

# artist profile adnan charara

DEARBORN, MI

It's impossible not to smile when you look at Adnan Charara's art. The images in his paintings have a cartoon quality to them, and you can't help but be drawn in by the busyness and bright colors. Adnan loves humor and he uses it to capture our attention in his drawings, his paintings, and in his found-object sculptures. Once you're pulled in, you see and appreciate the underlying messages.

Adnan was born in Lebanon, but spent a good part of his young life in Sierra Leone, West Africa. He received no formal art training in school, but he

always pursued art on his own. He not only wanted to learn as much as he could about art, Adnan *needed* to learn about art.



Opposite:  
"Airmail"  
• 6' x 8'

Left: Adnan  
Charara

Far left: "Return  
to Sender"  
envelope art

Photography by  
Eric Smith



At the age of 19, he came to the United States to study architecture. Though his parents understood his desire to be an artist, they wanted him to be able to make a living, and architecture was as close to studying art as he could get at that point in his life. Adnan first settled on the west coast, and went on to receive a degree from Yakima Community College in Seattle, Washington. He moved to the east coast two years later, where he attended Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, and then Boston University for city planning. He met his wife in Boston as well. He was the first member of his family to come to the U.S.

Adnan finished his schooling and took a job with the state of Massachusetts.

While working full time as a regional planner, he continued to study art, to learn about art, and to create his art, always yearning to make art his life's work. After 10 years he decided to do just that. His parents had retired to the U.S. and he took their move as an opportunity to make a change in his life as well, relocating his family to Michigan where his parents had settled.

Adnan has been a full-time artist for 15 years now. His artwork comes from his life experiences, and those of the common man. His studio is in Detroit, and once he moved to this bigger studio, he found his work became much larger, something he enjoys and something he had always wanted to do

but couldn't because he worked in a small space.

All of Adnan's artwork has a message. He tries to bring awareness to a situation or a condition, but in a humorous way. He seeks to bring attention to issues that we have been dealing with for centuries and yet have still not resolved—peace, inequality, racism—but he does so in a simple way to ease the harshness of the situation.

Adnan thinks that people tend to dwell on and take issue with the differences among people instead of relishing the similarities, often causing friction.

BY barbara **d** elaney



His drawings and paintings deal with the fear he had to overcome when he came to the U.S. His work also depicts the adaptability and resilience of people in general.

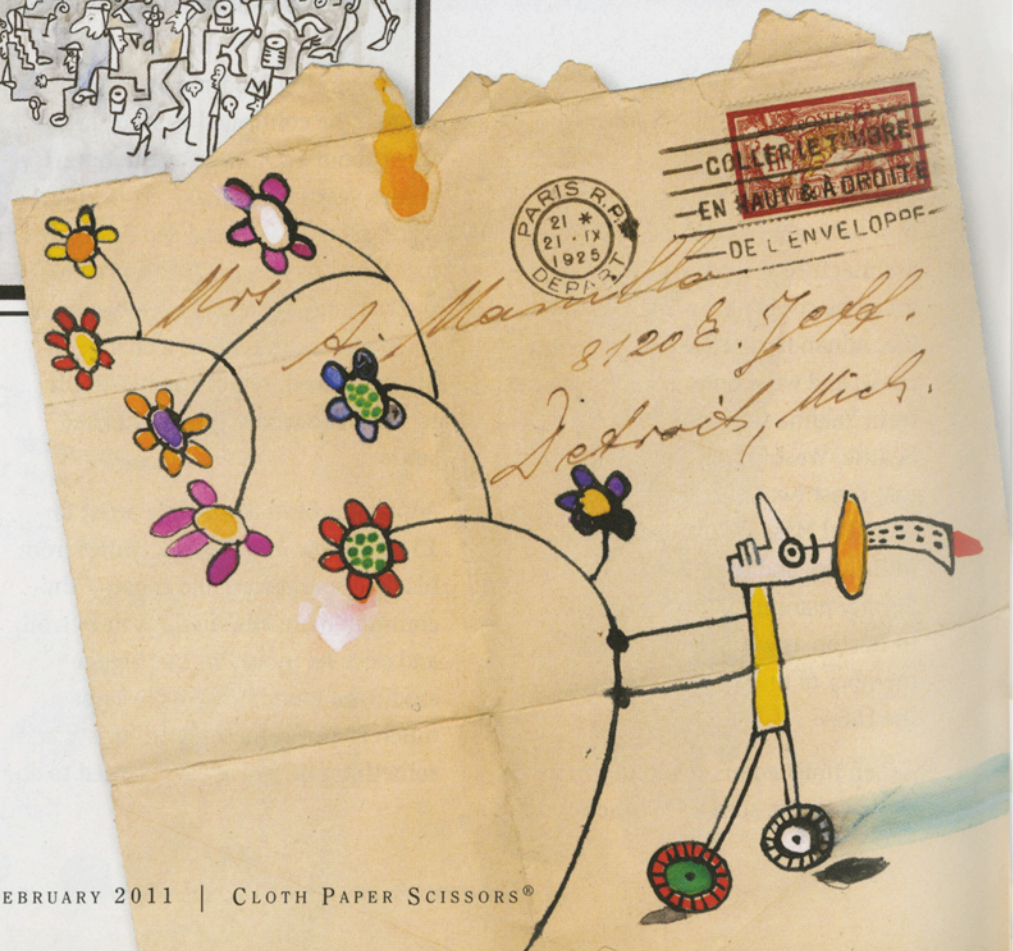
After 9/11, he found that people looked at him differently. He had not changed, but people had, he says. "I felt the same pain and sadness as all Americans did that day. I am an American; my pain and sadness were very real."

