

NABIL NAHAS: 'Tethys'

Essay by Gilles Khoury

As one discovers Nabil Nahas's world and language, situated somewhere between the material and cosmic realms, it is certain that we are met with a body of work that defies easy categorization, challenging the boundaries of art and inspiring us to unearth a silent and eerie relationship between nature and geometry. Indeed, ever since he established himself in New York in the early '70s, Nabil Nahas, an artist hailing from the Mediterranean, has embarked on a lifelong journey of artistic exploration, drawing inspiration from his roots in Lebanon and Egypt while delving into the realms of color, texture, and his enigmatic take on nature, something that has always fascinated him. His body of work is a testament to his relentless pursuit of artistic expression, transcending the confines of a signature style. What has indeed set his practice apart is the fact that the artist has continuously probed various techniques and themes, while managing to weave together a harmonious and protean body of work.

Nabil Nahas, born in Beirut in 1949, is an artist whose name resonates throughout the art world. Long before contemporary Middle Eastern art gained global recognition, Nahas had established himself as a master of color, texture, and atmosphere in New York's art circles.

Besides, one of the striking aspects of Nahas' career is his refusal to be tethered to a singular artistic style. Unlike many of his contemporaries who are known for a distinct signature style, Nahas has consistently pushed the boundaries of his craft,

juggling between languages he has made his own. Since the early 1970s, he has developed numerous series that transcend traditional artistic norms and on which he works simultaneously. His body of work is fluctuating, with different facets that seamlessly interconnect and communicate with each other in a quasi-mystical manner.

Nahas's artistic exploration spans a wide spectrum of themes and concepts. His work dances at the intersection of extremes, playing with size, scale, texture, and seemingly opposing ideas. He masterfully navigates the realms of natural and artificial, microscopic and macroscopic, geometric and organic, material and immaterial, all while exuding a profound sense of spirituality. This confluence, in effect, gives rise to a sense of mysticism that permeates his art. His artistic journey is marked by a constant oscillation between eras and materials, resulting in paintings that, though apparently distant from one another, consistently reveal his unwavering fascination with the natural world and geometry. Each series introduces a new way of painting, a new method altogether, as a direct response to his evolving subject matter.

At the heart of Nahas's artistic journey lies his Fractal series, a collection that began in 1991, triggered by the aftermath of Hurricane Bob. The artist was deeply moved by the apocalyptic landscape of marine life strewn along the beach. Drawing inspiration from this surreal scene, Nahas covered his canvases with starfish, creating compositions that bore a striking resemblance to motifs found in Islamic Art. These fractal paintings are a manifestation of Nahas's deeply personal geometry, unfolding in mesmerizing patterns that defy conventional boundaries and envelop his paintings with something meditative.

The monumental and moving nature of Nahas's work has earned him a place on the global stage. His pieces, for which he created a technique of his own, have been exhibited extensively, gracing renowned institutions such as the Tate Modern in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Nahas's art stands out not only for its magnetic and somehow magical features but also for his innovative use of color.

Color, for Nahas, is more than a visual element; it is a medium in its own right. Layers of color are applied with textured intensity, imbuing his paintings with an ethereal luminosity that transcends the conventional. His works are a visual rhythm of hues and shades, applied in layered textures that give his paintings a dimension, a texture that goes beyond the two-dimensional canvas.

As we immerse ourselves in Nahas's 'Tethys' exhibition at the Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Dubai, we are invited to explore the intricate relationship between geometry and nature in his recent works. The title 'Tethys' refers to the rich history of the Tethys Sea – an enigmatic body of water that once extended across what is now known as the Mediterranean region, the Middle East, and parts of Asia. This ancient sea holds a pivotal place in the annals of our planet's geological and biological evolution. According to Greek mythology, Tethys emerged as the offspring of Uranus and Gaia. Intriguingly, she occupied a dual role as both the sister and spouse of the Titan Oceanus, and she played a vital role as the nurturing mother of the river gods and the Oceanids.

