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Nabil Nahas: Opium and Candy

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Nabil Nahas

Opium & Candy

We yearn for a profound geometry, a very exact knowledge of what is revealed by dissection and microscopic examination, and an exquisite artistic feeling which, taken together, might enable us to isolate some principle of natural morphology.

—Paul Valéry, “Man and the Seashell” (1937)

Nabil Nahas is an American painter whose work does not so much “contain multitudes” as it reconciles opposites. Whether implicitly or explicitly, Nahas’s work explores extremes of size, scale, temperature and mood; and seemingly polarized concepts such as nature and artifice, materiality and immateriality, East and West, drawing and atmosphere, beauty and “ugliness,” refinement, and —well, a deliberate, exploratory gesture toward “bad taste.” There is, for starters, an element of deliberate provocation in the very title of this exhibition, “Opium & Candy,” evoking as it does the polarized pleasures and terrors those substances together and separately connote. Actually, the polarities in Nahas’s work are not so much reconciled as they are allowed or encouraged to coexist in willful contradiction, or as he puts it, “surprising visual resolution.” Placed between them, the viewer is challenged, changed and energized as by a kind of chemical reaction.

As exhibited in the interior gallery at Sperone-Westwater, Nabil Nahas’s new paintings become a site-specific installation. Two wall- and eye-filling paintings hang opposite each other with barely fifteen feet between them; the viewer steps in the middle warily, as between warring entities. Ranged on the other walls are forty small paintings on wood panels. In titling the exhibition and the two large paintings collectively “Opium & Candy,” Nahas deliberately leaves it ambiguous whether one is designated “Opium”, the other “Candy” (and if so, which is which?) or whether they each encompass both polarities. One is “hot” and the other “cool,” yet both paintings in their different ways work against our eyes’ initial physical reaction to their predominant hues. The deep purples, blues and blacks of the one draw one’s gaze in, yet the large projecting forms that swarm and spiral across its surface give the illusion of growing before one’s eyes, thereby pushing out of and off the painting surface. At the same time, the golden color of the other, whose reflectivity tends to stop the gaze, is opened up into atmosphere by the drawn, open biomorphic shapes, multiplicitous colored daubs and circles, and also the irregular reflections from the bumpy surface of the gold itself, which move and flicker as we cross in front of the painting.

Nahas says, “I never think of myself as an abstract painter, really,” and he encourages a reading of his paintings as landscapes for a time in which our concept of “landscape” has been expanded to

include not only scientific, macro and micro visions and non-optically-based “imaging”, but also new ideas about how the brain sees and processes visual information. His scintillating, radiantly colorful surfaces might equally be actual depictions of “closed-eye vision on the beach” or metaphors for the synapses of visual pleasure. For him, “Nature, geometry, is the beginning of everything: the golden section coming out of the way a stem grows.” Certain paintings seem to replicate nature, too, in that they look as though they could only have evolved or grown spontaneously. Yet the fantastic, coral-like growths on some that can extend several inches into the viewer’s actual space, making the once-freighted Greenbergian notion of the painting “surface” a moot point, are created, as he simply says, “of paint, with a brush.” Their means have evolved gradually over the last decade and a half. Works of the early 1990s consisted of hundreds of actual starfish mounted on board and painted in monochrome. Later in the decade, acrylic casts of starfish and shells were used as a base upon which to build up increasingly rococo (the word comes from “rocaille,” meaning pebble-and-shell decoration) painted surfaces, in complex, electric colors—a formula which, with variations, Nahas is still exploring. The under-layer of shell-forms lies unseen but sensed, like pre-historic sediment beneath the burgeoning paint surface. The paint is built up gradually, incrementally, each brushfull adding its own matter to the increasingly attenuated outer edges of each projecting “petal,” the way nacre forms on the lining of a shell.

