

ETEL ADNAN & SIMONE FATTAL with Sara Roffino & Anna Tome

Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal met in Beirut in the 1970s. They have since lived between Paris, Beirut, and northern California, working in different media—Adnan is a poet and painter while Fattal is a sculptor and the founder and publisher of the Post-Apollo Press—to explore and reconfigure notions of history, politics, freedom, and feminism. Adnan and Fattal are both included in *Here and Elsewhere*, an exhibition of contemporary art from the Arab world at the New Museum through September 28th. Adnan was also included in the most recent Whitney Biennial and an anthology of her writing, *To look at the sea is to become what one is: An Etel Adnan Reader* was published earlier this year by Nightboat Books.

Meanwhile, Fattal's sculpture is on view at "Gres et Porcelaines" at Galerie Tanit in Beirut. *Brooklyn Rail* managing editor Sara Roffino and Artseen writer Anna Tome sat down with the couple in their Paris apartment to discuss their work, the changing ideas of the feminine, and the role of morality in art.

Anna Tome: Let's start with Baudelaire. He was one of your first influences.

Etel Adnan: You want to start there. That's good. I was 20. Before that we didn't read French poetry at all or any other poetry, maybe very little in elementary school. So it was my first college year in Beirut, and it happened that the professor was a famous specialist in French poetry and he gave a special course on three poets: Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Gérard de Nerval. He really favored Baudelaire and on top of the course, he gave a series of public lectures on Baudelaire that year. So poetry and Baudelaire became one. The professor spoke a lot about the philosophy of

Baudelaire and so I associated poetry with meaning from the start—poetry is not just a formal exercise. It finds a way to say something, but the way is not the purpose, the way remains the way. If you read him in the original French there are not really sonnets, but verses, and there is something haunting in



Etel Adnan, "Untitled," circa 2000. Oil on canvas, 9 × 12". Courtesy the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, NY.

the sound. It's almost as if the sounds, separate from the words, convey the meaning. I compare it to Shakespeare's theater, which for me is really like an ocean of sound. Baudelaire is not the same type of oceanic sound, but it's almost like somebody opening up his heart just to you. It's confidential, not sentimental. I had the feeling I met him, he became so familiar. I would read him over and over. When I discovered poetry, I became an addict. I would sit in the streets, on the sidewalks, and read. That's when I got the idea that the purpose of life is to read poetry. I didn't see myself as a writer of poems immediately, but at last, somebody was talking to me differently. Parents, the parents we had—and I say “we” because it's pretty general—did not talk to their children like grown-ups. They never shared emotion and soul. They just spoke of everyday life. So here was a person talking to me differently.

Sara Roffino: Baudelaire believed that beauty requires both permanence and context—that it has to be relevant in the intimate as well as the universal.

Adnan: Yes, and Baudelaire has a sense of Beauty with a capital “B”—like a platonic idea, a concept of its own. But also it translates into a woman he loved particularly. He speaks of her as the embodiment of beauty. He's not the poet of details of everyday life, but everyday life is there—it's experienced. His poems are more about emotions than objects. Poetry for him is already philosophy.

Roffino: How do you think his version of Beauty with a capital “B” changes as the context around him changes?

Adnan: Beauty was that idea—it's an idea that one can incarnate, descend into the beauty of a moment or into a person or into a landscape. He was aware of his own beauty, of his way of dressing. He was an aesthete; he was sensitive to the surrounding beauty. They used to call them “dandy.” He loved that. He was a refined person—very aware of that.

Roffino: Has the negotiation of beauty, for both of you, changed throughout your lives? Has your idea of or your context for beauty shifted?

Simone Fattal: For me it has not shifted, but it has certainly shifted around me. Today, in art and even with movie stars, there is no longer an ideal of beauty. In the '30s you had Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, and Marlene Dietrich—this kind of beauty, which was an icon, doesn't exist. People don't even look for it. And in art you have tons of things that are very ugly and they are doing it on purpose. They look for something really *not* beautiful. So this has shifted tremendously—on all sides. Dresses, looks, and art. Even writing. You don't write in an idealistic way with a perfect sentence. You write the way you want. I'm not saying it's bad, I'm saying it has shifted, definitely.

Roffino: Is it still relevant?

Adnan: It depends. Some people would be embarrassed; they would say beauty is old-fashioned.

Tome: It's funny. When we asked about beauty, one of the first things that came up was the icon of the beautiful woman, which you said no longer exists. How is the definition of the feminine changing as the ideals of beauty are changing?

