





nature
and beyond

nabil nahas

profile

Through his evocative artworks, Lebanese artist Nabil Nahas intertwines two powerful themes – those of Mother Nature and Islamic culture. Leaving his native, pre-war Lebanon and studying in the USA gave the New-York based artist the opportunity to experience personal interaction with notable American artists. Nahas's artistic journey is an imaginative tale of how he combined his two prized passions, blending the best of two diverging worlds.



TEXT BY YASMINE MOHSENI

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF AGIAL ART GALLERY AND THE ARTIST

Previous pages: *Untitled*. 2007.
Acrylic on canvas. 165 x 330 cm.

Facing page: *Tyrian Purple*.
1992/2007. Acrylic on canvas.
120 x 120cm.

New York-based Lebanese artist Nabil Nahas is getting ready to go to Lebanon. He is having a spacious studio constructed in the mountains of his native country, but what he is looking forward to most is planting a grove of olive trees. "I love gardening!" he exclaims in accented yet perfect English. Nahas looks to nature as a point of departure in his painting, so it should come as no surprise that this passion extends to having green fingers. Nature and Islamic culture are the two most consistent sources of inspiration in his painting. Whether he is thinking of Islamic geometric patterns in his Abstract paintings or looking to the iconic cedar trees of Lebanon in his recent group of landscapes, Nahas is never far from Mother Earth and his native culture.

Early Impacts

Nahas was born in Beirut in 1949, to a Lebanese mother and an Egyptian father of Syrian-Lebanese ancestry. This background served to strengthen his ties to the region and its culture. In 1960 Nahas settled permanently in Beirut, and eight years later travelled to the USA to study art. "I wanted to go [straight] to New York, but my parents were apprehensive. Fortunately, an aunt living in New Orleans made it possible for me to pursue my undergraduate studies at Louisiana State University."

After two years in Louisiana, Nahas moved to New Haven to pursue a master's degree in fine art at the prestigious Yale University School of Art. His experience there proved to be life-changing. Big-name artists like Chuck Close, Alex Katz

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and Frank Stella would visit the school and talk to Nahas and his fellow students about art, technique, inspiration and their lives as working artists. Such intimate access to iconic artists had a major impression on Nahas. "We were now familiar with all those [artists]. [They] weren't myths anymore, they were human beings like you and me. It made the concept of succeeding in the art world entirely possible." In 1973 Nahas moved to New York, where his arts contacts from Yale opened many doors. "It was a lucky happening," he says. Another stroke of luck for Nahas was moving to what was then an affordable New York City. Thirty-eight years ago, he settled into an apartment in Tribeca and has been living there ever since.

While at Yale, Nahas studied under the American painter Al Held, whose ideas would influence the young artist. Mid-century Abstract painting was an important visual source for Nahas from the very start of his art education. "When I was 12 or 13 years old, I got a Skira book by Nello Ponente called *Modern Painting: Contemporary Trends 1940-1960*. It was a survey of all

the important Abstract paintings in Europe and America. That book was a revelation to me, a real treasure trove."

Great Comparisons

Nahas's affinity for American large-scale painting is such that many have drawn comparisons between his style and that of Jackson Pollock. At first glance, the similarities are evident: both painters create large-scale works that contain

profile



all-over patterning. “The coffered ceilings at the Alhambra are a subliminal experience, not unlike the never-ending cosmic swirls of a Pollock painting,” Nahas explains, “however, the all-overness in my paintings is not the result of a heroic force of gesture but, rather like Islamic geometry applied to architecture, a vigorous force of mind.” Nahas often works on the same painting for a year, going back to the canvas and adding layers of

complexity onto it. “There’s an overload of information, it’s difficult for the viewer to grasp the painting as a whole,” he admits. While

aspects of his work may appear chaotic, “every inch of the canvas is thought out with clockwork precision”. Constantly reinventing how one approaches the making of a painting, Nahas started experimenting with mixing crushed pumice stone with acrylic paint. The combination creates a thick paste which he then slowly brushes onto the canvas. The use of natural elements in his paintings is indicative of his steadfast study of everything that comes from the earth. Nature is everywhere in his paintings, from colour and form to subject matter and technique.

