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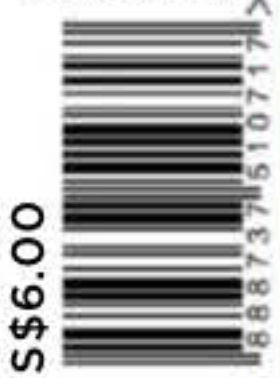
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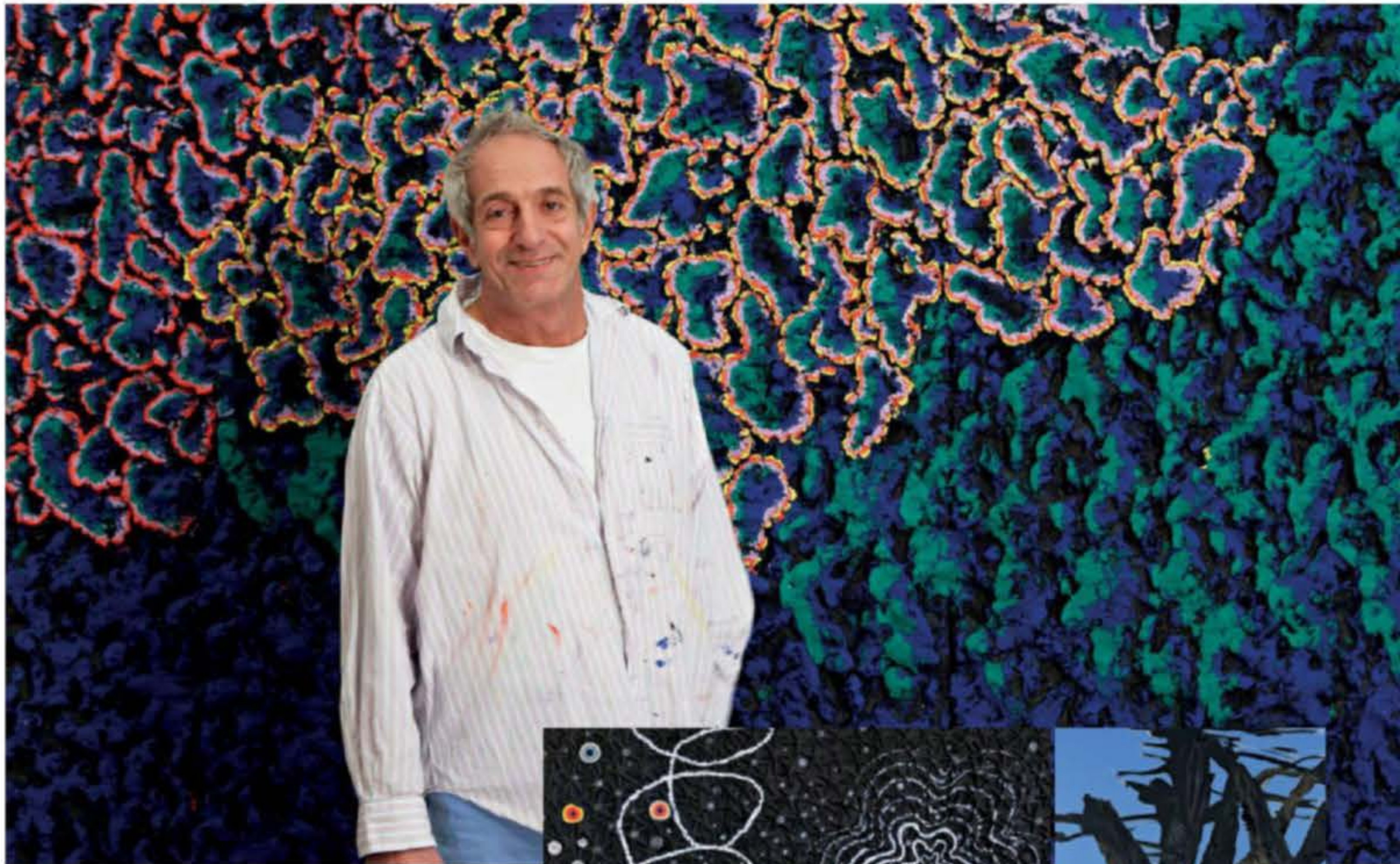
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# DESIGN

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION FROM  
THOSE IN THE KNOW



**35**  
**Chasing Stars**  
Nabil Nahas on his love for marine life and translating it into contemporary art.



**35**  
FROM THE DEEP SEA TO THE COSMOS  
One of Lebanon's most celebrated contemporary artists, Nabil Nahas talks about starfish, fractals, geometry and the infinity of the universe.

