



Hans Ulrich Obrist

Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal talk poetry, pottery, and philosophy from their Breton retreat

Ahead of their presentations at Art Basel, Hans Ulrich Obrist interviews the artists and long-time partners

Etel Adnan (b. 1925, Beirut) and **Simone Fattal** (b. 1942, Damascus) are known for unique and wide-ranging artistic practices forged separately and over decades of creative life together. At different times they both studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, with Adnan going on to become a celebrated painter and author, recognized as much for her poetic writing as for her abstract paintings and folded paper works, or leporellos, that have featured in numerous important solo exhibitions. First a painter, Fattal founded the experimental Post-Apollo Press in 1982 in Sausalito, California, where she and Adnan lived in exile from Lebanon's civil war, later developing her ceramic sculpture practice. In this interview, conducted over the summer from their home in Erquy, France, with friend and collaborator Hans Ulrich Obrist, Artistic Director of the Serpentine Galleries, they discuss their many projects and the work each will be showing at the Art Basel show in Basel in September.

Hans Ulrich Obrist: I'm so happy to see you both. Tell me, how is Erquy?

Etel Adnan: It's a straight line, on the sea. There's no width, it's narrow and long, and it's very clean. There's not a cigarette butt in the street.

Simone Fattal: Listen, Etel is so impregnated by this straight line that she makes a leporello per day. In any case, she works every day. She looks out of the window – there are rocks, trees, surfers, people walking on the beach.

HUO: So, Etel works on the leporellos every day and you, Simone, what are you working on?

SF: At the moment, I have to write three texts, so I'm really busy. One is about the exhibition I have at the moment at the Klosterruine in Berlin. As you know, I have an exhibition in Milan at the ICA at the beginning of September, and for that I also wrote a text.

HUO: And what is the text about?

SF: About the exhibition, [which I have called] 'A breeze over the Mediterranean'. It's about a visit to Italy, to Pompeii, to all this Mediterranean history – Egypt, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, and about mythology.

HUO: And the third text?

SF: Well, the third text is about my exhibition at the Whitechapel [in London] in September.



Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, photographed at their home in the Bretagne, July 2021. Photo by Louis Canadas for Art Basel.

HUO: What will be shown there?

SF: It's a big secret! It's called 'Finding the Way'. I think the pandemic has inspired a lot, stressed the fact that we have to find a way to live, a way to breathe, to move forward. That's it!

HUO: How was the confinement for you? For more than a year you were both in Paris without traveling.

SF: The first lockdown was great. We had our time, there were no airplanes, no

appointments, no deadlines. We spent the day quite freely, working, and in the evenings, we had the *cinematheque* – every evening at 6pm. We watched all the Antonionis, the Viscontis, all the great films. That phase lasted about a month. We worked a lot, I did a lot of collage. Etel, what did you do during the first lockdown?

EA: I did what I always do, which is to say I worked well, drawing on canvas, with ink, and I did a lot of drawing on canvas without color.

HUO: Yes, when we came to the studio in Paris in June this year, I saw this new extraordinary series of ink drawings without color. Can you tell us about it. It's really what's on your table – the fruits, the flowers. It's like a still life of what's on the table.



SF: In Paris you drew the inkwell, the flower.

EA: They are close to me, and I see them with precision, I have found. And I found it interesting – this little worktable had a world. There were hundreds of drawings that came out of this worktable.

HUO: Now there are other themes, it's not the table anymore. There are boats, the horizon.

EA: Erquy is no longer the table, it's a straight line, which is blue with triangles – the sails of the boats, the rocks.

HUO: Yes, and in fact you're both going to exhibit in Basel in September. Etel will show a painting called *Horizon* from 2020, and it's interesting because it's a painting in color that was done in Paris and already there is the horizon that now appears in the drawings of Erquy. Could you tell us about this painting, because it's a whole series of horizons.

