وزارة الثقافة
Ministère de la Culture

Lebanese Visual Art Association

La Biennale di Venezia
61. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte
Partecipazioni Nazionali

PAVILION OF LEBANON
61st INTERNATIONAL ART EXHIBITION
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA

DON'T GET تعدّدٌ بـلا حـــدود ME WRONG

Press Kit - April 2026

Artist
NABIL NAHAS

Commissioner & Curator
NADA GHANDOUR

EXHIBITION
09 MAY
22 NOVEMBER
2026

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ORGANIZERS

وزارة الثقافة
Ministry of Culture

The Lebanese Ministry of Culture has appointed Mrs. Nada Ghandour commissioner and curator of the Pavilion of Lebanon at the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. He appointed the Lebanese Visual Art Association - LVAA as the operator and organizer of this national Pavilion.

Lebanese Visual Art Association

The Lebanese Visual Art Association – LVAA is a non-profit association whose main aim is to organize and produce the Pavilion of Lebanon at the Biennale Arte – Venezia.

PRESS RELEASE

“Don’t Get Me Wrong”

An installation by Nabil Nahas

Nada Ghandour Commissioner and curator

On the occasion of the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia, the Pavilion of Lebanon presents Don’t Get Me Wrong, a monumental installation by Nabil Nahas (born 1949, Beirut).

On view from May 9 to November 22, 2026

The artist explores the relationship between man, nature, and the cosmos in this immersive work, offering a visual and spiritual experience, which transforms the spectacular into a vehicle for introspection.

Reflecting Lebanon’s fluid and multicultural identity, the Pavilion celebrates unity in diversity and the beauty of contradictions, in line with the artistic research Nabil Nahas has been pursuing over several decades, travelling between Lebanon and the United States.

Spanning forty-five linear metres within the Arsenale, the installation consists of twenty-six acrylic-on-canvas panels. Each panel rises three metres high and is arranged side by side to form a monumental, enveloping frieze that invites visitors to navigate within it. Inspired by Persian miniatures, the installation resists linear narrative and fixed interpretation, offering instead an experience to be lived rather than an image to be deciphered.

The compositions feature a rich, complex visual language, where different types of geometric abstractions, inspired by Islamic and Western traditions, meet figuration and fractal patterns, forming an unexpected continuum.

The geometric forms evoke the mathematical structure of the cosmic order: a unified ensemble, the universe is composed of the infinitely small and the infinitely large. Certain patterns repeat across all scales, in both the animal kingdom and nature, reminding us that humanity is part of an infinite whole. Likewise, the spiral — a symbol of infinity drawn from Sufi mysticism—acts as a hypnotic force on the mind, guiding an intimate, inward journey.

The tree motif, central to Nabil Nahas’s work, embodies the tension between rootedness and transcendence through tree species found in biblical texts, including the cedar—the mythical tree of the Lebanese mountains, symbolizing endurance and strength—and the olive, an allegory of life.

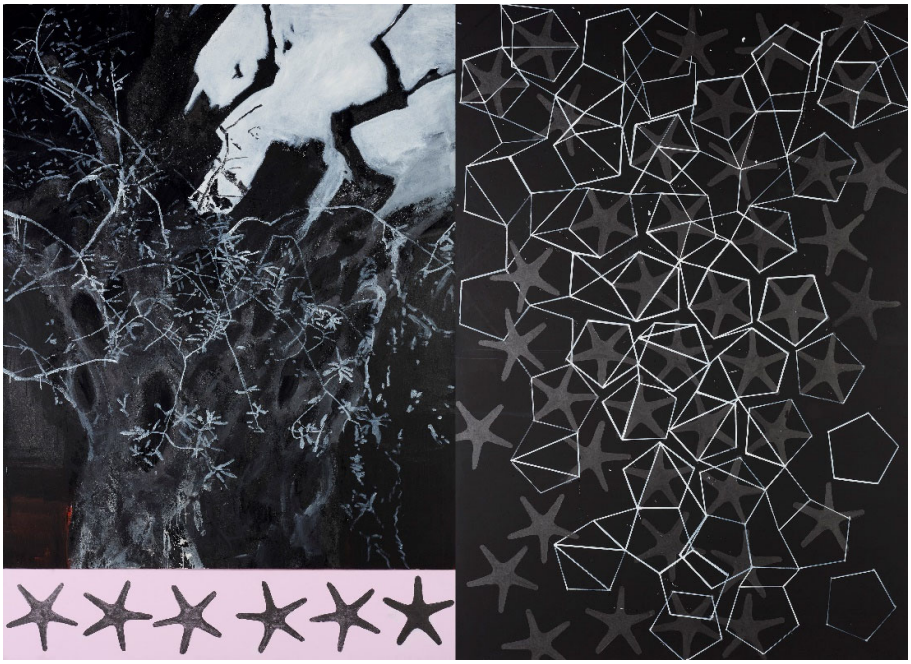
Through this installation, Nabil Nahas celebrates Lebanon as a land of confluences, where communities rooted for centuries have shaped a plural identity. Rather than a mere collection of disjointed fragments, this identity is seen and represented as a living, coherent entity, constantly evolving and perpetually in motion.

The history of Lebanon is that of an extraordinary crossroads, a place where great civilizations have emerged, succeeded one another, and intersected. In Nabil Nahas’s work, Greco-Roman,

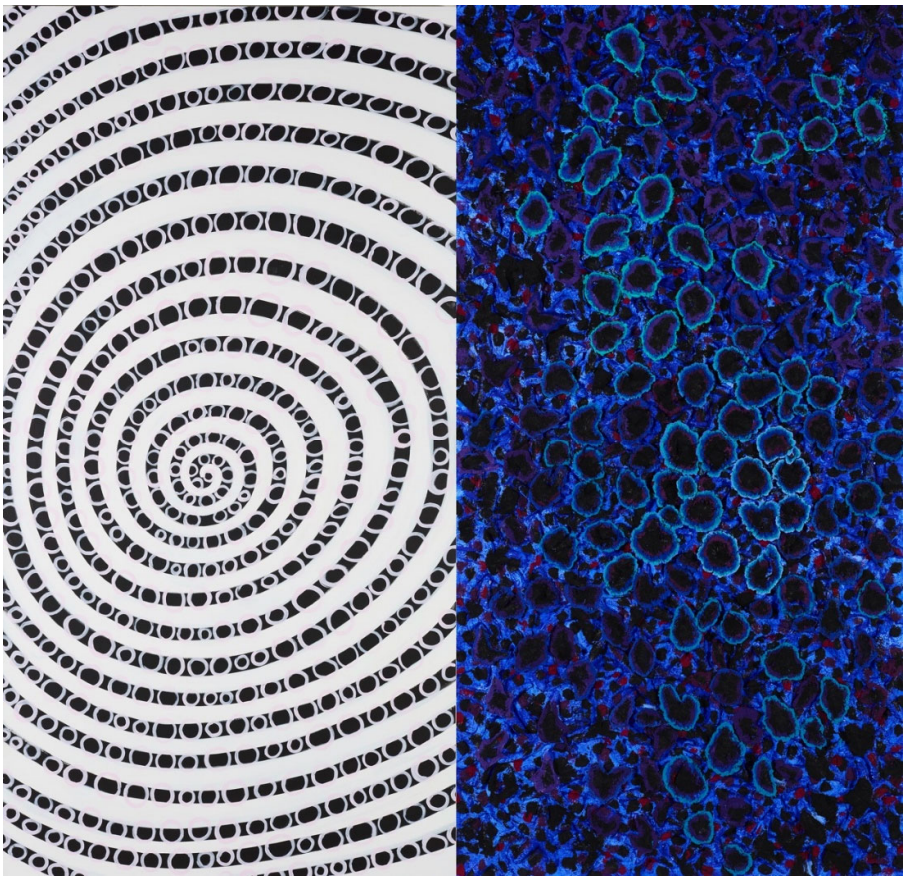
Judeo-Christian, Byzantine, and Islamic influences reflect the country's layered, centuries-old heritage.

Don't Get Me Wrong can be read as a sensitive topography of the country. For the artist, the memory of his homeland is a polyphony, composed of echoes and resonances that extend into his own life: after growing up between Lebanon and Cairo, Nahas settled in New York. Following an 18-year absence, he returned to Lebanon for a brief visit after the civil war—a visit that marked the beginning of increasingly frequent returns.

The scenography of the Pavilion is conceived by Charles Kettaneh and Nicolas Fayad - EAST Architecture Studio.



Nabil Nahas, *Don't Get Me Wrong*, 2026. Installation, acrylic on canvas, H. 2.90 × L. 45m
Detail, diptych: 290 × 400 cm. Photographer: Elie Bekhazi © Nabil Nahas / Courtesy of the artist © LVAA



Nabil Nahas, *Don't Get Me Wrong*, 2026. Installation, acrylic on canvas, H. 2.90 × L. 45 m
Detail, diptych: 290 × 300 cm. Photographer: Elie Bekhazi, © Nabil Nahas / Courtesy of the artist, © LVAA

Foreword

Dr. Ghassan Salamé
Minister of Culture

A national pavilion at Venice is never merely an exhibition; it is a statement about how a country chooses to see itself, and how it hopes to be seen. For Lebanon, participating in this Biennale is an opportunity to speak a language we sometimes forget we master: that of nuance, depth, and creative imagination.

The work of Nabil Nahas, presented here, offers a reflection on the conditions that shape his as well as Lebanon's cultural trajectory. Through an interplay of rhythm, abstraction, and symbolic resonance, the installation reminds us that identity is not frozen but rather an ongoing movement, a negotiation between our ancient past and our uncertain future.

What emerges is a Lebanon that resists simplification and whose creativity persists not by ignoring fragility but by transforming it into insight, form, and vision. In these pages, and in the work they accompany, we find a country that does not hide its complexity but elevates it. We find the traces of civilizations that shaped us, the echoes of landscapes that continue to sustain us, and the quiet conviction that culture remains one of our most enduring strengths.

The pavilion stands, therefore, as both an artistic proposal and a civic gesture: a reminder that, despite the turbulence of our times, Lebanon still knows how to imagine and to contribute to a global conversation.

