

FOREWORD

I am delighted to present this catalogue of Nabil Nahas's recent work which accompanies our exhibition in the Brook's Mews gallery. This is Nabil's first show in London and as such, demonstrates the versatility and exuberance of Nabil's dynamic skills as an abstract artist. In a climate that places increasing focus on the Middle East, Nabil acts as a compelling bridge between two cultures and is one of the most interesting artists whose work links the distinct cultures of Lebanon and New York. Since his move to New York in the early seventies, Nabil has managed to become one of the preeminent New York artists while retaining both his Lebanese identity and subject matter. The word dazzling springs to mind when considering some of the paintings in this show and this certainly resonates with his Lebanese upbringing.

Rather than emerge under the umbrella of any one art movement, since the 1970s Nabil has resisted categorisation and engineered a continually evolving style. What I have always admired about Nabil's work is how it imperceptibly sidesteps the parameters of abstract art. One always feels something literal in the paintings, these are very much images taken from something or referring to a moment in time.

All of the works in this exhibition demonstrate the mastery of colour and inventive surface manipulation that Nabil has become renowned for. In his hands the painted surface resides somewhere between two and three dimensions with layers of thickly encrusted acrylic paint lending the works a confident sculptural quality. Several of the works in the exhibition incorporate paint chips, which are a by-product of his

larger paintings. The concentric rings of vivid colour have been described as resembling 'petals' and are effectively detritus from the studio floor which have been recycled. In this sense, they are ready-mades of the artist's own making and reveal previously invisible processes employed in larger paintings, specifically the underside of acrylic-pumice mixtures built up upon the painted surface.

This manipulation of traditional material is typical of Nabil as a true innovator. He maintains a critical attitude to his work which has led to several developments within his oeuvre. Most notably Nabil recently began to paint the landscape of his native Lebanon, creating recognisable images of cedar trees and palms. Though the works lack the high level of abstraction of the Fractal series, they share the same enigmatic quality. By directly referencing his middle-eastern background, the works become nostalgic images which connect the artist to his childhood homes in Egypt and Lebanon.

The natural world has always been a major source of inspiration for Nabil and the theme is ever present in his work. The Fractal series considers the relationship between order and disorder in the micro-processes of nature, reiterating one organic form through texture and vivid colour. The series began in 2005 and takes its name from the work in the field of chaos theory by Benoit Mandelbrot who demonstrated the inconsistencies in the natural world in contrast to the ideal and strict parameters of mathematical geometry.

Nabil combines the textured quality of the Fractals series with more recognisable natural motifs in his distinctive Starfish series. In these works Nabil builds his canvas from the echinoderms, creating an interlocking pattern in a monochromatic palette. Nabil created the first painting in this series in 1991 and has described how the starfish was instantly interesting to him because it had a distinctive geometric quality but was not perfect due to the roughness of the natural world. In this sense, the Starfish emerge from the same body of thought as the Fractal series: both reconcile opposites of perfection and imperfection; order and disorder and simplicity and roughness of form.

As well as drawing upon the geometry of nature, Nabil also references Islamic traditions in his work, particularly its abstract geometric and chromatic qualities. His rich gold paintings recall Byzantine mosaics and his repetitive forms structured in an interlocking pattern form hint at Islamic decorative arts and coffered ceilings. It has been commented that the compositional approach taken by Nabil also owes a legacy to the non-hierarchical method of organising repeated small shapes in a picture plane in Islamic art. In his works, Nabil adopts the same process, slowly building his shapes and line through reiteration and contrasting colours and textures. The results are a new kind of radiant surface, both intuitive like an automated surrealist drawing and partially predetermined like the repeated spirals in a conch shell.

It is truly a pleasure having these extraordinary paintings in the gallery and I look forward to welcoming you all to the show.