Roffino: And how do you define the feminine? What are the terms?

Adnan: Artaud—he said something right. He said the feminine and the masculine are concepts. They are not objects. Like in electricity, you have positive and negative, though I don't agree with the connotation of negative.

Fattal: Yin and yang.

Adnan: So there is a principle we call masculine and a principle we call feminine. And there are expectations for men and expectations for women—but it depends on the generation. In my mother's generation to be feminine meant to wear make-up, to be cute, to be attractive. And women were expected to wait, not to be aggressive, and so on. A lot has changed. The concept has softened up. We are going toward unisex. Biologically, we still know what we mean, but beyond that it's free form—it's an open field.

Tome: Are we losing something in the shift—the softening of these ideas of masculine and feminine?

Adnan: It depends. Before, women were dependent, but they had some security. But there was a price—they had to obey. Now it's okay when it works out, but suddenly you can be all alone and abandoned and without a penny. For example, in the Islamic world, by religious law, man had to take care of woman. But the woman had to obey. An unmarried woman was always to have a brother or a cousin or an uncle with her. There were no prostitutes or women in the streets. Today, women can successfully earn a living, so most men don't follow that law anymore. But what if it doesn't work out and the woman can't work? If you are incapable of paying for that independence, the anxiety is unbearable. Every system has a price. Its victims and its victors.

Roffino: In one of the *Letters to Fawwaz* from 1993, you asked, “Rhetorically, is there still a possibility for a feminist recourse?” Is it possible now?

Adnan: In the old days, when women didn't want to get married they chose to go into a convent. In the Islamic world, they have no convents so if they were in the street, or penniless, there was no recourse. We forget the bread and butter. We get theoretical. My mother used to say, in her generation there were two jobs for women: picking grapes in the villages or being a prostitute. So the economics, the bread and butter aspect of life, plays a very big role in people's lives, not only men's lives.

Roffino: When you were a child, you wanted to be an architect and your mother said, “Women can't be architects.”

Adnan: My mother said, “Shame on you. This is a man's job.”

Roffino: It made me think about the parallels between architecture and writing. And it makes sense that you became a writer. Architecture wasn't an option for you, but you found a similar way to participate in the building of culture—



Installation of Simone Fattal in *Here and Elsewhere* at the New Museum. Image courtesy the New Museum. Photo: Benoit Pailley.

Adnan: It's funny. In the Islamic world and in the old French world, it was somehow accepted that women could write. But they didn't accept that women could give a concert. They could only play the piano at home.

Fattal: Because it's something you do at home, hidden in your bedroom. Nobody sees you. That's why.

Roffino: Simone, did you know you wanted to be an artist when you were young?

Fattal: I wanted to be a writer. And then I did become a writer. No, I didn't know I wanted to become an artist—it came later.

Roffino: Did you feel like it wasn't an option to be an artist?

Fattal: Then, yeah. I didn't think being an artist was an option for me. I had no model of another woman being an artist. You go to school, and there is no art department at all. But of course the model of writing is everywhere. I think, also, I had, a real love for it.

Tome: One thing that comes up again and again in your work is the concept of time and the means of marking it. Your sculptures imply a continuum of time because the forms reference the ancient, yet the work is so modern. And with the Post-Apollo press, which you started 32 years ago, it seems very much like a record of the present. Even the name of the press, Post-Apollo, is a demarcation of a moment in time—the moment after humans walked on the moon.

Fattal: For me, this history is a continuum. The archeology of 3,000 B.C. is very present in my mind, in my psyche. It's my history. But I didn't know it before I started my sculpture—it just sprang up. Before I started sculpting my taste was totally for avant-garde and experimental poetry, but now I don't see any difference between the two. The same thing happens in music. For instance, Maurizio Pollini, the pianist, did a series of *progetto* in which he programmed concerts where he would start with music of the 12th century then going on to the 18th century—Mozart, Stockhausen—through to the music of today. He wanted to prove that it's the same music. And I don't want to prove anything, but I do feel that very much.

Roffino: Do you feel that publishing is a responsibility?

Fattal: Yes, for sure. When I started, I wanted to publish just one chapbook, *From A to Z*. Then a friend of ours wanted to translate *Sitt Marie Rose* into English and I said, "When you do, I will publish it." I had two books, therefore I had to give them life. And you cannot give them life if you do not continue to publish. It's a responsibility. If I stop, these books will not have a life.

Adnan: But do they sell?