Introduction

Dr. Nada Ghandour
Commissioner of the Pavilion of Lebanon

After 2022 and 2024, the Pavilion of Lebanon returns to the Venice Art Biennale in 2026, reaffirming its presence on one of the leading stages of international contemporary art. This participation renews Lebanon's commitment to promoting the richness and diversity of its artists and their insight into the issues of our time.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Ghassan Salamé, Minister of Culture, for his trust. It is an honor to once again serve as curator of the Lebanese Pavilion and to accompany a Lebanese artist of international stature in 2026: Nabil Nahas.

In the monumental installation *Don't Get Me Wrong*, Nahas questions the notion of identity and evokes a collective memory. The Pavilion of Lebanon presents itself as a space for reflection and resonance, where Lebanon emerges as a crossroads of creation, shaped by the layered histories and civilizations of the Mediterranean, Arab and Western worlds.

The transcendence that permeates *Don't Get Me Wrong* responds to the questions of our time, echoing the concerns explored by many artists presented in Venice today. This dimension resonates deeply with *In Minor Keys*, the theme of the 61st International Art Exhibition, which privileges the sensory over the didactic. Visitors are invited to engage through emotion, intuition, and perception rather than discourse.

Through a visual language imbued with spirituality, *Don't Get Me Wrong* moves beyond the boundaries of painting to become an immersive experience, encouraging viewers to slow down, look differently, and embrace multiple interpretations rather than a single fixed reading. This catalogue, designed to accompany and extend that experience, offers interpretive keys that grant readers – like visitors – the freedom to chart their own path through the work.

Located at the heart of the Arsenale, an iconic venue for contemporary art worldwide, the Pavilion of Lebanon stands as an artistic and cultural center on the international stage, supported by an entire nation. This achievement would not have been possible without the dedication of a team of professionals and the loyal support of donors whose generosity has once again enabled this major undertaking.

In 2026, the Pavilion of Lebanon will stand as a celebration of creativity and fraternity. At a time of global uncertainty and instability, it is essential that nations promote voices other than violence. Space must be given to the imaginative and conciliatory power of artists who express a shared, open, and free language, as art has the capacity to create bonds that transcend geographical, cultural, historical, and ideological boundaries to affirm the power of human connection.

CATALOGUE EXTRACTS

« DON'T GET ME WRONG »

Dr. Nada Ghandour, Curator of the Pavilion of Lebanon

With *Don't Get Me Wrong,* an immersive installation stretching across 45 linear meters, artist Nabil Nahas (born 1949, Beirut) invites viewers into a visual and spiritual experience that questions the relationship between humans, nature, and the cosmos.

Composed of 26 acrylic-on-canvas panels, *Don't Get Me Wrong* brings together figuration, geometric abstraction, and fractal forms within a disruptive project that employs spectacle as a means of fostering introspection. The coexistence of multiple scales of representation, the mystery of signs, and the absence of narrative contribute to the emergence of a total work of art, one that seeks transcendence through painting.

Don't Get Me Wrong invites visitors to reflect and meditate on their relationship with the universe as a means of reconnecting with the world. In this context, the Pavilion of Lebanon becomes a site for contemplating the fragility of humankind, no more than a speck of dust within the immensity of creation.

A meeting point between art, culture, and spirituality, this work follows a philosophical and symbolic approach: it extends beyond aesthetic exploration to question being, its memory and its identity. Drawing on references that span major Mediterranean civilizations and beyond (Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, Byzantine, and Islamic), Nahas fuses heritages to formulate a pictorial language that conveys pluralism and dialogue between cultures. This approach reflects a worldview rooted in the fluid identity that characterizes Lebanon and its multicultural fabric.

Fluid identity refers to a shifting form of subjectivity constructed outside rigid social, gendered, cultural or aesthetic categories. It examines an identity in perpetual evolution, an identity enriched by its capacity to integrate exogenous elements from past and present, enabling it to project itself into the future. The dynamics of regeneration and circulation within one's heritage determine the meaning and mode of being of this identity.

Echoing this notion, *Don't Get Me Wrong* celebrates art's ability to transcend divisions, a metaphor for unity in diversity, a space of encounter between East and West; between artistic expression, the spiritual realm, the cosmos and earthly existence; between heritage and future possibility.

In this original and innovative installation, Nahas revisits and expands the themes and motifs that run throughout his oeuvre and underpin his creative process.

Culture, Identity and Fluidity in Nabil Nahas's Work

> *"As a teenager, I used to go and play with my friend in the ruins of Byblos on Saturdays. A veritable mille-feuille of Neolithic, Amorite, Hyksos, Phoenician, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Mamluk and Ottoman civilizations, the cliff offered us, through winter erosion, countless amulets and small objects that I still keep. Everything was*

mixed together in a flow of earth: raw, ancient, overwhelming. This connection with such a distant past already fascinated me."[1]

This early fascination with the strata of Byblos, the founding place where civilizations intertwine across time, deeply informs his artistic approach. For Nahas, the memory of Lebanese soil becomes a metaphor for identity: not a fixed block but a living, breathing material composed of layers, echoes, and circulations. This worldview, both archaeological and poetic, aligns with the concept of fluid cultural identity, continually under construction, where multiple heritages do not cancel one another out but coexist and even transform.

Referring to a set of knowledge, beliefs, practices and values shared by a given group, "culture" forms the symbolic base through which individuals construct meaning and orient their relationship to the world.

Identity is complex and variable, shaped by factors such as culture, geography, language and personal experience. It is defined both by the individual's uniqueness and by the collective affiliations that anchor them in a history and environment.

The fluidity between culture and identity is a recent interpretation. As French researcher Geneviève Vinsonneau notes: "For several decades now, the static and fixed view of culture […] has been giving way to a dynamic model. Today, culture is understood as both a product and a resource, a potential source of identity development for social actors. Cultural heterogeneity, once perceived as a threat to identity coherence, is now seen as an opportunity for openness and enrichment."[2]

It is from this open approach that it becomes possible to imagine modes of thought and action that do not oppose what is universal in human beings to the particularities inherited from history and environment. Instead, these dimensions encounter and confront one another without being erased. Change thus emerges as the dominant paradigm.

In this context, art plays an essential role: it becomes the privileged site where fluid identity finds expression, where boundaries dissolve to give way to hybrid, shifting forms in constant transformation.

This fluidity emerges throughout Nahas's work in the citation and transformation of ancient symbols inherited from those who have inhabited Lebanon across millennia. None remain isolated; all intertwine, meet and overlap. Culture becomes a terrain of plurality, open to exchange, otherness and instability.

Bringing together multiple visual and spiritual legacies, Nahas's art embodies a worldview grounded in cultural dialogue and porosity, an aspiration to transform differences into cohesion rather than division.

[1] All of the quotes by Nabil Nahas are taken from an interview between Nabil Nahas and Nada Ghandour in October 2025.

[2] Geneviève Vinsonneau "Le développement des notions de culture et d'identité: un itinéraire ambigu," *Carrefours de l'éducation,* 2002/2, no. 14, Armand Colin, 2002. See https://shs.cairn.info/revue-carrefours-de-l-education-2002-2-page-2?lang=fr&ref=doi

American Connections

> *"In 1962, at the age of 12, I bought a book titled Modern Painting Contemporary Trends" by Nello Ponente, which was a revelation to me: an overview of abstract painting in Europe and the United States. It was Pandora's box: a flood of images I had never seen before, which I absorbed like a sponge. On one hand, Wols, Dubuffet and Fautrier; on the other Pollock, Rothko and Newman. Two contrasting yet complementary aesthetics. At 18, I chose the New York School and set off for the United States."*

Thanks to Ponente's *Modern Painting: Contemporary Trends* [3], Nabil Nahas discovered European and American art simultaneously. Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, Henri Michaux and Wols struck him with their rich, organic handling of pictorial materiality, a quality that would profoundly shape his own relationship to texture. At the same time, he was captivated by the great masters of American Abstract Expressionism: Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and Willem de Kooning. Looking at the reproductions in this book, Nahas did not yet grasp the magnitude of their paintings. It was only during his first trip to the United States, while in transit through London, that he encountered a Rothko in person and was overwhelmed by its monumentality. Shortly thereafter, a vast painting by Morris Louis "drove him crazy," as he recalls: an aesthetic shock that proved decisive.

The trajectory of this French-speaking Lebanese artist began at a time when most of his compatriots chose France for their studies. Nahas, however, looked toward the United States, feeling more attuned to the artistic developments taking shape there, particularly the various forms of geometric abstraction cultivated by such artists as Frank Stella and Al Held. Having grown up between Lebanon and Cairo, he was already familiar with formal approaches embedded in his own cultural environment. They attracted him, and he sensed their power intuitively. His artistic training took place at Louisiana State University and Yale University between 1969 to 1972. In 1973, he moved to New York, where he still resides. After an absence of 18 years, he returned to Lebanon in 1993 for a brief visit, a trip that marked the beginning of regular returns and the transformation of a family silkworm farm into his studio.

Nahas's work belongs to the lineage of American abstraction, particularly the movement that emerged in New York during the 1940s and 1950s. This period saw the rise of Abstract Expressionism and such figures as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman and Clyfford Still: artists determined to break with European conventions and invent a new, more gestural, more intuitive and often monumental way of painting. Abstraction became an energetic field, the direct projection of the state of the soul, a terrain to explore and interpret rather than depict. In Rothko or Newman's work, shapes take the form of vibrant color expanses that invite immersion. This idea of an immersive, meditative and spiritual painting resonates deeply with Nahas's own practice. Yet unlike the artists of Color-Field Painting (Morris Louis) or Minimalism (Donald Judd), Nahas introduced dense, textured, organic material that lends his surface an almost sculptural relief. This pictorial density anchors abstraction in physicality, making color not only atmospheric but tactile, nearly mineral. In this sense, he joins an American movement which, since the 1970s, has renewed abstraction through material and motif, with such artists as Robert Ryman and Brice Marden.

[3] Nello Ponente, *Modern Painting Contemporary Trends,* translated from Italian by James Emmons, Geneva, Skira, 1960.

At the same time, Nahas's practice draws upon legacies from both tradition and modernity. His work merges Western material culture with the spiritual geometry of the East, forging a hybrid visual language that unites the sensuality, density, presence, and monumentality of modern Western painting with the purity and mysticism of Eastern geometric forms.

