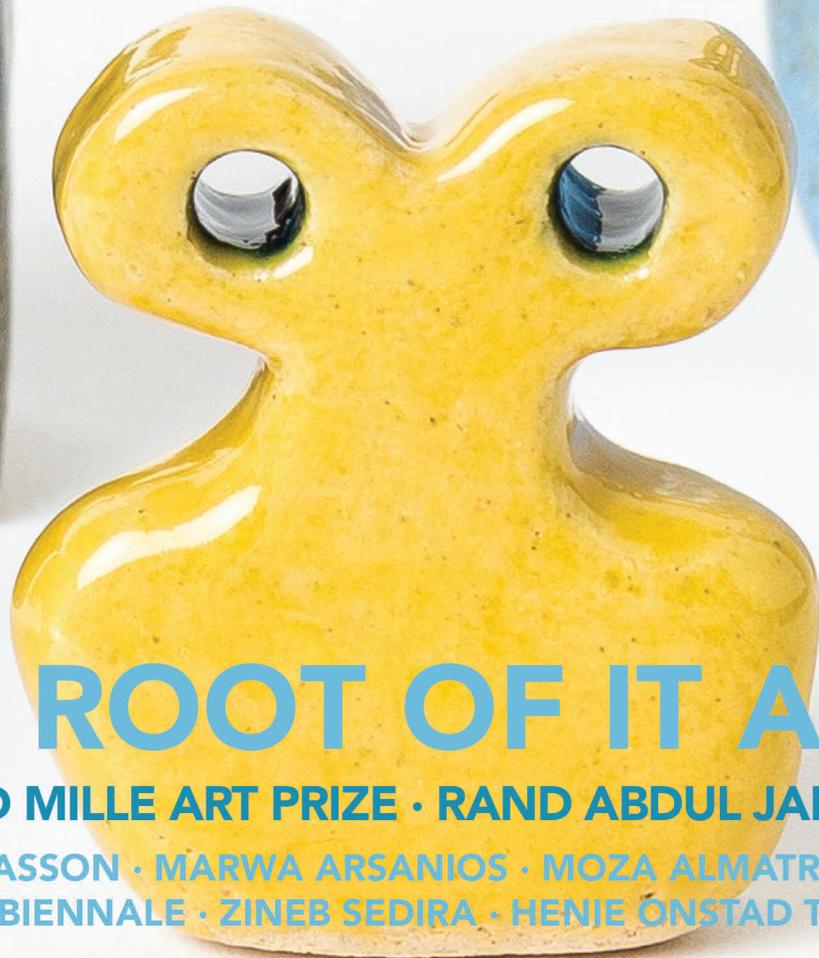


Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD



THE ROOT OF IT ALL

RICHARD MILLE ART PRIZE · RAND ABDUL JABBAR

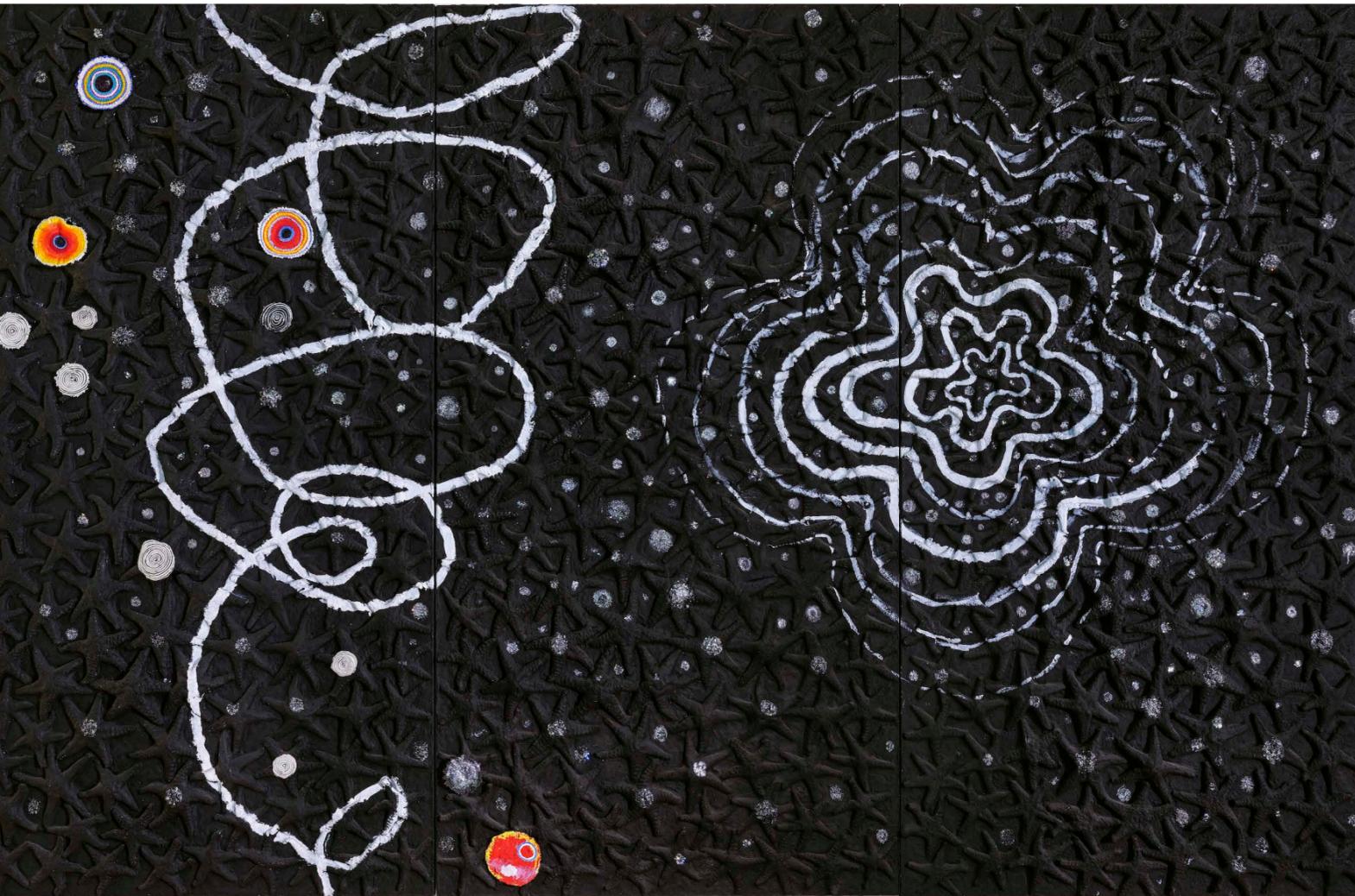
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THE ROOT OF IT ALL

Representing both humble beginnings and the support structure for complex ecosystems, roots are at the very heart of our world. Sustaining, nurturing and expansive, they provide the very basis for life, for connecting with the land and providing a home and refuge. They also represent the symbolic give and take between humans and nature, particularly as we try to navigate our way through an environment increasingly disrupted by our own activity and in need of replenishment and restoration.

In this section of *Canvas*, we look at how artists explore the concept of roots and rootedness. Whether as a source of food, the basis for cementing identity and sense of place, the inspiration for artistic assessment of the past or the means to create new landscapes and communities in the future, the physical and metaphorical value of roots fascinates and compels.





Nabil Nahas. *Untitled*. 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 290 x 450 cm © Rabih Andraos. Image courtesy of the artist and Château La Coste

WHERE EARTH AND SKY MEET

The new exhibition by **Nabil Nahas** at **Château La Coste** in the south of France gathers together all of the celebrated Lebanese-American artist's favourite things: starfish, fractals, geometry and the boundless universe.

