NABIL NAHAS

New Paintings

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The recent works of Nabil Nahas are flat, rectangular, and covered with paint. Thus they are paintings. Yet they offer that rare thing, a real surprise, one that redefines our ideas about his medium and its possibilities. Among the largest of the new works is Mars and Venus. Eight feet high and just over fifteen feet wide, it looks from a distance like a field of red shot through with filaments of yellow. The field pulses, as if the very grain of it were alive. Close up, you discover that the painting is a network of crevices.

Having mixed his pigments with pumice—volcanic rock ground to a powder—Nahas applies color in small dabs. As they accumulate, these brush marks produce rough, closely clustered clumps and stalks of material. The narrow gaps between them can be as deep as two or three inches, suggesting an intricate pattern of erosion. A stronger suggestion is of mineral accretion or biological growth, as of coral spreading over a reef.

Nahas begins by covering his canvas with a thick blanket of white acrylic that has been thickened with a medium and imprinted with the tightly nested shapes of starfish. This expanse of marine form relieves the canvas of its anonymity, the empty flatness which provides a place of origin for most abstract painting. Starting with a highly inflected surface, Nahas inflects it further—so extravagantly, in fact, that the underlying star-fish pattern vanishes, though traces of it can be made out in certain of the new paintings.

Until a few seasons ago, the starfish themselves supplied Nahas with imagery. At first he would attach one or just a few of these creatures to a smallish canvas. Then, on larger canvases, the star fish multiplied. Immersed in a single color, they would cover every inch of the surface. Next, Nahas scattered dabs and touches of contrasting color across his monochrome fields. Spreading calmly, a play of red and yellow or purple and pinkish orange would obscure the quirks peculiar to each starfish. The individual now stood for the type, in dense profusion, and there was another sort of generality to be seen in these paintings. Nahas has said that the concise, linear shapes of the starfish appealed to his taste for "geometry in nature." The origins of this taste are deep in the artist's past.

Born in Beirut in 1949, he spent his first ten years in Cairo, then settled with his family in the city of his birth. In 1969 he arrived in the United States for undergraduate studies, having grown up in an Islamic milieu fully open to, and familiar with, the culture of the West—especially the art and literature of France. Nahas also has vivid memories of the books and catalogues that gave him his first exposure to the abstract painting of postwar New York. He counts Western art among his cultural inheritances, as securely in his possession as the legacy of Islam.

Yet the latter is in some way prior, which may explain why Nahas looked for geometry in nature, not in the Euclidean—indeed, the Platonic—tradition that supplied European Constructivists and American Minimalists with their repertory of forms. One might add that the high styles of Islamic architecture and architectural decoration owe their geometric order as much to a vision of natural form as to the ruler and the plumb bob. So there is quality of natural geometry built into the structure of Islamic civilization.

For Nahas, that quality made its crucial appearance not in the desert but at the edge of the sea—on the beach at Southampton, to be exact. A storm had littered the sand with starfish, and the artist saw in their reiterations of a single form a new possibility for painting. It is impossible for us to know how such visions occur. At most, we can try to extract a kind of logic from the aftermath of the vision.

Before he made the first of the starfish paintings, Nahas had been covering his canvases with dark, streaky pigments. Often, golden tints would shimmer up through the darkness, sometimes with enough persistence to cover the entire surface with a lustrous glow. When these paintings were new, they looked like evocations of atmosphere and light. Nahas had shifted Impressionism into a metallic key. In retrospect, the gold paintings look more fluid than atmospheric—or some of them do, and the star fish seem to have been solidified from this lush fluidity.

In looking for links between art and life, it's possible to make too much of a painter's background. After all, one motive for making art is to find a way beyond the determining factors of one's life—to declare, with unaccountable images, that one is not simply the distillate of one's past. Having made this obligatory point, I can't help suggesting that the elegance of the gold period is a reflection—oblique and long-delayed—of what we might call the Parisian side of the artist's sensibility.

Growing up in Lebanon at a time when the ties between Beirut and Paris were close, Nahas always felt at home with the monuments of European modernism. This familiarity freed him to explore the entire tradition, led on by whatever subtleties caught his eye, and even today he continues to discover—or to rediscover—artists of genuine interest who are overlooked in schematic accounts of earlier decades. Nahas has a particularly good eye for work of the 1930s and '40s that blends formal innovation with a sense of high style. Never a prisoner of these refinements, he managed ,with the gold paintings, to transpose his "Parisian" heritage into the idiom of New York abstraction. Indeed, the gold paintings are a notable contribution to the History of monochrome in Manhattan.