The Legacy of Islamic Art

> *"When I was living in Cairo as a young boy, my mother would sometimes take me to Khan el-Khalili[4], but my real discovery of Islamic art came at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. That was when I understood the formal beauty, abstract power and spiritual depth of this art, whose influence is instinctively reflected in my work."*

Spread across a vast geographical area, from Spain to Central Asia, Islamic civilization fostered an artistic production that, despite diverse origins, remains remarkably homogeneous. Nourished by the cultural influences of the conquered countries, Islamic art took shape from the 7th century AD onwards across distinct movements, yet with shared principles. One of the most important is the instrumental and symbolic use of geometry, particularly in the transposition of architectural structural elements into decorative motifs. Another is the art of illustrated books and secular miniatures, developed to interpret the world visually. Originating in the Arab world, this art form spread throughout the Mediterranean and parts of the West.

Nahas draws three essential elements from this great civilization: sacred geometry, which reflects the order of the cosmos and refers to the hidden structure of the world; Sufi inspiration, which infuses an inner quest and mystical, meditative dimension; and non-hierarchical composition, inherited from the Persian miniature painting, which dissolves central perspective.

A Sacred Geometry

In Nahas's work, geometry is not decorative: it functions simultaneously as principle, structure and energy. It belongs to an ancient visual tradition of Islamic art, in which the divine is not figured but expressed in the tight rhythm of the composition, the hypnotic repetition of motifs and symmetrical correspondence. The octagon, from which the star shape derives, recurs throughout Islamic visual history. The art of pattern design, which flourished during the golden age of Islam (8th - 13th centuries), continues to this day.

This abstraction is never meaningless: it articulates a unifying and transcendent cosmic order. The sacred nature of geometry lies in its capacity to open a contemplative, ineffable, ideal realm. Its rigor generates remarkably complex patterns from simple shapes. The fundamental figure is the circle; its division and repetition forming the basis of most patterns. Each geometric shape carries symbolic meaning in Islamic culture. The circle, a perfect and endless

[4] Khan el-Khalili is one of the most famous historic bazaars in the Arab world. Founded in 1382 by the Mamluk sultan Jaharkas al-Khalili, it is located in the heart of Islamic Cairo and is a remarkable complex where Mamluk architecture has been largely preserved.

figure, expresses eternity, the uniqueness of God, and the infinite cycle of creation. The square evokes stability, balance and the foundations of the terrestrial world. The star, often composed of multiple intersecting shapes, embodies light and spiritual elevation, like the stars that guide us through the night. The triangle may signify harmony between mind, body, and soul, or the divine presence.

Yet Nahas does not simply cite Islamic tradition: he interprets it. His favored motifs include spirals, polygons and stars. His compositions endow geometry with an embodied, almost organic presence. For Nahas, geometry becomes a shared language that synthesizes several aesthetic worlds, each rooted in real worlds. As a language of contemplation, it does not reveal the sacred in *Don't Get Me Wrong,* but rather the rhythm of the world: an exceptional space shaped by centuries of turbulent history, both violent and peaceful, prosperous and fragile, ancient and current.

In this sense, Nahas's art may be seen as a contemporary expression of the oldest and most universal foundations of visual culture: ancient geometry, in which form is inseparable from number. The pentagon and its internal star, the pentagram, occupy a privileged place in this tradition. For the Pythagoreans, the five-pointed star served as a sign of recognition among initiates and symbolized harmony and perfection. It represented the golden ratio, the "divine proportion." This ratio (approximately 1.618) is found in architecture, nature, and the human body. In the famous pentagram of the *Vitruvian Man*, Leonardo da Vinci illustrated the canon of universal aesthetics.

Nahas stands within this lineage. For him, the golden ratio is not a rule, but a hidden rhythm. Another mathematical pattern recurs throughout his work: the Fibonacci sequence. Each term in this series, where each number is the sum of the two preceding ones, produces a logarithmic spiral, a form found in shells, galaxies, and plants. This spiral structure holds a privileged place in Nahas's creative process.

The Sufi Spiral: Movement, Unity and Mysticism

Breaking through the surface of Nahas's monumental installation, the spiral motif performs its essential function: it opens a passageway. The spiral exerts a hypnotic force upon the human mind: it captures the gaze, draws it inward, and opens an intermediate space.

A ringed spiral on a Nahas panel is particularly demonstrative of this magnetic pull. Its force of attraction lies beyond the boundaries of the canvas: by the time the gaze settles on the surface, it has already been absorbed into its movement. In this way, Nahas conveys a world in perpetual motion. The spiral, a recurring motif in his work, refers directly to Sufi imagery: it represents the inner quest, the endless path toward divine unity, each return carrying with it a step forward.

In Sufi mysticism, the spiral is the privileged symbol of the inner journey and the movement of the soul toward God. It expresses the tension between two poles: the center, seat of the sacred and the Origin, and the movement towards the periphery, the realm of the temporal world. The return to the center corresponds to the believer's quest, the movement of purification and inner knowledge, *ma'rifa,* through which the soul returns to its source. This pulsation, at once expansion and contraction, reflects the breath of the divine spirit (*nafas ar- rahmânî).* The Creative Word, *Kun!* ("Be!"), opens the world in a spiral gesture, a whirling momentum. In

the ritual dance of the whirling dervishes, this spiral becomes visible: the body turns upon itself and around the axis of the circle, mirroring the rotation of planets around the Sun. This cosmic choreography is a metaphor for the soul revolving around the Divine Principle. The position of the dervish's hands as he spins, one extended toward the sky and the other toward the earth, establishes a link between dimensions and energies circulating through the human body. The movement is never mechanical repetition; it is ascending, each turn yielding a new depth of understanding. The Sufi spiral is therefore not merely a geometric form, but a spiritual experience.

Across civilizations, the spiral has symbolized the rhythm of life and the pulse of time. Opening outward, a circle still in the process of becoming, it expresses continuity and progress, renewal and transformation. It is order in motion.

Sacred and profane meanings interlace in Nahas's spirals, which operate as catalysts for deeply intimate experiences. "And what a spiral human existence is! In this spiral, so many dynamics are reversed! We no longer know *right away* whether we are running toward the center or escaping from it.[5]" For the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), this transitional phase is where humanity's creative imagination comes into play: the passage from chaos to order, from the raw material of dreams and primal images to a living form. The spiral embodies the life of the mind, which advances through reversals, repetitions, and deepening. Its ambivalence activates the ceaseless work of imagination, transforming confusion into coherence.

From Miniature to Monumental

Nahas evokes Persian miniatures as they developed between the 13th and 17th centuries. What interests him is not the relation between text and image, the former absent from his work, but the compositional logic: a constrained space in which every detail has symbolic value, and where multiple scenes coexist without imposing a linear reading.

In *Don't Get Me Wrong,* Nahas transposes this principle to a monumental scale. By juxtaposing panels and arranging sequences to be perceived simultaneously, he creates a composite yet coherent image that is at once dense and open to random but equally significant visitor experience.

The narrative logic that gathers successive moments on the same plane without strict separation enables him to express the coexistence of multiple temporalities on a single pictorial surface. Each painting becomes a layer of memory, a suspended instant that enters into dialogue with others, as if past, present, and future were juxtaposed within an infinite continuum.

This non-linear, cyclical perception of time allows Nahas to express a worldview anchored in *maktoub* [that which is written], destiny. In his work, each motif, color, and texture seems guided by an inner necessity, as though the canvases themselves participated in a cosmic narrative already inscribed.

[5] Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace,* 3rd edition, Paris, Les Presses universitaires de France, 1957, p. 240

When Aesthetics is Mathematical

> *"In the 1980s, one morning while walking on the beach [in Long Island], I watched the waves wash across the sand and retreat, carving shapes and small holes. I immediately saw a connection with the constellations in the sky: my first instinctive approach to the relationship between the terrestrial and the celestial, between the macrocosm and the microcosm. Basically, it all starts with the atom."*

The dialogue between macrocosm and microcosm structures Nahas's vision and unfolds from panel to panel. The macrocosm, the space of the cosmos and the whole, is expressed in his monumental compositions and their immersive ambition. The microcosm reveals itself in the meticulous detail of textures, in organic densities reminiscent of living cells and mineral fragments. The two are not opposed but rather mirror one another: each element is a miniature version of a large whole, and the monumental whole retains traces of microscopic precision.

The starfish motif crystallizes this principle. A perfect mathematical figure, the starfish nonetheless corresponds, at every scale, to the human body. Symbolically, it supports its representation and consciousness in the world. Thus, in this dialogue from which the human figure seems absent, it remains continuously implied. The star is also a messenger between realms: from the celestial to the terrestrial, from the infinitely large to the infinitely small. Within the language of painting, it becomes the common denominator between cosmos, nature and man, the indicator that binds these dimensions.

Nahas's aesthetic is in dialogue with the laws of nature. Some of his forms organize themselves according to fractal logic. A fractal is a geometric figure that replicates its structure at every scale: an endlessly self-reproducing form. Fractals appear throughout the mineral, plant, and animal worlds.

Fractal theory was formalized in the 1970s by the French-American mathematician Benoît B. Mandelbrot, notably through *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (1982). Mandelbrot demonstrated that many natural phenomena (clouds, mountains, rivers) follow fractal logic, combining similarity and hidden order in often striking ways. "As I continued studying fractals, I increasingly encountered geometric objects of growing, undeniable, surprising and ambiguous beauty…My programmer enters seemingly innocuous equations into the computer. And one after another, a whole range of characters appear on screen, sometimes realistic, sometimes dreamlike or nightmarish. Every time, it's an unforgettable aesthetic shock.[6]"

Nahas echoes this: "For me, fractals are organized chaos. The patterns interlock and tessellate, like a honeycomb structure. They unfold chaotically, without a pre-established design. Painting is a flat surface on which forms construct themselves, interlock, repeat, and evolve on their own. This apparent disorder is actually a form of organic order, where each element naturally finds its place. Disorder is simply another face of harmony."

In his works, Nahas captures the energy of this movement: proliferating, abundant, interconnected. He does not paint a motif; he paints the natural phenomenon that connects the apparent obviousness of the world to a complex and invisible coherence. His compositions

[6] Benoît B. Mandelbrot, *Les objects fractals* (1982), 1984, Paris, Flammarion, p. 180.

aim less to represent an object than to evoke the experience of nature, suggesting that behind contingency lies a hidden order. Through endlessly repeating forms reminiscent of fractals, Nahas fuses mathematical rigor with millennia-old processes.

