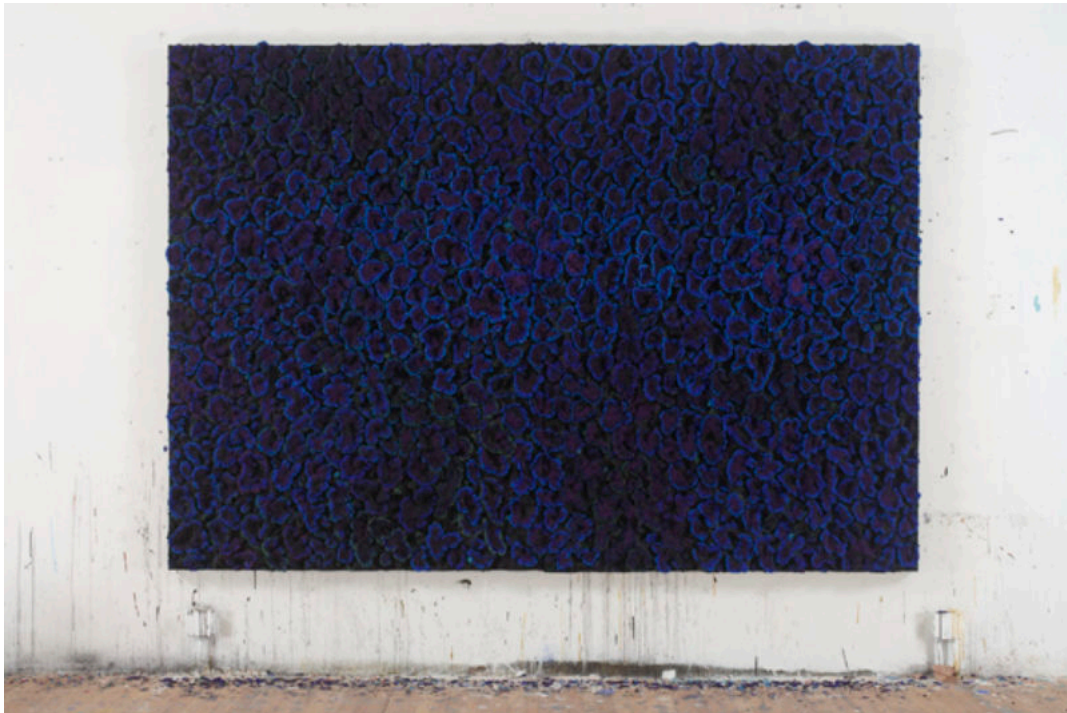


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Nabil Nahas by Tabitha Piseno

Nabil Nahas on painting with starfish, the reception of his work in the Middle East, and the symbolism of cedar trees.



Nabil Nahas. *Sapphire*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas; diptych. 84 x 60 inches each panel, 84 x 120 inches overall. Photo courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York.

Born in Beirut in 1949, Nabil Nahas spent the first decade of his life in Cairo before returning to his native country of Lebanon, where he remained until 1968. During the uprisings preceding the Lebanese civil war, Nahas, like many others, left the country to start a new life elsewhere. After studying painting under Al Held at Yale, Nahas moved to New York in 1973, where he has been living ever since. It was twenty years before he began to visit Lebanon again, and those trips would prove to have a profound affect on his work.

Ranging widely from densely textured works on canvas formed with layers of an acrylic and pumice mixture to abstract representations of the native olive and cedar trees of Lebanon, Nahas's work consistently oscillates between many aesthetic sensibilities, ultimately driven by his almost religious passion for abstraction.

Nahas's character has the same rapidly shifting qualities of his painting repertoire. His personality is iridescent, shifting rapidly yet gracefully from a serious man weathered by worldly experience to a sage with a sly sense of humor. I visited his Chelsea studio on a cold but bright afternoon in early March. After coffee and a light brunch, we perused the set of newly finished paintings to be included in his solo show at Sperone Westwater and discussed the stylistic shifts in his work, his recent exhibition at the Beirut Exhibition Center, and his relationship to the landscape of Lebanon.