EA: Yes, color paintings called 'Horizon'. I am amazed by the fascination the horizon creates with its simplicity. It's really a perfect line, it's a perfect

geometric world.

HUO: Beautiful.



Etel Adnan, *Horizon 1*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris and New York City.

EA: I understand that the Greeks loved geometry because, in the idyll, we see a perfect geometry.

HUO: The other work that will be shown by Etel [at Art Basel Unlimited] is going to be *Le Soleil Toujours* [*The Sun Always*], a mural. Obviously the sun plays a big role in relation to [Etel's 1980 book] *The Arab Apocalypse*. Etel, could you talk a little bit about that – *The Sun Always* and the importance of the sun in relation to *The Arab Apocalypse*?

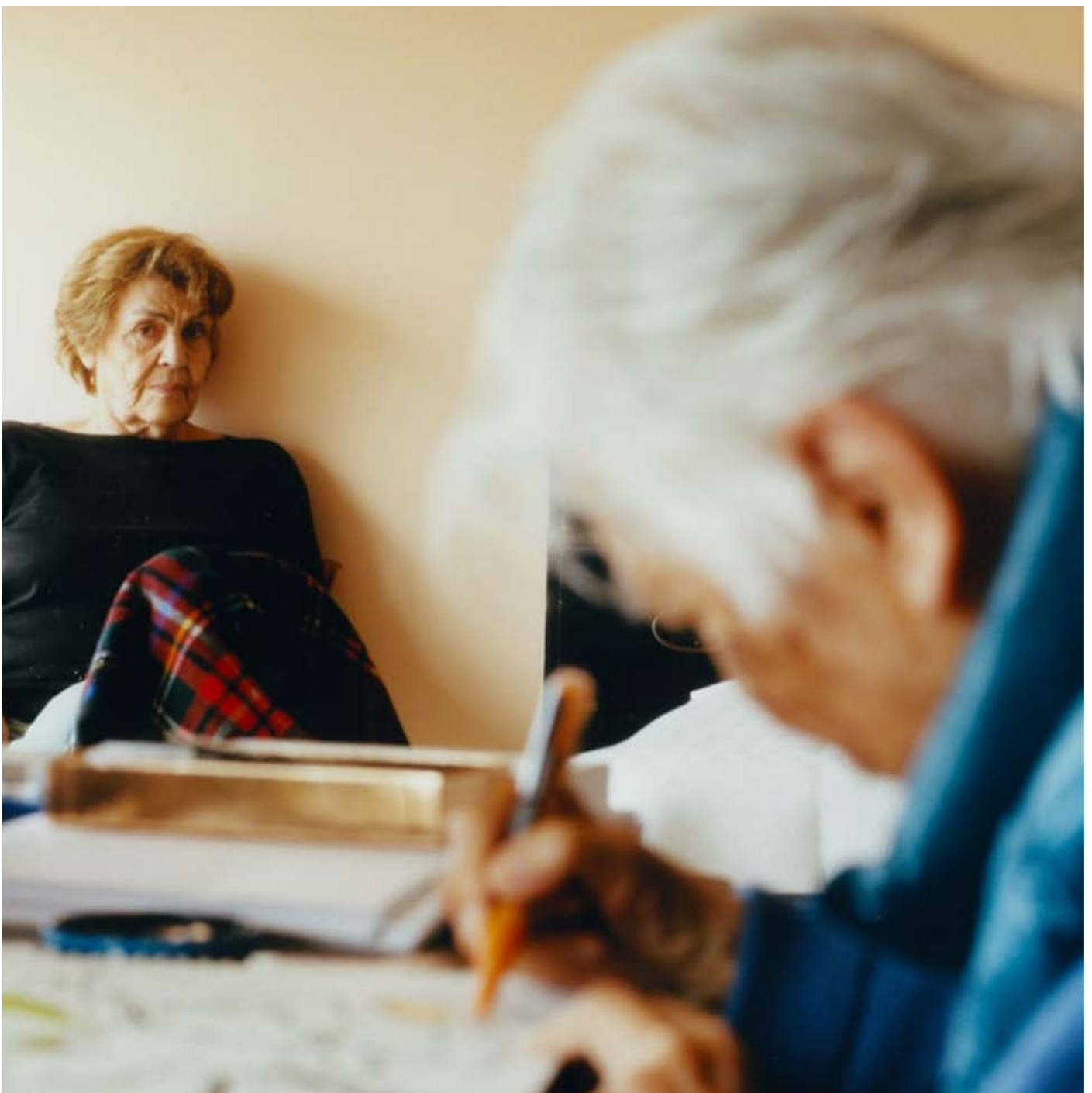
EA: The sun is a perfect form of the round, because we see the sun in reflections. In Lebanon, after the rain there is the sun, and when you look while walking, there are puddles and, in the water, you see the image of the sun. It is very interesting for a child to see the sun when he walks in the water.

