

Nabil Nahas Links Sea And Sky In His New Exhibition At Chateau La Coste

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onal, multi-layered paintings marrying g with vivid color and texture, Lebanese-American artist [Nabil Nahas](#)' first solo exhibition in France, "Grounded in the Sky", proposes two series of recent works and a never-before-seen outdoor sculpture – his largest to date – evoking a mysterious marine creature. On show until June 13, 2023 at [Château La Coste](#) in Provence, the artworks are spread across two gallery spaces of the wine estate: the Renzo Piano Pavilion and the Old Wine Storehouse rehabilitated by Jean-Michel Wilmotte. Large-scale cosmic "Constellation" compositions, referencing both seabed and sky, appear to be pulsating, in perpetual movement, while tortured, apocalyptic depictions of trees emblematic of his homeland – cedars, olives and palms – transform the space into a gallery of botanical portraits, where each appears to lay bare its soul, as viewers are plunged into the artist's heavy-hearted mental landscape. I sit down with Nahas to discuss his origins and the creative process behind the works in this exhibition.



Nabil Nahas, Untitled, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 290 x 450 cm PHOTO RABIH ANDRAOS

Tell me about your childhood.

My father was a textile industrialist and my mother was a housewife. They had nice art at home and I had a bourgeois upbringing. At 10, they sent me to boarding school in Lebanon. Lebanon was very important for me because of the attachment I developed to the land and the archeology. I used to go with my friend Roy to play in the ruins of Byblos, so I was very taken by the geography, the trees, the cedars. At 10 years old, I started painting. My mother's first cousin is actually one of the pioneer Abstractionists in Lebanon. Her name is Yvette Achkar, and it was my first encounter with abstract painting. From a very young age, I was buying art books every time I would get money as a present, so I was quite sophisticated and had quite a knowledge of art, and I took myself very seriously when I painted my little paintings. I guess I grew up in a more or less artistic environment. My uncle, Antoine Nahas, was the most famous architect in Egypt, and he had some very good paintings in his house. Skira published this book called *Modern Painting. Contemporary Trends*, and it was a survey of abstraction in Europe and the United States up to 1960, and I got that book. I was 12. It



was like a Pandora's box, with images I'd never seen. At the time, I decided that I really liked the American School: Rothko, Pollock and company. The French, European part, I was quite taken with Henri Michaux, the inks, and Fautrier and Dubuffet. And when I wanted to go to school, I thought, well, I want to go to New York.

Tell me about the four large-scale canvases from your series “Constellation”. How do these spiral compositions evoke the cosmos as well as the patterns found on seabeds?

They discuss the relation between macrocosm and microcosm. I think those paintings will make more sense in time. Now, they look spectacular, but the meaning will become more obvious as time goes by, I hope. I was always very interested in something that was taboo and still is taboo in art: visual pleasure. When you take something from nature, a crystal formation or a fish in water – I used to scuba dive a lot – it's extraordinarily beautiful. Why deprive yourself of that? I like giving visual pleasure; I think it's important. Who wants to look at something ugly?



Artist Nabil Nahas in his atelier PHOTO FARZAD OWRANG



Why are starfish present on all four paintings?

It's the basis of all those paintings and the geometry within them. The drawings that I had done in the early '70s are tessellated patterns, and if you take a starfish and join it by the legs, you'll end up with a polygon, which is the basis of all Islamic geometry. So I found that and I thought why not reuse it because it's molecular in a way and it's like honeycombs. I make 5 foot by 5 foot molds of starfish, cast them in acrylic paint and mount them on canvas. Each painting has three panels, and each panel contains two molds.

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Why are you so obsessed by starfish?

I had a house not far from the beach on Long Island and, in 1991, a terrible hurricane wiped out the island. You couldn't walk there; it was literally studded with starfish. The image was quite amazing. I picked up a few, took them home, stuck them on a piece of board, painted them and put them in a guest bathroom. A few months later, I looked at them again, and I said maybe there's something there, so I started developing it and realized there are two aspects: one, a very poetic aspect, and two, it's the basis of all Islamic geometry, the polygon, the Golden Rule, the Golden Section, and you can expand all that in different philosophies. It's the basis of everything, really, and I'm still stuck in it.



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Nabil Nahas, Untitled, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 250 x 200 cm PHOTO RABIH ANDRAOS

Describe the personal series linked to your Lebanese roots, this gallery of portraits featuring trees critical to the history, culture and ecology of your homeland. How did you go from abstraction to painting trees?



I was making iconic images of the flora of Lebanon: the olive trees, cedar trees and date palms. The landscape there stuck in my head. They're very much part of Lebanon, but I didn't want to do landscape paintings. They're more like portraits than landscapes. I don't think of them as landscapes. What is interesting about the tree is that it feeds from its roots, but also its leaves, so it's from the ground and from the sky. And here, what I'm doing is going from the microcosm to the macrocosm, to the universe. It's expansion, essentially.