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# DESIGN

IDEAS AND INSPIRATION FROM THOSE IN THE KNOW

## **FROM THE DEEP SEA TO THE COSMOS**

One of Lebanon's most celebrated contemporary artists, Nabil Nahas speaks to Y-JEAN MUN-DELSALLE about starfish, fractals, geometry and the infinity of the universe. Nabil Nahas has stars in his eyes, or rather starfish, to be exact. ▶

photo JOYCE NG GILLES





photo FARZAD OWRANG

acre site set amidst an idyllic Provençal landscape lined with grapevines, cypresses, stone pines, olive trees and ancient oaks. What he calls “sea stars” pave the entire backdrop of these canvases. In fact, he’s 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, which triggered his Fractal series. Initially mounting real starfish to his canvases instinctively, they are today composed of cast acrylic paint. His five-pointed starfish that form a polygon are the basic pattern of the golden section and Islamic geometry, which is itself derived from nature.

Nabil may be known for his three-dimensional, multi-layered paintings vibrating with vivid colour – using only high-grade natural pigments like cadmium, cobalt, stainless steel, crushed mica or graphite – and texture in the form of pumice powder, suggestive of coral or biological growth, but he has never sought to imitate nature, only to mimic the way it operates, like how an oyster grows – by accretion. “I’m not interested in copying what nature looks like, but in the process that nature has and replicating that,” he states. “It came out of observing nature – my antennas pick up things – and maybe now some things I’m doing are beginning to make sense. I’m not an intellectual when I paint at all. I don’t have theories; it’s all instinct.”

Developing diverse vocabularies throughout his



photo COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CHÂTEAU LA COSTE

We’re gazing at the Lebanese-American artist’s gargantuan paintings on display in his first solo exhibition in France. Curated by Joanna Chevalier of CMS Collection, *Grounded in the Sky* runs until 13 June 2023 at Chateau La Coste winery, this marvel of art and architecture encompassing over 40 major works of contemporary art on a 500-



1. Nabil at work on one of his huge canvases.

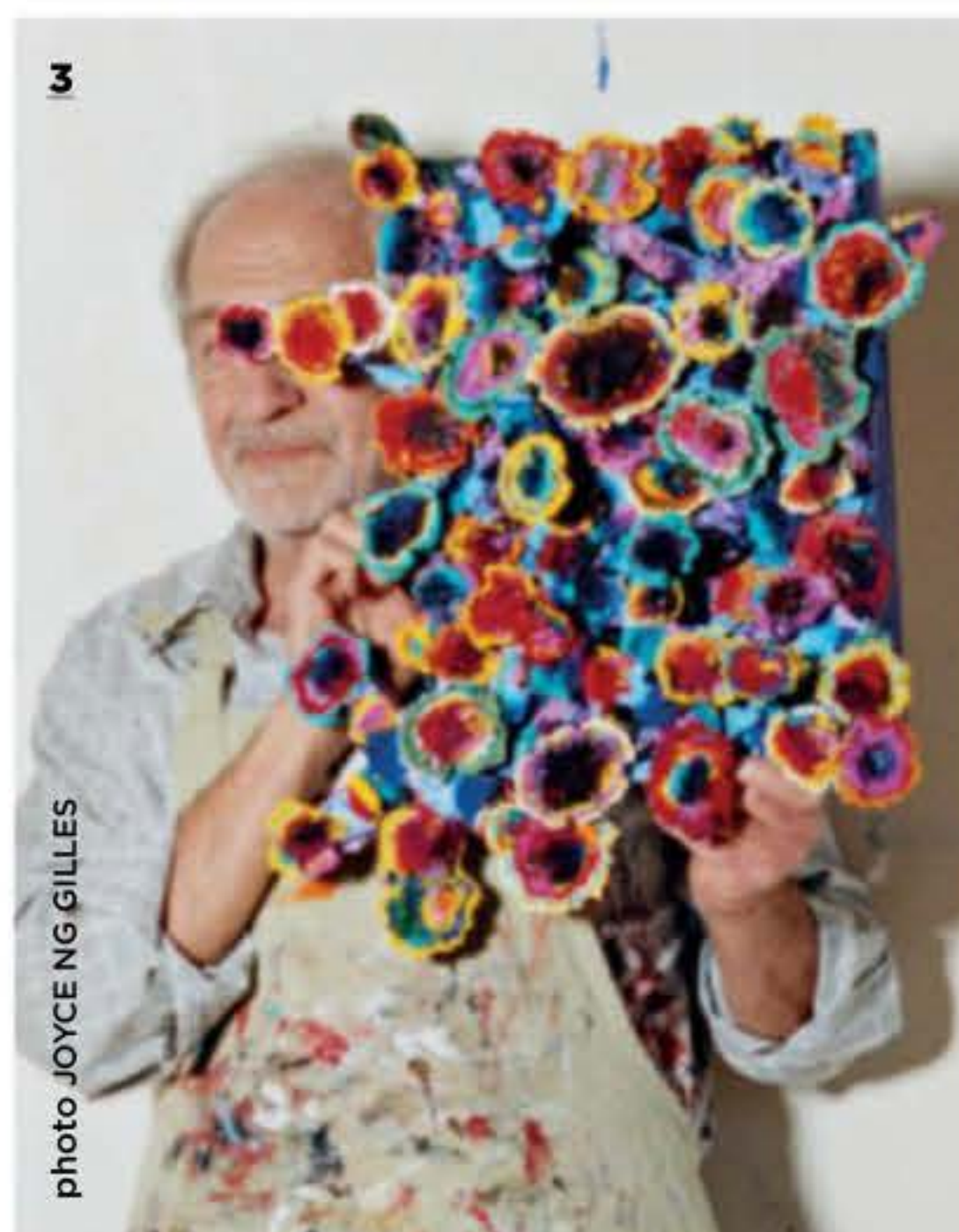
2. *The starfish silhouette* features prominently in his works.

