

NABIL NAHAS

IN COVERSATION WITH GILLES KHOURY
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STYLING BY MAKRAM BITAR



Without a doubt, this past year has been one of the most tragic and heartbreaking in recent Lebanese history, between the economic collapse, the Covid-19 crisis and above all the 4th August 2020 Beirut blast that brought the country to its knees. Artist Nabil Nahas received photographer Joyce Ng and writer Gilles Khoury at his house in Ain Aar, about 15 kilometres north of Beirut, where he spent the entire lockdown period surrounded by his dogs and cats, his goats Rose and Georgette, his flowers and homegrown vegetables. Stylist Makram Bitar, also involved in this project, was raised in this same village. Nahas describes his house as a 'haven', and here he has recreated the flavours of a traditional Lebanese village. His latest series of olive tree paintings echo a Lebanon in disarray and reveal how Nahas never stops, in his own way, resisting through his art and deciphering the world from afar.





GILLES KHOURY: First of all, I want you to tell us about this house in Ain Aar, the story of the house, once a silk factory; your relationship with the village; and how you took the decision to take over the house and transform it the way you did.

NABIL NAHAS: This village is where my grandparents had their property and where we used to spend all our summers. I spent all my summers here from a very early age, and my relation to this village was 'home', whereas Cairo, where we lived back then, was 'school' for me, and I didn't enjoy that very much! As far as I remember, Ain Aar always had a flavour of vacation, and I was very close to nature, of course.

I left Lebanon in 1968; that was before the civil war, which started in 1975. Back then, it was Lebanon as I always knew it. When I came back 18 years later, in 1993, the country had completely changed; it was so different from the way it was in my memories. There were no more demarcations between Beirut and the towns around it. It had all become one. Even here, the village, which is in the hills – about 600 metres in altitude – had become like a suburb of Beirut.

The country was, as far as I'm concerned, disfigured by the massive construction that occurred in all the orchards that separated Beirut from here. They disappeared and were replaced by ugly buildings built in a rush, chaotically, during the civil war.

My uncle, who owned this property, asked me to take a look at it. I hadn't been in it for 50 years. It was

a ruin. But when I walked into it, I just thought, 'My God! How fabulous.' All I had seen was this floor where my studio is now and the one below. You couldn't see anything else. But something inside me told me, 'Why don't I refurbish it?'

So I bought it from my uncle and started working on it. I'd decided to reconcile myself with the situation as I realised that the landscape was not going to be what it used to be; it's going to be bubbles, and this would be one bubble – mine. I'm a dreamer, essentially, but I also try, as much as possible, not to limit myself to dreams but to turn those into realities. That's how I undertook the project, and I worked on it for many, many years – like 10, 11 years. And it's really home for me now.

GILLES: Usually, you spend half of your time, if not more, in New York, in another bubble of yours, between your Manhattan flat and your Long Island studio. But this year, things have changed. How did it feel to spend so much time in Lebanon?

NABIL: It felt fantastic. Not for one minute did I miss New York. I was really able to establish a very strong bond both with the country and this home. And with my garden, of course. For years I'd collected Roman olive trees, which I transplanted from southern Lebanon to here. It was quite an unusual relation that I had with those trees, because they're between 1500 and 3000 years old – they've witnessed so much and they're still here, and still giving olives. And I'm still

pressing those olives. Previously, my link to the ancient past was through antiquities, and now that I look at those trees, they're like living antiquities. It sounds corny, but I always thought, if only they could speak, you know.

GILLES: You had painted palm trees and cedars in previous series, and it's as if, after the explosion in Beirut on 4th August 2020, those olive trees finally found themselves on your canvases.

NABIL: I've been wanting to paint them for a while, but I really didn't know how to approach the subject or how to put them on a canvas. In the past, I'd made four or five paintings of olive trees, but they were just like representations of trees. This year I spent here has given me the opportunity to really spend time with them, observe them carefully and think how I could do it. After 4th August they naturally took on a different meaning. It's as if they dictated the paintings, and I did the job almost instinctively and very quickly, without any reflection. I never thought they'd come out as apocalyptic as they did. So, it was a surprise for me as well. The tree itself is so tortured, and it's so tragic.

GILLES: Nature as a whole was always a big part of your work – if we go back to your 'Fractal' series, for example, which started from a walk on the beach in front of your house in the Hamptons. Can you tell me a bit about the place of nature in your work, and the 'Fractal' series?





