your poems is this very quick and subtle shift of register in the language. So many different idiolects enter into the stanzas or paragraphs that you write, which I actually think of as images in the way we were discussing.

EA What do you mean by "idiolects"?

LR Well, extreme colloquialisms right up against much more subtle, highly literary language.

EA Oh, I don't realize that I'm doing that. That's not a decision. I write as things come to my mind, maybe because I love philosophy, but I don't love theory. There is a big difference. Not that I don't respect theory, but I am incapable of writing it or even reading it.

LR Let's talk about the difference between philosophy and theory. What is philosophy for you?

EA For me philosophy is *really* thinking, as abstractly as possible. Of course since Nietzsche, there are no systematic philosophers anymore. He destroyed that. Now I read Schopenhauer like I read Baudelaire, for the same reasons. There is philosophy in Baudelaire. I like it when thinking comes close to philosophizing. Theory is closer to classical philosophy: it really believes in the search for some truth, but I don't believe in truth anymore. But of course I believe that lies exist. People do lie! (*laughter*) Very often, truth is considered by philosophers to be old-fashioned. I don't know what we even mean by "old-fashioned," because we don't really know what people thought in the past. The most beautiful book I read in the last two years is Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson*. It's a model for approaching a poetry book.

LR That *is* a beautiful book.

EA Howe manages to show how you should read a writer. The writer is unique, but is also part of a context. You can only approximate what a writer *might* have said. Philosophy is freer now, and for that reason Heidegger could say that the great philosophers were the poets. That a real, trained philosopher like Heidegger would come to that is very important to poets. Poets were afraid to think and philosophers were afraid to let go, to let loose and speak of themselves as part of their thinking. This boundary has been broken down. I love contemporary poetry because it moves between what we call *poetry* and what we call *philosophy*. It joins these fields and makes writing more natural, as in how it is lived in the person. We don't separate thinking from feeling in real life, so why should we separate it in writing? The life of the mind is one and the boundaries and the categories are useful tools. We made them realities, but they are not realities—they are only tools, categories.

This existed before. In Hölderlin, for example, there is a lot of Romantic German thinking. I'd



say Ezra Pound is more of a philosopher than we realize. There is a great presence of thinking in his poetry. Of course there is thinking when you write, but I mean thinking as such—

LR Approaching a problem.

EA That's it! I find it in Pound. And there is political thinking in Charles Olson, whom I like very much. There is what they call proprioception, which comes very close to thinking—in Robert Creeley, for instance.

LR I am not familiar with your philosophical background. Were you reading phenomenology?

EA My first degree was in literature. I have a *licence ès lettres*, so I really studied literature and then I studied aesthetics in Paris. I was here for three years on a scholarship and studied with Gaston Bachelard and Étienne Souriau, the creator of aesthetics in France. He was famous just after World War II. He was trained as a philosopher, but other French philosophers did not take aesthetics seriously. Of course there is a branch of aesthetics in Hegel. Nevertheless, the philosophy of art was not taken as seriously as other fields of philosophy. I use the concept of philosophy in a broad sense. For example, Van Gogh's letters to his brother are pure philosophy to me. Van Gogh put a nontraditional art of thinking on the map in France. But as I said, in Europe we owe the loosening of boundaries mostly to Heidegger's chapters on Hölderlin, where he calls him a great philosopher. I had a French professor in Beirut who lectured on the thinking of Baudelaire and Balzac. They were great thinkers. Balzac was a Theosophist.

LR I had no idea!



Untitled (Paris), 1993, ink on paper, 8 x 121 inches.

EA Oh, yeah. He was a follower of Swedenborg. And Baudelaire was open to that, but he never said he was a Theosophist. There is both a pantheism and an openness in his writing; for example, when he says, "*Mon esprit, tu te meus avec agilité.*" "My spirit, you move with fluidity." It reminds you of God's creative spirit moving over the waters; it's a kind of revelatory sentence. There are a few key poems like "*Correspondances*" or "*Harmonie du soir*," where Baudelaire is a deep thinker.

And from the first Balzac to the last, there is a direct spiritual evolution. When you read *Vautrin* and then *Cousine Bette*, you marvel at the metaphysical range of Balzac's mind; it's the power of evil and the power of good that he shows in a masterly way. Balzac was a Theosophist. In *Séraphita* there is a human angel—it's as if we are going to mutate one day into pure angels. We see Balzac as a hardcore realist, which he was, but he was also a great visionary. He died very young and was busy all the time. I don't know how he had time to write so much. There is, though, the sense that he accomplished a complete and remarkable spiritual evolution through his work. We can also think of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as being a masterpiece of mysticism: it's philosophy, poetry, whatever you want.

LR You are also a reader of Sufi philosophy.

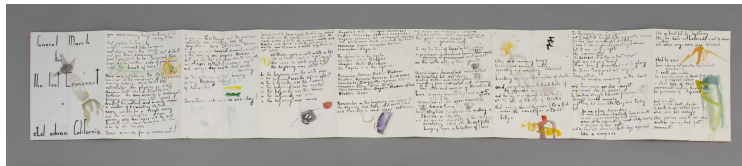
EA Yes, I particularly like Sufi philosophy.

LR Can you talk about that?