3. Nabil's creations straddle the border between two and three dimensions.

4. An untitled piece from Nabil's *Grounded in the Sky* show.

5. Nabil's style takes inspiration from the shapes and colours seen in nature.

artistic career spanning more than five decades, Nahas constantly navigates between various series, advancing in circles rather than linearly. Over time, these languages converged through his unexpected fusions of geometry and nature, thereby propelling himself into uncharted territory. Take for example his spiral/tree diptychs depicting the connection between the infinitely large and the infinitely small. "Why limit yourself to one signature if you have the ability of having five signatures?" he questions. Looking at his paintings today, they embrace the dichotomy between figuration and abstraction. Considering himself to be an abstract painter profoundly inspired by the natural world – his ▶



**"I'M NOT INTERESTED IN COPYING WHAT NATURE LOOKS LIKE, BUT IN THE PROCESS THAT NATURE HAS AND REPLICATING IT."**





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.

Enchanted by the Lebanese countryside, Nabil 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, which were more botanical portrait than landscape. “Lebanon was very important for me because

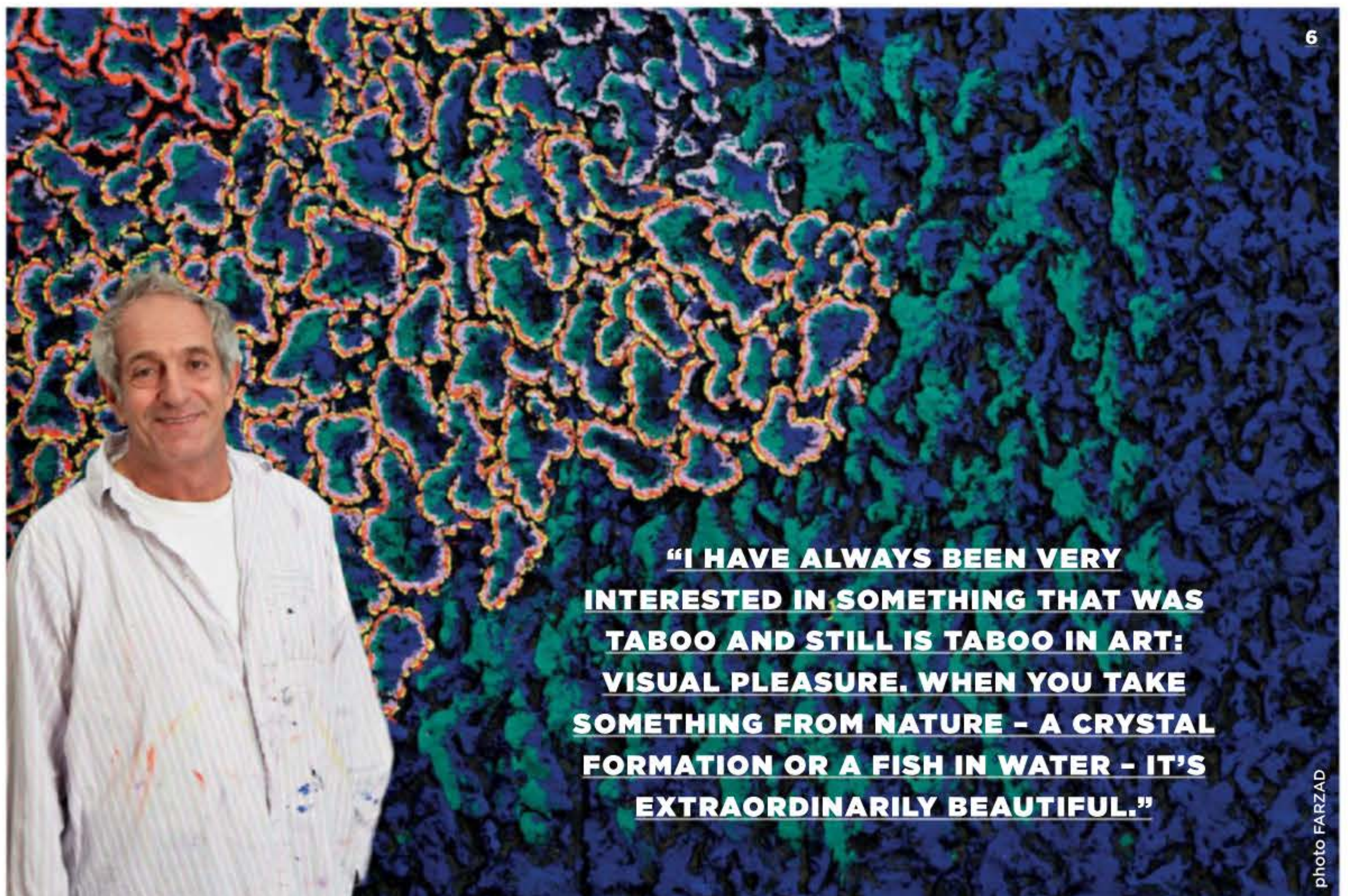
of the attachment I developed to the land, the geography, the archaeology from a very young age,” he explains.