Tabitha Piseno

When was the last time you presented a major show of paintings in New York?

Nabil Nahas

My last show in New York was in 2010, at the French Institute Gallery, in the context of a celebration of Lebanon's cultural aspects. The show was titled *Cedrus Libani: Roots and Memory* and for the first time, I showed the cedar paintings I started in 2007, along with the fractal works.

TP

You've also been exhibiting internationally quite frequently. Your work was exhibited most recently in Beirut, yes?

NN

Yes, I have been exhibiting in the Middle East, the Far East and Europe. The show in Beirut in 2010 was actually my first time exhibiting there. It was a retrospective held at the Beirut Exhibition Center, covering my 40 year career in New York. It was curated by Vincent Katz. The exhibition allowed me for the first time to see my work in its totality from the geometric paintings of the '70s through the moody monochromatic paintings of the '80s which I refer to as the *Gold Paintings*, followed by the *Dot Paintings*, the *Stars*, the *Fractals* and the *Trees*. I did not know what the show would look like, but in the end it all made sense—Vincent did a brilliant job.

TP

What was the reception of your work like there?

NN

It was extremely well received. People knew my name but had no idea of the diversity of the work. The show was a big hit. It marked the opening of the Beirut Exhibition Center. Having exhibitions abroad allowed the work to develop quite a bit. My new series of *Tree Paintings* are going to be shown for the first time in New York. It should be interesting.

TP

The *Tree Paintings* are so different than the rest of your repertoire. They seem to represent a real stylistic fissure in your work —almost traumatic.

NN

Actually, the real "breakthrough" was my discovery of the starfish. It happened that I had a house in East Hampton, Long Island, and in 1991 there was this terrible hurricane that swept the island and did quite a bit of damage to the area. I wasn't too far from the ocean and decided to go for a walk on the beach only to encounter this amazing sight: thousands of sea stars washed up on the sand, it looked like a spangled sky with a sinister touch. I picked a few of them up, took them home, dried them and made my first starfish painting titled *EUREKA*. I began to realize all the different connotations one can associate with the starfish: It is a naturally structured geometric element occurring in the pentagram shape. Leonardo's *Man*, standing arms and legs stretched out, a reference to Vitruvius and the multi cultural aspects of the Renaissance and so on. There were a lot of readings one could have also the relationship to macro/micro phenomena.

TP

Yes, even though you've had these major stylistic breaks, your interest in macro/micro phenomena is always apparent.

a studio.

NN

That's the way influences work. They're always apparent in the works themselves, despite how different they are. When I first went back to Lebanon after a 20 year absence, I was taken by the beauty of the geography and often wished I were a landscape painter. I didn't know how to make sense of it, so one day in 2007, I was in my studio and I started painting palm trees from memory. They're all done from memory. They were very formal—modernist and iconoclastic. Their cropping made them look more like portraits of palm trees, olive and cedar trees than traditional landscapes. The *Tree Paintings* are much more rooted in my childhood memories and are very emotional. They come from the heart while the *Fractal Paintings* have a more cerebral approach and a rigorous execution. I paint them both at the same time. With the *Tree Paintings* I reclaimed the pleasure of freely running a brush on the canvas. My *Tree Paintings* are much more emotional. They come from the gut, and not from the brain, so it's a nice balance between the two. And it's a nice break, given that the *Fractal Paintings* are a real pain in the butt to paint.

TP

Oh yes? What is the process like for you?

NN

It's a very rigorous and tedious process. When I first started those pictures, I was using real starfish. Then I was a bit concerned about the permanence of the starfish, and I must confess they didn't smell very nice. I thought of making acrylic molds of the stars which I proceeded to mount on canvas. The first paintings were saturated monochromatic multiplications of the same natural geometric element. As the surfaces became more loaded with a multicolored mixture of acrylic mixed with pumice, biomorphic repetitive shapes started to appear.

TP

It's amazing—even after the molds are painted, they still so closely resemble coral. Do you only use pumice to give the painting texture? Or, do you integrate any other textured materials into the paint?