Arguably, though, his most "American" paintings are the ones he showed at the outset of his career, in the 1970s. Filled with grand and hectic geometries of Euclidean flavor, these canvases remind us that Nahas studied at Yale with Al Held, by then a veteran proponent of hard-edged form. Nahas's differences with Held were many. As the older artist worked toward stability, the younger filled his pictorial spaces with sudden gaps and unexpected vectors. As Held reduced his palette to diagrammatic black and white, Nahas added colors and enlivened them with a variety of textures. Sheerly pictorial opulence was undermining structure and eventually his quasi-architectural imagery dissolved into the luster of the gold paintings. When geometry returned, in the starfish paintings, it was natural—which is to say, no longer Euclidean.

As the starfish crowded the canvas, their shapes became increasingly difficult to see. Discrete form was turning into an irregular pattern. At this point, Nahas might have returned to the clarity of the first starfish paintings. He might have looked in nature for other geometries and begun afresh with them. Instead, he accepted the jostling roughness of the patterns he had created, and looked for a way to make them rougher, denser, more elaborately compacted. Paintings like Mars and Venus began to appear.

Nahas's mix of acrylics and pumice gives the colors of his newest paintings a crusty texture rather like that of a desiccated starfish. And, as I've mentioned, the forms of these creatures are imprinted on the expanses of molded acrylic where he begins. So the fact of the star fish and the idea of the sea persist as Nahas builds up his colors, working evenly, bringing the entire surface to the same degree of finish before he moves to the next stage. While a painting is in progress, its materials can look extremely raw—like living tissue on the mend or an industrial substance undergoing some inexplicable procedure.

Until the procedure is complete, it's difficult to see how the object is ever going to count as a painting. As the artist says, "Nothing works until it all does." And he can never know precisely when that will be. He can only continue, laying on a color, accenting it with a contrasting color, then another, repeating the process until the deeply creviced skin of material, this almost sculptural crust, takes on pictorial life.

This is life generated by color. From a distance, the flicker of colors in Mars and Venus -may seem random, like the play of colors in a densely veined slab of marble. But a closer look shows how deliberately Nahas has edged with yellow the craggy build-up of red, to give each of these forms a sharp definition within the overall spread of color. And just as deliberate are the touches of blue that give a tone of luminous shadow to the crevices between the protrusions of red and yellow.

On the evidence of his brush work, it seems that Nahas paints in a state of hyper-attentiveness. Nowhere in these new works is any reminiscence of automatism, not the faintest sign that for a moment or two his hand was sustained by a momentum that carried it beyond the mind's jurisdiction. Such signs usually abound in heavily painted canvases, for most painters seek now and then the ease of a gesture unburdened by thought. Nahas never does. There is a quality of premeditation in the very grain of his colors. Thus his paintings have a look of highly wrought artifacts. They also remind one of marble or lichen or coral—natural things of startling vividness.

For Nahas, color is not coloring. It is the substance of his forms. Approaching Mars and Venus, you might expect its light to dim as distinct shapes emerge from the field of color. The opposite occurs. The closer you are to the surface, the more vehement its red—rather, the more vibrant the contrast of hot red and hotter yellow. Get close enough to see how blue works to intensify this contrast, and you may be reminded of the blood red that fills the eyes when you've closed them against the blaze of the sun.

The light of Arcadia, a much smaller painting, is brighter still. Building with a chalky aqua, Nahas edged it with yellow and a high-keyed mauve, then filled the crevices with maroon. Glowing as it accumulates, color turns incandescent. There's a dryness to this painting's luminosity, a suggestion that the several hues are in competition, pushing one another toward combustion. Nothing resists this overheating but the lush and shadowy maroon, which gives the light of Arcadia a tenuous stability.

Though they are all fragments of the same world, each of Nahas's new paintings opens onto a different climate. Arcadia's lush aridity becomes a damp, voluptuous simmering in Orpheus, where purples and maroons threaten to bubble up out of the crevices and overwhelm the craggy islands of bright, grayish blue. Mercury looks dry but somehow temperate, a zone where keyed-up yellows and grays are balanced by keyed-down purples, and the mid-point on the tonal scale is marked by red. For all the writhing intricacies of its forms and textures, Mercury is calm.

White wells up from the depths of Aurora, giving an extra increment of brightness to this painting's radiant reds and yellows. For Galatea, Nahas used white as his leading hue, his chief substance. Its crags and protrusions edged in yellow, red, and lilac, this surface floats before your eyes like an afterimage—a sheerly optical phenomenon. Yet it's obviously palpable. By turning colors into forms—or making forms of sheer color—Nahas has narrowed drastically the gap between what an abstract image is, in physical fact, and what it becomes as we follow its allusions into the realm of the imaginary. In Echo, the gap between fact and reference seems almost to have disappeared.

