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A SEA OF STARS: INTERVIEW WITH NABIL NAHAS

BY SOPHIE VON WUNSTER



Portrait of **NABIL NAHAS**. Courtesy the artist and Ben Brown Fine Arts, London/Hong Kong.

New York-based artist Nabil Nahas was born in Beirut in 1949, then spent his formative years between Egypt and Lebanon before leaving for the United States to attend college. Now, Nahas still periodically returns to his birthplace. He started painting at a young age and quickly became interested in abstraction. Throughout his career, the artist has been influenced by his homeland's traditions, decorative styles and surroundings; at the same time, Nahas is thoroughly schooled in the practices of Western abstract painting and has continued to experiment with nature's colors and materials, as seen in his usage of natural pigments and pumice powder.

Ahead of the artist's second presentation in Hong Kong, which showcases his latest works inspired by allover patterns, color-filled corals and what he calls "sea stars," Nahas sat down with *ArtAsiaPacific* to discuss geometry, nature and the revenge of texture.

The sea stars found in your paintings are rooted in your experience of finding them when you were walking along a beach on Long Island after Hurricane Bob brushed by in 1991. What is your relationship with these marine forms now?

The sea star pattern is present in the background of my fractal works. The very first paintings were made using real starfish, but I was concerned about the perpetuity of the material and soon realized that I could cast the inflected surfaces in acrylic paint. Arabesque geometry is derived from nature, and the five-pointed sea star that forms a pentagon is the basic pattern of arabesque geometry. As the paintings developed, it almost became an abstract entity—their crawling and creeping and destructive nature giving way to a more celestial reading. Later on, the inflected monochromatic surface became a base for colorful, encrusted brushstrokes, which organized into fractal patterns, obliterating the underlying stars.

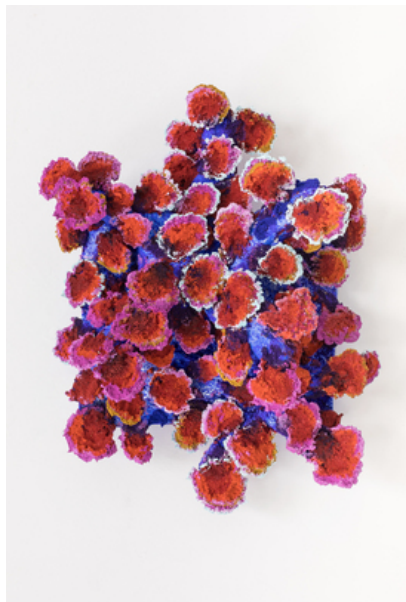
Throughout your career, you switched back and forth between abstract and realistic painting. What's your relationship with these two styles?

It is only of late that I have been switching back and forth. I was always an abstract painter, though one who is inspired by nature. It was upon my return to Lebanon when I began painting trees. I felt a need to do it, so now I alternate between both.

It seems to me that there is more than one person in me working. Essentially, over the last 50 years, I developed different vocabularies that now seem to be merging together, combining landscape with fractals.

When I really think about my abstract works, I understand that it has always been inspired by nature. The first geometric paintings from the 1970s were all inspired by crystalline structures, arabesque geometry and the three-dimensional, repetitive, pyramidal shapes found in the stress-bearing structures of that decade's architecture. Although my newer works are tedious to paint, the fun aspects are their optical concerns and the ensuing shameless visual pleasure.

Is there a story behind your landscape paintings?