NABIL: You know, since childhood I've always been fascinated by nature. I was always hunting for fossils. Lebanon is rich in fossils. To decipher nature always meant a lot to me. I had a house in the Hamptons in the 1980s and 1990s, and all those gold paintings, although they seem abstract, had a lot to do with the ponds surrounding me in Bridgehampton and the reflections in the water. It was always in me. Even if the works seemed very abstract, I was always very much inspired by nature. The change in the work that happened was after Hurricane Bob in 1991. The beach, facing my house, was completely covered with starfish. It was a vision that was quite startling, and that took me on to a new venture which, stemming from nature again, developed into fractals going from zero, and this time, instead of representing nature, I found myself imitating the way nature proceeds. Again, as always, the paintings were very surprising to me.

GILLES: It's a series that has been following you since then, that you still work on today. As a matter of fact, your way of working is quite particular because you don't tackle one series and then just stop, and then move on. You jump from one to another, do many things at the same time. How do you explain this?

NABIL: I think if you don't follow the canon as dictated by the art world – finding a style, and beating it to death. And in most cases, you'd be lucky to be able to come up with one style. A mind is something very kaleidoscopic, and if you want to explore the different facets of it, you cannot be stuck in one single vision. My curiosity has always taken me back and forth. What I've done so far would take five good painters to do in a lifetime. So sometimes I go back and forth out of curiosity – for no other reason. The same applies to the trees, for example. When I came back to Lebanon, I was quite impressed by the landscape, as I was saying earlier, and I wished I were a landscape painter. It

took me a few years before I started painting my trees. They're not really landscapes, more like portraits.

GILLES: Portraits of trees.

NABIL: I did it in parallel with the rest of the work, what I refer to as the 'drip paintings' from 1981, 1982 and 1983 – the black-and-white drip paintings, which then turned into gold paintings. And then came that total break in the way I was painting, which was when I started using starfish, which ended up becoming fractal paintings. Painting those trees at the same time as I was doing my fractal work, the only way I knew how to approach them, was the way I painted the wall paintings. So that's the technique I took. There's always been the back and forth between different periods. I don't work in a linear manner. It's like I'm mapping, more than going in a straight line. I'm going in circles, in loops.

GILLES: Something drew my attention when we were looking at those drip paintings from the 1980s, which coincided with the AIDS epidemic ...

NABIL: I think those painting represented their time, and my state of mind back then, more than a specific subject. The younger Lebanese artists were heavily inspired by the war they lived through, and even if I wasn't consciously thinking of the war while painting the drip series, it dawned on me in retrospect that, actually, it was very involved with the situation in Lebanon, although I was living in New York. I mean, it was the result, maybe, of my emotional state during those years, plus you had the AIDS crisis that had started at the same time. When I look at them again, the paintings were pretty loaded with a lot of information referring to those times.

GILLES: Exactly. Now, looking back in retrospect, you know that they were actually loaded with those things. And it's a sort of coincidence that your olive trees today have something very similar to those series. I wanted

to ask you about your relationship to Lebanon – even if you were spending more time in New York – and even more so now, after this very tough year.

NABIL: The situation in Lebanon has been very precarious for several years already, and extremely unstable, but the explosion at the port in Beirut was beyond comprehension. I mean, one-third of the city was totally blitzed. A lot of people died. Friends of ours. This is beyond description. It's still incomprehensible, 10 months later. What happened is still incomprehensible for me on the humanitarian level; witnessing the human suffering that ensued from that was really difficult to cope with. And then, that doubled up by the Covid-19 crisis, which was contained at the time but then got out of hand. The whole world, obviously, is suffering from the Covid crisis, but we had the explosion in the harbour which practically destroyed the city, which was the cherry on the cake.

In relation to the trees, the way they came about wasn't something I expected. It's like when I started the black-and-white drip paintings. The total break was the geometric paintings. I didn't know where they were coming from. I just started making them, and they took over. Here, the paintings took on a very ominous and apocalyptic aspect, which was, again, out of my control. My subconscious was probably working on that one, but not my reason. For me it was a surprise as well. I arrived in Beirut on 3rd August, one day before the blast, and I never consciously did the exercise of trying to digest what happened that day. In retrospect, the olive trees series was undoubtedly my way of trying to express something.

GILLES: Whether it's New York or Beirut, your two homes – both were extremely shaken this year. The US and Lebanon, in two very different ways, were maybe two of the most hectic and most chaotic places to be this year.