Fattal: We do sell the original individual books because people prefer to have one little book—especially the smaller books—rather than buy an anthology. But at least I know these books exist. My responsibility is less now because with time, the books have found good places to go. If I find someone to take on the press, I would love that. It has a life of its own, a character of its own.

Adnan: Each book has a history, has a world of its own. And presses make literature possible.

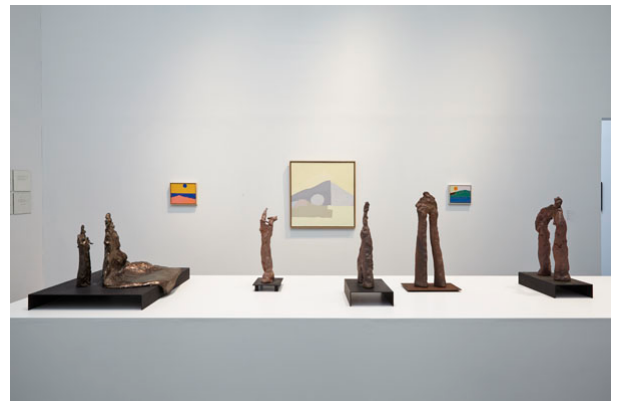
Roffino: You made a decision to commit to literature and not to an ideology.

Fattal: I made that commitment at a moment which was very difficult because when I started in '82, the feminist movement was very strong. There were many feminist presses, many feminist bookstores and publications, but I didn't want to have this label. When I published *Sitt Marie Rose*, Etel was sick and there was the war in Lebanon. We left California and a friend of mine distributed the book, but she was a staunch feminist—she only distributed in the feminist bookstores. And when I came back, it had been co-opted. I didn't know that the feminists would be completely taken by this book, but they completely identified their problems with the problems of Marie Rose. For me it was a political problem, but for them it was a clear feminist problem. I was alone in my niche, but I kept doing it and it evolved.

Adnan: *Sitt Marie Rose* created solidarity between women. It created a community.

Tome: An international community.

Fattal: Some of the other publishers were really not simpatico. At one of the book fairs, I went to another female publisher because I didn't have racks to put my books on, and she said, "You can go over there and buy some." Then I went to a man and he gave me some of his own. [*Laughter.*] He was more relaxed, and more happy to help.



Installation of Simone Fattal in *Here and Elsewhere* at the New Museum. Image courtesy the New Museum. Photo: Benoit Pailley.

Adnan: I feel sorry that the feminist movement stopped, in a way. It missed, I think, the next step. You see woman is related to man, and man to woman. These concepts don't exist alone. It's a relativism. As a movement they did not open a dialogue with men and that's a big failure. They were either anti-men or they forgot about them.

Fattal: The men also reacted badly. They said, "We have to have our own movement, we have to empower ourselves."

Roffino: What are some of the differences between the feminist movements you've been involved with in Beirut, California, and Paris? Have they been similar despite the cultural differences?

Fattal: In Beirut, it was very different. There were none of the big demonstrations you had in France. For a while, it was wild—here you had so many radical groups. There was a group called Le Gouine Rouge, "The Red Lesbians."

Adnan: Where?

Fattal: In France. *Une gouine* is a slang word. It's not "lesbian." They were radical; they took off their bras. In London they would go after the men and put their hands where you think. [*Raucous laughter.*] And the men were like, "Agh! Don't touch me!" That did not happen in Beirut, I can tell you that. Nor in America, actually. In America they were very serious, organizing bookstores and magazines and presses and a lot of fantastic publications. And they were helped by big names who were teaching women's

studies, which still exists.

Adnan: In America, the feminist movement had a bigger impact. In France, there were these events, but they didn't stand up. What made feminism possible were the universities and the jobs.

Fattal: And that happened in America.

Adnan: It's through the university and the job market that women acquired agency, which couldn't happen in the Arab world. In most countries, in Morocco for instance, women are fighting on an individual basis.

Roffino: We've also been talking about morality and one thing that you've written, Etel, is that you learned through Sartre that morality is separate from religion. I'm curious about the role of morality in your work, because I think that it's there for both of you in different ways and in similar ways.

Fattal: Well, for instance, if you read Etel's book *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, there's a very good sense of morality. In a word, she says, "You can't do a good piece of art if you are not moral." It's a spiritual book. It's a book that is very important for any person, not only artists, but of course for artists because it's a meditation on art and its relationship with nature. What you receive from it is this very strong sense of morality and the strength with which you conduct your life.

Roffino: Do you see a relationship between morality and spirituality?

