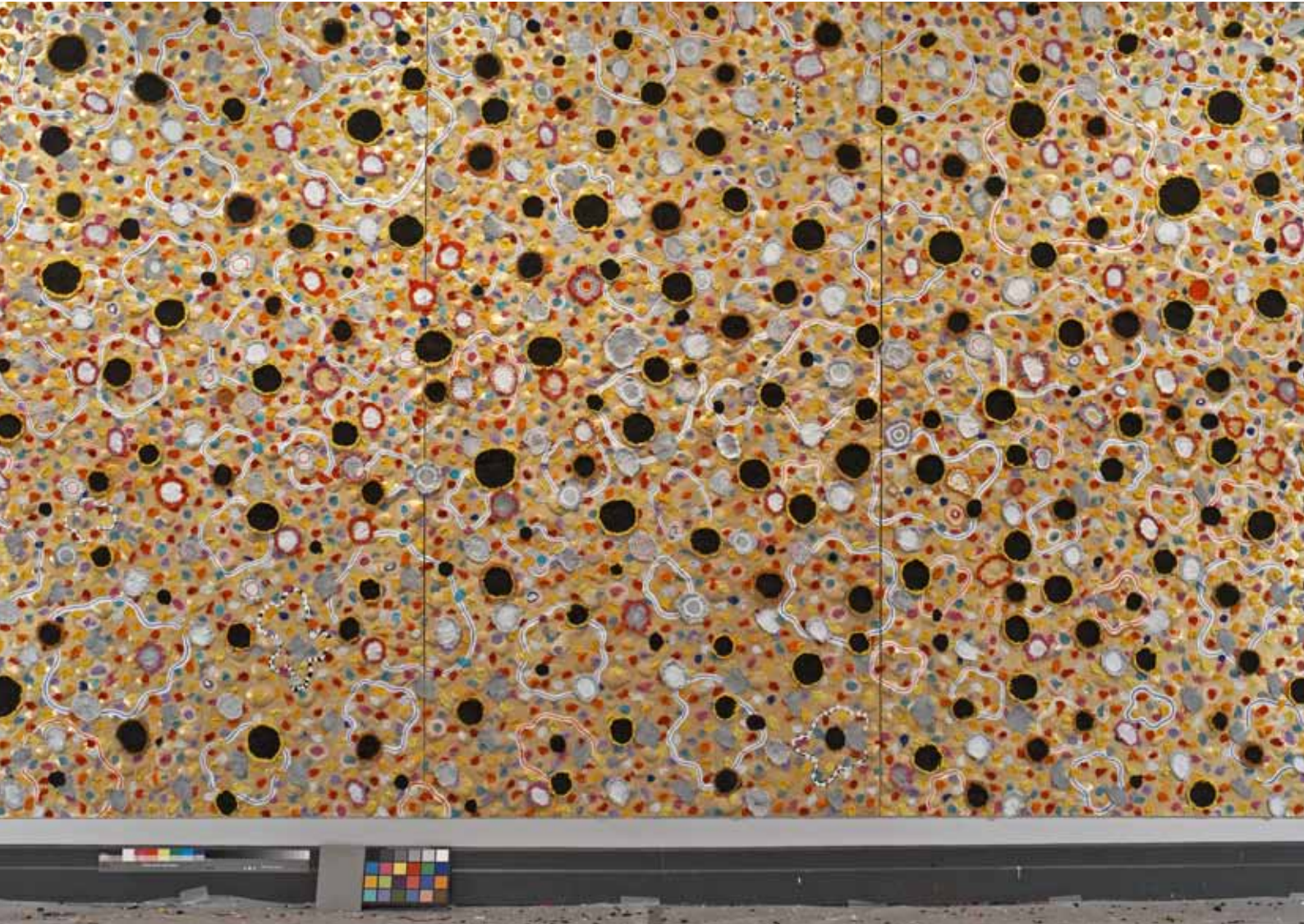


# Nabil Nahas

*By William Lawrie*



**Nabil Nahas - Opium & Candy** 2005 .9x15> . (274,3x457,2

Well before the current heightened interest in contemporary art of the Middle East, Nahas had established his reputation in New York art circles as a master of colour, texture and atmosphere. Although thoroughly schooled in Western abstract painting, Nahas takes his inspiration from a diverse range of influences, most significantly nature, and

occasionally Islamic art, in particular its abstract geometric and chromatic qualities.

