

NABIL NAHAS AT THE VENICE BIENNALE

Lebanon: where civilisations met and merged

Nabil Nahas's monumental frieze at Venice reflects the culture of Lebanon, his birth country, not through the lens of war, but through its creativity, history and artistic vitality

Maya Jaggi | LMD English edition exclusive



Top Nabil Nahas with an olive tree outside his studio in Ain Aar, Lebanon **Middle** The ruins of ancient Byblos on Lebanon's Mediterranean coast, linking Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece, inspired the artist **Bottom** The Nuhad Es-Said Pavilion for Culture at the National Museum of Beirut enables visitors to view past Venice pavilions

From his studio he heard Beirut being bombed 20km away, and found 'people, including children, sleeping rough on the streets; it was heartbreaking.' Yet, faced with 'Iran's and Israel's war that happens to be taking place on Lebanon's territory,' he clung to his goal of seeing his new artwork, created over eight months of 12-hour days, safely shipped to Venice. After delays, the container finally set sail. 'Then my mind was at rest,' he told me. 'It's fabulous to represent Lebanon, especially at this tragic time for the country, in a way that gives a little hope.'

From abstraction to 'portraits' of trees

On show at the Venice Arsenal until 22 November, *Don't Get Me Wrong* is a monumental installation with a 45-metre frieze, composed of 26 acrylic-on-canvas panels three metres high. With no set beginning or end, and no narrative path, it concertinas many of the 76-year-old artist's styles and periods, from his geometric abstraction after settling in New York in 1973, to thickly encrusted paintings incorporating starfish inspired by Long Island, to gestural landscapes from his stays in Lebanon since the 1975-91 civil war ended. Transplanted from his Ain Aar studio, where I saw it as the paint dried, the frieze will immerse global visitors in the artist's idiosyncratic visual imagination, inspired as much by his childhood in Lebanon and Egypt as by half a century in New York.

For Lebanon's culture minister Ghassan Salamé, who spoke at a packed press conference in Beirut in February, a national pavilion at the Venice Biennale – the Olympics of the art world – is a 'statement about how a country chooses to see itself, and how it hopes to be seen.' Even before the present war, the pavilion, which has the culture ministry's endorsement but zero funding from the bankrupt state, embodied a collective act of will in a society brought to its knees.

Nada Ghandour, its commissioner and curator, and president of the Paris-based Lebanese Visual Art Association behind it, said a presence at Venice is crucial to 'preserve our identity and visibility' and as a 'way of affirming that Lebanon exists not only through the lens of war, but also through its creativity, history and civilisation.' For Sorbonne-educated Ghandour, who left Tripoli in northern Lebanon for Paris during the civil war, the pavilion is also a 'vital link between the diaspora and its roots.' An unsalaried president without an office, with a team of 12 volunteers, she has raised €700,000 for the pavilion from the private sector and personal donations.

The Venice Biennale dates from 1895, but Lebanon's first national pavilion was in 2007. It had only four iterations before its revival in 2022. The impetus, Ghandour told me in Beirut, was the port blast of 4 August 2020 – one of the biggest non-nuclear explosions in human history – on the heels of a crippling banking crisis since 2019. 'We've been living this kind of war in Lebanon for 50 years now,' she later told me from Paris. 'I was there when people were displaced in the street. It's very hard. At the same time, we will not give up... We're the only association working on the image of Lebanon outside, trying to give another narrative that reflects its cultural richness, intellectual vitality and artistic excellence.'

'Art can open eyes and dialogue'

Basel Dalloul, founding president of the Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation (DAF) in Beirut – named after his late parents who began his private collection in the 1970s – is a lead sponsor. Among DAF's 3,000 artworks from across the Arab world are five Nahas paintings (others have sold at auction for as much as \$245,000). DAF's mission, Dalloul said, is to 'introduce and educate people about art from this part of the world [with its] 400 million people. Art can open people's eyes and open dialogue' while debunking misconceptions ('some people are shocked to learn Arab artists painted nudes'). Seeing Nahas's frieze in Venice

will be 'similar to the experience of walking into a cathedral with stained-glass windows – you'll be in awe.'

The frieze was painted upstairs in Nahas's maternal grandfather's former silk factory, where he spent childhood summers. He completed its restoration in 2012, after returning in 1993 following an 18-year absence during the civil war. 'Downtown Beirut was totally destroyed,' he recalled. 'When I came up here, it had been ruined by militias squatting. God knows what horrible things happened in this building.' He found a 'medium to clean it, burn incense, so the bad vibes are gone.' The compound, which has an open fireplace in the downstairs living room and a swimming pool flanked by classical sculptures, is now home to his art collection – plus three black labradors, goats and chickens.