Words by Y-Jean Mun-Delsalle

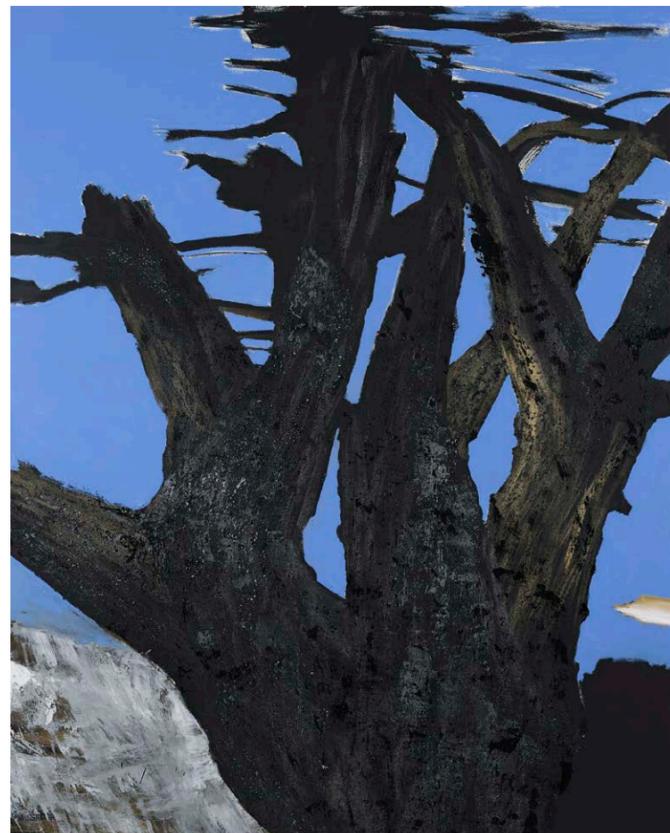
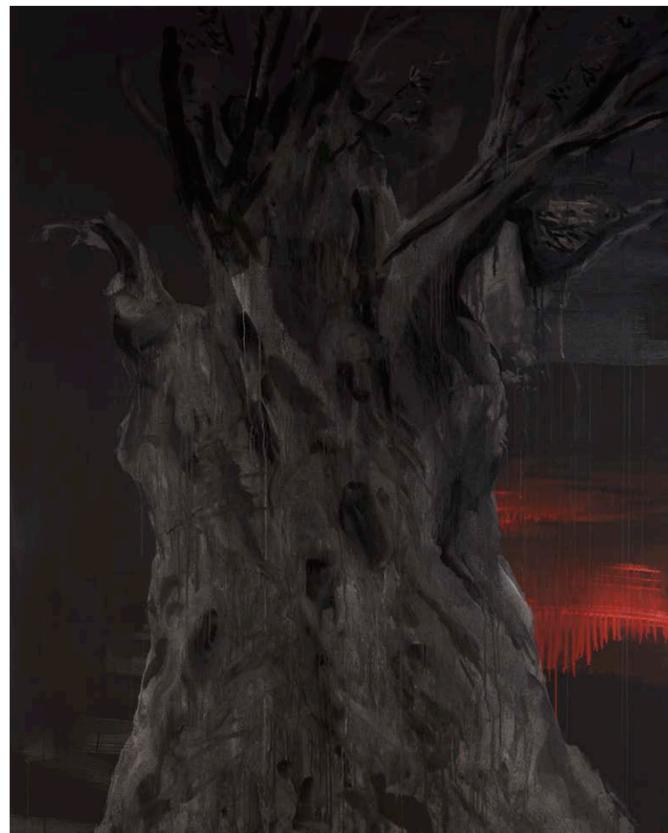


Nabil Nahas. Installation view of *Grounded In The Sky* at Château La Coste, Aix-en-Provence, 2023. Image courtesy of Château La Coste