Most often working in an abstract idiom, he denies being a fully abstract artist. Nahas has moved through various themes and media in his continual need for self-re-invention. Nahas is not an artist to be tied to one 'signature style'. Not only does

he often work in more than one style concurrently, so too does he return to themes and techniques, sometimes after considerable time intervals. It is this flux of ideas that links his works from various periods. Also characteristic of his work is the high degree of technical finish he lavishes on his paintings, regardless of theme or media.

Active since the 1970s he has worked in many styles and themes but at none of these stages work is his work transitional- each stage is fully-formed with its own concepts and techniques specific to it.

Much of Nahas' work mimics the natural world without illustrating. He is a technician, decorator and artist, constantly experimenting with different pigments of various densities and an array of materials. Nahas is acutely aware of the technical element in his paintings, but that does not prevent him from making light of it. As he himself jokingly referred to one of his works "the cooking had to be perfect" 1. Nahas is not one for false modesty or pretensions. Although a perfectionist, Nahas is a very instinctive artist, his breakthrough ideas coming to him usually by accident. He then employs his considerable technical skills to find the right method and medium to develop these concepts.

Nahas' large-scale works and sometime use of gesture draw comparisons to Jackson Pollock. Often one to draw parallels and visual connections, Nahas compares the viewer's subliminal experience before a Pollock to that felt when beneath a murqanas (stalactite vaulted) ceiling in the Alhambra. 2 This helps explain much of Nahas's work.

Of his many series those for which he is best known are his thickly encrusted starfish and "Fractal" paintings, built up by layer upon layer of acrylic paint mixed with pumice and finished in vivid colours, and also his landscapes, which are expressive portraits of cedars, olive trees and palms, which reconnect him to the places of his childhood, Lebanon and Egypt. Born in 1949 in Beirut, Nahas spent the first ten years of his life in Cairo. It was here that his father, a textile manufacturer, took him to visit his textile

mills, where the colours of the fabric and the looms made a strong impression on the young Nahas. So too was he fascinated by the ancient sites around the city, in particular the Pyramids and the Sphinx, and upon his return to Beirut, aged ten, he spent much time at his mother's boutique "Amethyst" which sold crystals and fossils. All of these were formative experiences.

Nahas made the decision to go to the United States for his fine art education, an unusual choice at the time, when many of his contemporaries from Lebanon went to Paris or elsewhere in Europe for their studies. Nahas first completed a BFA from Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge in 1971 and then an MFA from Yale University in 1973. It was during his time at Yale that Nahas encountered many of the most prominent contemporary artists of the time, including Al Held, Robert Rauschenberg, Frank Stella, Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein, and Brice Marden. As he explains "artists were visiting all the time at Yale. The great thing was meeting those people, those mythical names and then seeing they're just like you and me, that the life of an artist is a possibility" 3.

This experience compelled him to move to New York after graduation from where he has been based ever since.

When discussing his oeuvre, the importance of Nahas' time at Yale cannot be underestimated. Coming into contact with significant artists and commentators, this is the backdrop against which his early paintings are set and to some extent informs much of his subsequent work.

The dominant critical theory of the 1970s was still that of the arch modernist Clement Greenberg. According to Greenburg abstraction was paramount. Figural representation of any kind, pictorial devices such as chiaroscuro and perspective and even using a brush in the traditional sense were considered retrograde. When Nahas moved to New York after Yale, he found the reality of current artist practice was more nuanced. Greenburg's theories still persisted to some extent, either to be accepted or reacted against.