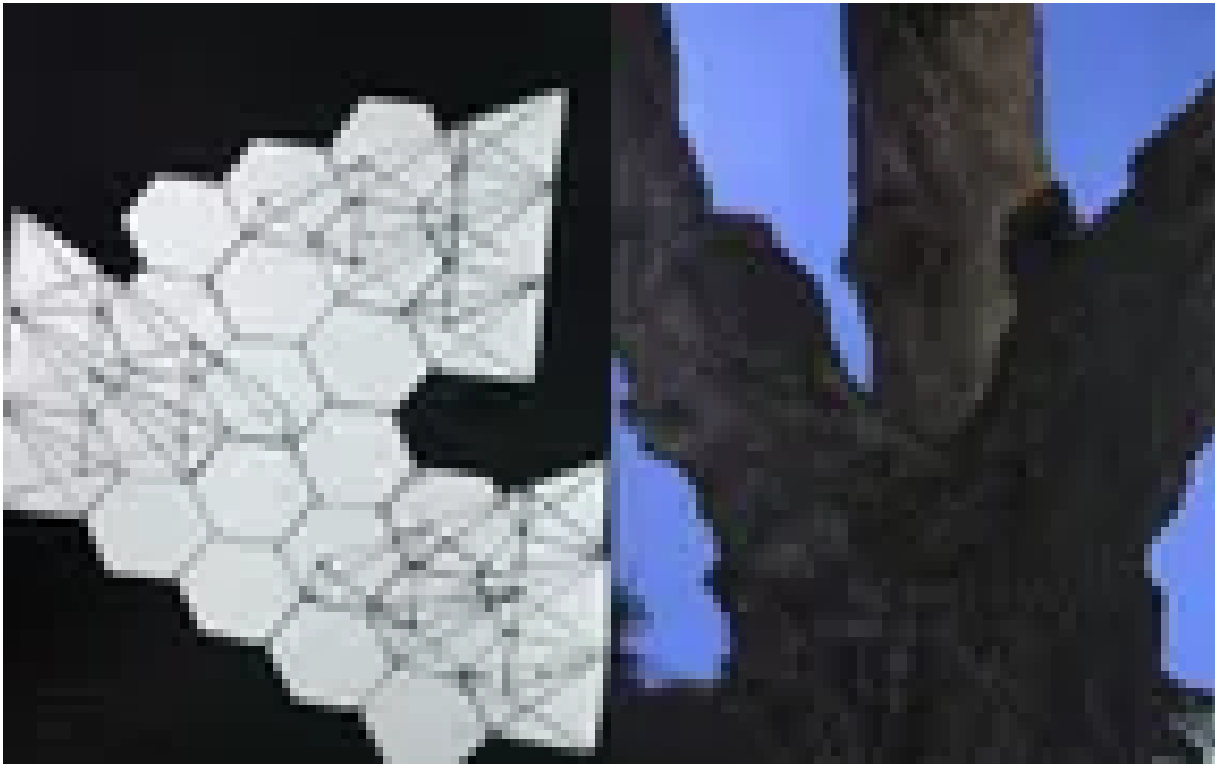
Your tree paintings became the expression of your emotions following the Beirut port explosion in 2020.

Yes, but they were not intentionally meant to be that. It just filtered through me and then I was surprised by the first project. Then I kept doing it and realized that it was actually a well-adjusted resolution to the feeling I had from the explosion, which was devastating.

You had just arrived in Lebanon when the explosion happened.

I arrived the night before, and I was in my studio at 600 meters in altitude in the mountains, which has very high ceilings, and my five-meter-tall curtains flew up. I thought the paint factory that's not far from my place had exploded. Beirut was completely demolished. It was the same feeling I had after September 11. I lived five blocks away.





Nabil Nahas, Untitled, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 250 x 400 cm (each panel 250 x 200 cm) PHOTO RABIH ANDRAOS

Tell me about the three diptychs that depict both trees and geometry.

I was doing the trees, spiral paintings and fractal paintings at the same time and, as they were sometimes standing one next to the other, one day I looked at them and said there's something there. This is how I started putting the diptychs together. Visually, it made sense, and then I understood what I was doing. It's like picking different pieces of a puzzle; they come together sometimes and sometimes it doesn't work. But in this case, I think they were quite good. It's like "grounded in the sky", so you have the tree, which is rooted in the earth and breathing from its head, and the universe, the cosmos. It's kind of a naive interpretation of the larger picture.