Nabil Nahas has stars in his eyes – or rather starfish, to be exact. We're gazing at the 73-year-old, Beirut-born artist's gargantuan paintings on display at his first solo exhibition in France. Curated by Joanna Chevalier of CMS Collection, the show is presented at the Château La Coste winery near Aix-en-Provence, a marvel of art and architecture encompassing over 40 major works of contemporary art on a 500-acre site set amidst an idyllic Provençal landscape thronged by vines, cypresses, stone pines, olive trees and ancient oaks. What Nahas calls "sea stars" pave the entire backdrop of his huge canvases. These aren't flat depictions, but three-dimensional bas-reliefs that project from the background, as if they're alive. The artist has been obsessed with starfish ever since he saw thousands of them littered across a beach in front of his house in the Hamptons on Long Island in the wake of Hurricane Bob in 1991, an experience that triggered his *Fractal* series. Initially mounting real starfish on his paintings instinctively, they are

today crafted from cast acrylic paint, his five-pointed starfish forming a polygon that reflects the basic pattern of the golden ratio and Islamic geometry, which is itself derived from nature.

Grounded in the Sky proposes two series of recent works and a never-before-seen outdoor sculpture – the artist's largest to date – which are on display across two gallery spaces: the Renzo Piano Pavilion and the Old Store Winehouse gallery, rehabilitated by French architect Jean-Michel Wilmotte. In the first room, the viewer is confronted with four large-scale *Constellation* compositions that symbolise the inky black depths of the seabed or the infinity of the cosmos. This time, Nahas's beloved starfish in relief are coated with glitter that sparkles with reflected light in the manner of iridescent seashells. Made in 1.5 x 1.5-metre silicone moulds, the starfish here are like fossils of a past geologic age surfacing from the sediment and covered with wild explosions of colour composed of swirls, spirals, concentric circles and ripples hinting at stars, planets



Left: Nabil Nahas. *Untitled*. 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 250 x 200 cm © Rabih Andraos
 Right: Nabil Nahas. *Untitled*. 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 250 x 200 cm © Farzad Owrang.
 Images courtesy of the artist and Château La Coste

and other heavenly bodies. Everything appears to be pulsating and in perpetual motion, giving the illusion of growing before one's eyes, stretching beyond the edges of the paintings. "I'm trying to duplicate the constant expansion of the universe, on every level," he notes. "I have always been very interested in something that was taboo and still is taboo in art: visual pleasure. When you take something from nature – a crystal formation or a fish in water – it's extraordinarily beautiful."

Even though Nahas has never sought to imitate nature, only to mimic the way it operates – like how an oyster grows, by accretion – he is known for his multi-layered, sculpture-like paintings bursting with vivid hues. He uses only high-grade natural pigments like cadmium, cobalt, stainless steel, crushed mica or graphite, and creates dramatic textures in the form of pumice powder, which are suggestive of fauna and flora. Inside two alcoves, visitors are immediately enchanted by a scintillating plethora of electric blues, purples, greens, turquoises, yellows,

oranges, reds, pinks, whites and blacks that form crowded coral-like growths – made solely out of paint – that protrude several centimetres out from the canvases. "I'm not interested in copying what nature looks like, but in the processes that nature has and in replicating those," he explains. "It came out of observing nature – my antennae pick up things – and maybe now some things I'm doing are beginning to make sense. I'm not at all an intellectual when I paint. I don't have theories – it's all instinct."

Two bronze sculptures mirroring imprints of the underside of brain corals stand upright like human figures, while out on the terrace, one of Nahas's trademark starfish seems to have escaped from his paintings to inhabit a 2.6 x 4-metre sculpture fabricated by Fusions Foundry in Auvergne in central France. His first time working in aluminium, it evokes a mysterious creature from the ocean's depths or outer space. It stems from a series of papier mâché maquettes that he has been playing around with



Nabil Nahas. *Untitled*. 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 290 x 450 cm © Rabih Andraos.
 Image courtesy of the artist and Château La Coste

for the past five years, made by squeezing the medium in his palm so that his hand print is left behind. Loving the silhouettes of the models, he has never had the occasion to scale up his experimentations until now. "I've always been fascinated by those huge dinosaurs in the Natural History Museum in New York. I thought it would be great to have these in your living room, so I made my own little dinosaur," he jokes.