Islamic geometric patterns are not mathematically fractal, but they cultivate an aesthetic of repetition and infinity that echoes the fractal principle: a play between the completeness of the pattern and the limitless expanse it implies. This idea of infinity contained within the finite resonates deeply in Nahas's work, where each motif seems part of an endless whole. The multiplication of motifs referring to a single one is a powerful image that resonates strongly with certain spiritual principles of Islam, particularly with the Sufi view of the world. Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) teaches that each element of creation reflects the Whole (God). According to the Persian poet and theologian Jalâl ad-Dîn Rûmî (1207-1273), the world is a fabric of signs (âyât) that point to Divine Unity:

"You are not a drop in the ocean.
You are the entire ocean in a drop."
Mathnawî[7]

Lebanon, Biblical Nature and Living Metaphor of a Multicultural History

> *"After living in the United States for 18 years, in 1993, I returned to Lebanon for a short stay for family reasons. I rediscovered the local landscape. The nature here is completely different: raw, ancient, overwhelming. I was deeply impressed by the olive trees, the cedars, and the ancient landscapes. These elements gradually became an integral part of my work. If I hadn't returned to Lebanon, I would never have painted trees; I would have remained abstract."*

Figures from the landscapes of the Levant (Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Palestine), the cradle of biblical texts, the olive, palm and cedar trees are associated with transcendence and resilience, values shared with the community.

In the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), these natural motifs are used to encourage caring for others (their branches offer protection) and, beyond that, to exalt permanence, even eternity on earth. Yet they also symbolize fragility, especially when they fall victim to human violence, as with the olive trees set ablaze in *Don't Get Me Wrong* by Nahas. Even charred, they stand in the panels: the ground has not been surrendered. Others will follow in their footsteps.

Nahas's formal language is imbued with Judeo-Christian symbolism, particularly in his treatment of trees. Linking heaven and earth, the tree is one of the key symbols of man's relationship with God in the Bible.

In Lebanon, the cedar is called "*arz el-rab"* (cedar of God), attesting to its sacred nature. Cited dozens of times in the Old Testament, the cedar embodies majesty, strength, and proximity to the divine, from King David's palace to the righteous who rise "like the cedar of Lebanon" (Psalm 92:12). In the *Song of Songs* it is written: "His appearance is like Lebanon, as majestic as the cedars!" (Song 5:15). The cedar's longevity and durability made it the chosen material

[7] ***Mathnawî*** (or *Masnavi-ye Ma'navi*) is the masterpiece of the Persian poet and mystic Jal**â**l ad-D**î**n **Rûmî** (Thirteenth century).

for Solomon's two temples in Jerusalem and the ships of the Phoenician, Assyrian, Egyptian and Roman fleets.

The cedar, olive and palm trees are deeply rooted in sacred texts and popular culture. In Lebanon, Nahas lives among these symbolic trees, which he collects as well as paints. Like many Lebanese, he reveres the cedar, centered on the national flag, as a bearer of collective memory, resilience, identity and freedom. In 1920, the founding fathers of Greater Lebanon adopted it as the emblem of the Lebanese people: "An evergreen cedar represents a people that remains young despite its cruel past. Though oppressed, never conquered, the cedar is its rallying symbol. Through unity, it will overcome all attacks."[8]

As a symbol, the cedar finds contemporary resonance in Nahas's work, becoming a metaphor for Lebanese identity, rooted in the earth yet open to the universe, balancing materiality and spirituality.

Don't Get Me Wrong may be read as a sensitive topography of Lebanon. Natural motifs anchor the territory in their body of work: the sea and coastline through mineral tones, undulations, and dense textures; the mountains through vertical power; and the sky through star-studded expanses that act as spiritual horizons. The fragmented reality of nature and the fiction of painting merge, welcoming visitors into a space where Lebanon is materially and spiritually embodied, a land traversed by civilizations. *Don't Get Me Wrong* thus offers a positive alternative to the conflict-ridden geography that has shaped Lebanon for decades and distorted its identity. In Venice, Nahas opens a memorial, transcendental and syncretic space that restores the soul of Lebanon's multi-millennial, multicultural, and multi-faith history.

Intertwined Legacies and Formal Renewal

> "I come from an Orient deeply connected to the beauty of Islamic art and abstraction. I am also influenced by Western art across all periods. This approach comes naturally to me."

The legacy of Islamic art is not the only one Nahas revisits; he also reactivates the Greco-Roman tradition in the spatial structure of his installation.

Nahas uses the term "frieze," inherited from Greco-Roman architectural vocabulary. While Greek in origin, frieze-like bands of bas-relief exist across many cultures of East and West. Friezes were used extensively by architects in Greco-Roman antiquity. They adorned buildings as horizontal crowns, shaping their appearance rather than structural integrity. Indoors, they articulated the space between floor and ceiling. Since the Renaissance, the term has referred to any elongated composition unfolding in sequence.

In figurative friezes, scenes follow one another linearly, guiding the eye through a continuous narrative, founded on the unity of time and space. Nahas subverts this logic: he inhabits the conventional frieze while undoing its narrative function, applying, instead, the principles of Persian miniature painting. The planes coexist without hierarchical continuity; the sequences

[8] https://patrimoinedorient.org/index.php/2019/10/24/le-cedre-du-liban-un-embleme-menace/

do not tell a story but coexist, respond, and overlap, dissolving temporal markers and inviting an open, non-linear reading.

While the hybridization of Islamic ornamentation, Mediterranean memory, and classical tradition nourishes his creative process, Nahas sublimates these references into a present-day language where affinities and correspondences flourish, with Lebanon as a powerful catalyst.

Following the tradition of ancient friezes but inflected with contemporary sensibility, Nahas's work crowns the Pavilion of Lebanon. Suspended more than two meters overhead, the immense canvas-banner forms a mystical sky whose multicolored stars represent humanity. The scenography celebrates the circulation of time, space, symbols, and ideas in the heights of the grand hall, magnifying a work conceived as a swirling spatial entity.

The treatment of the pictorial subject reveals a Byzantine influence, recalling sacred icons where figures emerge against abstract grounds. The absence of decor situates the image in a timeless register. Continuing in the Byzantine tradition, Nahas employs gold to create a vibrating field, situating his work within a visual continuity between ancient and contemporary sacredness.

Alongside these luminous tones, Nahas's palette is remarkable for its intensity: deep blues, close to lapis-lazuli, open the space toward infinity; greens evoke vegetation and earthly memory.

The chromatic harmony is never merely decorative: each tone carries cultural weight and emotional resonance. It expresses the tension between order and profusion: colors interact and sometimes collide, generating a dense visual field that reinforces the sensations of simultaneity and fragmentation.

Nahas amplifies the power of color through contrasts of light and shadow. The reliefs of the material, variations in thickness, and modulations of brightness enliven the surface, guiding light across the plane, highlighting certain areas while plunging others into subdued darkness. These contrasts lend depth to his compositions and contribute to their cosmic and organic character. Nahas's use of color transcends mere decoration, functioning as a symbolic and plastic language that articulates his heritage and contemporary vision.

What Gesture Means

The sensory experience, to which Nahas invites us, is both simple and complex. It requires an openness to immersion in a space where the visible and invisible hold equal value, and where spirituality gives form to materiality. Here, painting becomes the vehicle for a foundational experience.

Contemporary art trends reflect an era of rapid transformation and deep questioning. Whether through technological experimentation, environmental commitment, or the celebration of diversity, contemporary art continues to push mental boundaries and expand our understanding of the world.

As global connectivity accelerates and digital technologies proliferate, artists worldwide are increasingly turning toward traditional arts. They revive ancient techniques such as ceramics, embroidery, and engraving (sometimes technologically assisted but not dominated by

technology). Grayson Perry's narrative pottery or Ghada Amer's embroidered feminist works exemplify this return to manual and technical skills. This alliance of old and new enables works that draw upon tradition while reflecting shifting cultural values.

Nahas's approach participates in a broader contemporary movement that places painting, gesture, and materiality once again at the center. For decades, conceptual art, pure abstraction, and digital media dominated, emphasizing the dematerialization of the artwork. Today, painting, and with it, the figure, texture, and the trace of the hand, has returned with force. In 2025, the prestigious Marcel Duchamp Prize was awarded to a painter for the first time in 20 years, signaling renewed confidence in this ancestral medium.

Nahas engages ancient and modern legacies not to historicize them but to *activate* them within painting. The motif is never an isolated decorative element but living matter, a plastic rhythm. He makes the gesture of the hand, the brush, and the painted surface an act of presence. Painting is not merely a vehicle for ideas: it is immersion and experience.

This renewed valuation of gesture and materiality aligns with the resurgence of painting. A "vibrant" painting of layers, textures, and strokes asserts itself against the coolness of conceptual and digital aesthetics. This is not opposition but coexistence: conceptual art has reshaped the conditions of artistic production, but the pictorial gesture, particularly in a dematerialized digital age, recovers extraordinary power. Gesture becomes the locus of subjectivity and freedom. Alone in the studio, facing the canvas, the artist performs an irreducible act: giving birth to a vision.

Ultimately, Nahas's art poses a fundamental question: In a hyperconnected world saturated with digital images, what place remains for painting, for gesture, and for the intimacy of creation? His answer is simple yet profound: painting remains a place of *being*, of being in the world, of attending to form and matter. By reactivating ornament, reinterpreting motifs, and transforming the painted surface into an active field, Nahas invites us to a sensory experience in which art is not only seen but lived.

Thus, Nahas's painting becomes an act of reaffirmation: the reaffirmation of painting as an essential medium; of gesture as a space of unmediated subjectivity; and of an identity that is not fixed but fluid, multiple, traversed by heritage, and turned toward the future.

