

Press Release

Simone Fattal – *Works on Paper* 06 February – 13 March 2021

Simone Fattal
in conversation with
Hans Ulrich Obrist

Hans Ulrich Obrist (HUO): So Simone, to start at the beginning, I wanted to ask you how it all started? How did you come to art? How did art come to you? Was it a sudden epiphany or was it a more gradual awakening?

Simone Fattal (SF): I remember very well, it was a kind of epiphany. I had two painter friends in Lebanon that I used to visit a lot in the afternoon for tea, and one day I took a paint box lying around and a brush and I made four watercolours. Before that, one or two years prior to that day, I had made a series of paintings and drawings but I had not taken them seriously. That day I recognised them as a work of art. I remember one was a rendering of Chéri. I was reading *Chéri*, by Colette, this lovely novella in which the young man wears a string of pearls that belonged to his mistress, so I did this portrait of a young man with a string of pearls. The pearls were pale blue. I can't remember the subject of the other three watercolours but I remember having considered them as important, as constituting a beginning. Later one of these two painter friends made me a watercolour box. The box was made from light coloured wood. He put each colour in a round porcelain container and across it wrote the name in his beautiful handwriting. He gave it to me as a gift, for my birthday, and so I started with watercolour

HUO: Can we talk a little bit more about these first four watercolours? There was a portrait of this young man?

SF: Portrait of Chéri... maybe also a portrait of one of the friends sitting with us and the two others were of trees.

HUO: How old were you then?

SF: I was already 25/26. It was after I'd graduated from studying philosophy. So it was not about starting as a young girl.

HUO: Graduating in philosophy – what did you specialize in? Who were the philosophers, for instance Kant and Wittgenstein? Etel said Nietzsche and Schopenhauer were more important for her but what about you? That is interesting, that it is the backdrop for these watercolour activities, this philosophy study.

SF: That is true, I'd chosen to study Logic so there was already Wittgenstein. Before I had gone to Paris to study philosophy, I had spent a year in London. My parents wanted me to study English – I was very young – and Wittgenstein was very big in London at the time – I would hear his name constantly! I also studied aesthetics with Revault d'Allonnes. Etel had read aesthetics with his predecessor; Etienne Souriau. Souriau had started the aesthetics studies in France and I studied with his pupils. I was very much interested in reading Descartes and Kant. We also read a lot of Jean Paul Sartre. Bachelard was one of the main thinkers I was reading; he was the guy who studied the phenomenology of texts, and yes, Merleau-Ponty was also very important in those years. But I must say for me the most important reading, then and until today, remains Plato. I had a version of *Zarathustra* that I still have in my library and it was so hard to read, for I think it is the worst translation ever.

HUO: Then you made these first watercolours and in them are the trees. Can you talk a little bit about the role of trees in the work?

SF: As soon as I started painting, I rented an apartment in Beirut, with the intention of making it my studio, and I lived in it. I had great difficulty designing it as a studio. People were not used to anyone living alone. I

was one of the first people living alone in Beirut – even men didn't live alone! When I saw his little roof as they called them, a two-room apartment on the last floor of a building, I took one look, and knew I could work there. It was hard to make my decorator friend understand what I wanted, i.e. a studio to work in and not an apartment to live in gracefully. In any case, I finally got what I wanted, a great place to work in. He built me a long running wooden shelf with a drawer, running the whole length of the walls. And so I started. Before oils I did a lot of pastels, and those soft pastels were all of trees, it was the only recurring theme. I did a huge number of trees on paper that were big, 180 x 110 cm. All of these pastels were really great, however are lost, they disappeared during the war. It's one of my very big sorrows. I have a few of them smaller, half the size, but the big ones are gone.

HUO: Who would be the heroes or heroines at that time for you? We spoke in the past about Paul Klee, in terms of watercolours, but who were the artists who inspired you?

SF: In relation to my work, in the trees and the pastels of that time, I didn't have any one person in mind. I can tell you when I started painting, I started my series of paintings as you know them – white and pink – in 1973 through to 1980; seven years I was working in those whites and pinks! I went to New York once and saw a small show of Agnes Martin's. I know my work has nothing to do with hers but when I saw it, I knew I was on the right track. In Lebanon we didn't have any examples of contemporary art, there were no museums, hardly any galleries. There was only Gallery One, where Etel and I made our first show, first book in 1973, so there were very little references one could relate to. When I first left school, I spent one year in London and that's where I discovered painting.

HUO: Looking at the watercolours in your studio, there are some that are more abstract, that have the forms of crystals.

SF: Before we go to the abstract, the watercolours that you have seen in the studio are all about fruit and flowers. It's a whole series of gardens.

HUO: When did the fruit and gardens start? You often draw gardens and houses and in watercolour render them. Then there is a more microscopic view, you go into the fruit, you go into the garden, as if zooming in.

SF: Zoom in, yes, sometimes on the trunk of the tree, sometimes on the fruit itself, you're absolutely right.

HUO: How did that happen? How did the zoom moment occur?

SF: Well, I think it came with the desire to go deeper into one's subject. It is a natural movement. I wanted to know how an orange was made. I didn't want to make an orange but I wanted to make how the orange appears and how the orange is formed, so it's actually like phenomenology, to understand what it is about. In painting, it is the natural movement to go further into the investigation.

HUO: There are also the more abstract watercolours.

SF: They are, like elements of atoms. It's like zooming further inside something.

Simone Fattal – born 1942 in Damascus, Syria – lives and works in Paris. She studied philosophy first at the École des Lettres in Beirut, later at the Sorbonne in Paris, before taking up painting in 1969. Through her work in sculpture, painting, watercolor and collage, Fattal translates the cross-cultural experience of her life into a universal narrative of humankind. Upcoming projects involve solo shows at the Whitechapel Gallery in London as well as at ICA Milan. Amongst numerous others, Fattal has had solo shows at the Yves Saint Laurent Museum in Marrakech, MoMA PS1 in Long Island City and Kunsthall Bergen. Also, she has shown at Punta della Dogana in Venice, at Palais de Tokyo in Paris and at the Shiriah Biennale. In 2017, Heni Publishings, London issued a book dedicated to Simone Fattal's watercolour works.