Looking at Nahas's paintings today, they embrace the dichotomy between figuration and abstraction. Considering himself to be an abstract painter profoundly inspired by the natural world – his first geometric paintings from the 1970s were inspired by crystalline structures, arabesque geometry and three-dimensional, repetitive pyramidal shapes – he finally returned to Lebanon in 1993 after an 18-year absence due to the civil war. Struck by the beauty of the Lebanese countryside, he found himself wishing to be a landscape painter. Then, in 2006 in his New York studio, he began painting majestic trees

emblematic of his homeland – cedars, olives and palms – from memory, works that were always more botanical portrait than landscape. "Lebanon was very important for me because of the attachment I developed to the land, the geography and the archaeology from a very young age," he explains. "I used to go with my friend Roy to play in the ruins of Byblos. Had I not gone back to Lebanon, I would have never painted those trees, not in a million years."

Over in the Old Store Winehouse, Nahas's tree series transforms the space into a gallery of portraits, where each appears to lay bare its soul, as viewers are plunged into the artist's heavy-hearted mental landscape. His tortured, apocalyptic tree canvases took on new meaning after the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with the tragic Beirut Port explosion in 2020 that occurred when he was in his atelier situated in the mountains at 600-metre-high altitude. It reminded him of his state of mind after 9/11, when he was living in New York City just



Nabil Nahas. Installation view of *Grounded in the Sky* at Château La Coste, Aix-en-Provence, 2023
© Stéphane Aboudaram of WeAreContents. Image courtesy of Château La Coste

five blocks away from the site of the terrorist attacks. In these highly personally interpretations of his childhood and adult environment, his subconscious appears to have taken over and the paintings have become a reflection of his emotional state. "They were not intentionally meant to be that," he discloses. "It's like it filtered through me, and I was surprised when I did the first project. Then I kept doing it and realised that it was actually a well-adjusted resolution to the feeling I had from that terrible event." Echoing his monochromatic works from the 1980s, carbonised trees in a raging forest fire are given a rough texture resembling real bark. In multiple nuances of black, they are like haunting, ominous shadows, but are still proudly standing tall, survivors amidst the flames that vary from fiery to blood red. They are courageously resisting, thanks to the strength of some unknown power – much like Lebanon itself.

Developing diverse vocabularies throughout an artistic career that now spans more than five decades, Nahas constantly zigzags between various series, advancing in circles, like nature's

own cycles, rather than linearly. "Why limit yourself to one signature if you have the ability of having five?" he questions. Over time, these languages have converged through his unexpected fusions of geometry and nature, thereby propelling him into uncharted territory. Take for example his spiral/tree diptychs depicting the connection between the infinitely large and the infinitely small. He says, "I was working on the tree, spiral and fractal paintings at the same time and, as they were sometimes standing next to one another, one day I said, 'Wait a minute, there's something there.' Visually, it made sense. This is how I started putting the diptychs together. It's like picking different pieces of a puzzle – sometimes they come together and sometimes it just doesn't work."

In light of Nahas's formative years spent in Cairo, his paintings' combination of starfish and pigment might recall the blue ceilings with golden starfish he saw in Luxor, while his use of spirals reference those on Predynastic Egyptian pottery from the Naqada period that he came across at The



Nabil Nahas. Installation view of *Grounded in the Sky* at Château La Coste, Aix-en-Provence, 2023.
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Met. "They have eternity in them," he admits. "They were nothing I invented, but came from my unconscious. I was not purposefully trying to imitate this, that or the other." In titling the exhibition *Grounded in the Sky*, Nahas wished to blur the horizon between earth and sky, encouraging these two worlds to meet in his canvases. He concludes, "What is interesting about the tree is that it feeds from its roots, but also its leaves,

so it's from the ground and from the sky. It is rooted in the earth and breathing from its head. My concerns seem to have a more universal dimension: the relations between microcosm and macrocosm, cosmography and telluric energy. It's kind of a naive interpretation of the larger picture." ■

Grounded in the Sky runs until 13 June 2023