1- Vincent Katz, "Fluid Stasis: The Progression of Nabil Nahas", Nabil Nahas: Paintings 1990-2002-, J. Johnson Gallery, 2002

2- Yasmine Mohseni, "Nature and Beyond: Nabil Nahas", Canvas Magazine, 1 December 2008

3- Vincent Katz, "Nabil Nahas: Perpetual Energy", Nabil Nahas: Works 1970-2010, Beirut Exhibition Center 2010



**Nabil Nahas - "Untitled".** 2010 Acrylic on canvas. 213x275cm

Of all the artists he encountered at Yale, his mentor Al Held had the most influence on his early work. In Nahas' first exhibition, held at the Robert Miller Gallery in 1977, the influence of Held's hard-edged geometric works was apparent in Nahas' very carefully worked paintings. In these canvasses, although the geometry seems derived from Euclidean forms (triangles and pyramids), the superimposition of the shapes and their all-over arrangement lends them a decorative effect more akin to Islamic patterning. The colouring and compositions of the earlier works are extremely subtle. Later works from the series are increasingly bold in colour and executed with a broader touch, becoming brighter and more thickly layered.

Total transformation came quite suddenly:

"One day I was painting the geometric pictures and I started painting black canvases. It was very interesting because it was like someone else was painting the pictures, not me and I was very curious

to see what the hell was actually going on!"<sup>4</sup>

This was 1982, which fell in perhaps the worst period of the Lebanese civil war. Just a few months earlier, on 17 July 1981, Israel had bombed a civilian apartment building and now their conflict with Palestinian Liberation Organization had made Lebanon their battleground. This could help explain his dark mood.

These works were completely free of the influence of likes of Greenberg and Stella. On the large black canvases Nahas scrawled or dripped vertical white marks. These are the only compositional features. There is something primeval about them, recalling as they do the attenuated figures of Giacometti or the outlines of fossils or animals in cave painting.

In his abstract untitled paintings of the late 1980s gold is introduced into his black canvasses, giving luminosity and a sense of depth. In colour, tone and technique they anticipate his recent landscape

4- Vincent Katz, "Nabil Nahas: Perpetual Energy", Nabil Nahas: Works 1970-2010, Beirut Exhibition Center 2010

paintings. Closest to them is *Centaur*, a work from 1988. Here, a looming vertical black shape in the centre is set against a shimmering gold ground, giving a clue to his recent landscape works with their vertical trunks set against contrasting ground. However, this further transformation was to take another twenty years.

The “Circle” paintings of the late 1980s-early 1990s came about by accident. By dropping water repellent on to still-wet acrylic, Nahas noticed a circular mark was formed with concentric rings of pigment of various densities. Nahas then multiplied these drops and spread them randomly across the canvas. These works mimic the effect seen in wet sand once the waves have rolled off it, leaving its surface peppered with small holes. At the same time, he explains, “the result was a galactic image which made me link *Microcosm* to *Macrocosm*, which was to become an important aspect of the [later] *Fractal* paintings.”

It was while making one of these paintings, a diptych, that in 1991 a breakthrough occurred. Like many New York artists since the 1960s, Nahas has long sought temporary refuge from the city in the Hamptons in Long Island. While walking down a beach in Southampton after a recent storm, Nahas found the shoreline completely littered with the bodies of countless starfish. Fascinated by the random composition they made against the wet sand, Nahas attached a starfish body to one of the panels of this diptych, itself part of the “Circle” series. This was a pivotal work and he knew it, thus entitling it *Eureka*. Typically, he wears this lightly “could be a link- if we wanted it to”.<sup>5</sup>

The starfish carries symbolic value. Along with the heavenly connotations of the star itself, the five-pointed form recalls the ideal man of Vitruvius and Leonardo. The pentagram also underpins much of the geometric patterning found in Islamic art and architecture.

In the first two years of this series Nahas used real starfish, but found the quantities needed prohibitive. First he had to buy the starfish rather than find them, and when even this was not sufficient he began

to cast their forms from acrylic. As their numbers multiplied he began to conceal the starfish bodies through colour and a variety of textured finishes.

Looking to thicken the paint and further explore texture, another breakthrough work came in 1997, entitled *Silver Wind*. Here for the first time Nahas mixed ground pumice with acrylic, building up a thick encrusted surface in psychedelic colours. This set the tone for the next few years. Working across a variety of sizes these paintings are of different scales and moods. The smallest of these, with their roughness of texture and tightly packed irregular forms, are like windows into the underwater world of coral reefs, the surface resembling clusters of mussels or coral reef, the bright colours recalling the dappled light of tropic waters. Quite different are larger paintings, which overpower the viewer like the encrusted surface of a leviathan.



