

Galaxies and Fractals

We are delighted to welcome back Nabil Nahas for his second exhibition at Lawrie Shabibi. For this exhibition, Nabil has focussed on his three-dimensional paintings, mostly *Fractals and Galaxies*. Taken together with the works in his previous show, *Palms and Stars*, they show the astonishing depth and breadth of Nabil's artistic production.

Nabil is perhaps best-known for his *Fractals*. He has been developing this series on and off since the mid 1990s, when he began to obliterate the familiar outline of starfish that he was fixing to his canvases at the time, heavily encrusting them with a ground pumice and acrylic mix and finishing them in psychedelic tones. Like much of Nabil's work, the technique and meaning came hand in hand. The term *fractal* refers to the theory of fractal geometry, formulated in the mid 1970s by Benoit Mandelbrot. Mandelbrot described random events in nature deviating from the ideal Euclidean geometry, the rough and fragmented geometric shapes which can be split into parts, each of which is at least approximately a reduced size copy of the whole. According to Mandelbrot, things typically considered to be "rough", a "mess" or "chaotic", like clouds or shorelines, actually had a degree of order. Nabil saw the parallels with his own work- his *Fractal* paintings also represent a kind of asymmetrical equilibrium. This relationship between order and disorder is a recurrent theme in his work, and not just for his *Fractals*.

At first sight Nabil might seem an abstract artist, but he can never be so easily labelled. Even in the most abstract of his works he defies any easy definition of abstract art. His paintings are literal- the images are always taken from something, they often infer movement and thus refer to a moment in time. The *Fractals* themselves vary considerably in size and colour, and evoke a variety of scales and moods. The smallest are like windows onto an underwater world of coral reefs and the larger ones simply overpower the viewer. On the one hand they look like encrusted surfaces of leviathans, and on the other they resemble irregularities that are visible only on an unimaginably minute scale- the false colour images of a scanning electron microscope. The subtle variations in tone and colour that ripple across the mottled surfaces of these fractals is both like the dappled light of tropical seas and like the mineral deposits in a slice of marble. Nabil has concentrated on the colour blue for his recent *Fractals*. The results are astonishingly beautiful.

Nabil switches between his various styles – they evolve, diverge and sometimes converge again. This is partly what he means when he says he paints Nature. He may be painting a tree at the same time he is building up a *Fractal* or tracing the lines of a *Galaxy*. He sees no contradiction- in fact this diversity is at the core of his work. For a painter to move so deftly between such disparate styles might seem confused or confusing, but everything is interconnected. Both the *Fractals* and the *Galaxies* stem from his 1990s starfish paintings - the encrustations of his *Fractals* always hide an underlying network of moulded starfish shapes. Moulded shapes also underlie the *Galaxies*- the bubbling surfaces of these paintings are moulded clam shells. Lest the connection be less than obvious, Nabil playfully highlights it with the ghostly, cartoonish five-sided outlines that populate each of these *Galaxies*, partially hidden by twisted knots. Of course they are no longer really starfish- more like ripples, waves or force fields. These are not the only ghosts of earlier periods that Nabil has allowed to waft into the *galactic* paintings- the circular drops of his late 1980s colour field works also make an appearance, as does an innovation lifted from his *Fractal* series. Nabil incorporates paint chips, themselves a by-product of making his larger *Fractals*. He scrapes these vividly coloured concentric rings from his studio floor- recycled by-products of his *Fractal*-making that are effectively ready-made objects -albeit of the artist's own making, which reveal his process of accretion which builds up the under-surfaces of his acrylic-pumice mix.

One might think of Nabil's *Fractal* paintings as representations of the phenomenal world on a microcosmic scale- a vastly magnified one at that, but at first glance his *Galactic* paintings appear to speak of a scale that is more macrocosmic. Rather than the all-over effect of the *Fractals*, the *Galactic* paintings are both three-dimensional and graphic, with fluid forms and sinuous lines moving around their surfaces. The lines and shapes look like the interactions and repulsions between heavenly bodies, but just as easily they recall amoebic life forms. This paradox is emblematic of Nabil's work- the *galactic* paintings undoubtedly have grandeur, but so do they have a fair helping of humour. Their titles- *Twizzler*, *Serendipity* and *Inka Dinka Doo* clearly have nothing to do with either the cosmos or protozoa, much more to do with the visual puns of his paintings. Scale is important in Nabil's universe, but not that important. He would never let it get in the way of making a good painting.

William Lawrie
Dubai, October 2013