

## ARTSCOOPS

Set out across two spaces at the glorious Château La Coste, Nabil Nahas's exhibition 'Grounded in the Sky' simultaneously explores the wonder of nature and the fragility of humankind

Nature in all its forms has long been a source of inspiration for the Lebanese-American artist Nabil Nahas, from the fossils he collected as a child to the glorious, 1000-year-old trees in the garden of his home in Ain-Aar, Mount Lebanon.

'Grounded in the Sky', the title of Nahas's current show at Château La Coste in Provence, southwestern France, clearly reflects this passion, even if it also appears to be intriguingly contradictory.

Nahas explained, when asked, that the exhibition's name is actually borrowed from the French author Romain Gary's trailblazing novel, 'The Roots of Heaven', which was among the first works to be published on the topic of the slaughter of African elephants for their ivory.

"I liked the title," he said. "I also felt it worked well as a way of describing the trees featured in the exhibition, since although their roots feed from the earth, these wonders of nature also need the sun in the sky to survive."

The majestic olive trees, located in his garden, were among those he felt inspired to paint, returning to Lebanon after a lengthy absence, alongside glorious cedars and palms.

However, while some paintings celebrate Lebanon's rich ecosystem and natural heritage, others have an altogether different feel to them. In these works, the black branches of the olives are burnt to a cinder, while another work, 'Untitled' takes the form of a raging forest fire, the trees depicted in incandescent orange, set against a dark, foreboding background.

Nahas explained that significantly, he arrived back in Lebanon just one day before the Beirut Port explosion of August 4, 2020 and immediately started painting the trees. "I found myself turning unconsciously to a palette that I hadn't used since 1981/82 during the civil war in Lebanon," he said. "While I've never been an engaged painter, I think I filter external elements through into my work. In this case, I created these paintings not so much as a witness to something - rather they transpired in a tragic form, somehow reflecting my mood."

'Grounded in the Sky' also features several other distinctive artworks, on a different theme but still aligned with the title, which evoke galaxies and black holes in Nahas's signature fractured style, complete with spirals of mesmerising movement and colour. Four large-scale canvases from a new series titled 'Constellation' set out in a separate space, meanwhile, seemingly bring together both sea-beds and celestial skies in glorious velvet blues and greens, enveloping viewers through their sheer size. They are presented alongside a large sculpture, which marks the beginning of a new project for Nahas and a move away from the smaller-scale works that have been his primary focus in recent years.

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Nahas describes himself as extremely lucky to have been given two spaces offering distinctly different settings ideal for his contrasting artworks at Château La Coste, a 500-acre site situated, between the historic city of Aix- en-Provence and the Luberon National Park.

“I’ve been very fortunate, since there are two very different themes in play and I’ve had the benefit of being able to separate them,” he said. “The Renzo Piano Pavilion is a beautiful space with great light, making it an ideal venue for the constellation paintings, while the Old Store Winehouse Gallery has an intimate feel to it that chimes with the trees and complements their poignancy.”

The exhibition, which has been curated by Joanna Chevalier and organised by CMS Collection, has also given Nahas an opportunity to extend his reach in France, building on the recognition he has long enjoyed in the US and Lebanon.

That recognition reached new heights in the early 1990s, when Nahas created an unusual series of works from mounds of starfish that washed up on Long Island during a hurricane.

“I was living close by at the time and went out for a walk the next morning, only to find hundreds of starfish along the shore. It was an incredible vision,” he explained. “Almost instinctively, I picked some up and took them home.”

Nahas explained that as he began work on the project, casting the starfish and other shells gathered, he began to see an affinity with the Islamic geometric patterns and elements of high mathematics that had fascinated him since his days as a student at Yale University, where he gained his MFA.

“I’d been interested in Islamic art for many years,” he said. “Looking at the starfish through fresh eyes, the five legs took on the appearance of a polygon. Soon, I began extrapolating the different dimensions, with polygons developing into pentagons, moving from one mystical aspect to another and incorporating Islamic motifs.”

Nahas’s thickly encrusted starfish on canvas quickly garnered interest across the art scene, alongside his brightly coloured fractal, geometric paintings, with their numerous layers of acrylic paint, combined with pumice. Over the years, his work has been acquired by several esteemed organisations, including: Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha; Guggenheim Abu Dhabi; Tate Modern, London; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, among others. It has also been displayed in numerous high-profile solo and collective exhibitions worldwide. Highlights for Nahas include representing Lebanon in the 25th Bienal de São Paulo in Brazil (2002) and taking part in ‘Glasstress 2011’, a collateral event forming part of

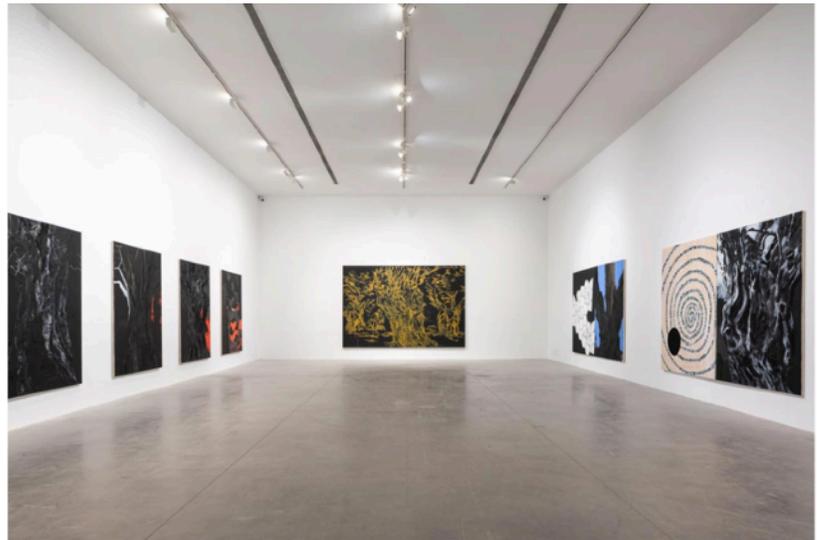
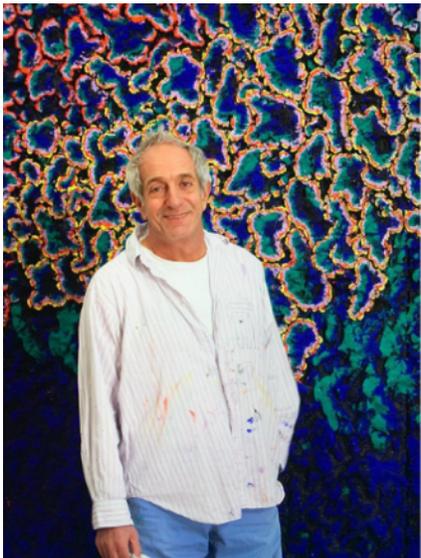
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the 54th Venice Biennial, which travelled to New York the following year. Among the many presentations of his work, a 2010 retrospective in Lebanon at the Beirut Arts Fair, BIEL remains firmly in his mind as one that brought huge satisfaction and pride.

“It was incredible to be able to see 40 years of my work in one show,” he said.

In 2023, ‘Grounded in the Sky’ breaks new boundaries again, connecting Nahas with new audiences, while reminding us of the strength of feeling he retains for his country of birth, its natural beauty, people and all that happens there.

*‘Grounded in the Sky’ is currently under way at the Renzo Piano Pavilion and the Old Store Winehouse, Château La Coste, Provence, daily, from noon until 5pm. For more details, go to [chateau-la-coste.com](http://chateau-la-coste.com).*



All photos of exhibition by Stephane Aboudaram

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