"People categorize without fully understanding a situation," he says, adding, "Every person is responsible for their own actions. You can't blame the whole group; we are all individuals." Adnan wants people to seek more knowledge rather than letting fear guide them. In one of his

Left: "Conscious" • 8' x 6'

Below: "Return to Sender" envelope art

He does not believe we should simply tolerate each other's differences, but rather feels we should seek to understand each other and appreciate our differences. Adnan says his cartoon-like characters allow him to deliver serious messages without hurting anyone's feelings. His art speaks to the characteristics and flaws that are common to all groups without singling out any one group.



Osmosis Series pieces, “Blue Rain and Yellow Cars,” the yellow cars, taxicabs really, symbolize the stereotyping of people. Adnan uses the heads in this series to say we are what we think. “What we store in our heads, our brains, makes us who we are,” he explains. When we get into a taxi we have a certain mindset—certain expectations—and they are often not correct. This piece speaks to that problem.

There are a number of recurring symbols in Adnan’s artwork. Buildings, wheels, and flowers, to name a few, show up in his drawings and paintings, and tools abound in his sculptures.

The buildings on people’s heads in his paintings symbolize the “empire we build through time,” based on our experiences and knowledge. Adnan says these buildings are “the world we carry with us, our inner self—the world we are trying to build for ourselves.”



Above: “Blue Rain and Yellow Cars” • 82" x 62"



“Pioneers” • 22" x 10" x 8"

Adnan’s “Return to Sender” series began as art on the back of actual envelopes. He found and collected vintage envelopes at estate sales and flea markets. This series symbolizes immigrants and their travels. He later translated this art onto large canvases, keeping some of the same elements for continuity.

Two of his very large pieces, 6' x 8', have almost a “Where’s Waldo” busyness. “Subconscious” is painted in

black and white and shades of gray. It depicts what is stored in our brain—information that we take in constantly. By comparison, its sister piece, “Conscious,” is full of color. The color indicates that these things are choices we have made. “We are always taking more in,” Adnan says. The empty space at the bottom of this painting indicates the room that’s still available to make new choices and learn new things.

“Pioneers” is a wonderful bronze piece that is based on Adnan and his best friend. In it the two men are shown leaning on each other, almost becoming one. It shows how friends support each other in life. He says, “If one pulls away, the other will fall.”

Adnan transforms discarded objects and he is always looking for new ways to enrich his art. He refers to himself as a “visual poet.” His art has its own language. Adnan does with his art what a writer does with words. Though you smile when you see his sculptures, the titles help you appreciate the humor, and at the same time you can “read” his message— you can see it and feel it. He says his sculptures “pay homage to the work done by immigrants.”

“To me these are discarded items. They’re used and abused, thrown out. I give them new life.”

Some of Adnan’s pieces will make you chuckle because of their familiar titles, like “The Thinker” and “American Gothic.”

Adnan has a difficult time throwing anything away and, being conscious of the environment, even his spent art supplies sometimes find their way into his artwork.

The found objects he works with are the tools of the working class. He tries to elevate them while giving them a new life. He has a real affinity for hammers. He says, “They symbolize us as humans—people can be constructive and destructive.” With his touch, the sculptures made



with hammers seem to take on personalities.

Adnan loves Detroit and feels a real connection to and a respect for the blue-collar workers there. He wears overalls to work in his studio and loves that his studio is in the heart of an area wrought by industry. His current studio is 3,200 square feet and he says it is jam-packed. He is hoping to move to a new space soon that is 7,400 square feet.

Adnan compares himself to the autoworker, saying he “assembles and creates something just like these hard workers do.” He says his art is “what I need to leave behind.” Whether Adnan is recognized in his lifetime is not what’s important to him. He believes time is the best critic. Adnan says, “Time justifies your art, whether you’re good or bad.” ●

Visit Adnan’s website:  
[adnanchararastudio.com](http://adnanchararastudio.com).

Left: “The Thinker”  
 • 5" x 1½" x 3"

Right: “American Gothic”  
 • 6½" x 8½" x 3"

