



## Eliott/Elliot/Eliot

### When Reading T.S. Elliot [sic]

Mixed Media Works on Paper

by *Nada Sehnaoui*

Pleiades Gallery, 591 Broadway, New York City

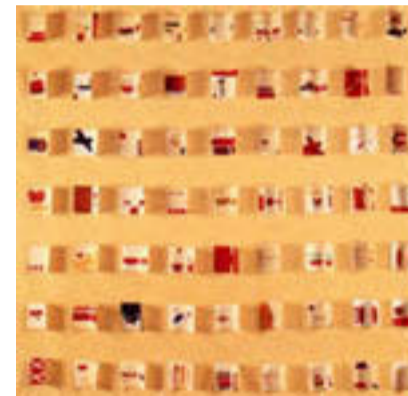
May 16-June 3, 2000

### Elizabeth Brunazzi

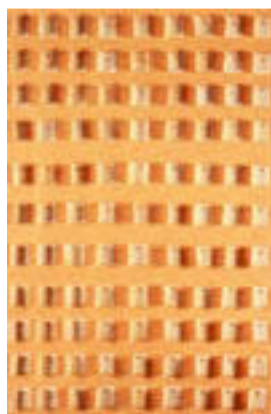
I hadn't been reading the work of T. S. Eliot, not in a long while. He was diminished for me as a college student, as for many others, I suspect, by those allusion-hunting critics and the editors and professors who followed them in the sixties and seventies. I didn't want to read all those footnotes. And I still like my poetry raw.

Nada Sehnaoui lures me back to reading Eliot because her work — the act of a visual artist abducting the poet from the academicians — presents his poetry more or less naked. She inscribes her selection of Eliot's texts on a grid of white-paper flaps (flags?) resembling little books and frames them on vividly painted blood- and sun-hued grounds. The experience is agreeable, something like dancing on graves in a Swiss cemetery — let us say Fluntern Cemetery in Zürich where the dense profusion of red flowers almost, but not quite, camouflages the white gravestones. And where James Joyce is buried (an oxymoron).

I like to think of Sehnaoui as a Joycean reader of Eliot. Her entertainment of the Missouri-born poet has a distinct gaiety to it, and a determined assertion of vitality runs through it. Her "irony" is hardly a fit with Eliot's (as the press release claims), which is somber — gorgeous but grim. Sehnaoui's interpretation of the century's most "metaphysical" poet is a gleeful romp through the complicated ceremonial of Eliot's work. Her reading is naïve, fearless, and fun. "The Hollow Men" with their straw brains and "Phlebas the Phoenician," who was "once handsome and tall as you," but now lies decomposing in the sea, don't scare her. Perhaps not enough.



*"Reading T.S. Elliott II", 1999.*  
Mixed Media and Paper on Canvas  
57" X 58"  
by Nada Sehnaoui



*"Reading T.S. Elliott, East Coker", 1999.*  
Mixed Media and Paper on Canvas  
59" X 39"  
by Nada Sehnaoui

Four out of the seven large-scale (57" x 58", 59" x 39", for example) works on paper incorporate fragments of Eliot's poems inside the little white books, and they are the most successful. The texts re-emerge from a great depth, some from among a welter of roses, an Eliot salvaged for the year 2000 (they are dated 1999). The announcement for Sehnaoui's show, however, features two of the three wordless pieces in which the little books, collaged onto bright ochre grounds, contain predominantly red images of little flowers, crosses, and bird-like blots. These pieces are much less successful as stand-alone mixed-media paintings than the ones that work with visual interpretation of texts, but the wordless pieces take on interest in the vicinity of the ones where Sehnaoui has us read Eliot with her eyes and through her hands.

The announcement for Sehnaoui's show, her second at \*Pleiades, is also noteworthy in that the titles of the mixed-media pieces refer to a "T.S. Elliott", while the title of the exhibition is "When Reading T. S. Elliot." Meanwhile, the excerpts from a critical article by Denise Bibro inside the announcement brochure concern yet another "T. S. Eliot." Is Sehnaoui slyly suggesting that there is more than one T. S. Eliot swimming around in the exhibition? That authors are onomastically polymorphous while texts are inevitably polysemous? Darned right.

### DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

T.S. Eliot. *The Wasteland and Other Poems*. Intro. Helen Vendler Signet Classics, 1998. Mass-market pb, 224 pages, \$3.95. ISBN: 045 1526848

\*In addition to her two exhibitions with Pleiades, Sehnaoui has shown at Alpha Gallery in Boston, Rosseler Gallery in Munich and Musée Nicolas Sursock in Beirut. She has studied at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and at the University of Paris.

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