I absorb things like a sponge – Byzantine, Roman, Western art. For millennia, we've been extremely eclectic. Even before the Phoenicians, we were multicultural and cosmopolitan; it's in our DNA

Nabil Nahas

Both his grandfathers were textile industrialists, and the colourful looms beguiled him, as did crystals sold in his mother's 1960s boutique. His father's business took them to Egypt with its 'amazing mosques; some people may say it's decorative art, but it's sublime. Visual pleasure is important.' Recently, he renovated his grandfather's 1920s (Maronite) church across the street (his mother was Maronite; his father Orthodox Catholic), though he said, 'I'm not religious; I'm spiritual. Whether it's a mosque or church or synagogue, I sometimes feel they're portals to another dimension – and art can do that.'

Although Nahas gravitated to the New York School of abstract expressionists, he does not consider himself an abstract artist. 'I don't see any difference between abstract and figurative painting. My main inspiration has been observing nature: from microcosm to macrocosm; from observing a flower blooming to realising the link we have with the universe.' After a Long Island storm in 1990 washed up starfish on the beach, the diptych *Eureka* (1991) began a series with real dried starfish thickly encrusted in brilliant layers of acrylic paint, often spilling beyond the frame. He moved to acrylic casts, later mixing in pumice, 'blending painting with relief.' Having used Arabic and Islamic geometry in early tessellated paintings that are 'never-ending unless you crop them', in the mid-1990s he 'metamorphosed into fractal geometry' – figures that replicate at every scale through nature, from crystals and honeycombs to leaves, which he sees as 'organised chaos... another face of harmony'. The return to Lebanon inspired landscapes – 'close-up portraits of trees, great fun to paint'.

At Byblos, on the windswept coast not far from his studio, Nahas spoke of the ancient port-city as a 'magical' inspiration in whose ruins he played as a boy, trawling cliffs renowned for 100-million-year-old fish fossils. 'I was fascinated with crystals, archaeology, this mille-feuille of civilisations.' One

Right Nabil Nahas with Nada Ghandour, curator of Lebanon's pavilion at the Venice Biennale, in the artist's studio for the pavilion's frieze



of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities, Byblos dates from at least 6900 BCE. Inscriptions in the 22-letter Phoenician alphabet (a great step forward for literacy from having to master hundreds of Egyptian hieroglyphics) reveal the origins of European writing. The site is the timely subject of an exhibition at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, *Byblos, Lebanon's Millennium-old City*, which was opened by President Macron on 23 March and runs until 23 August, but some of whose vitrines stand empty because of the war.

The harbour linked Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece, and its layers of ruined fortifications show it was of strategic value to the Persians, Romans, Byzantines, Crusaders, Ottomans and French. Lebanon's cedar forests – the tree on the national flag – provoked timber raids: the Egyptians prized the wood for shipbuilding. They, in turn, exported papyrus – or *byblos* to the ancient Greeks, who named the port through which it reached them after this valued commodity. With trade came ideas. 'For millennia, we've been extremely eclectic,' Nahas said. 'There's a strong pharaonic influence in the Phoenician art of Byblos. Even before the Phoenicians, we were multicultural, cosmopolitan; it's in our DNA.'

His frieze reflects this plural identity, from star-studded pharaonic tombs and Byzantine gold icons to spirals that recall both Sufi whirling dervishes and ammonites. 'I absorb things like a sponge – Byzantine, Roman, Western art. My head is a kaleidoscope of images of different civilisations that come together.' Persian miniatures inspired the perspective-less use of different scales. 'Some panels relate to a cedar tree and others are my interpretation of the cosmos, a spiral rendering of the universe. I'm interested in how the panels fuse one into another.' For Nada Ghandour, the frieze embodies a Mediterranean crossroads. 'Lebanon is not simply a juxtaposition of cultures. It's a place where civilisations met and merged. This is what creates an identity that is open, inclusive, rooted in dialogue.'

'There is trauma in my paintings'

Yet darker elements recall his 'black canvases' of the early 1980s. 'There is definitely trauma in my paintings,' he said. 'It's absorbing what's around me.' In New York during the AIDS crisis, 'a lot of friends were dying very young. It gave me a real sense of life and death. At the same time, I watched the civil war in Lebanon on TV. I'm sure it found its way into those black drip paintings, which are like a gloomy vision of Monet landscapes.' In 2001 he was five blocks from the Twin Towers, seeing a 'huge crowd of people running, all covered in grey and white debris. Then I saw one of the towers collapse.'

Ain Aar became a refuge during the Covid pandemic, but 'I was here when the port explosion happened. I had friends who died in it.' It seeped into images in the frieze, of olive trees set ablaze. Another canvas shows a disturbing maelstrom of red paint. 'The horror bothers me – Lebanon, Ukraine, Gaza, Palestine, Iran. I can't be insensitive to all the murder that's happened for political reasons.' Beside a grand piano in his living room is a large painting of wounded Iraqi soldiers by Serwan Baran, who represented Iraq at the 2019 Venice Biennale. Baran, who settled in Beirut, is among many Arab artists who have found Lebanon a surprising haven with its relative freedoms.

