

## Nabil Nahas Art forum , 1999 p154

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It must be hard to give painterliness a new twist these days, but Nabil Nahas's recent abstract works manage to do so. Literally building up the painterly surface, shaping a mixture of ground pumice and acrylic into what look like organic forms, which he then repaints, the artist gives gesture fresh resonance. His richly textured surfaces, teeming with life and often even extending beyond the limits of the support, resemble lush coral reefs. Other works appear as though strewn with luridly colored dried petals. The title of the work adorning the invitation card advises "Don't Get Me Wrong," but we do, and even after realizing it's all just paint, we return to

Nahas seems especially interested in the vital kick color can give a painting, an effect he seems to acknowledge with the ironic title *Color Blind*, 1998. Even black is exciting for him (as it was for Matisse). In *Life on the Edge*, 1999, iridescent touches of white and chartreuse seem to grow spontaneously on the edges of the gray, brown, blue, rust, and green amoeba-like shapes, as if bringing them to life. Similarly, the orange and white edges on the mostly pitch-black shapes in *Atapuerca*, 1997-98, give the hope of life in a barren environment-or perhaps insidiously reveal that life has been entirely leached out of it. The tension between life and death in these paintings-the threatening column of black ash in the midst of incandescent yellow in *Vesuvio*, 1999; a black blotch on the sickly yellow-red field of *Vesta*, 1998-gives them, for all their brilliant color, a tragic undertone

Nahas's abstract paintings are technically all-over, but clear patterns-decorative, yet peculiarly unsettled-emerge. On the one hand, Nahas takes what Clement Greenberg called "Mediterranean painting" (with polyphonic all-over painting its grand climax) to a luxurious new extreme, perhaps even to what Greenberg deplored as decadent hedonism of luxury painting. On the other hand, Nahas restores sensual and emotional density to all-over painting, rejecting the flatness that eventually drained it of life. Thus he gives what art historian Anton Ehrenzweig called non-gestalt gesture-the vehicle of inchoate unconscious emotion (the form in which

Nahas's paintings are not simply beautiful, but morbidly so. Trauma is built into their surface, suggesting that their look of luxury is ironic, the result of pestilence, and their rich colors those of putrescence. One can't help wondering if the tragedy of his native Lebanon informs his work. Their uncanny beauty, tense with emotional turbulence and passive fatalism, makes Nahas one of the more intriguing painters working today.

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