



nabil nahas

Born in 1949 in Beirut, Lebanon. Lives and works between Lebanon and New York

You've lived in the US for so long. What was your reaction to the presidential election?

Like almost everyone, I was absolutely surprised and couldn't believe the results. But then, nothing should ever surprise us – or should it? The Dada movement that occurred as a reaction to the First World War and the rise of nationalism, for instance, speaks equally to the times we are witnessing now.

How do you think as an artist you can try and influence the situation and retaliate through your work?

I have never been a political artist per se. And I wouldn't use the word retaliation, because I think that the various issues we are confronted with, the most dramatic of which are the environment and the travel ban, are really the result of ignorance and xenophobia. It's clear that everything that is happening is alarming, to say the least, but I would definitely prefer to educate rather than retaliate. Having a positive presence through my art is my preferred approach.

Have recent events changed your view of America as the land of the free?

No, they haven't. As a matter of fact, perhaps it has made us realise that even in the US, a sound democratic system can be challenged. I hope we're going through a short bad spell that will be reversed in the not-too-distant future.

Do you think your art would be different had you not moved to the US?

You know sometimes I think of that, and I don't know how to answer the question. I've kept many of my early works from when I was 12 and 13 and I can see how a lot of what I'm doing now was already brewing back then. Now revisiting Lebanon has certainly had a big impact on my art and my work has taken a completely new turn since.

And how often do you go back?

Very frequently, as often as I can to recharge my creativity.

Would you say that you would never have painted landscapes if you hadn't gone back?

I would definitely have not painted trees had I not gone back to Lebanon. Having spent all the war years here in New York and only returning after an 18-year absence, I was very impressed by a landscape that I had cherished as a child. It made me wish I were a landscape painter. This was in 1993. In 2006, I found myself in my New York studio, painting palms and other iconic trees, such as Lebanon's cedars and Roman olive trees, alongside the fractal abstractions I had developed. Over the years, the different vocabularies I'd invented began fusing together in totally outrageous images.

Was there a favourable reaction from the public and collectors?

I had a provocative show of the new work at the Saleh Barakat Gallery last May and there was a mixed reaction. Some people really liked the paintings a lot and others didn't. What more can one wish for? Overall, the response was very positive. Leave it to the Lebanese to exert their uncanny capacity to embrace the new!



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How about the critics?

Although we have excellent curators in Lebanon, we have very few art critics, mostly journalists covering art events. Thankfully, they tend to be very gracious.

What gives you the most pleasure to work on?

Well, I'm having a great time with the new works because I never really know where they are taking me. It's like a constant challenge and a ride into uncharted territory.

How did you develop these new works?

It was by accident. A painting of a cedar tree was giving me a very hard time and after a few weeks of struggle I realised that it had gone somewhere else... Not knowing what to make of the painting, I took it off the wall and happened to place it next to a fractal work of the same size and Eureka! It just clicked. One thing led to the next and I was soon merging the various images I had developed over the years, finding myself on a scary but fun rollercoaster ride.

Tell me more about the sculptures that are behind you.

I dabbled with sculpture some 20 years ago but never took it further until last year. Like the paintings, they really emanate from nature and I use organic forms that I make myself, as well as acrylic casts of different sea creatures.

Some of them look like forms coming out of the sea, others look like molecules.

It's all the same language of growth, by multiplication of the same form.

I know you aren't political about your art but there is a question I haven't asked any other artist: why do you think the Americans elected Trump?

This is a very serious political question and I don't think I want to get into it.

So what are your worries about the Trump presidency?

My major concern would be what might happen to the White House if Mr Trump decides to re-decorate it.

What do you know about his taste in art?

I saw images of some of Mr Trump's residences in various publications and I must say that we both share a fascination for GOLD.