HUO: You also said that *The Arab Apocalypse* began as an abstract poem about the sun.

EA: I wanted to say 'a sun, a sun, a sun' through a little book, and the war came and took the poem.

HUO: Simone, what you are going to show at Basel?

SF: It's a sculpture that I made at the Artigas Foundation in Barcelona. I had the chance to work with a wonderful collaborator, Joanes [Joan Gardy Artigas], and his son Isao, in a magnificent place of crazy beauty. So this piece I made three years ago, for me it really represents the man of today. It's not an archetype, it's someone who is lost in today's world. I had the idea to do things with Belos as a theme, so really the theme of loss, of finitude. I did a lot of things on Greece, including Selene giving birth to little Jonisos, Demeter, and her daughter. I worked a lot at that time on separation, also on love. I had seen a documentary on [Rudolf] Nureyev, and I refocused him with his friend [Erik Bruhn], two dancers [facing] each other. This piece comes from that same moment.



HUO: You both connect visual art and poetry in your work. Can you talk about that a little bit?

SF: Poetry has always been very present in my work. I can say that the themes I find in poetry are very often found in my work, because how do you talk about other things without talking about important things? Etel, do you think a lot about poetry when you work on your canvases and leporellos?

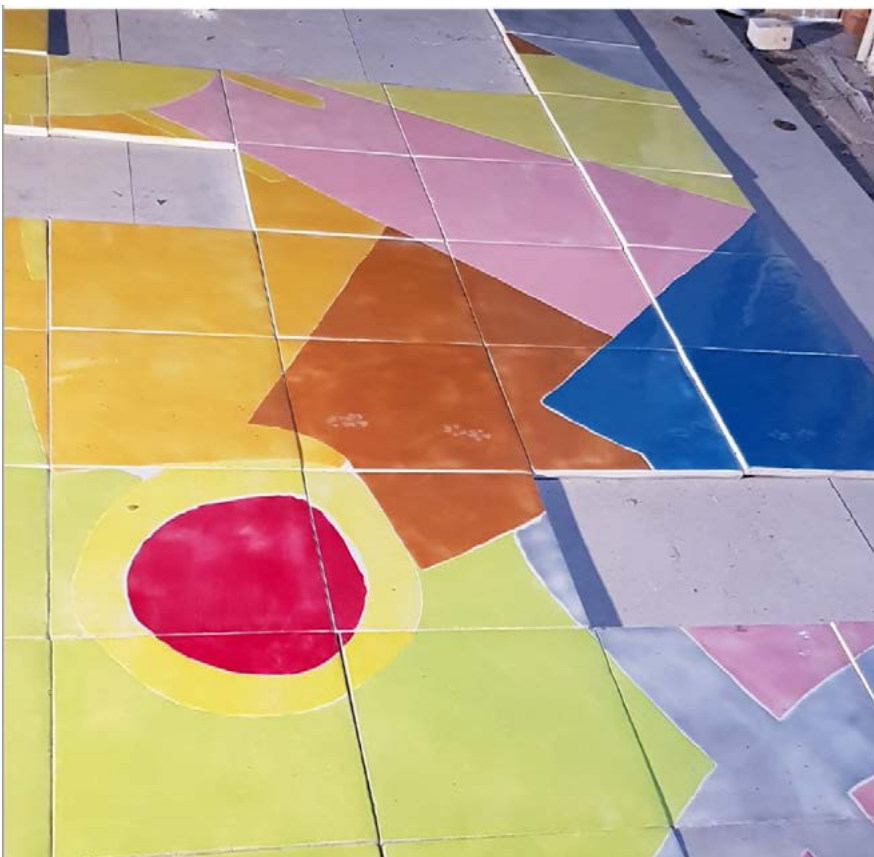
EA: I think about poetry but not during the drawings, no. But I think about poetry in an uninterrupted way, I always have it somewhere.