PAINTING "THE ACTION OF THE UNIVERSE STRUGGLING WITH ITSELF"[9]

Emilia Philippot

Heritage Curator, Head of Scientific Department and Collections – Musée Rodin, Paris

When I discover Nabil Nahas's work in his studio, I am immediately struck by the abundance of works hanging on the walls, the diversity of formats, techniques, styles and motifs. The whole thing is like a rich spectacle, an explosion of colors and textures where abstract and figurative figures coexist and interact, from the deepest black to the most precious brightness, from the smoothest of flat surfaces to the thickest of rough surfaces. Extremely diverse in nature and size, the forms metamorphose from one canvas to another; they bounce, contract, overlap, absorb each other, navigate as if autonomously, and compose an eclectic environment of singular unity.

Their presentation in the studio offers the viewer a genuine environment. An environment in which works from different periods are mixed together and, despite their individual identities, define a contemplative space as a whole. It is precisely this idea that Nahas has chosen to explore for the Lebanese pavilion at the Biennale, composing a unique, continuous, and monumental ensemble from newly produced works that revisit and develop his favorite themes. As he explains his project, and I discover more details about the nature of the paintings already completed, I see the unifying thread of his approach taking shape and perceive a connection with Claude Monet that is as profound as it is unexpected. This thread is that of a "constant expansion of the universe"[10] which the artist aspires to reproduce through an open, ever-evolving work that explores several modes of representation simultaneously.

Peaceful meditation

Born in 1949 in Beirut, Nahas grew up in Cairo before emigrating to the United States in 1968. A graduate of Louisiana State University and Yale University, he belongs to the second generation of American Abstract Expressionism, a New York school whose recognition in the early 1950s coincided with the rediscovery of the master of Giverny's *Water Lilies*, which he called his *Grandes Décorations* [Great Decorations].

The large *Water Lilies* paintings were donated to the French state by Monet the day after the armistice of World War I on November 12, 1918. This collection, displayed in a specially constructed setting within the Musée de l'Orangerie, opened to the public in 1927. However, the theme had appeared much earlier in the artist's work. Between the late 1890s and 1926, it inspired a huge output of some 300 paintings, constituting the artist's final series. Before becoming an installation, the *Water Lilies* therefore had, like Nahas's series, their own

[9] "Monet painted action, the action of the universe struggling with itself" Georges Clemenceau, *Claude Monet, Les Nymphéas*, Paris, Librairie Plon, 1928, p. 53-54.

[10] Nabil Nahas interviewed by Jean Mun–Delsalle, July 4, 2023, see *Singapore Home & Décor,* https://www.homeanddecor.com.sg/design/art/nabil-nahas-art-paintings-biography

autonomy. Nevertheless, critics of the time, including Monet himself, quickly projected onto them a large-scale decorative design in which the motif would extend far beyond easel painting. As early as 1909, the artist imagined the theme "carried along the walls, enveloping all of the surfaces of its space" and providing "the illusion of an endless whole, a wave without horizon or shore: nerves overworked by labor would have relaxed there, following the restful example of these stagnant waters, and to those who lived there, this room would have offered a peaceful retreat for meditation in the center of a flower-filled aquarium."[11]

Despite the aesthetic and chronological distance that separates it from Impressionism, Nahas's project for the Biennale is very much in line with this tradition: spanning some 45 linear meters, his work consists of 26 large-format paintings, approximately 3 meters high, juxtaposed with one another to create an immense, enveloping frieze that invites contemplation. But where Monet chose an iconographic continuum, finding inspiration in the single source of the water lily pond in his Impressionist garden, Nahas brings together very diverse visual worlds by alternating paintings from different series: spirals, geometric shapes, starfish, Lebanese cedars, palm trees…The whole thing could seem scattered if it were not for an underlying movement that deeply unifies the ensemble. Beyond the interplay of colors, textures, and rhythms induced by certain particularly circular or star-shaped motifs, a palpable energy emerges and draws in the viewer, subjecting them to a new kind of cosmic vision that finds its coherence in a constant shift between microcosm and macrocosm.

Cosmic vision

Nahas does not seek to copy nature, but rather to understand its processes and reproduce them. What matters to him is not so much the motif as the way in which it comes about. Deeply influenced by fractal theory, which gives its name to many of his paintings, the artist explores nature's propensity to generate irregular geometric shapes that can be divided into parts, each of which is a copy, at least approximately reduced, of the whole. From this theory formulated in the 1970s by mathematician Benoît Mandelbrot, Nahas draws a possible interpretation of a world where chaos is governed by a form of order, and where the part coincides with the whole. In some of his paintings, as if swollen with blisters, different materials come together, from the minerality of pumice stone to the organic nature of starfish, without any one taking precedence over the other. The attentive observer of his work witnesses the spectacle of a magical sedimentation, hypnotized by the teeming alchemy that surfaces in the painting, and becomes a witness to the origins of a world whose secret laws are expressed in the interstices of the canvas. In a way, one could say that the principle of continuity that governs the work in the pavilion reflects this "constant expansion of the universe"[12] which governs everything and in which the cosmic meets the atomic, and the macrocosm meets the microcosm.

Continuity, saturation, repetition, decentering: These are just some of the terms used to describe Nahas's fractals, which also resonate in the critical reception of Monet's *Water Lilies*. What is striking, both in the water landscapes of the Orangerie and in the Venice installation, is the departure from the Western tradition of pyramidal composition and the emergence of

[11]Roger Marx, "*Les Nymphéas* de M. Claude Monet," Gazette des Beaux-arts, 4 ème période, v. 1, June 1, 1909, p. 523-531

a decentralized painting, where no part of the picture takes precedence over another[4]; it is also, indirectly, the absence of an imposed reading direction, the blurring of the scale of things, reconciling the infinitely large and the infinitely small, and the corollary affirmation of painting, as a medium, over representation.

This connection becomes clear when we consider the contemporary interpretation that certain major figures of American Abstract Expressionism made of the *Water Lilies* when, in the early 1950s[13], the many formal similarities between this vast installation and the painting of the New York School were brought to light. Among these similarities, the saturated, off-center *all-over* composition stands out as a true renewal, allowing, as André Masson pointed out at the time, the artist's vision to have "a field vast enough, imposing enough, to embrace the world."[14] In the aftermath of World War II, the "cosmic vision" of this "Sistine Chapel of Impressionism" sounded like an "encouragement to start afresh, to rediscover, by forcing fate, the divine sensation(…)."[15]

Within the Lebanese pavilion, Nahas continues this aspiration today by creating a new Sistine Chapel where painting, truly *alive*, offers the viewer a space for contemplation and meditation on the beauty and mysteries of the universe. One does not emerge unscathed from this experience, as it is at once a revelation, a communion and a reconciliation.

[4] This is true of Monet's standalone paintings as well as the Orangerie cycle and Nabil Nahas's installation, conceived without beginning or end and with several possible entrances and viewpoints.

[13] In 1944, at the time of the Liberation of Paris, a shell fell on one of the glass roofs of the Musée des Tuileries and damaged one of the panels, leading to the closure of the space. It was not until 1952 that the elliptical rooms of the restored monumental complex reopened to the public. More than 25 years after their unveiling, the panels by the master of Impressionism were given a new reception. While Jackson Pollock was exhibiting in Paris, the Orangerie became a place of pilgrimage for American painters. Two years later, following his visit to the Musée des Tuileries, the pope of modernism, Clement Greenberg, placed the work of Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman in the wake of Monet's late paintings. See Cécile Debray, ""J'ai bien un rêve…" *Les Nymphéas*, paysages d'eau," in the *Nymphéas*, *L'abstraction américaine et le dernier Monet* exhibition catalog, Musée d'Orsay et de l' Orangerie, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2018, p. 20.

[14] André Masson, "Monet le Fondateur," *Revue Verve*, 1952, vol. VII, nos 27-28, p. 68

[15] *Ibid.*

INTERVIEW

NABIL NAHAS IN CONVERSATION WITH NADA GHANDOUR

In this interview, conducted in October 2025, Nabil Nahas enters into conversation with Nada Ghandour, Curator of the Pavilion of Lebanon, reflecting on the formative experiences, artistic influences, and visual inspirations that have shaped his practice.

Nada Ghandour: We often talk about beginnings in your work. Do you remember a particular event that might have triggered your artistic sensibility?

Nabil Nahas: There were books and art objects at home, but I remember one event that, in retrospect, had significant consequences. Each holiday, my aunts gave the children in the family an envelope of money. In 1962, at the age of 12, I used mine to buy a book called *Modern Painting*: *Contemporary Trends* by Nello Ponente, and it was a revelation. It offered an overview of abstract painting in Europe and the United States. It was a Pandora's box: a flood of images I had never seen before, which I absorbed like a sponge. On one side were Wols, Dubuffet, and Fautrier; on the other, Pollock, Rothko and Newman: two opposing yet complementary aesthetics. At 18, I chose the New York School and set off for the United States.

Nada Ghandour: Why New York?

Nabil Nahas: Because I was far more drawn to the New York school than the Paris school, and I had come to realize that Paris had been replaced by New York as the world center of the arts.

My parents agreed to send me to the United States, where I was first welcomed by my aunt Tina, who lived in New Orleans. I enrolled at Louisiana State University, and after earning my Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA), I was fortunate to be admitted to the art department at Yale University, where Al Held became my mentor. I received my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) from Yale in 1973.

Those years of study were deeply formative. Above all, they opened my eyes to an artistic world of unexpected richness. I discovered new approaches, new visual languages, and the freedom unique to the American scene.

Nada Ghandour: Which artists, American or otherwise, did you like?

Nabil Nahas: Among the European artists I admire are Jean Dubuffet, Lucio Fontana, Henri Michaux, and Hans Hartung. The American artists who have most impressed me are Clyfford Still, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko.

When I moved to New York, I reconnected with artists I had already met at Yale: renowned figures who would sometimes spend a day with us every few months. This opened doors for me and allowed me to grow within an exceptional creative atmosphere. It was New York in the 1970s, a period of intense excitement, during which I shared the daily lives of several of these artists.

Nada Ghandour: Your work is imbued with a deep awareness of civilizations and the layers of time. Can you tell me about the experiences that connected you to this heritage and shaped your perspective?

Nabil Nahas: As a teenager, I used to go and play with my friend in the ruins of Byblos on Saturdays. A veritable mille-feuille of Neolithic, Amorite, Hyksos, Phoenician, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Mamluk and Ottoman civilizations, the cliff revealed, through winter erosion these different strata, and offered us countless amulets and small objects that I still keep. Everything was mixed together in a flow of earth: raw, ancient, overwhelming. This connection with such a distant past already fascinated me.