5- Vincent Katz, “Fluid Stasis: The Progression of Nabil Nahas”, Nabil Nahas: Paintings 1990-2002-, J. Johnson Gallery, 2002

**Nabil Nahas - Untitled** 1994. Echinoderms and Acrylic on canvas. 153x122cm

In these works Nahas' painterly accretions imitate the encrustations seen in the natural world. He calls these paintings his "Fractal" series, a reference to the theories of Benoit Mandelbrot, who coined the phrase in 1975. It describes random events in nature, which deviate from the ideal Euclidean geometry. In physical terms it refers to a rough or fragmented geometric shape, which can be split into parts of which each part is at least approximately a reduced size copy of the whole. As Benoit points out "Clouds are not spheres; mountains are not cones; coastlines are not circles, and bark is not smooth. Nor does lightning travel in a straight line"<sup>6</sup>. For artists, Chaos Theory, quantum mechanics and fractal geometry were a further nail in the coffin of Greenbergian modernism.

There are various phases of this series in which Nahas switches between bright and dark colours, creating a range of moods. Some of the earliest of these employ a limited range of colours with densely packed shapes, carrying names drawn from classical Greek literature (Orpheus and Echo for example). By the mid 2000s Nahas was naming them with humorous titles of things they loosely resemble or call to mind. From this period come his monumental Candy and Opium and Opium and Candy triptychs, huge ambitious works exhibited at his New York gallery Sperone and Westwater. The black "shells" on the coloured grounds resemble poppies among pick-and-mix candies.

Starting from the late-2000s a new phase of his began. Through his paintings of trees, which Nahas calls his "Landscapes", he reconnects to Lebanon and to Egypt, where he spent his childhood years. Cedars from the high altitudes of the Lebanese mountains, olives from the Mediterranean coast and palm trees from the coasts and deserts form his repertoire. We never sees the trees in their totality. Instead Nahas' viewpoint is up close. Cropped and foreshortened, his cedars tower above the viewer, whilst in his olive trees and palms he concentrates on the trunks, with their gnarled and uneven textures. The effect is visceral. With their lack of symmetry and with

their similar yet irregular repeated features there are undeniable links to his "Fractal" paintings.

At the same time as painting these landscapes Nahas has returned to his heavily encrusted technique, but instead of the all-over effect of the earlier works, the elements are kept in a state of flux, joined together by rings, whorls and lines which, though on a larger scale, recall those of the "Circle" paintings. In these works no two parts of the canvas are treated the same. In one work Nahas will use a range of colours and differences of scale, where the features appear almost like those on a map, linked by paths and roads. Alternative readings are possible- they also recall the interconnections between cells and even "galactic cloud chambers"<sup>7</sup>.

Today Nabil Nahas still continues in these themes, but as an ever-exploring and curious artist at any moment these are likely to morph into something new. Nahas would not want it any other way.

Nabil Nahas has exhibited regularly at important New York galleries, including Robert Miller, Holly Solomon and Sperone Westwater, and in Galerie Tanit in Hamburg and Agial Gallery in Beirut, and at museums including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Katzen Centre, and the American University Art Museum. His works can be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Vorhees Zimmerli Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the Colby College Museum of Art, Maine, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, the Flint Institute of Art, Michigan, and the Michigan Museum of Art UMMA.

Recently a major retrospective of Nabil Nahas' paintings was shown at the newly inaugurated at the Beirut Exhibition Center. Held from 22 June – 22 August 2010, this was its first exhibition and a fitting tribute to one of Lebanon's most outstanding artists.