EA I don't know all the philosophers. They're famous; I'm far from having discovered them. Al-Niffari is very good. Also Al-Hallaj and Ibn Arabi—they are great thinkers. But Al Hallaj I like as a poet, if by poetry you mean something emotional, poignant. Why shouldn't thinking be poignant? Why shouldn't thinking be emotional? That is what poetry is! You can't separate even love from thinking. If by thinking you mean the activity of the Supreme, the activity of your mind, then when you love you think better in other fields also, because your mind is alert. Love is an energy that goes into many things. Love makes your perception clearer and you suddenly discover flowers. In school we're told that this is sentimental—that is nonsense! We should stand in the origin, which is mindful energy. Why should a computer be smarter than your mind? Our head is a little radar. It is a message receiver and a message sender.

LR It's sending and receiving, but isn't it also inventing or mixing?

EA Inventing *is* sending. If you are not inventive, you don't receive. These are not dead things. They are very complicated processes. We just have a glimpse of them.



*Funeral March for the First Cosmonaut, 1968, ink and watercolor on paper  
10 x 105 inches*

LR In *Of Women and Cities (Letters to Fawwaz)*, you talk about Ibn Arabi and love.

EA Ibn Arabi was a twelfth/thirteenth-century Sufi from Spain, although he died in Damascus. He went to Mecca and fell in love with a woman to whom he wrote love poems. The scholars of Islam who, like European theologians, were fanatical about their ideas, said to him, "How dare you write such things?" And he said, "Oh no, no, I didn't write them about a woman, I wrote them about God!" So he got out of trouble that way. He was very much open to love as a divine energy. God is love, is what they meant by divine energy, which affects your own energy if you are receptive to it. Then you are more capable of love.

LR In a sense, it's like the image.

EA Yes. You use the image almost like a pulsating, creative force. It's moving, unlike Plato's idea, which is fixed. It's an energized idea that can be both an inner and outer thing. Sufis use love that way; love for flowers or for the world is part of love in general. When I wrote my little book for Documenta two years ago, they had asked me to write on my latest interest. I told them it was love. After a long life, I realized it's what matters most. When we are young, we take things for granted, which is good—we keep going in a blind way in life. We don't realize that our first real loves were the most important things we had. Maybe we were too young to manage them. This happened to me. The first person I loved madly, I couldn't even look at! I was blinded; I couldn't manage the situation. When I couldn't manage, I would stand up and leave, and the others thought I didn't love them, you see? I messed up because of shyness, but it was really mismanagement. Things have to be managed, even emotions, which are the least manageable. *Manageable* means to deal with things, and I couldn't and I regretted it all my life. I miss that person even this hour. You don't overcome that. You love others, you get



busy, you love. It's not only love of people—I love the world, I really do. In a way, it took the place of other loves.

LR The love of the world?

EA Yes. I don't call it "nature"; I call it "the world."

LR Well, what is the difference between them?

EA It's historical. By nature we always mean landscapes. Language! The world is really the word; it's the fact that it *is*.

LR Its isness.

EA It *is* and I love that. It distracted me from other forms of love. At the end of my life, I realize that the love of a person is a key to the world. Nothing matters more. To love a person in particular is the most difficult form of love, because it involves somebody else's freedom. That is where misunderstandings come in; two people don't have necessarily the same timing. You may love books and you may love paintings. They have their own technical difficulties, you fight with them, but you are the master of that fight.

LR Are you talking about time and timing? I mean, if you love a book or a painting, it's more or less stable.

EA At least you are on top; it depends more on you. But a person has priorities, his or her problems, his or her character—you can't control that and you don't want to anyway. I mean, your freedom runs into somebody else's, or a person may suddenly not love you anymore. You can do nothing about that. With a painting, it's a different form of love. You do what you like, what you can, but it doesn't shoot back at you. Of course if it doesn't work you can throw your canvas away and start another one.

In the last eight or ten years I have sensed that the love of another person is the most important experience in life. You can relativize other things more. I sometimes get upset that people speak so much of sex and not of love. They can go together or they may not go together, but when you separate sexuality too much from love, love gets very damaged. That's the point I reached. Voilà! I love thinking, poetry, politics, and the state of the world. I didn't give up all that, but I still feel that the most revelatory experience in life is love. Friendship is close; it's a form of love, another facet of it.



**LR** Do you see a difference between friendship and love?

**EA** I see a difference in expectations. From love, you expect some physical response. You can't say that aspect is not important. Friendship can be deep love, real love and, in a way, you can manage it more. Sexuality somehow creates trouble. It's too emotional. Sometimes it overwhelms people and they say, "No, no that's enough." It's funny, people want love, but when they have it, sometimes they run away—they have other priorities and they think love is an obstacle, or they get scared.

**LR** Do you have advice for lovers?

**EA** Try to keep going as long as you can! And with time you will get wise, so don't lose the forest for the trees, the essential for lesser things. It's important in love to keep tension without being a victim of that tension, and also keep some humor, some distance. To de-dramatize situations in any aspect of life is a good thing. You need experience to do that. Yet I don't believe that getting older makes you better automatically, no. Voilà! I think we've covered many things.

**LR** Yeah.

**EA** We did it!