“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.”

Grounded in the Sky proposes two series of recent works and a never-before-seen outdoor sculpture – Nabil’s largest to date – evoking a mysterious creature from the ocean’s depths or from outer space, which are on display across two gallery spaces: the Renzo Piano Pavilion and the Old Wine Storehouse. Large-scale cosmic Constellation

compositions, referencing both seabed and sky, appear to be pulsating, in perpetual movement. “What I’m doing is going from the microcosm to the macrocosm,” he notes. “I’m trying to duplicate the constant expansion of the universe, on every level. 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.”

Born in Beirut in 1949, Nabil spent the first decade of his life in Cairo, where he was mesmerised by the abundance of complex geometric ornaments





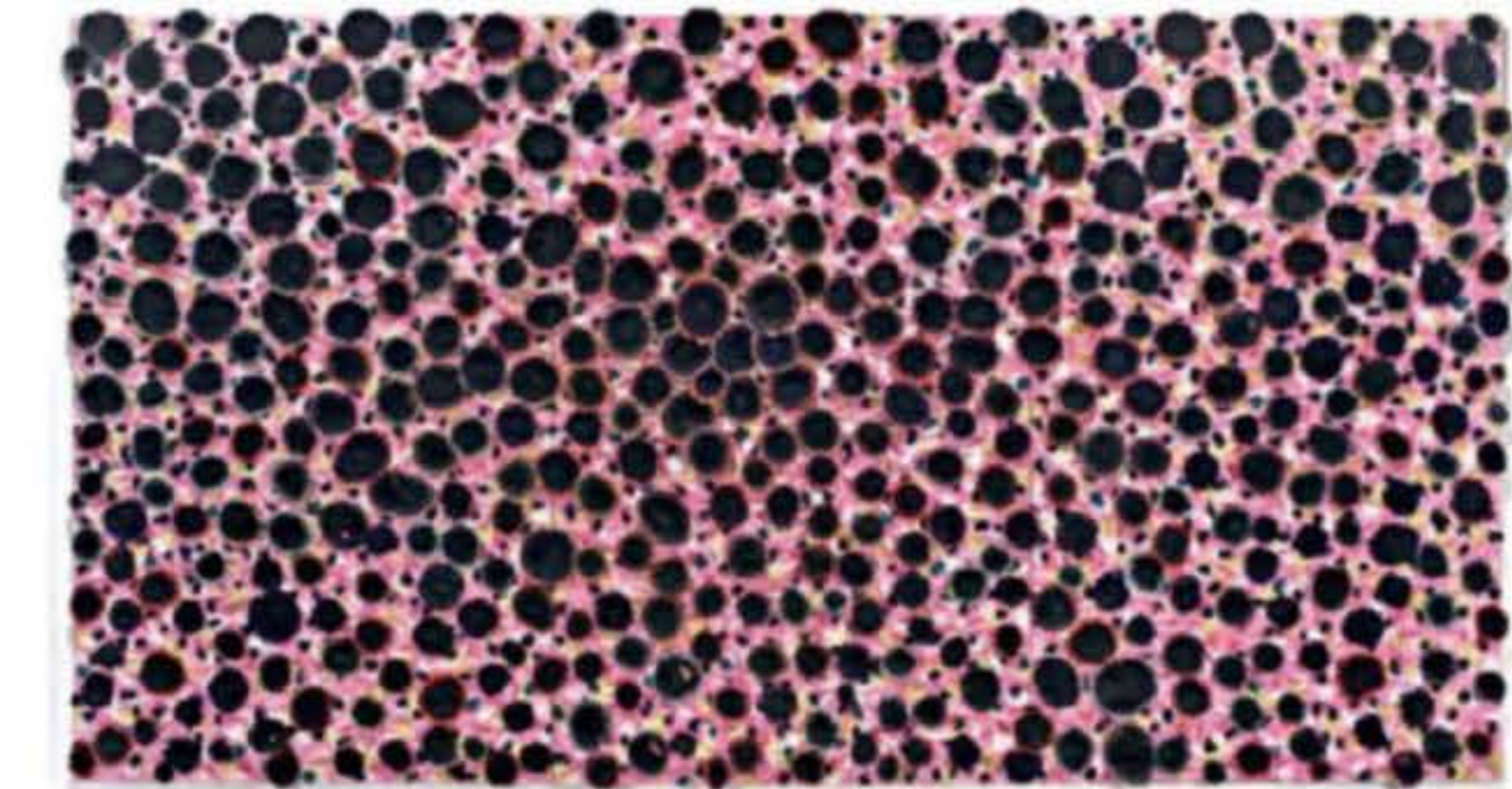
in Arabic architecture and decor, before attending boarding school in Lebanon. He started painting at the age of 10, originally encountering abstract painting through his mother's first cousin, Yvette Achkar, a Lebanese pioneer abstractionist. "Skira published a book called *Modern Painting. Contemporary Trends*," he recalls. "It was a survey of abstraction in Europe and the United States up to 1960, and I got that book. I was 12. It was like a Pandora's box, with images I'd never seen. At the time, I decided that I really liked the New York School: Rothko, Pollock and company. The French, European part, I was quite taken with Henri Michaux's inks, Fautrier and Dubuffet. So for school, I thought, 'I want to go to New York.'"

After moving to the United States in 1968 to study fine art at Louisiana State University then Yale University, where he was immersed in Western abstract painting, Nabil's encounters with contemporary painters of the New York School convinced him to settle in the Big Apple after graduation. Today, he splits his time between New York City and Ain Aar, a village in Lebanon's central mountain range 15 km from Beirut where his grandparents used to live and where he would spend each summer as a child. After buying and rehabilitating his uncle's derelict house there, he started planting trees – even transplanting millennia-old Roman olive trees from southern Lebanon to his property and making his own olive oil – an orchard