My awareness of Islamic art came later. When I was living in Cairo as a young boy, my mother would sometimes take me to Khan el-Khalili[16], but my real discovery of Islamic art came at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. That was when I understood the formal beauty, abstract power and spiritual depth of this art, whose influence is instinctively reflected in my work

Nada Ghandour: How did Persian miniatures, which you sometimes mention, find their way into your work?

Nabil Nahas: What interests me about Persian miniatures is their organization of space, a distinctive pictorial space without a central vanishing point, where scenes and narratives are juxtaposed in tableaux. This concept came back to me instinctively when I began assembling different panels for my project for the Lebanese Pavilion. It explains the representation of space and narrative as a frieze of thematic scenes, a spatial approach that Matisse ultimately adopted as well.

Nada Ghandour: You often speak of the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm in your work. What do you mean by this?

Nabil Nahas: I sometimes recall an anecdote that made a deep impression on me. In the 1980s, one morning while walking on the beach [in Long Island], I watched the waves wash across the sand and retreat, carving shapes and small holes. I immediately saw a connection with the constellations in the sky: my first instinctive approach to the relationship between the terrestrial and the celestial, between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

Later, after a hurricane, the beach was littered with stranded starfish. I collected a few to incorporate into my work. At first, I made monochrome paintings. Then I began working the surfaces, adding material to reveal recurring shapes. I emphasized these forms, and gradually, from one work to the next, these consistencies gave rise to what I call fractals. The patterns interlock and tessellate, much like the structures of certain crystals and organic forms: honeycombs, for example.

[16] Khan el-Khalili is one of the most famous historic bazaars in the Arab world. Founded in 1382 by the Mamluk sultan Jaharkas al-Khalili, it is located in the heart of Islamic Cairo and is a remarkable complex where Mamluk architecture has been largely preserved.

Nada Ghandour: Nature seems to be an important theme in your work, but that wasn't always the case.

Nabil Nahas: Indeed, observing nature in its broadest sense has always been important to me. I think of my mother's crystal collection and the looms in our family workshops, which undoubtedly influenced my early abstractions. Observing the ancient monuments of Baalbek also played a role. My first abstract painting, at the age of 14, was directly inspired by a fossilized fish found in Lebanese rocks.

Then, after living in the United States for 18 years, in 1993, I returned to Lebanon for a short stay for family reasons. I rediscovered the local landscape. The nature here is completely different: raw, ancient, overwhelming. I was deeply impressed by the olive trees**,** the cedars**,** and the ancient landscapes**.** These elements gradually became an integral part of my work. If I hadn't returned to Lebanon, I would never have painted trees; I would have remained abstract.

That trip was a true catalyst: it marked the beginning of my regular returns to the country, where I later transformed an old family silkworm farm into a workshop and living space.

I am also deeply sensitive to what is happening around me today. The explosion at the port of Beirut profoundly affected me. I translated that pain into a series of paintings depicting thousand-year-old olive trees that I had previously transplanted into my garden.

FROM TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS TO SPIRITUAL RESONANCE

EAST Architecture Studio
Charles Kettaneh & Nicolas Fayad

The act of entering a space is never neutral. It sets a rhythm of steps, of breath, of expectation that precedes looking. In this pavilion, the act of looking had to be made possible before the act of seeing could truly unfold.

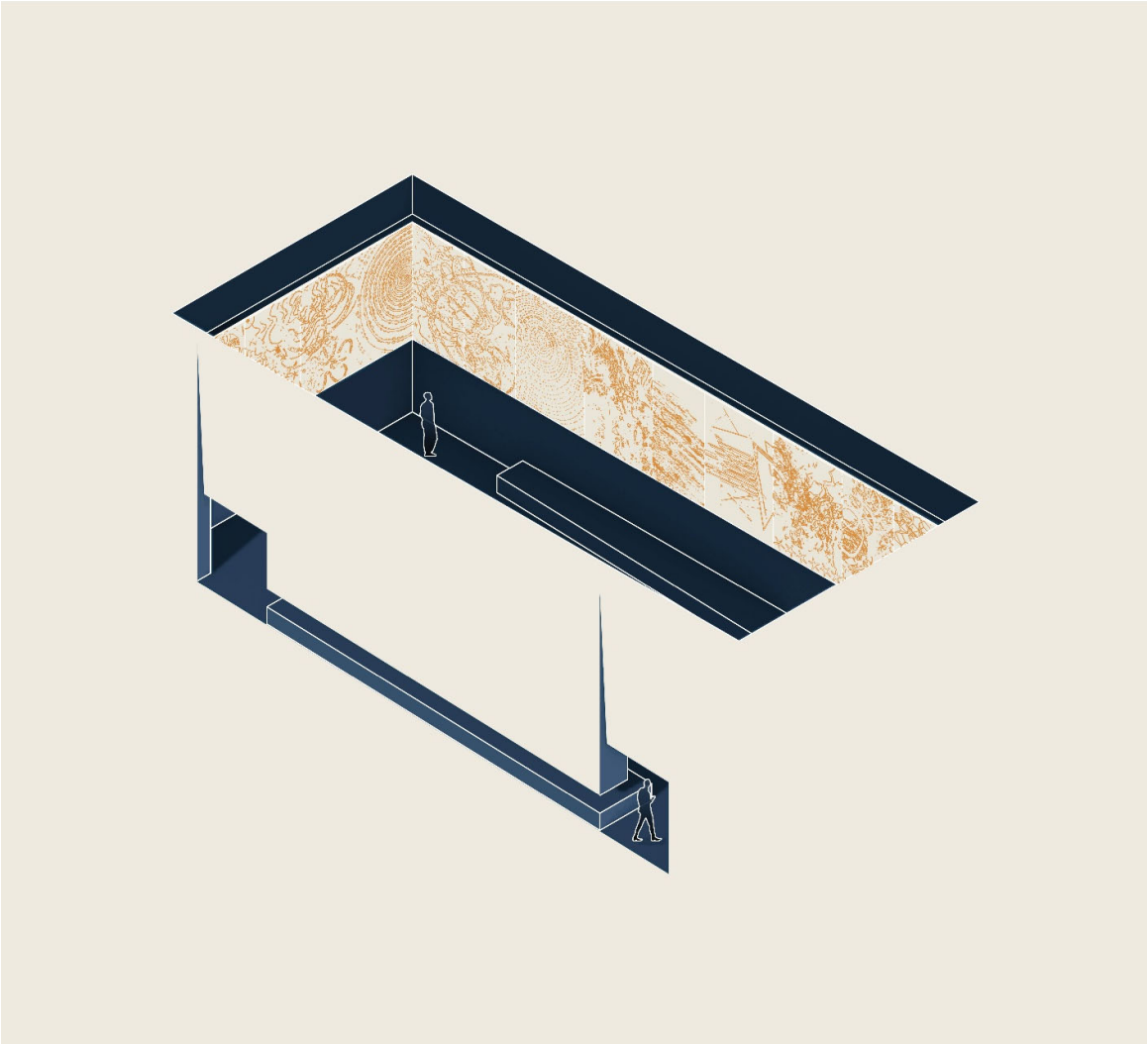
The works presented here stand tall. Each is a vertical field of colour and energy, 2.9 meters in height, bearing widths of 1.5 or 2.0 meters. Their scale is confident, their language expansive, yet the room that houses them measures a modest 7.5 meters across. It was this spatial tension, between scale and distance, between intimacy and horizon, that animated the conception of the installation. Grounded in a precise technical inquiry while aspiring toward poetic effect, our intervention began from a simple but decisive observation: a work of art, to be fully seen, must be given room to be read.

Thus, the intervention began with a recalibration of viewing rather than with adornment or decorative framing. The question shifted toward how the works could be approached, perceived, and lived. When horizontal distance could not be increased, vision itself was extended upward. This led to the pivotal decision to elevate the artworks.

The works are raised such that their base begins at more than 2 meters above the floor, lifting their centres closer to the human field of aspiration than to the human field of reach. Crucially, the paintings are not only elevated, but they are also detached from the wall. This decision allows the works to float, physically and symbolically, liberated from architectural containment. The space behind them becomes charged, like a halo or breath. It reinforces the idea that these are not fixed images, but energies suspended in space. This gesture of elevation, oriented toward contemplation instead of dominance, reorients the body by shifting vision away from the eye's immediate plane toward a reflective ascent. Height becomes a strategy, producing an elongated line of sight that compensates for limited plan depth and opens a vertical dimension of engagement.

Light, in this symphony of space, plays a role akin to breath. We employed narrow-beam, downward-oriented luminaires with carefully calibrated colour temperatures, warm enough to evoke the quiet luminosity of aged frescoes while remaining cool enough to preserve the chromatic integrity of each work. Light here avoids dramatization and instead reveals finish, nuance, gesture, and chromatic field without theatricality. This measured illumination situates the works as gentle atmospheres rather than spectacle and aligns the space with a quality of silence understood as presence of attention instead of absence of sound.

Indeed, the spatial effect that emerges is that of a chamber of presence rather than a conventional gallery. Looking becomes the primary occupation, and stillness its medium. The intervention transforms the pavilion from a mere container into an environment of perception, where the body can slow, and the gaze can deepen.



EAST Architecture Studio
Nicolas Fayad & Charles Kettaneh
Axonometry of the installation Don’t Get Me Wrong
Pavilion of Lebanon, Biennale Arte 2026.
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BIOGRAPHIES

NABIL NAHAS

ARTIST



Nabil Nahas, photo by Milad Ayoub

A major figure in the contemporary art scene, Nabil Nahas is a Lebanese-American painter born in Beirut in 1949. He settled in the United States in 1969, where he earned a BFA from Louisiana State University, followed by an MFA from Yale University in 1972. He lives and works between Beirut and New York.

Nabil Nahas's works are featured in the collections of major institutions such as the British Museum (London, United Kingdom), Tate Modern (London, United Kingdom), the High Museum of Art (Atlanta, United States), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, United States), the Voorhees Zimmerli Museum at Rutgers University (New Jersey, United States), the Colby Museum of Art (Waterville, Maine, United States), the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (Pennsylvania, United States), the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, United States), the Flint Institute of Arts (Michigan, United States), the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA, United States), the Barjeel Art Foundation (Sharjah, UAE), Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (Doha, Qatar), the Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (Beirut, Lebanon), and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (UAE).