SF: I think of certain poems, certain sentences, that come back to me during the work, but it's obviously very different from painting.

HUO: In Etel's leporellos, poetry and drawing often meet.

SF: The leporello is more direct.

EA: The leporello is a journey. When you start a leporello, it's like getting on a boat – you have a journey in front of you and that's what's beautiful. In the middle of a leporello you are afraid of making a mistake because you would have to throw everything away. You have to invest in the work and you have to keep a tension. It's like composing music, [maintaining] a rhythm – that's the work of the leporello, not to fall into a hole, to continue like when you are surfing, to hold the wave.



HUO: And the last time we met in Paris, Etel, you told me that we must reconnect what words have separated.

EA: Yes, we have to reconnect what words have separated. Words are separate units and they have to connect, they have to harmonize with each other. We have to help words to reconnect, like people.

SF: To become sentences again.

EA: It's true between human beings. When you meet a friend, you have to recreate this 'togetherness,' this whole. It's the same phenomenon – you do it spontaneously, unconsciously.

HUO: And this also brings us back to you two. I wanted to know about your 'togetherness,' about your collaborations together.

SF: That is to say, as soon as we got to know each other, a few months later, we made a book together.

HUO: A lot of your collaboration and your life together was in exile in Sausalito, after the Lebanese Civil War, but also in Paris and now in Erquy. It is also the question of Lebanon and the return to Lebanon. There is a devastating crisis that shakes Lebanon, which is a different situation from the civil war that you lived through but very dramatic. How do you see the current situation, the tragedy in Lebanon?

SF: It's funny that you mention it. Just earlier, Etel told me that she would like to go to Lebanon but can't. There is no electricity, it's very hot in the city and there is no air conditioning. The house we have in the mountains is too high, she can't go up the mountain because it's too much for her health, because of the altitude. She often feels this impossibility to go there, and so it is an exile that is rechecked, if I may say so, every time I think about it. But Etel is constantly reading the Beirut newspapers, all day and all night, she reads them and comments on them. It's a big and constant sorrow.

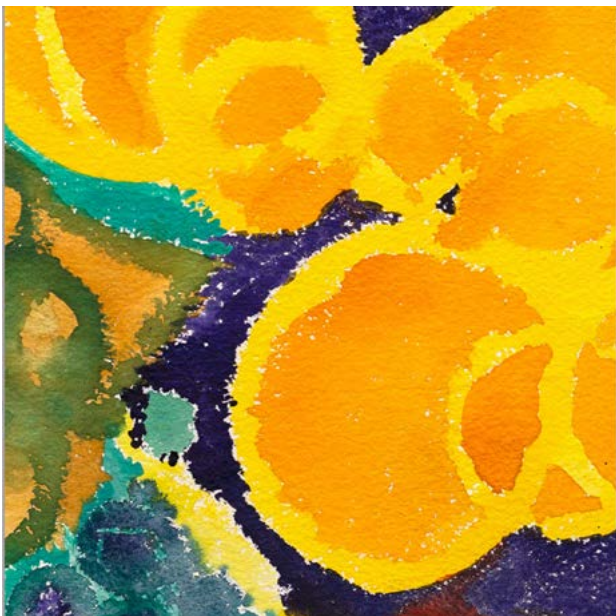


HUO: Etel, do you want to say anything about that?

