

Looking and Thinking

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If you're not at least a little bit puzzled by the art of Nabil Nahas, you're doing something wrong. It means, that is—and I hope you won't mind if I'm quite frank—you're either not looking hard enough or not thinking hard enough.

Yes, I can understand some of the reasons one might have for looking or thinking in somewhat superficial ways. The most understandable of them, when it comes to Nahas's paintings, would be that you were knocked silly by the sheer gorgeousness of the, that the opulence and beauty of their surfaces was so overwhelming that you simply lost track of your critical faculties while reveling in their delicious excess—understandable, but no less of a mistake. One commentator who's understood this implicitly is Vincent Katz, who once observed that Nahas "is equal parts technician, decorator, and artist." That's beautifully said, but while these three characters may all be combined in one person, they are not equals. It is possible to luxuriate in what the decorator has provided, or be wowed by what the technician has accomplished, without comprehending what the artist has achieved; but you cannot appreciate the artist without taking note of the technician and the decorator. And to appreciate the artist's work, you must remember that "to see is to think," as Etel Adnan wrote in her book *Seasons*, excerpted in the catalogue for Nahas's exhibition at New York's FIAF Gallery in 2010. And to think is to wonder. What are you looking at when you look at these paintings? Are they paintings—rather than, I don't know, flattish sculptures? And how is that they make the experience of color—optical, as art criticism used to tell us—into something so insistently tactile? Why is that something accomplished with so much artifice and effort can so nearly approximate the concoctions of the natural world, in works that seem to have grown by accretion like coral reefs?

Here one might recall the famous words of Jackson Pollock, when asked why he didn't paint from nature: I am nature. Much has been said about those words over the years, perhaps too much, but what's all too rarely noted about them is that every single one of us would have had the right to say the same. No human being is anything other than a part of the one natural order we are all so blindly continuing to degrade and disrupt. And yet our felt need, as a culture, to remember our belonging to nature has only become more intense over the past century—perhaps especially since the First World War when, as Paul Valéry said, civilizations learned to recognize that they were mortal (that is to say, suicidal). Certainly it's been since that time that artists have more and more come to think that their task should be to imitate, not the appearance of nature, but its processes. There are works by Nahas that fulfill this desideratum as much as any I know, and more than most.

The paradox is that Nahas reminds us most of nature just when he is reminding us most of the artifice that is invested in his work. That often happens via color, which can sometimes put you in mind of just those phenomena in nature you'd swear could only be artificial—the hues of a neon tetra, for instance. So I was more than a little surprised to learn for the first time recently of his paintings of the '80s—moody, romantic, deeply shadowed works in which color is reduced to a minimum. And yet on second thought I should not have been as surprised as all that, for in the last few years he has been engaged, alongside his other ongoing series, in painting images of trees—the cedars and palms of his native Lebanon—that, while generally much less dark in color than those stormy, nocturnal abstractions of the '80s, nevertheless have much in common with them, including a de-emphasis on chroma. These recent paintings with their abundant landscape recollections are nonetheless characterized by a high degree of abstraction and, like almost all the artist's other work, they are untitled, as if to insist on the fact that their subjects must remain ambiguous, no matter how much he (or the viewer) might like to insist on emphasizing a sense of return, of homecoming, in their character.

In fact, Nahas made a very telling remark to me when I was visiting his studio recently, to the effect that the abstract paintings he has been engaged in making do not necessarily embody a turn away from representation of the phenomenal world but instead can be seen as representing it on a microcosmic scale (in the paintings related to the series that Nahas refers to as “fractal” paintings) or a macrocosmic scale (those work that follow in the lineage of his 2004 work *Candy & Opium* and may be exemplified more recently by such paintings as the playfully titled *Kwak*, 2013, or *Peekaboo*, 2013, works which seem to evoke swirling galaxies and the echoing light of stars as translated by Vincent van Gogh). And furthermore he suggested that the gesturally dramatic paintings of trees merely return (for the first time in this artist's mature work, it's true) to the everyday scale of nature as we see it with the naked eye, rather than through the lens of either the telescope or the microscope. The remark is not to be taken literally, for as Carter Ratcliff has pointed out before, “Micro and macro are interchangeable in Nahas's universe,” and in it, “Grandly architectural is also molecular.” But it does serve to remind us that Nahas's abstraction is not one that turns its back on the things of this world; rather, its attempt is to evoke a far greater range of phenomena than traditional representation can encompass. At the same time, Nahas's statement helps us see that this apparent “return” to representation is not a complete departure from, not at all tangential to the many years of abstract work that precede it and that continue to accompany it, but somewhere near its still-to-be-discovered center.

Moreover, even as the landscape paintings recall the ancient terrain of Nahas's ancestry, in which he grew up from the age of 10 (having lived until then with his family in Cairo) until coming to the United States as a university student in 19??, they

are filled with many other recollections as well. I for one cannot forget, when looking at them, that the young man's desire to study in the New World was stimulated by his interest in the art of the Abstract Expressionists. Of course he did not yet know their work at first hand. "I had acquired a book surveying contemporary abstract art of the 1950s, covering Europe and the United States," he told Katz. "I preferred the New York School (Pollock and Rothko) to that of Paris (Soulages or Manessier)." Studying at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge may have brought him only marginally closer to the epicenter of the New York School than he had been in Beirut, but going on from there to get his MFA at Yale was another thing. Here he became close to Al Held, who really had been an Abstract Expressionist (of the second generation), though we tend to forget this because of his subsequent turn toward hard-edged geometry. Though Abstract Expressionism was probably seen as somewhat *passé* by the time Nahas came close enough to it to really understand, under the skin as it were, what it was really about, he did imbibe something of its spirit, whether through Held or in some other way. Yet only now, some four decades later, in painting trees, has Nahas revealed his deep affinity with the Abstract Expressionists. Echoes of their work may be easily detected everywhere in these paintings, above all through their bluntly gestural approach to constructing an image—echoes in particular of Franz Kline, but also more faintly of others such as Philip Guston. This is a landscape filtered through abstraction, and not only that, but filtered through the history of abstraction. Well, and why not, seeing as how Nahas's work in abstraction is filtered through a love of the sea, the sky, and the earth?

Commentators often seem fazed by how to account for the multiplicity of Nahas's oeuvre, the way he has moved through so many distinct styles, starting from the geometrically linear paintings he was producing in the 1970s, perhaps influenced somewhat by Held but more so, I'd say, by another prominent teacher at Yale who had already retired by the time Nahas arrived (and also, like Held, a kind of reformed Abstract Expressionist), namely Jack Tworok, and on through the dark, dense, brooding expressionism of the '80s to the high artifice teeming with naturalistic references of his abstraction of the past two decades, more recently supplemented by quasi-landscapes. No one would deny Matisse or Picasso or de Kooning their protean mutability but today we have become used to artists being more careful about cultivating their brands. As for me, I'm glad that Nahas is becoming ever less predictable and that his art embraces so many distinct approaches to our common reality without trying to tie them all together in a single encompassing style. If witnessing him switching from one kind of painting to another throws you off balance, maybe that's all to the good. It takes a bit of bemusement, a quantum of confusion to help a person remember to stay alert—to keep looking and thinking with care.