

MORE THAN A SOFT TOUCH

BY NASRIN HIMADA

YYZ

“Poetry is spirit and it can come into anything you do.” -Etel Adnan

If I begin by conjuring the spirit of Etel Adnan to be in dialogue here with the works of Sarah Pupo, then it would seem like it is for the purpose of comparison. But it is not. I just can't stop thinking about Etel Adnan. I can't stop thinking of her poems, her paintings, the images she gives to process, and the way the abstract functions as form. I can't stop thinking about her, not since her passing last year. So in some way I feel like this invitation to write about Pupo's work is also a way to pay homage to Adnan, who has paved the way for poetry, philosophy, architecture, textile, and painting to be in the orbit of what echoes as the expression of experience. For both artists, the compulsion toward making comes into articulation and manifests in the form most suited for its purpose. In reading Adnan, in looking at her paintings, or tapestries, or Leporellos, one can't help but feel the excitement of curiosity at play, of just being in the presence of what is lived and what is living. Curiosity for thought, for colour, for landscape, for shapes, for what surrounds us, what comes to hold our attention, is given power to appear in the ways they are imagined. Adnan taught me this. And continues to teach me that the way we might look at a landscape (like how she looked at Mount Tamalpais), or the way we are captured by a thought can be extraordinarily physical and spiritual.

Adnan has said that art has the power to create “sudden ecstasy and we don't know why.” I can't think of a better line that resonates so deeply with Pupo's practice. As a close friend, I have, in more than a decade, been witness to Pupo's trajectory as a multidisciplinary artist: as a painter, animator, and installation artist. Her love for colour in expansive space has conditioned poetry's effect in multiple forms: on canvas, in stop animation, through textile. I can't help but use the word poetry in what I see take place in this exhibition, and in the way these works function together. With braver, much punchier colour, and with fuller

shapes that repeat throughout the show, there is something at play here that activates the power of the fragment, the liminal, and the trace. And in the most fulfilling turn, as Pupo's practice has always considered the textural and rhythmic elements of spatial experience, this time, she physically takes us outside of the canvas, off the screen, onto the floor, up toward the ceiling and toward overlooked crevices and corners. She considers the materiality of shapes in sculpture, through velvet, and in the magic of “trash pile objects,” as she puts it. These pieces, as they sit alongside each other, are in-formation, and the physicality of their spirit is enhanced through their proximity to one another and in how they are spaced. They are in conversation, and we are pulled into the loop of what resounds.

I can't help but think of Adnan's consideration of painting as poetry, poetry as spirit, and spirit as the manifestation of ecstasy. We don't know why, but we know its presence is what makes it all work. There is a discipline and a refinement showcased in this exhibition that gives power to associative play. This is something that Adnan also facilitates: an exploration of material and media to get at the heart of what's possible when intuition and curiosity are exercised. This isn't new to Pupo, but this time the attention given outside the frame and in the direction of the floor matters. A new surface is enlivened and considered, and this changes everything because it changes orientation and perception, especially as movement is often controlled in a gallery space.

In order to capture the intensities that manifest in the barely visible, almost undetectable formations of movement, what is realised in the space is through the power felt in the relation between echo and reflection. We are drawn into the connection between what is around us, below us and between us. From wall to floor, to corner, to ceiling, an interplay between these elements of the spatial structure offers up a world felt in its layering of form.

For Pupo, the spatial parameters of the gallery space as a workable surface, offer information and hold attention. Captured by the room's

impression, she utilises it here as a way to convey another pathway to perception. To go there, to have the instinct to engage the space as surface, decentres the familiar ways in which we are oriented. Pupo's installation lets us wonder, and conditions an experience of curiosity through the manipulation of an unresolved architecture that lets us in on a secret. What that is, is for you to seek out.

NASRIN HIMADA is a Palestinian writer and curator currently based in Kingston on Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee Territory. Their writing on contemporary art has appeared in many national contemporary art publications, including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, *MICE*, and *Fuse*. They have collaborated with film festivals and art institutions in Canada and the US, among them the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco; Trinity Square Video, Toronto; Fondation PHI pour l'art contemporain, Montreal; Mercer Union, Toronto, SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montreal; and the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montreal. Nasrin's recent project *For Many Returns* typifies their current curatorial interests. The series is designed to explore the possibilities of art writing as a relational act. Since its debut at Dazibao in Montréal, it has toured across Canada, the US and Europe. Currently, they hold the position of Associate Curator at Agnes Etherington Art Centre.

SARAH PUPO lives and works in Tiotia:ke/ Montreal. Her practice bridges watercolour painting, drawing, provisional installation, and lo-fi animation. Pupo's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally, most recently at the Accademia di Romania (Rome, Italy) and Trinity Square Video (Toronto / Toronto, CA). In 2020 she was a resident artist at the British School in Rome. Other recent residencies include Atelier Circulaire (Tiotia:ke/Montreal, CA) and the CALQ Québec Studio in Mumbai, India. Her work has been supported through grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec.