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## Ahmad Minkara Interviews Lebanese-American Artist Nabil Nahas

POSTED ON: MAY 20, 2016

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A long and winding road

Ahead of his new show, which opens on May 20 at the Saleh Barakat Gallery, Nabil Nahas talks early influences, Lebanese landscapes and unexpected departures of style with Ahmad Minkara.

*Untitled, 150x150cm, acrylic on canvas, 2011*

A return to his native Lebanon in the 1990s after a lengthy absence would prove to be significant for the artist Nabil Nahas on many levels.

First, there was the new inspiration it brought in the form of majestic mountainous landscapes, dotted with cedar trees. And then there was a meeting with Saleh Barakat, art expert, curator and owner of the Agial Gallery, which would signal a turning point for Lebanon's most famous living painter. "Saleh was instrumental in raising my profile in the Middle East," Nahas notes.

With artist and curator having formed a close bond over the years, the fact that Barakat will mark the opening of his second gallery on Friday May 20 with an exhibition of Nahas's work is somewhat fitting.

The inauguration of the Saleh Barakat Gallery has been timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the Agial while, on his part, Nahas made a pledge a while back to show his work at the new space.

As milestones go, Nahas's latest exhibition represents a landmark in a long and varied career, which began when a young boy, passionate about art, devoured Skira Art Books in a bid to feed his thirst for knowledge.

"Growing up in Lebanon in the 1950s and 1960s when we had no museums of fine art was a challenge and the internet of course was still decades away," he notes.

*Untitled, 152x122cm, acrylic on canvas, 2008*

Nahas moved to the US in 1968, aged 19, inspired by the School of New York and a "love for Rothko and Pollock". He explains that American abstract art held a particular appeal, seeming to have a spiritual dimension that made it more "romantic and other-worldly" than the Paris movement.

While New York was always the goal, it would be a few years before Nahas moved to the East Coast. Initially, he settled in Louisiana, where his aunt lived, and attended the state university in Baton Rouge, gaining a Bachelor's Degree in Fine Arts. Later, he took up a place at Yale, where he obtained a Masters in Fine Arts.

The move to Yale broadened Nahas's horizons and brought him into contact with myriad leading talents. "Top artists came to Yale from all over the world to do artist's residencies," he explains. "I got to know them all."

After graduating, Nahas moved to New York City and settled in Tribeca, where he continued to develop his individual style, with its hallmark abstract, geometric and chromatic qualities. His broad range of influences, use of colour, layered texture and ability to evoke atmosphere, were of particular note. "I was one of the pioneers of Tribeca," he notes, with a smile. "It was a no-man's-land back then!" Indeed, today, he retains the same address on Franklin street.

In the 1970s, Nahas began holding regular exhibitions at the Robert Miller Gallery, while the 1980s saw him team up with prominent collector of contemporary art and gallery founder, the late Holly Solomon. In more recent times, he has worked closely with the Sperone Westwater Gallery, holding his first solo show there in 1997.

*Candy and Opium, 272x458.5cm, acrylic on canvas, 2005*

The end of the civil war in Lebanon prompted Nahas to revisit his birthplace, eventually resulting in a landmark first show in the Middle East at the Beirut Exhibition Center in 2010. Curated by Vincent Katz, son of the late painter Alex Katz, the retrospective, non-commercial show was titled “Perpetual Energy”.

The homecoming provided Nahas with a wealth of new ideas and a rethinking of his style. “I fell in love with the landscaping,” he says. “I would drive through the winding roads of the Lebanese mountains wishing that I was a landscape painter.”

Inspired by the nature of his childhood, Nahas began producing iconoclastic paintings, in vivid colours, of the cedars of Lebanon and palm trees from Egypt, where he spent some of his earlier years. Juxtaposing his fractal geometric work with the new iconoclastic paintings in a diptych, Nahas gradually began to incorporate the vocabulary accrued across the years into his work. In recent years, he has participated in several high-profile exhibitions, while his work can also be found in museums and collections worldwide.

Nahas, who today divides his time between new York and Lebanon, describes his latest show as “a new unexpected departure”. “Once again I am out of the fashionable mainstream doing something personal,” he notes. “All my different periods have resulted in a different universal dimension!”

*Untitled, 122x122cm, acrylic on canvas, 2009*

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