

# Nabil Nahas

Palms and Stars

13 March – 13 April 2011

sharpening



Lawrie Shabibi focuses on both established and emerging contemporary artists from the Arab world, Iran, North Africa, South Asia and Turkey.

Founded in 2009 by William Lawrie (former director of contemporary art at Christie's) and Asmaa Al-Shabibi (former managing director of Art Dubai), Palms and Stars by Nabil Nahas is the gallery's debut exhibition. The gallery will continue to engage the public with art that imparts a cultural and political discourse intertwined with a powerful aesthetic.

The gallery also provides art advisory services for discerning collectors looking to acquire unique works of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art.

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## when things come full circle

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When asked by the New York gallerist David Mann to comment on Warhol's soup can paintings, Marcel Duchamp, arguably the father of conceptual art said: "If you take a Campbell soup can and repeat it fifty times, you are not interested in the retinal image. What interests you is the concept that wants to put fifty Campbell soup cans on a canvas." With those words, the re-inventor of la pissotière relegated Warhol into a conceptual artist. Greenberg, however, brushed it off as a form of "predigestion" or Kitsch which, according to him, borrows from the popular culture of mass production and is easy to understand and, therefore, to sell.

We art historians and the rest of us who are closely affiliated to art, are plagued with a chronic proclivity to stylistic lineage. When confronted by an object that eludes our proverbial demarcations of period and genre, we are propelled into a garrulous, sometimes contrived expiatory mission that seeks to exonerate the artist in question from the cardinal sin of creative individualism.

Nabil Nahas fits all too well the bill of such artistic singularity. His aesthetic sensibility and stylistic evolution are replete with a thread of rigorous reinventions that are at times, a traceable bifurcation and at others consummate ruptures. Yet, it is not only his chameleon-like formalistic meanderings that render our too well informed attempts to classify his work challenging to say the least. More so, it is Nahas's obstinacy against any confinement within a specific painterly style or school that pause a challenge to our art-critical categorizations.

In the literature that has been written about Nahas's four-decade career, numerous correlations have been put forward between his work and that of several others. To enumerate even the half of them is beyond the scope of this essay. What comes across however, upon consulting these writings, is a disparate and at times desperate attempt to contextualize an artist who seems to be intransigent to traditional classification. And this is exactly where the genius of Nahas's work lies. The eclecticism that one encounters in the parallelisms that have been drawn between the artist's vast oeuvre and those of his predecessors and contemporaries reveals a rare virtuosity in mastering and molding endless artistic styles to come forth, not with a thin veneer of some hesitant byproduct, nor with a hybridized form of expression, but rather with a piercingly individualistic voice that is rightfully the artist's own and nobody else's. In dissecting his work, curators have likened him to characters as dispersed as the symbolist Odilon Redon

and the abstract expressionist Joan Mitchell. Critics have gone to such exacting measures in order to link him with such ancient traditions as those of the Phoenicians of the eastern Mediterranean, Byzantine mosaics and Moorish covered ceilings. And there is of course the obvious connection that keeps popping up: that to the American school of abstraction, both geometric and painterly due to studying under Al Held in the early seventies at Yale where he came to meet the likes of Stella, Poons and Marden amongst others.

In all fairness, many of these connections are not entirely unsolicited. Both, the assiduous drive towards broadening his fields of experimentation, alongside a conterminous geographical framework of origin, professional development and cultural influence have contributed to the elucidation of Nahas's work within the congruent parameters of mainstream artistic practice and the bolder lines of respective cultural traditions. Yet to stop just at that would be an erroneous shifting of the creative locus within this multilayered chain of imaginative outbursts.

The innovative thrust that defines Nabil Nahas's work emanates not from a conscious alignment with the canonical movements of posterity, modernity or contemporaneity. Nor is his unwavering desire to expand the vernacular of his aesthetic indicative of an artist seeking to be in vogue. But, it is as though there was a deep-seated ontological restlessness carved within his creative faculties that urge him to constantly shake off what he has learned and perfected in search of the unfamiliar and seemingly imperfect. This dissatisfaction with the "tried and tested" and "proven to work", so to speak, is the underlying catalyst that comes first and foremost at every juncture when a shift has occurred in the artist's stylistic trajectory. This impetus was there when his hard geometric abstractions adopted more painterly gestures in the late seventies and early eighties. It was also present throughout most of the eighties which he spent painting his large-scale gold wash black canvases. The same drive alerted him to the possibility of transforming a technical glitch, water repellent falling on a freshly painted canvas, into a full-blown departure: the circle paintings of the late eighties and early nineties. And of course, it requires the workings of a restless creative soul, ever discontent with its own achievements to fathom what has become Nahas's signature statement: the starfish and the fractal paintings that resulted from an encounter with nature at the beach in Southampton in 1991. The rest is, history? Maybe if this were some other artist, but not with Nahas.

In *Palms and Stars*, Nahas summons us to a face-off with his untiring self-subversion. Here we encounter an opening up of the canvas, brilliantly achieved with expanses of white and a lighter palette of varying tints of yellow, orange, green, and blue that are very different in temperature than his trademark bold aesthetic. There is lightness in texture, "alloverness" in brushstroke that, at first sight, seem to be in sharp contrast with his thoughtfully crafted accretions. Yet, upon closer inspection, the viewer begins to witness a coming together of so many nuanced elements that make subtle references to an array of snippets from the various formal episodes that marked his ongoing career. The geometric patterns of the late seventies are employed to depict the wild interplay of the palm branches and the shadows that they cast. The linear white and grey graffiti-like markings from his vertical paintings of the early eighties have evolved into uninterrupted lines of paint that vertically expand beyond the physical realm of the canvas. Even the organic geometry of his starfish is subtly present in the natural geometry of the tree trunks. In *Palms and Stars*, Nahas has conjured the diverse voices of an intended stylistic dissonance that he willfully constructed over decades, and orchestrated them into a chorus of harmonious unison.

As I gaze into these new works, my memory takes me back to the day I met Nabil in his Studio. It was a grey afternoon in New York. Drizzle, a chilly wind blowing from the Hudson and patches of snow-turned-ice still lingering from the blizzard of the previous week. With my neck tucked deep between my shrugged shoulders, the words of Albert Camus were coming to me: "Sometimes, from beyond the skyscrapers, the cry of a tugboat finds you in your insomnia, and you remember that this desert of iron and cement is an island." A monumental Chelsea Wharf, a catacomb of hallways and I find myself in front of a cold grey metal door. I ring the bell. I wait. Nabil Nahas opens the door and welcomes me into his studio. The gloominess of the day outside makes the contrast with the art-filled interior more pronounced and gladly welcome. We chat, we drink coffee, and we look at paintings that span several decades. I leave. One sentence keeps resonating in my head: "It's all coming full circle." On that island, on that gloomy afternoon, things were falling into place for Nabil Nahas. Through *Palms and Stars* it is evident that things have come full circle indeed! But only for now... the big island is way too small for this restless soul.

*Munich, February 2011*