Nahas is fundamentally an innovator; but he is also a person of wide culture. He has invented a way of painting whose results look like no other’s; yet his work also holds multiple and subtle references and homages—some no doubt unconscious—to a wide range of earlier civilizations, schools and artists. In light of his Lebanese origins, his paintings’ marriage of seashells with pigment, for example, might recall the Phoenicians’ famous purple cloth, dyed using local murex trunculus shells and traded throughout the ancient world; while his use of gold and rich color to create expanding, tessellated, interlocking patterns contains hints of both Byzantine mosaics and Moorish coffered ceilings. Closer to hand, the linked legacies of symbolism, surrealism and abstract-expressionism—of, say, Redon’s iridescent shells and sea-creatures, Ernst’s “stone blossoms” formed of spread paint (his interest in using physical properties of paint to shape it in new and expressive ways), and Pollock’s alchemical, transformative magic in a painting like “Full Fathom Five”—can also be sensed in Nahas’s work. Nahas’s mimesis of the process of accretion, after all, is only a subtler way of “being” nature than Pollock’s outpourings.

With 40 small paintings on wood, each measuring only 7 x 5 inches, Nahas takes what looks to be an important step into new territory. Spread across the walls like so many notebook pages, the panels might suggest collectively a sort of Theme and Variations, or *ars pictoria*, if only they weren’t each individually so beautiful. Many of them incorporate chips of paint, by-products of Nahas’s working process, picked up from the studio floor the way one picks up strange and beautiful shells from the beach. Some of these are small, pebble-like blobs of single color; others are mysteriously coruscated, many-colored and many-layered. One recalls the branch of French post-war abstraction known as “tachism,” after the word “tache” or spot. Here Nahas wittily takes actual, physical “taches” and treats them as objects in their own right, isolates them and holds them up for examination, like scientific specimens, and puns with the abstracted, inadequate terminology of criticism. As far as Nahas himself is concerned, they are simultaneously found objects and products of his own hand, and he responds to them with a fresh, impudent eye, imparting to these paintings, and the viewer, a sense of discovery (as of scale) that belies their small size.

Sometimes the taches read as what they more or less are: stones of colored matter—suggesting minerals from which pigments are ground. Arrayed in a circle of rainbow hues and connected by wavering lines that converge in the center of the panel to form a star or a constellation of dots, they propose a heartbreaking ingenuousness reminiscent of Miró. The more elaborate raw chunks of paint are comprised of concentric uneven rings of vivid color—the backs, actually, of individual “petals” like those on the large paintings, (and we can now better understand how the layers of paint are built up on them). Convoluted pearls of a New Age Wunderkammer, they morph before

our eyes to conjure up all sorts of associations, including the sexual, the scatological, the topographical. Their rough apertures, like those of a Fontana “Concetto spaziale,” seem to turn space inside-out, transforming material, *matière*, into emptiness, into immaterial.

Nahas also glues leftover cast acrylic clam shells on the small panels; and both shells and stones—along with the grain of the wood panels themselves—become points of departure for Nahas’s free-associative drawing and painting on and around them. Using an exploratory line that can call to mind Klee, or automatic drawing of surrealists, Nahas simultaneously echoes and contradicts, extends and ties down, each three-dimensional *donné*. The drawing and painting often return to the image of the spiral, derived, in part, from his observation of conch shells, worn and broken to reveal their inner curves, found on the beach in Mexico. He finds and creates in the colors and forms of these paintings different “temperatures” and associations, almost like Proust’s “involuntary memories” (which at one point Proust spoke of as arising and expanding in the mind like Japanese paper flowers out of clam shells in a bowl of water). Memory does not have physical existence. It attaches itself to objects and to matter, through which it speaks powerfully, intimately, sometimes surprisingly. For Nahas, these paintings evoke specific sensual memories, inseparable from their idiosyncratic shapes and colors. One is like “walking from a dark space into bright sunlight,” another “the beach in winter.” It is, somehow, the specificity of Nahas’s own response to these visual adventures that lends them some of their mysteriously potent aura, and causes them to generate new spirals of association in the mind of each viewer.

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