NABIL: Yes. I've been living in New York for 50 years, and for the first time ever I was struck this year – especially at the end of the Trump mandate – by the resemblance between Beirut and New York. For me there's always been a lot of similarities between them on the micro/macro level, in terms of the diversity and, at one point, the tolerance that existed, but as we witnessed a few months ago with the takeover of the Capitol, they're more similar than ever today. The polarisation, the rise of extremisms, the fanaticism, and at the same time the incredible power of the youth who want change. Both cities were strangely mirroring each other. I was 21, 22 when I moved to New York after college. At the time, it was an amazing place in terms of creativity, the energy.

It's true that a young Lebanese boy going to study in the States in 1968 was not common at all, but, visually, I was extremely sophisticated when I arrived. From a very young age I was an encyclopaedia of art, and I was aware of the major painters of the New York School, and I was very attracted by the idea of working there. That's what took me there – my fascination with the New York School. When I got to New York, it was very funny – I felt completely at home because I already knew all the iconic buildings. It felt perfectly normal to see. I was at Yale, and I would spend the weekends in New York. I was very quickly thrown into the art scene. I took everything for granted, and then I realised what a fabulous opportunity it was, and very quickly I had my first show, in 1977 at the Robert Miller Gallery. Things went very smoothly for me from then on, and the 1980s were pretty amazing as well. Now New York is like *The Day After* [1983 sci-fi film]. It's *The Day After*. GILLES: Let's come back to Lebanon and to this house, and the way you've conceived your garden. Can you tell us what a normal day would be like for you here? Let's talk about the things you've planted; the animals you're surrounded by. How is this bubble?

NABIL: There wasn't a tree left on the property here. So when I got it, I started planting trees everywhere to hide the neighbouring building. I always liked to be surrounded by animals, so finally, I've ended up with a bunch of cats, dogs, chickens; I've even got some goats.

GILLES: And you've chosen very specific names for the goats.

NABIL: I've given them very common village girls' names, inherited from the French mandate. One is called Rose and the other one is called Georgette. Those were names that were quite common in the village. We had a lot of Roses and a lot of Georgettes, and now we have the goats!

GILLES: And, maybe without intending to, you're living a very sustainable, self-sufficient life.

NABIL: I am – I even plant my own potatoes and I have an orchard. I have my greenhouse as well, and my vegetable garden.

GILLES: This plays a very important role in your cooking. I mean, before this very terrible year – whether it's the pandemic or what's happening in Lebanon – this house was always open, and you really enjoy cooking.

NABIL: Yes, it was an open house; I loved it being filled with friends. Now I'm living a solitary life, which I'm enjoying as well. I can experiment with my cooking. The damage will be restricted to me!

GILLES: This cooking started when you moved to the States, right?

NABIL: Yes, I started cooking when I went to college. God, they were horrible, the first meals I made – but I improved! Cooking is very creative for me; I really enjoy doing it. I like to invent dishes and to fuse dishes. I have a very globalised kitchen.

GILLES: You were saying that, basically, this place moved from being an open house to a place where

you find yourself mostly alone today. How did you make this transition, for someone who likes to be surrounded by people?

NABIL: I like to have people around, but I also really like to be alone, so it's been very easy for me. I was able to work intensely, late into the night.

GILLES: You paint mostly at night. Is it something that was always the case?

NABIL: No, I don't usually paint at night, but there's a lot happening during the daytime as I have a lot of work being done on the house. There's a lot of disturbances, so it's the only quiet that I have. Now that I don't have dinners and what have you, I find it very peaceful to work at night.

GILLES: Facing the main house, if you cross the small road, there's a little church that's almost intact. Can you tell us a bit about that church?

NABIL: That's the family church, and actually it's the family crypt on top of which the church is built. Since the war ended, I had the feeling that Beirut spread and expanded, and I couldn't tell the limits of it, and so even the notion of villages has disappeared. But moving between this house, the garden, the goats, the chickens, and the church, I kind of feel that I've recreated what a Lebanese village used to be.

GILLES: Do you think that our times, today, are somewhere you'd feel comfortable living if you didn't have this bubble? Because these times are so turbulent and hectic and aggressive. Do you think this has become your haven?

NABIL: Totally. Essentially, I'm not at all a political person, but I'm not oblivious to what's happening and the way this country has been, basically, kidnapped by a bunch of gangsters and brought to ruin, and I don't know where it's going. So coming back to this bubble, I feel safe here. And for reasons I can't explain, it gives me hope in this country.