Nabil Nahas is represented by: Saleh Barakat Gallery (Beirut), Lawrie Shabibi (Dubai), Tanit Gallery (Munich), Ben Brown Fine Arts (London, Hong Kong).

NADA GHANDOUR
COMMISSIONER & CURATOR



Nada Ghandour, Photo by Milad Ayoub

PHD in History of Art and expert in modern and contemporary art, Nada Ghandour is a heritage curator graduated from the Institut National du Patrimoine (Paris).

She holds four specialties: Master's in Museology (Ecole du Louvre), Master's in History of Art (Sorbonne Paris IV), Master's in Preventive Conservation of Heritage (Paris 1), Master's in Digital Humanities (Sciences Po Paris).

She is an independent curator specializing in cultural management and digital technology.
She has worked in some of the largest European and North American museums, notably the Museum of Fine Art (Montréal), the Musée National Picasso-Paris (France), and the Fondation Louis Vuitton (Paris).

Thus, she has participated in large-scale exhibitions, such as: "Cuba: Art and History from 1868 to the present day"(2008), "Picasso! The Anniversary Exhibition" (2015-2016),"Icons of Modern Art. The Shchukin Collection" (2016-2017). She was the commissioner and curator of the Lebanese Pavilion "The World in the Image of Man" at la Biennale Arte 2022, "A Dance with Her Myth" at La Biennale Arte 2024.

EAST ARCHITECTURE STUDIO
Nicolas Fayad et Charles Kettaneh
ARCHITECTS – SCENOGRAPHERS



Charles Kettaneh et Nicolas Fayad © Copyright 2026 - East Architecture Studio - Photo by Tarek Moukaddem

EAST Architecture Studio is a collective practice working across housing, cultural buildings, exhibitions, master planning, and research. Under the banner of preservation as practice, the studio engages with both contemporary society and traditional culture, integrating the past into the shaping of the present and future, creating spaces that carry continuity as well as possibility.

From the adaptive reuse of buildings to international exhibition pavilions, the studio's work operates across a variety of contexts and temporalities, advancing an architecture that endures, rich in meaning and presence. Their collective design approach suggests an interpretive, tactile engagement with artisanal techniques and innovative design solutions. The studio's methodology reflects a collaborative spirit, with artists, engineers and environmental experts enriching architectural narratives through symbolic and material layers.

EAST Architecture Studio was awarded the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 2022, becoming one of the youngest practices to earn this globally celebrated honour. Two years later, the studio won the AlMusalla Prize for the design of a space for prayer and contemplation that was unveiled to the public during the second edition of the Islamic Arts Biennale in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

The studio's work is a testament to a visionary approach and a nuanced interpretation of history and culture, most notably in projects like the acclaimed Niemeyer Guest House Renovation in Tripoli, Lebanon. Their built and research projects have received international recognition, exhibited at prestigious venues such as the 17th and 19th Architecture Biennale in Venice and widely featured in leading publications like Wallpaper Magazine, The Architectural Review, Architectural Record and Domus.

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DR. BASEL DALLOUL

Founder and chairman of Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF)



Dr. Basel Dalloul © The Dalloul Art Foundation

Dr. Basel Dalloul is a Juris Doctor (J.D), technologist, and cultural strategist whose work bridges digital infrastructure, governance, entrepreneurship, and the stewardship of Arab modern and contemporary art. With formal training in finance (American University, Washington, D.C.), law and business (Georgetown University, J.D./MBA), and engineering studies at Rice University, he brings a system-driven approach to building institutions that operate at scale.

Over the past three decades, Dr. Basel Dalloul has founded and led technology enterprises that shaped global network infrastructure. He established Magnet Interactive in 1989, followed by NOOR Group in 1999, through which he developed digital and communications networks across 137 countries. This background in complex systems and governance now informs his work in cultural infrastructure, including open-access research platforms, large-scale collection digitization, curatorial programs, and institutional partnerships.

In 2016, Dr.Basel Dalloul founded the Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF) in Beirut, building upon a collection initiated in the 1970s by his parents, Dr. Ramzi Dalloul and Saeda Al-Husseini. Today, DAF houses nearly 3,000 works of modern and contemporary Arab art and serves as a leading research and public-access platform for the region's art history. Under his direction, the foundation significantly expanded its holdings and launched a comprehensive digital portal in 2020, reinforcing its commitment to accessibility and knowledge dissemination. His most recent initiative, the Dalloul Artist Collective (DAC), founded in 2025, pilots a shared-value model of artist representation that aligns artistic integrity, public access, and long-term value. Dr. Basel Dalloul is actively engaged with international art institutions and events, including ongoing involvement with the Venice Biennale, where he has sponsored and served on the Lebanese Pavilion jury. He also serves on museum advisory boards, speaks on technology, copyright, and cultural investment, and is a patron of the arts.

ELIE KHOURI

Président de The Elie Khouri Art Foundation (EKAF)



Elie Khouri is a seasoned marketing expert, businessman, and investor with over thirty years of leadership across diverse industries.

In 2017, he founded Vivium, a single-family office, to manage a curated portfolio of investments in real estate, design, hospitality, ventures, and design collectibles.

He also serves as Chairman of Omnicom Media and is committed to nurturing entrepreneurship and innovation, actively mentoring founders and supporting startups, including serving as a judge on Shark Tank Dubai.

Beyond his business endeavors, Elie is a prominent art patron and collector, curating a diverse collection of over 200 emerging and established artists from around the world. He is a passionate advocate of the regional and global art and design community and sits on the board and investment committees at internationally recognised institutions. Elie has been recognised in ARTnews's Top 200 Collectors.

MARIA SUKKAR

Co-Chair of the Tate's Middle East and North Africa Acquisition Committee (MENAAC)



Maria Sukkar est une collectionneuse, curatrice et philanthrope basée à Londres, dont le travail fait le lien entre l'art, la culture et l'engagement humanitaire. Elle est co-présidente du comité d'acquisition Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord (MENAAC) de Tate, administratrice de l'Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), ainsi que de Bidoun et de Fluxus. Engagée dans le soutien aux voix émergentes, Maria assure le commissariat de la section Positions à Photo London et préside le jury du Patina Art Residency Prize. En dehors du champ artistique, elle est vice-présidente de Chain of Hope au Royaume-Uni et administratrice du Children Cancer Centre au Liban.

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

The Scientific Committee has an advisory role. Made up of national and international specialists, its purpose is to provide recommendations and to create an environment for reflection, exchange, and discussion with the artist and the architect-scenographer.

- **Nada Ghandour**
  Curator of Heritage
  Commissioner & Curator of the Pavilion of Lebanon

- **Olivia Bourrat**
  Chief Curator of Heritage
  Director, Department of Heritage and Collections – Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris

- **Emilia Philippot**
  Chief Curator of Heritage
  Head of Scientific Department and Collections – Musée Rodin, Paris

- **Maximilien Durand**
  Chief Curator of Heritage
  Director, Department of Byzenthine and Eastern Christian Art, Musée du Louvre - Paris

SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR

- **Jean-François Charnier**
  General Curator of Heritage

OLIVIA BOURRAT

Chief Curator of Heritage

Director, Department of Heritage and Collections – Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris



Olivia Bourrat is a a National French Chief curator and currently serves as Director of heritage and collections at Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac. She was trained at the Institut National du Patrimoine in 2006-2007 as a civil servant, and was then Head of Conservation and Restoration at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac until 2014.

She then served as Deputy curator Director and then Curatorial Director at Agence France-Muséums for the Louvre Abu Dhabi project, a position that took her to the UAE until 2020. Upon returning to France, she joined the Ministry of Culture as a senior advisor within the Mission for International Cultural Affairs, where she oversaw more than fifteen heritage and museum collaborations around the world.

Since 2024, she was the Director of the Museums and Heritage Department at Villa Albertine – Cultural Services of the French Embassy in the United States. In this federal role, In this federal position, she led museum and heritage initiatives across the U.S., fostering Franco-American cultural exchange, like the immersive programs for French and American curators *Museum Next Generation* program).

Olivia has a strong and longstanding connection with Lebanon, a country she deeply admires. In 2019, she was a member of the selection committee for the Beirut Art Fair and curated its series of roundtable discussions, helping to amplify voices from the regional art scene on the international stage.

EMILIA PHILIPPOT

Chief Curator of Heritage

Head of Scientific Department and Collections – Musée Rodin, Paris



Emilia Philippot is a Chief Curator of Heritage. She began her career at the Réunion des Musées Nationaux, contributing to the scientific project and programming of the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais. She later joined the Centre National des Arts Plastiques, where she expanded design acquisitions to include graphic design.

In 2012, she has held key curatorial roles at the Musée National Picasso-Paris, overseeing graphic arts, early paintings, and drawings, before becoming Director of Collections and Education. In 2023, she was appointed Deputy Director of Studies at the Institut National du Patrimoine, where she leads the training of future heritage curators.

Since February 2026, she is Head of Scientific Department and Collections – Musée Rodin, Paris.

She has curated major exhibitions in France and abroad, including "Picasso! The Anniversary Exhibition" (2015), "Picasso. Blue and Rose" (2018), "Calder Picasso" (2019), and "Out of Focus, another vision of art from 1945 to the present day" (2025). She is a published expert on Picasso and Modern Art. She also participated in collective works, including The Dictionary of Cubism (Robert Laffont, 2018).

MAXIMILIEN DURAND

Chief Curator of Heritage
Director, Department of Byzenthine and Eastern Christian Art, Musée du Louvre - Paris



Maximilien Durand is a Chief Curator of Heritage and currently serves as Director of the Department of Byzantine and Eastern Christian Art at the Musée du Louvre - Paris. A prolific author, he has organized more than twenty-five exhibitions, notably Antinoopolis: Beyond Life, Beyond Fashion, Shadows of Elegance in the Desert at the Musée des Tissus in Lyon (2013-14), Icons from the National Museum of Art Bohdan and Varvara Khanenko in Kyiv at the Louvre (2023-24), and Icons from Ukraine at the Louvre-Lens (2024-25).