Fattal: Of course. Sartre wanted to write a book about morality but could never do it because it's a very tricky business.

Adnan: But he considered humanism moral.

Fattal: Yes, humanism should be considered moral—it is moral. But people who practice extreme spirituality, like the men or women who decide to live alone—their responsibility to society is not their main interest. Prayer, I think, can help society, even if you do it alone in your room, but they don't do it for that. They do it because they want a special relationship of their own and they don't want to be in society.

Adnan: But humanism is taught as a movement. You're taught that you can be moral outside religion, but historically morality comes through religion. In the civilizations based on Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, morality came through religious laws. And the European humanistic movement was not anti-moral. It tried to find out how one can be moral outside religion. Sartre was important because after World War II, he said you have to be moral, regardless of religious beliefs—outside religion. By being alive and being in society, whatever you do influences others, like it or not, therefore your responsibility creates duty. People were asking why they should be moral if they didn't believe in god. And Sartre said you need to be moral because you affect the others and they affect you. So we need some discipline, some morality, some self-given, positive laws of behavior which protect the other. It's an open question, but it's an interesting question. Morality does exist outside—that's what we call modern constitution. Constitutions are really moral laws.

Roffino: But what about spirituality, not religion?

Adnan: Spirituality goes beyond morality. It's very personal. It's a sensitivity to everything that could create a moral problem. Spirituality is your capacity to feel a beyondness. It's to go beyond what's obvious, to respond, to resonate. And of course art is 100 percent spiritual.

Roffino: For both of you, your publishing work is very morally driven, politically driven, but your other work isn't necessarily. Your painting, Etel, is so joyful and so light, and, Simone, your sculpture seems not directly political. For some people the act of making something beautiful is political—it is a radical, political thing to do. Do you address the political within your work that isn't directly political?

Fattal: I think a lot about the political situation that we are in. In that sense it is related. Etel's painting is completely outside this relationship because she writes so much about the political situation she does not have to translate it into another medium. She has this capacity for looking at the world, its beauty.



Etel Adnan, "Untitled," 2012. Oil on canvas, 8 × 10".
Courtesy the artist and Callicoon Fine Arts, NY.

Adnan: I think Simone's work is political. Not direct politics necessarily, although she did pieces on Iraq, but it's political in a deeper way. She's very aware of historical archetypes. And we are in a period, in our world, where even our history is denied. I am aware, and Simone is certainly aware, that our own people are historically ignorant because colonial power divided our countries by telling lies. They told some Lebanese, "You are not Arab." And they told Moroccans, "You're not Arab, you're a Berber." So what? They are Moroccan. Even our history has been manipulated by European countries to break us down. Therefore, to reconstruct your history in the artistic world is of major political importance. In that way Simone's work is deeply political—

Fattal: I'm not trying to prove something.

Adnan: No, it's political in its deep meaning. It's not a political weapon, it's not journalistic, but it is political. And my paintings are not. And I'm aware of that. I express myself politically in writing, so I don't feel that urgency—it doesn't occur to me in painting. I paint, almost, to rebalance myself. I am both a joyful and distressed person, and I'm an American. Not political in one way, but in a way that is part of something bigger. I'm many things together, in one thing. And it's my joy, I love the world.

Tome: Simone, we saw you in New York when you first saw the installation of your sculptures alongside Etel's writing and painting in the New Museum. You seemed happily surprised to see the works installed together. Does having them all in the same room emphasize the political or the visual elements of the works?

Fattal: It was a great joy to have them together, and I think there is, of course, a very big link between Etel's poetry and my sculpture. That was something the curators must have recognized. Otherwise they would not have put them together. Someone said there was a big silence in the room—a silence between our works. Whereas in the rest of the museum, you had many videos and sounds. So the silence was a counterpoint to the rest of the show.

Tome: Can you tell us a little more about the way you collaborate? We know that the covers of the Post-Apollo books are designed collaboratively, but do you collaborate in a bigger sense?

Fattal: Really, there is no official collaboration because everything we do is so different. But in some of my work—my sculpture—a lot of her poetry comes to mind. That’s for sure. She has a poem, “Beirut-Hell Express,” where she says, “People have come back.”

Adnan: It’s a historical poem.

Fattal: “They should come back to fight today.”

Adnan: “The dead are rising.”

Fattal: “The dead are coming back in order to fight again.” This sentence certainly influenced my work.

Adnan: You know, you can’t really know your influences, but you cannot live with a person 40 years and have no give and take.

CONTRIBUTORS

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