

# WORDS

# OF

# WISDOM

WORDS BY DAYTONA WILLIAMS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JACOB LILLIS





**T**he Parisian appartement of Nabil Nahas sits overlooking a lush courtyard a stone's throw away from the Place de l'Opera. The space, where the artist has lived for just over two years, is filled with a museum worthy collection of Jean Royère furniture. "*Things I had in storage*" he says, waving around the room at the goat hair covered Baquet armchair. "*I didn't want the space to feel too bourgeois*" he adds with a smile when I point out the bare electric wires poking out from behind a light fixture.

Born in Lebanon and raised in Cairo, Nahas knew from the age of ten that art was his calling. "*I picked up a paintbrush and knew I wanted to be a famous painter. I am still working on towards that*" he jokes. "*I would spend all my pocket money on art books, so I was very*

*up to date on what was happening. I was very intrigued by the work of Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko and the New York scene.*"

This interest led to a desire to study in the United States and before long, Nahas found himself on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean living with an aunt in New Orleans prior to enrolling in university to study art. "*The great thing about attending Yale was that you would meet famous painters who would come spend a week teaching. When I then moved to New York, this meant I knew a lot of people and doors were open. Things were almost easy. I found an atelier and in 1977 I had my first show. When I first arrived in New York, the city felt very familiar to me having grown up seeing these famous buildings in our*



*geography books and they acted as markers for me.*

*Being Lebanese, you are naturally very cosmopolitan; it is a very wide and varied culture so when I arrived in New York I felt very comfortable."*

On whether his work is equally informed by his years spent in America and the Middle East *"I think it is a mix of both. I came to America nearly fifty years ago. Growing up in Cairo, it was a very much a colonial culture. I had never been to the old city. I discovered Islamic art at the Metropolitan Museum in New York! As for Lebanon, it is the nature that inspires me. This became more apparent to me when I returned after being abroad for eighteen years and I began painting the series of trees.*

*When the civil war broke out, I drew a line on the idea of going back to Lebanon. I was very happy in New York splitting my time between Manhattan and the Hamptons with trips to Europe every so often. I have now replaced the Hamptons with Beirut."*

It was during one of these trips to the Hamptons, in the wake of the 1991 hurricane Bob that battered the Northeastern coastline, that Nahas found inspiration for one his most important bodies of works. *"After the storm destroyed the island, I took a walk along the beach which was entirely covered in star fish washed up from the ocean. You couldn't walk. It felt almost apocalyptic. I picked a few up on the beach, got home and stuck them to a canvas which I placed in a guest bathroom and forgot about. When I stumbled upon it again a few months later, I thought there might be something there to work with. There was something geometric in those star shapes that I liked.*

*My work changes constantly though not consciously; it happens by accident. I like to push in different directions and see where things go without fully closing the previous chapter. I have always worked in this manner and in result my work is not one straight line. I have never wanted to limit myself to a single style which meant at moments that people did not understand my style."*

This April will mark the beginning of the three-month

long installation *Les Racines du Ciel* (The Roots of Heaven) at the Chateau Lacoste, an open-air art center near Aix-En-Provence. As the artist's first solo show in France, the show offers visitors an immersive experience with recent works that embody his perpetual exploration of geometry and nature including works inspired by the double explosion that shook Beirut on the 4th of August 2020. Seeing the destruction in and around the Lebanese capital, Nahas began subconsciously painting a series of cedar trees (cedars have long been the national emblem of Lebanon).

*"I began painting them and one day I realized what was special about them: trees are alive. They are witnesses to everything and I find that beautiful. It's something that I cannot express in words, so I paint it. They are the guardians of our history. Especially for a country like Lebanon that has been invaded and destroyed countless times over the past 5000 years. Even in the Epic of Gilgamesh (written in the second millennium BC), the first instinct of colonizers was to destroy the cedar forests because it was so symbolic to the Lebanese people. The Roman emperor Hadrien was the actually the first to outlaw the cutting of the trees because the forests were decimated.*

*My attachment to Lebanon nowadays is to the geography and the earth: my earliest memories are of the mountains and the home outside of Beirut where my grandparents lived that I now use as my atelier. As a child I would play in the surrounding ruins and run through the trees. I am at one with nature"*

*Les Racines du Ciel* at Chateau Lacoste from April 1st to June 13th 2023.





