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For one gallery-averse painter, success still came quickly

Jean-Marc Nahas is prolific, and his work, for all its anxious energy, is reflective

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BEIRUT: "It's always the same thing," says Jean-Marc Nahas. "Rough, tender, violent, abstract."

A prolific painter in his early forties, Nahas is racing through his latest exhibition at Berytech, a high-tech multi-media office park that juts out from a hill above Mkalles, beyond Saint Joseph University's science and technology campus. There are paintings tucked into conference rooms and cafeterias, others hung high above the lobby and resting on the floor of a lower level near Berytech's pool. As an artist, Nahas is impressive not only for the bulk of his creative output but also for the speed with which he produces his work.

"Drawing has to be very fast," he says quickly. "And painting has to be very fast," he adds, becoming suitably breathless. Although he swears he can communicate in English only at a painstakingly slow pace, clearly, in any language, his talk has to be very fast as well.

Nahas's brushwork matches this rapid tumble of words. He covers his canvases with bold lines and blustery washes of color. His gestures are quick and rhythmic, like sketches that have been committed to paper in a period of restless activity. The feel of his work seems to dwell somewhere between the diminutive yet arresting portraits of young women by Lebanese painter Karine Wehbe and the color-soaked gouaches of Marlene Dumas, but without the smoldering, turbulent sexuality that courses through the Dutch-South African artist's work. Yet for all their anxious energy, Nahas's paintings and drawings are somehow reflective.

His smaller, more figurative works capture interior scenes and singular family units. His larger pieces toy with texture and the language of abstraction. And his sense of movement is distinctly cinematic, relying on a repetition of squares like film frames.

"It's like a storyboard," he explains, "with many things that make one thing. As I'm growing older, I like more and more the movies. I don't have a camera but I do have painting.

"When I draw," he adds, it's "like I'm writing a book, poetry, like I'm writing a letter to someone." Stopping in front of a small drawing he made by adding pigment to ink, he points and says, "This is seduction. The art is here, where you decide to stop, where you decide to continue."

Born in Beirut, Nahas studied painting at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris. He has been showing his work steadily since 1987, through exhibitions mounted in Montreal, Paris, Munich, Brussels, Dubai and Beirut. After spending a spate of time in both France and Canada, he returned to Lebanon in 1989.

"I achieved success very quickly," he says. But then he went back to Canada and describes the experience as "a bad dream" in hindsight.

"Now I've been back [in Lebanon] seven years, working very hard. I can paint and I can say I'm happy. I choose painting because I have something to say. I work. I need to show myself every time I have something new. I don't care for the market. I exhibit whenever I have something to show. All this," he says, sweeping a hand toward his work, "is six months of work."

Another striking facet about Nahas's productivity is the fact that he seems to resist the gallery system. He shows locally at such venues as the French Cultural Center, the Ecole Supérieure des Affaires (ESA), the Faqra Club, and now Berytech. This latest exhibition, which closed yesterday, was curated by Naila Kettaneh Kunigk, an art dealer who runs Munich's Galerie Tanit with Walther Mollier. (Together, Kunigk and Mollier put on a perpetually strong program, including work by such historical heavyweights as Dan Flavin and Robert Rauschenberg alongside young contemporary powerhouses like Jeremy Blake and Wim Deivoeye. This summer, they mounted a show called "Present Absence" featuring videos and installations by such Lebanese artists as Lamia Joreige, Akram Zaatari, and Jalal Toufic).