Though it is a few inches narrower than Mars and Venus, Echo seems larger—an immense wall of white shot through with a reddish grain. The red blanches the white, draining it to a clarity that the eye understands as sheer light, but only for as long as it overlooks the shapes that crowd the surface. And when you focus on its buildup of pumice and pigment, there is no lessening in the painting's glow, only a shift in the quality of the light radiating from its surface. Luminosity becomes tangible—or so it seems to the eye acclimated to this white-hot environment, where form and incandescent color unite and the suggestion of heat modulates into a hint of perfectly dry and invigorating cold.

Pumice gives pigment a minutely pitted texture. Filling this nearly invisible roughness are shadows that intensify a painting's colors by subliminal contrast. As Nahas has remarked, there is a similar effect to be seen in Impressionist paintings, for the Impressionists worked their high-keyed paints into swirls and gullies where darkness gathers. Played off against minuscule shadows, Monet's bright mauves or greens look all the brighter. Nahas makes a legitimate comparison between Monet's technique and his own. Nonetheless, his light is very different from the Impressionist kind.

Impressionist sunlight dissolves stone, converting cathedrals into luminous clouds. Nahas's light never denies the stoniness of his materials. He generates from grainy fact a luminosity not to be seen anywhere else, though his orangy reds do bring coral reefs to mind. Nahas knows the reefs of the Red Sea. That knowledge may have guided him beyond the starfish paintings to these new works, and in a roundabout way the theme of coral helps us see where Nahas stands in the history of postwar art.

Tiger's Eye was one of several small magazines that surfaced in the New York art world during the late 1940s and early '50s. Its second issue, which appeared in 1947, quoted from Shakespeare's The Tempest a lyric known as "Ariel's Song":

Full fathom five thy father lies;
  Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes.
  Nothing of him doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
  Into something rich and strange.

In need of titles for new paintings, Jackson Pollock borrowed from this song two phrases—Full Fathom Five and Sea Change. Another of his paintings from this time is called Alchemy.

To say that Pollock and his generation were preoccupied with change is of course an understatement. They wanted to change everything from their studio methods to the scale of their ambitions. Determined to reroute the course of modernism, they hoped to shift its capital from Paris to New York. Some of them tried to restructure the pictorial image. With his allover paintings, Pollock succeeded. And his success opened the way to infinite variations on the idea of alloverness. Nahas's variation is genuinely new. Instead of gesturing an allover image into being, as Pollock did, he accretes it, with results that recall the coral of "Ariel's Song." This echo links Nahas not merely to a pictorial idea but to a densely populated history. In crowds, of course, distinctions can be lost and similarities overlooked.

Barnett Newman's mature paintings are as thoroughly allover, as open to the infinite, as Pollock's. Yet the works of the two artists look so different that it's hard to see what they share—a reliance on gesture, whether limber and choreographic or precisely calculated. Gesturing in their different ways, Pollock and Newman dismantle traditional composition, rendered the frame arbitrary and filled the canvas with an idea of the infinite. Agnes Martin and the Minimalists did the same with a different sort of gesture, the repetitive kind that produces grids. Andy Warhol with his grids, color fielders with their flows of paint, certain monochromists—all charge the canvas with intimations of infinity. Nahas does the same, and yet he doesn't inhabit his infinite as these other artists do, for he doesn't employ a variant of Pollock's gesture, or Newman's.

Proceeding over the surface with minute touches of color, Nahas's hand enacts the process of scanning. It's as if his hand were an extension of an eye working as an agent of a meditative mind. A steady, contemplative process builds grains of color into granular forms, each shaped by the will to make color equally vivid at every point. Eventually, forms coalesce as an image, an almost tangible luminosity blazes forth, and the painting is done.

The sense of realization is especially strong if you note the "fractal" nature of these new paintings. Their textures reappear, enlarged, in the details of their coral-like forms, and those forms are in their turn enlargements of the details that compose them. No matter how widely or narrowly you focus your gaze, you see the same sort of form. Because Nahas permits size to have no effect on shape, scale floats free. This freedom of scale opens the image to the infinite, as in Pollock's dripped and poured images. The difference is that his forms are not fractal.

Seen very close-up, Pollock's splashes of color are eruptions of sheer, mindless matter. With distance they change, gathering the force of gesture, hence of drama. Pollock and other allover painters occupy their imaginary infinities as dramatis personae, figures animated by heroic impulse. Nahas appears in his infinite more as an unflappable force of mind. This is his originality, to have reinvented the allover field, not merely found a variant. For he has calmed the always at least slightly desperate drama of alloverness, and put in its place the quietude of sheer will. The effect is of a pictorial intent pervading every grain of the image with equal intensity, rendering substance transparent to thought, luminous to vision.