EA: I think the solution will come from international meetings. The Lebanese, left with themselves, will be stubborn and do nothing. They have voluntarily put themselves out of the game of their own country – they have a false sense of power by saying no to everything. It gives them a sense of being important negatively, so the solution will come from international meetings.

HUO: This morning I read [Etel's 2020] text *Shifting the Silence*, and that also brings us back to philosophy. When I met the philosopher [Hans-Georg] Gadamer, he said to me that we can never transcribe the silence. One last question, about silence, to both of you – to Etel about this book but also to Simone, because in fact, you come from philosophy.

EA: My last book is about realizing that I am going to die. It's different to know and to feel it, and it's as if life happens in silence. There is behind the noise of daily life a silence that we hear, another noise, a shifting silence. This silence has changed the focus of consciousness. That's my last book.



HUO: A wonderful answer. It's very important to shift the silence, it brings us back to the idea of philosophy. I remember, Simone, in our very first interview that you talked to me about Plato, about questions of metaphysics and about Zarathustra. It's interesting to re-examine an anthology of art through the 21st century, where a lot of certainties have been shifted. It's the shifting of silence but also the shifting of certainties.

SF: Silence has been a very important thing in my personal life. When I was a child, I suddenly changed my voice. I had a voice that you listen to now, which is a normal voice for an adult. They wanted to heal me at that time – I was silenced for many months, I was not allowed to speak. I had a little notebook with a pencil, I had to write [everything] down. Very quickly I had this gap in relation to reality, in relation to other children, in relation to all that I could do – there was a distance. And philosophy teaches you to learn this distance, to understand it, since you want to know what things are, what they represent, and you see them through a distance. Today there is not much certainty without a world. What happened with the pandemic was unthinkable three days before, [but today is] something with which we live and that will remain. [It is the] eruption of all that is improbable, and to understand it, to be able to live it, it is necessary to think a lot, to continue all the time to examine ourselves and to examine the world that surrounds us.

HUO: There could not be a conclusion more magical. Thank you.



Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, photographed at their home in the Bretagne, July 2021. Photo by Louis Canadas for Art Basel.

Etel Adnan is represented by **Galleria Continua**, San Gimignano, Beijing, Boissy-le-Châtel, Havana, Paris, Rome, and São Paulo; **Galerie Lelong & Co.**, Paris and New York City; **Sfeir-Semler Gallery**, Beirut and Hamburg; and **White Cube**, London.

Simone Fattal is represented by **Balice Hertling**, Paris; **Karma International**, Zurich and Los Angeles; and **kaufmann repetto**, Milan and New York City.

Hans Ulrich Obrist is artistic director at the Serpentine Galleries, London.

Simone Fattal 'Finding A Way' will open at the Whitelchapel Gallery on September 21st.

Captions, from top to bottom: 1, 2, 5, 7, 9: Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal, photographed at their home in the Bretagne, July 2021. Photo by Louis Canadas for Art Basel. 3. Installation view of the exhibition 'Simone Fattal: Works and Days' at MoMA PS1, New York. March 31–September 2, 2019. Image courtesy of MoMA PS1. Photo by Matthew Septimus. 4. Etel Adnan, *Horizon 1*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong & Co., Paris and New York City. 6. A preview of the work Etel Adnan will be presenting at Art Basel in the Unlimited sector. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut and Hamburg. 8. Simone Fattal, *Quince and Apricots* (detail), 2014. Courtesy of the artist and Karma International, Zurich and Los Angeles. Photo © Flavio Karrer.