Yet the challenges have escalated. 'Yesterday was horrific,' Dalloul said, speaking from DAF's tower block in Beirut the day after one of the deadliest single bombing campaigns in the country's history, when 100 targets were hit in less than 10 minutes on 8 April, killing more than 300 people. 'Five buildings came down around us – though these are not typically Shia, and definitely not Hizbullah, neighbourhoods. We check everyone coming into the building.' DAF had been due to open a stunning survey, *Echoes Across the Nile*, on a hundred years of Egyptian art, but 'exhibitions are all on hold. The country's at war, the city's bombed daily.' Even so, Beirut remains a

cherished base for artists: 'There's no censorship, other than for blasphemy towards religious icons.'

For Saleh Barakat, Nahas's Beirut gallerist, 'from the assassination of [former prime minister] Rafic Hariri [by a car bomb] in 2005 till now, it's been a total regression.' A colleague died in the port blast, when the gallery was also damaged. Yet Beirut is still a 'thriving artistic city – one of the rare incubators of Arab culture.' Barakat co-curated Lebanon's first national pavilion at Venice in 2007, 'right after the 2006 war, when Lebanon was as devastated as today, if not more so. I felt we needed to say the Lebanese are lovers of peace and music and beauty. Our country might be devastated, our buildings destroyed, but we look to the future.' One of his regrets was that that pavilion was 'seen on the international scene, but not in Lebanon because there was no place for it.'

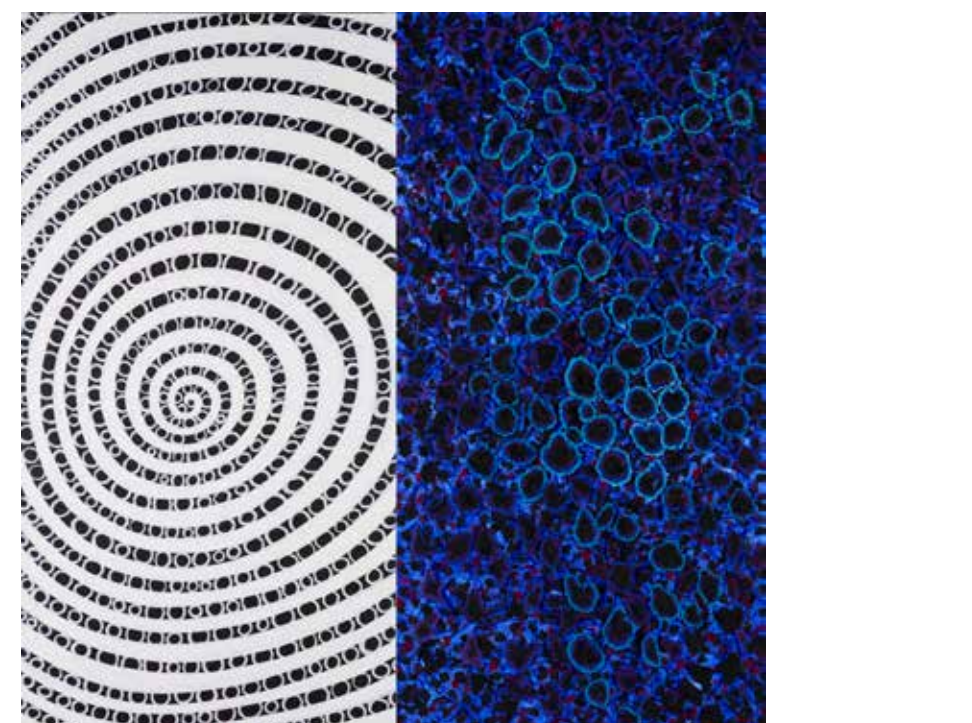
A national pavilion at the Venice Biennale is a statement about how a country chooses to see itself, and how it hopes to be seen

Ghassan Salamé

The Nuhad Es-Said Pavilion for Culture, a gleaming annex to the civil-war-scarred National Museum of Beirut, opened at the end of 2024 to show Lebanon's Venice pavilions to a beleaguered public unable to travel. The inaugural exhibition from Venice 2022, Ayman Baalbaki's installation *Janus Gate* in dialogue with Danielle Arbid's video *Allô Chérie*, closed in January. It was followed by *The Land Remembers* from last year's Venice Architectural Biennale. The location on the civil-war Green Line separating former East from West Beirut is a powerful reminder of the will to preserve culture even in time of war. The museum's then director, Maurice Chehab, encased antiquities in concrete to protect them during the 1982 Israeli invasion. A sniper-damaged mosaic and mortar-battered doors serve as a lasting anti-war memorial.

Nahas, whose oeuvre was unveiled to an enthusiastic Lebanese public at a Beirut waterside retrospective in 2010, hopes his Venice pavilion will also in time come home. 'It shows the other side of Lebanon, not an image of wars and destruction,' he said. 'It's more an idea of who we really are.'

Maya Jaggi is a contributing art critic to the *Financial Times* of London, and an award-winning writer and cultural journalist who has reported from five continents. She was elected a fellow of the UK's Royal Society of Literature in 2023 for her independent critical writing.



Below Details from Nabil Nahas, *Don't Get Me Wrong* (2026), whose 45-metre frieze draws on eclectic influences, from Byzantine gold icons and Islamic geometry to cedar trees and patterns found in nature