He has served as Vice-President of the Centre International d'Étude des Textiles Anciens (CIETA) and President of the International Association for the Study of Silk Road Textiles. Prior to joining the Louvre, he was Director of the Musée des Tissus et des Arts Décoratifs in Lyon (2011-17), Head of Conservation for Christian Dior Couture (2018-19), and Deputy Director of Collections and Research at Paris Musées, where he also served as Curator of the Paris Catacombs (2021-22).

He has been teaching Late Antique and Byzantine Art at the École du Louvre for many years.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS CHARNIER

General Curator of Heritage



Jean-François Charnier is a national general heritage and art curator. He graduated in Art History and Archaeology from the Ecole du Louvre and in Anthropology from Université Paris X-Nanterre.

His first role was in the field of preventive archaeology and heritage coordination. He became in 2000 director of department in the project for the Museum of Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean (MUCEM). After a mission at the Ministry of Culture, he joined in 2008 Agence France-Muséums to coordinate the expertise of French national museums including the Louvre, Pompidou Centre, Orsay etc. for the creation of the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

He was appointed Scientific Director of Agence France-Muséums in 2013: he created the contents of the museum and led the teams responsible for the museography, art acquisitions, programming, and publications of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, which opened in November 2017. He then joined Afalula Agency, the body created to develop AlUla cultural destination in Saudi Arabia, in August 2018 as Scientific Director. He has proposed and developed a series of archaeological missions, a network of 8 museums called Constellation, and several initiatives in the field of art creation like art residencies, contemporary art museum and several art commissions. All of these programs are currently in development.

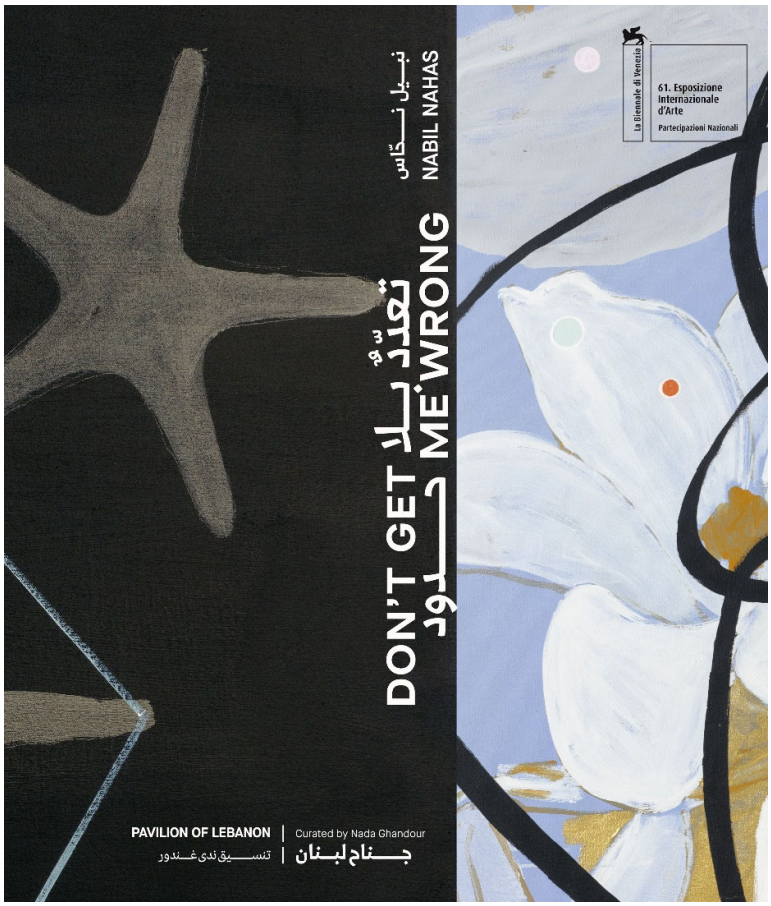
CATALOGUE

DON’T GET ME WRONG

Through a series of essays in Arabic and English, the bilingual catalog of the Lebanese Pavilion at the 2026 Art Biennale examines the multiple dimensions of *Don't Get Me Wrong*, a monumental and immersive installation by artist Nabil Nahas. It addresses the aesthetic and philosophical issues at stake and offers keys to understanding a work that invites contemplation, introspection, and meditation. Conceived as an extension of the exhibition, the publication contextualizes the pavilion's scenography and its dialogue with space and brings together a set of scholarly essays that situate the installation in the context of contemporary art and art history.

Authors: Nada Ghandour, Olivia Bourrat, Emilia Philippot and Jean-François Charnier.

25x30 cm (Portrait)
192 pages
Casebound, sewn
Hard cover
Retail price: 40 euros



PARTNERS

Ramzi & Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF)

The Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF) is a Beirut-based cultural institution home to an extensive collection of modern and contemporary visual art from the Arab World. DAF is a custodian of around 3,000 artworks comprising different media, such as painting, drawing, print, photography, ceramic, sculpture, tapestry, and installation. The collection includes works created by artists from across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula; it was compiled by the late Dr. Ramzi Dalloul and his wife, Saeda Al-Husseini, starting in the 1970s. In 2016, Basel Dalloul, their eldest son, took on the mission of safeguarding the collection and expanding it. He founded DAF in early 2017.

Today, DAF's mission encompasses preservation, documentation, archiving, publication, research, exhibitions, and cultural events, all aimed at making Arab art accessible to both local and international audiences. DAF's extensive database and research capabilities provide vital resources for researchers and students, facilitating deeper exploration into Arab art's history and evolution. Its expansive website https://dafbeirut.org/, launched in 2020, acts as a digital reference for Arab art. This online presence reflects DAF's dedication to disseminating knowledge and engaging a broader audience.

The foundation assumes the role of a cultural mediator and stands as a beacon of knowledge, underlining the importance of art as a tool for understanding and appreciating the complexities of the Arab world. DAF supports international cultural and art exhibitions, as it has supported the Pavilion of Lebanon at La Biennale Arte 2022, 2024, and 2026.

Elie Khouri Art Foundation (EKAF)



The Elie Khouri Art Foundation based in Dubai features diverse international established and emerging artists and serves as a platform for global engagement. The Foundation, committed to championing creativity, offers initiatives to uplift artists as change makers and promote cultural literacy worldwide. Its goals include demystifying art language for diverse audiences, stimulating collecting practices to serve the art ecosystem, and fostering cross-cultural conversations.

This foundation was created thanks to the art collection of Elie Khouri. Businessman, Art Patron and Collector, Elie Khouri is an ardent supporter of the regional and global art and design communities. He actively contributes to various publishing projects, showcasing his commitment to fostering artistic endeavors. He serves as a member of the Tate Middle East and North Africa Acquisitions Committee (MENAAC) and MoMA's Media and Performance Committee.

Catawiki



Catawiki is a leading online auction marketplace to buy and sell special objects. Hundreds of experts across 22 categories - art, design, collectibles, jewellery, classic cars, and much more - virtually select and review every object before being offered in auction. Over 250,000 objects are on sale every month, viewed by +10 million unique visitors.

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Audi Capital

Audi Capital

Audi Capital is a fully-fledged financial institution, established in Saudi Arabia and licensed by the Capital Market Authority (CMA). We offer Wealth Management Advisory, Asset Management, and Dealing Services. Since its inception in 2006, Audi Capital has been focusing on excellence, ensuring that our clients receive personalized financial solutions and trusted, expert guidance. Audi Capital also supports and invests in art-related initiatives, rooted in the Group's longstanding heritage in art and cultural engagement.

Palace Group

PALACE GROUP

For 25 years, *Palace Group UAE* has been shaping ultra-luxury residential living in the UAE. We approach every project not as construction, but as curation, guided by an appreciation for quality, design, and restraint.

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The Pavilion of Lebanon wishes to acknowledge the crucial support of its patrons, who have a deep affection for Lebanon. Thanks to their invaluable generosity, the significant undertaking of the Pavilion of Lebanon became possible.

The full list, except for those who wished to remain anonymous, can be consulted on our website:

https://www.lebanesepavilionvenice.com/

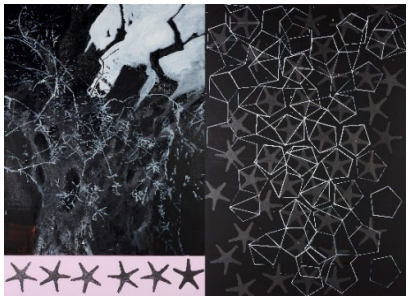
PRESS IMAGES

HIGH-DEFINITION IMAGES AVAILABLE FOR PRESS USE

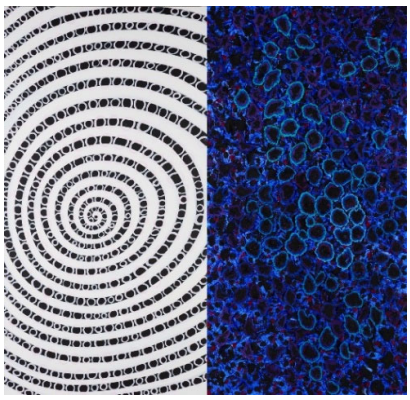
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Nabil Nahas
Don't Get Me Wrong, 2026
Installation
Acrylic on canvas
H. 2.90 m × L. 45 m
Detail, diptych: 290 × 400 cm
Photographer: Elie Bekhazi
© Nabil Nahas / Courtesy of the artist
© LVAA



Nabil Nahas
Don't Get Me Wrong, 2026
Installation
Acrylic on canvas
H. 2.90 m × L. 45 m
Detail, diptych: 290 × 300 cm
Photographer: Elie Bekhazi
© Nabil Nahas / Courtesy of the artist
© LVAA



Nabil Nahas
Don't Get Me Wrong, 2026
Installation
Acrylic on canvas
H. 2.90 m × L. 45 m
Detail, diptych: 290 × 350 cm
Photographer: Elie Bekhazi
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PRACTICAL INFORMATION

Pavilion of Lebanon
Arsenale, Artiglieri building
Campo della Tana 2169/F, Castello
30122 – Venice

Exhibition open from 9 May – 22 November 2026

To follow the Pavilion of Lebanon
https://www.lebanesepavilionvenice.com/

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#LebanesePavilionVenice2026
#DontGetMeWrong
#NabilNahas

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