and a vegetable garden, and surrounding himself with cats, dogs, blue-egg chickens, goats, turtles and salamanders, building a sanctuary that fills him with hope.

Nabil's 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, reminding him of his state of mind after 9/11 when he lived in New York City just five blocks away from the site of the terrorist attacks. In these highly personally interpretations of his childhood environment, his subconscious appears to have taken over and the paintings become the 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 the terrible event." Echoing his monochromatic works from the 1980s, black carbonised trees in a raging forest fire are still proudly standing tall, survivors amidst the fiery red flames.

Critical to the heritage, culture and ecology of his homeland, these trees have now become an integral part of Nabil's identity. He concludes, "I'm very fond of archaeology and I collect a few archaeological pieces, especially pottery. I like



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sharing an object that is 3,000 or 4,000 years old, having that link between the person who made it and me holding it. With the trees, it's the same link, but they're alive – they're not dead objects. It's amazing to have that link to history, and those poor trees are still witnessing disaster after disaster, and they're still there. I'm very interested in gardens and preserving the wild flora of Lebanon. Once you know how olive trees grow because this tree has a certain way of growing, you can grow them yourself on canvas. They're you, they're me, they're somebody. They've become a major part of my work." ■

**6.** Nabil spends his time in New York and a village in Lebanon.

**7.** His works are also influenced by world events, such as the pandemic and 9/11.

**8.** The artist is a lover of archaeology and history.