In the 'Tethys' exhibition, this historical reference goes beyond mere nomenclature. It serves as a link between the artistic oeuvre of Nahas and the enduring mysteries of the Tethys Sea. Nahas, renowned for his exceptional use of metallic and earthy hues, -particularly prominent in his fractal paintings showing at the Lawrie Shabibi space-, has succeeded in creating a distinctive artistic landscape. His own sceneries that exist in a captivating space, suspended between the domains of marine and geology. Much like the ancient Tethys Sea left a mark on our planet's geological and biological evolution, Nahas's artwork conjures a space where mythology converges with reality, mirroring the timeless dialogue between humanity and the cosmos.

The exhibition is divided into two distinct parts, each offering a unique perspective on Nahas's work. In the first part, Nahas presents his fractal paintings, a hint to the cycles of nature. His subject is drawn from celestial and marine phenomena, and his multi-layered paintings evoke a sense of biomorphic and organic forms. Nahas's art acts as a bridge between the microscopic and macroscopic worlds, emphasizing the interconnectedness of nature's various scales.

The second part of 'Tethys' focuses on Nahas's portrayal of the emblematic trees of Lebanon, the Landscape series. These trees hold a special place in Nahas's heart, as they evoke memories of his childhood in Lebanon. From palm trees along the coast to ancient Lebanese cedar trees or olive trees that he collects, Nahas approaches these subjects as "portraits." This unique perspective magnifies their presence, creating a sense of gravitas that pays homage to their historical and cultural significance.

However, it was a tragic event that marked a pivotal moment in Nahas's artistic journey—the double explosion in Beirut on August 4, 2020. This devastating event, amidst a year of crises and pandemics, prompted Nahas to embark on his olive tree series. His approach to art is instinctual and visceral, driven by his subconscious rather than meticulous planning. The resulting artworks, characterized by shifting black tones and bold, gestural strokes, reflect the turmoil within Nahas's own psyche. These paintings take on a corporeal quality, almost carnal in their intensity, as they stand as silent witnesses to the chaos. They embody an inexplicable strength that is both proud and tormented.

These olive trees, in particular, appear battered by an invisible storm, their twisted forms evoking a sense of resilience and defiance in the face of adversity. Behind them, the colors shift from fiery red to blood red, casting an eerie illumination on the scene. The trees, still standing amidst what seems like an apocalypse, symbolize a fusion of rage and courage.

In Nahas's landscape series more generally, it is as though the creative magic within his soul has rooted these trees in a cosmic dialogue. His sculpture-like cedars, his whimsical palm trees illuminated by iridescent moons—transcend the realm of the physical and reach into the metaphysical, inviting viewers to contemplate the profound connection between humanity and nature.

As we navigate the complexities of Nahas's "Tethys" exhibition, we feel that Nahas' art serves as a reminder of our place within the vastness of the universe, urging us to interrogate the mysteries of nature and the profound beauty that can emerge from the interplay of opposites. In 'Tethys', the artist offers us indeed a glimpse into

the mystical realm of his artistry, where the boundaries between the physical and metaphysical blur, and where the timeless dialogue between humanity and the cosmos continues.

Nahas's impact extends far beyond the gallery walls. In recognition of his significant contributions to Lebanese culture, he was awarded the National Order of the Cedar in July 2013. His works can be found in prestigious collections around the world, including the Tate Modern in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the British Museum in London, among others.

Nabil Nahas's 'Tethys' exhibition at the Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Dubai is, for that matter, a testament to his artistic prowess and his ability to bridge the realms of nature and geometry. His protean body of work challenges conventional artistic norms, inviting viewers to contemplate the interconnectedness of all things. As we stand before his mesmerizing fractals and haunting tree portraits, we are reminded of the enduring dialogue between humanity and the cosmos – a dialogue that Nahas captures with unparalleled grace and beauty, illuminating his paintings with color, his invisible light.