NN

One often wonders how these pictures are made, I've heard it all from glued lichen to crumpled paper and so on. No limits to one's interpretation... they are simply painted with a paint brush like a traditional painting. I only use acrylic paint to build my surfaces. The pumice which is very absorbent gives the paint the look of dry pigment and the illusion of fragility, which I like given that process and perception are two of my main concerns. I use golden paints and I recently started using large mica flakes in my acrylic. I had fun.

TP

That definitely comes through in the paintings. The inclusion of the mica flakes is new with the starfish is something totally new—you've never done this before?

NN

No. It is fun, isn't it?

TP

Yes, it is fun!

NN

There's a lot of optical mixture. The mica flakes kind of make the starfish disappear, doesn't it? I can never make a painting like this consciously. There are a lot of different systems for me coexisting in the same painting, and I like to think of the different shapes I'm using. Whether they're ribbons or those amoeba shapes that are expanding, I like to think of them as different systems coexisting.

TP

Like an ecosystem?

NN

Yes, like looking at a microscope or into the Hubble space telescope, or looking out my window at the garden, looking at my trees—I think they're all ultimately related. I'm very old fashioned in my approach to painting. I'm not interested in political art; I'm not interested in consumerist art...

TP

You're a real purist.

NN

I would not call myself a purist, more of an esthete.

What's really interesting for me is coming up with paintings that look like nothing else. I am always interested in the process of the making of a painting and try to exhaust these possibilities.



Nabil Nahas. *Untitled*, 2013. Acrylic on canvas. 89 x 84 inches.

TP

But, the trees! I always come back to the *Tree Paintings*. Everything changes when you go back to landscape painting. And for you, the *Tree Paintings* are symbolic of Lebanon?

NN

Yes, definitely. The date, the palm tree, the cedar, the olive tree have all been celebrated since antiquity and they

provide me with an abundance of imagery.

Do you know Etel Adnan's work?

TP

No.

NN

She is a Lebanese poet, who wrote this book of poems titled *SEASONS*. I used excerpts from her book to accompany the images in the catalog of my exhibition at the French Institute Gallery as I felt both bodies of work shared a common spirit. One incisive excerpt reads: "What is this place we call sky, that recedes when we fly the way the horizon does when we sail? To see is to think."

TP

The paintings are so volatile, so severe...

NN

Yes, they are severe. My earlier cedar tree paintings are much more dramatic and tragic.

TP

There is a sense of violence about them.

NN

Really? I would not use the word violence—maybe the cedar trees are tragic but that is in keeping with their troubled history. On the other hand, the palm trees are serene and the majestic olive trees are silent witnesses from Biblical times.

For thousands of years, Lebanon was always attacked, it was always occupied, and the trees were hacked down, the cedars. The first thing a conqueror would do was burn all the forests down. You know, I'm a good gardener. I like botany. I like integrating Lebanese flowers—hollyhocks, pink laurels, cactus plants, and poppies. I like to mix different flora in the paintings—some trees are two to three thousand years old, and poppies will only last a day or two.

TP

What is your present relationship to the history and strife of Lebanon?

NN

I left in 1968 before the civil war, which I watched the civil war unfold on my TV screen in New York. When I look back at history I see the fate of this country unchanged for thousands of years—a geographical miracle and a strategic curse. It's been rising from its ashes over and over and over again for millenniums and that seems to be its fate.

Nabil Nahas in his studio.

TP

Do you have any feelings towards what's going on politically there now with the influx of Syrian refugees?

NN

I think what is going on in Syria is tragic to say the least.

My work is about observing nature in the multiplicity of its dimensions, from microcosm to macrocosm—without forgetting to look at my immediate surroundings.

TP

How often do you visit Lebanon?

NN

I didn't go back for 20 years, now I go back all the time, every chance I have. I go when my garden is in bloom. I make my visits coincide with things relating to the flora of Lebanon. I love wandering in the forest when it's bursting with flowering bulbs.

Nabil Nahas opens April 5 at Sperrone Westwater.

Tabitha Piseno is an artist and curator currently living and working in NYC and Providence, RI. She is the Co-Founder of Richard Keller (R.K.) Projects, an experimental exhibition platform that conducts nomadic exhibitions and performance-based projects.

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