Untitled. 2005.
Acrylic on canvas.
180 x 150cm.





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The Forces of Nature

“From microcosm to macrocosm, I never stop observing my surroundings. I spend hours looking at waves, the desert, clouds and flowers, seeking out the movement and repetition inherent in each of these.” A major change occurred in his work after he strolled along a beach in the Hamptons and was witness to hundreds of starfish that had been washed up during a recent storm. This powerful image was a pivotal moment in his work. “It was like I was starting from square one when I began painting starfish in 1990. That’s when the fractal painting started.” He began by purchasing real starfish, which he affixed to wood panels, before opting for rubber casts of the sea creature.

An Expanding Palette

Nahas’s use of luscious reds, Yves Klein blues and other vibrant hues is clearly inspired by the shades visible in underwater ecosystems and gardens. Nahas uses the word ‘lush’ to describe his own work. Others have opted for ‘hedonistic’ and ‘luxurious’. Nature is not terribly abundant in Tribeca, or anywhere else in Manhattan for that matter, so Nahas built

Butterfly:
Opium and Candy. 2005. Acrylic on canvas. 272 x 458 cm.
Mimosa. 2002. Acrylic on canvas. 91 x 61 cm.
Untitled. 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 152 x 122 cm.
Pink. 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 152 x 122 cm.
Equinox II. 2000. Acrylic on canvas. 152 x 122 cm.

Previous pages:
Untitled. 2006. Acrylic on canvas. 150 x 180 cm.

Above: *Untitled*. 2008. Acrylic on canvas. 180 x 300 cm.

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himself a house in the Hamptons, “where nature is gorgeous”. Now it is in Lebanon where he finds his inspiration.


Nahas left Lebanon at 18 and did not return for about 30 years. “During the war years, I put a big ‘X’ on Lebanon and I blocked it out. I was happy here [in New York], I had my little world. I just didn’t want to go back during the years of destruction.” When he returned at the age of 48, he fell in love with the country. “I can’t go away for too long now, I recharge myself when I’m there.” Lebanon quickly seeped into his work. With respect to his Abstract art, he found that his use of light became more contrasted and his imagery more complex. Since his first trip back to Lebanon over 10 years ago, he returns there at least once a year.

New Perspectives

Overwhelmed by a landscape he left years ago, Nahas was quick to transform cedars and palms, both trees abundant in ancient times, into iconic images that go beyond simply capturing the trees that are native to his homeland. “The cedars became a vehicle to express the grandeur and tragedy of Lebanon over the last few thousand years. Like a [Diego] Rivera painting of a girl holding calla lilies embodies the soul of Mexican culture, I hope my cedars and palms accomplish the same for the Middle East.” The term ‘landscape painting’ should be loosely interpreted here – his landscapes are visceral depictions of the land and are quite raw and abstract. He has replaced the rainbow palette and organic sinusoidal shapes he favoured in such series as

Opium and Candy (2005) with haunting forms in vibrant blues, browns and greens.

After his stay in Lebanon, Nahas will travel to Abu Dhabi for the artparis-AbuDhabi fair. He is enthused and fascinated to see the nascent art scene in the UAE, and that of Dubai in particular. “I think we are where perhaps the Chinese art scene was 10 years ago; there’s amazing potential, it’s developing quickly, and I think it’s real.”

While he has spent the majority of his adult life in the USA, Nahas continues to identify strongly with the Middle East. He is not quite capable of finding the words to describe the connection he feels, except to say that it is geographic. “It’s about the air, the light and the land.” Upon viewing his new landscape series, the viewer may not be able to express precisely how these canvases communicate such melancholy and depth. Perhaps it takes leaving your country, and then coming back, to be able to tap into that particular artistic and emotional reserve. Another homecoming of sorts will occur for the painter in the fall of 2009, with the unveiling of a Nabil Nahas retrospective in Beirut, held by Solidaire. 

Nabil Nahas is represented by Sperone Westwater in New York <http://www.speronewestwater.com/cgi-bin/iowa/index.html> and Agial Art Gallery in Beirut. His works will be included in the latter gallery’s booth at the artparis-AbuDhabi fair in November 2008. For more information visit www.agialart.com