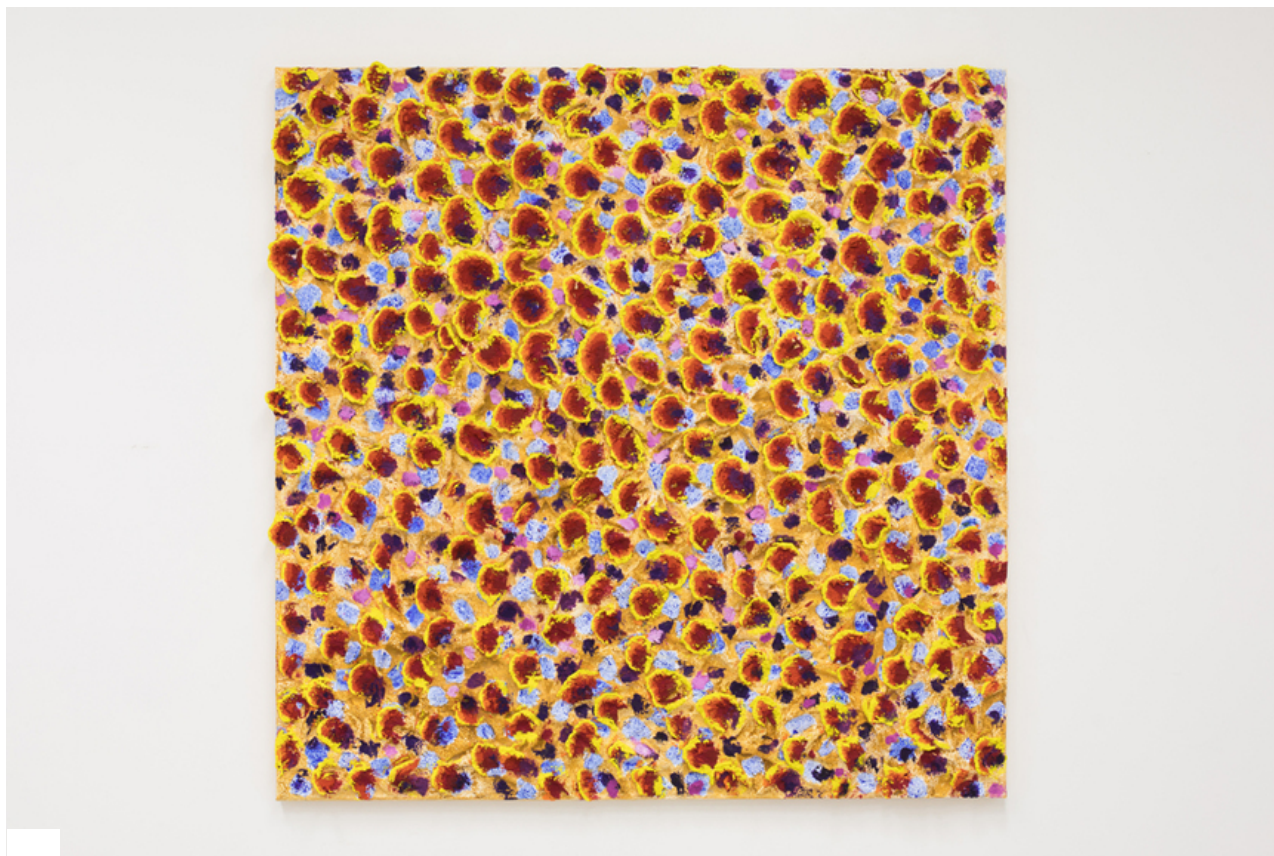
NABIL NAHAS, *Untitled*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 43.2 × 33 cm. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London/Hong Kong.

When I went back to Lebanon after 20 years of absence during the civil war, I was really impressed by the country's geography and I found myself thinking, "I wish I were a landscape painter!" Back in 2006, in my studio in New York, I decided to start painting some trees from memory—cedars, olives and palms—and I realized that they were iconoclastic paintings that pertained to Lebanon, more like portraits than landscapes. At first I didn't know how to justify these paintings as they came from left field, so I approached them in a modernist way. It was fun for me to dabble with that—it was recreation.

A central characteristic of your newer paintings is the texture, which challenges the observer to get closer and admire the details. What led you to this interest?

In my works from the 1970s, I made a point of abolishing texture, which was prevalent back then, from my paintings. I wanted the paintings to just be luminous.

It seems like texture had finally taken its revenge. My previous works had absolutely no texture and now look at what happened! I have always been curious technically and experimented constantly, so when I was offered pumice as an option, I went for it.



NABIL NAHAS, *Untitled*, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 × 182.9 cm. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London/Hong Kong.

You once described seeing a Cairene carpet displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York as a "celestial experience." Has that feeling sustained itself through the years?

Definitely. It doesn't make any difference whether I'm looking through a microscope or a telescope. There is a universal quality in the pictures, and also a cosmic quality. From microcosm to macrocosm, or sometimes... a simple peek out of the window—it's an expanding universe.

Can you describe your most recent usage of colors, as is present in the artworks shown in your current exhibition?

I am very interested in how colors mix optically, but have no color preference. I go by the principle that all colors can be worked out; some are more challenging to resolve, but this is where the fun is. I never use synthetic pigments or dyes, but only natural pigments like cadmium and cobalt. I try to electrify a color to its max, to intensify it by juxtaposition. I don't use color theory, but proceed by trial and error, so the possibilities are open-ended.

In addition, regarding these specific works, the three-dimensionality of the canvases create something else in the opticality, because your eye has to adjust not only to different colors on a two-dimensional surface, but also to different depths, thus creating a visual haze that dissolves the encrusted surface.

And I can also see there's gold color present in some of your artwork.

I find gold fascinating as it is part of the univers's matter. It is a cosmic element. There is also a Byzantine reference, which is part of my childhood, as well as my early years in Cairo and my fascination with King Tut's trove of gold.

Would it be accurate to say that the mystery of the sea gives you the conceptual space to let your imagination run wild?

The sea is very mysterious and very scary, as it's a dimension that is unknown. But at the same time, there is another world to be discovered. It's funny because I used to scuba-dive, and it altered my perception. This work came along many years later, and I wasn't really thinking about it. It just happened, and I thought that it had really a lot to do with underwater vision and the way the currents come and go, and how the lights flicker through the water—I kind of picked up on that subconsciously. I am not imitating nature; I'm mimicking the way nature proceeds, like how an oyster grows—by accretion.



Installation view of **NABIL NAHAS**'s solo exhibition at Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong, 2018. Courtest Ben Brown Fine Arts, London/Hong Kong.

Sophie von Wunster is an editorial intern at ArtAsiaPacific.

Nabil Nahas's solo exhibition is on view at Ben Brown Fine Arts, Hong Kong, until March 17, 2018.

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