6- Vincent Katz, "Nabil Nahas: Perpetual Energy", Nabil Nahas: Works 1970-2010, Beirut Exhibition Center 2010

7- Carter Ratcliff, "Nabil Nahas: A Painter's oeuvre considered as a Landscape", Nabil Nahas: Works 1970-2010-, Beirut Exhibition Center 2010

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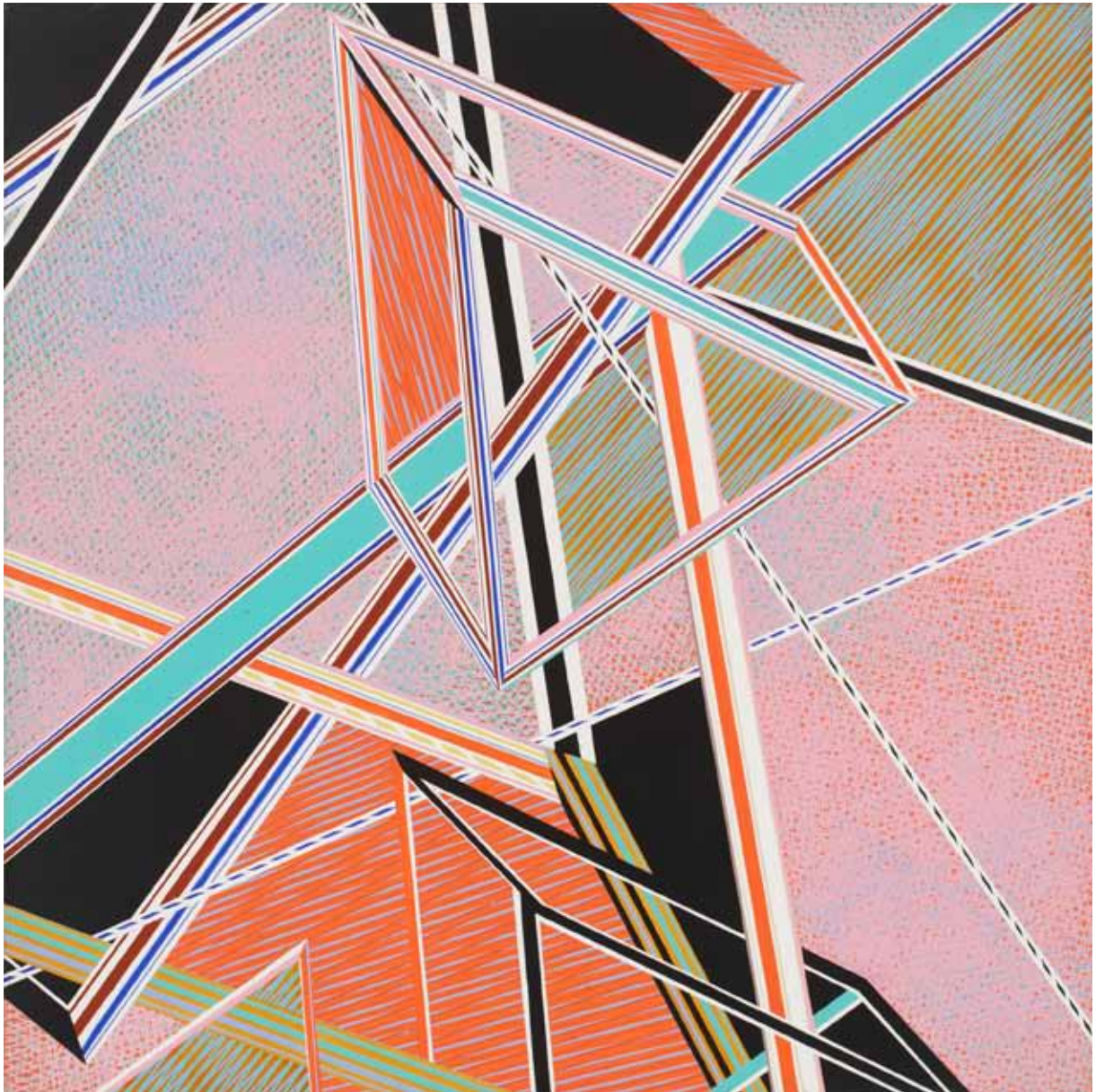
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**Nabil Nahas - Untitled** 48x48». Acrylic on canvas. 1979