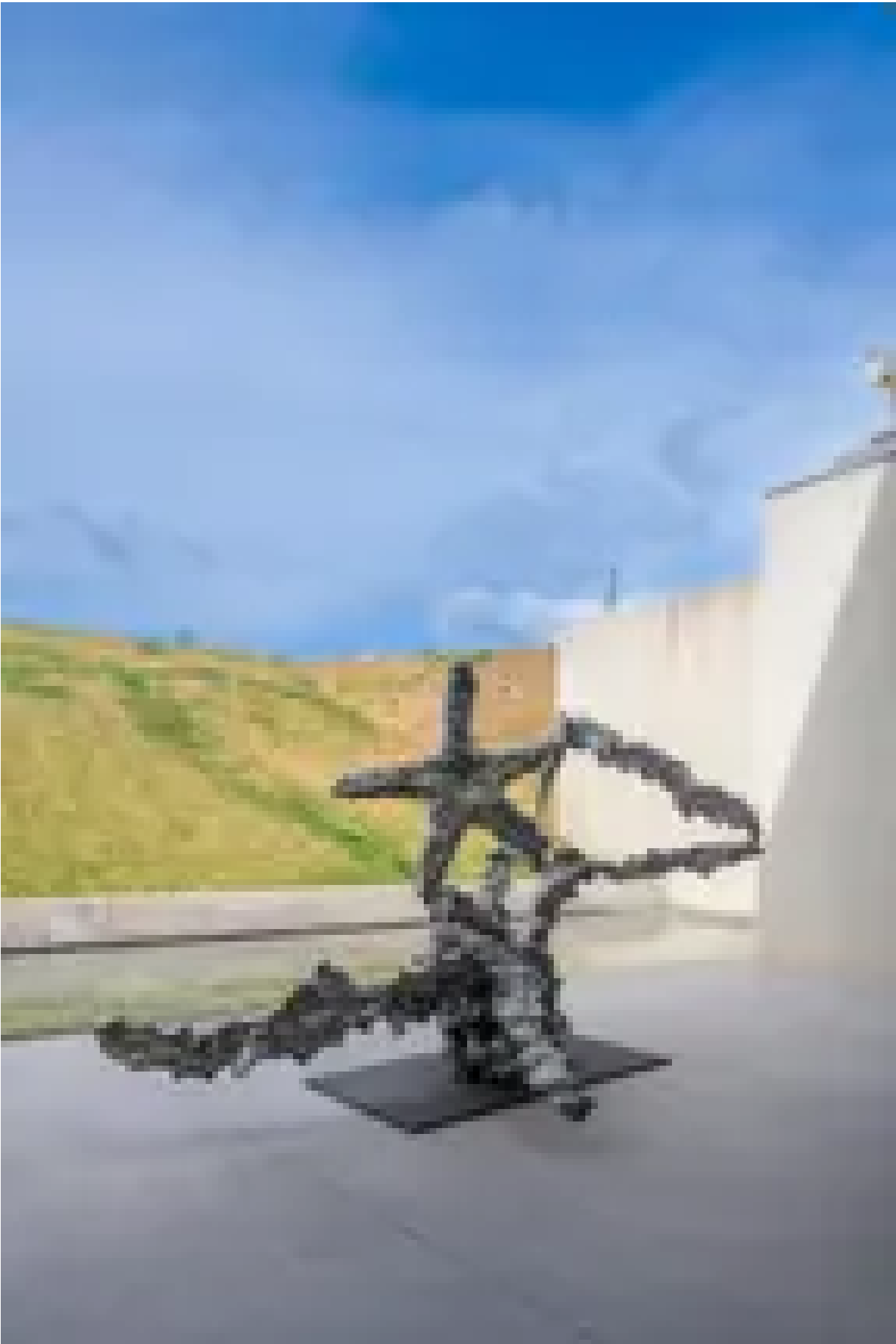
How did the monumental outdoor sculpture in aluminum come about?

I've made a lot of sculptures in papier-mâché over the past five or six years. Essentially, I was holding the papier-mâché and squeezing it and it made an



imprint of my hand. I sprayed them with a chrome spray and then I thought they would look good as sculptures if they were very big, but I never had the opportunity until Château La Coste because it's extremely costly and where are you going to put them? So we made the first one in a very good foundry in Auvergne called Fusions – the only good one in France as a matter of fact – and I think it looks terrific. They did a great job.





Nabil Nahas' monumental sculpture at Chateau La Coste PHOTO STEPHANE ABOUDARAM | WE ARE CONTENTS



Had you worked in aluminum before or was it your first time?

This is a new thing for me and I'm very happy. I think I'm going to be doing more because they really look like nothing else. From outer space or something. I've always been fascinated by those huge dinosaurs and what have you in the Natural History Museum in New York and, at some point, they were starting to sell them at Sotheby's. I thought it would be great to have this in your living room, so I made my own little dinosaurs.

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