

Butterfly Effect

OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, THE ELEMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF HOME has been brought into sharp relief by unprecedented global events. Creating a soothing cocoon to withstand everything from pandemics and pollution to digital overload seems more pressing than ever.

It's something that our cover star, the musician and architect Carl Gerges touched upon when I interviewed him via phone and WhatsApp for this issue. The shoot took place just as Dubai and Beirut were both going into lockdown, causing many unforeseen complications and highlighting the conveniences we take for granted in our hyper-connected world. Still, we made it work. Our chosen photographer couldn't fly in, so the multi-talented Mr Gerges shot the interiors himself and we booked the brilliant Pedro Hasrouny to shoot portraiture and video. The resulting portfolio is a beautiful celebration of Beirut-based talent.

Another thing that has become abundantly clear is that respecting the natural world is of crucial importance for humanity to thrive and prosper. Two stories in this issue highlight the work of people who are doing just that in boldly different ways. French-Iranian artist Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar's colourful, abstract canvases often depict his efforts to convene with nature, and at Babylonstoren in South Africa, Karen Roos has created a sylvan paradise that celebrates the bounty of the land. Set around a centuries-old Cape Dutch farmstead, the walled organic gardens (pictured, left) are in perfect harmony with the seasons. I was lucky enough to visit last September and came away with the feeling that we should focus more on the feet-on-the-ground wisdom of the ages. We all have the power to effect small changes that cumulatively can make a big difference.

Talib Choudhry
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



MAIN IMAGE: TREES OF PARADISE 2019, SASSAN BEHNAM-BAKHTIAR



Force of Nature

In Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, an upcoming exhibit by a French-Iranian artist promises to encapsulate the life-affirming beauty of its landscapes

FROM TOP:
Sassan Behnam-
Bakhtiar with a
selection of his
vibrant canvases;
the sapphire blue
water of Saint-
Jean-Cap-Ferrat.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
L'Arbre de Vie (Blanc)
2019, oil on linen.



When the municipality of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, a commune of the Alpes-Maritimes department in the south east of France, decided to establish a cultural space, it realised there was no better inauguration event than a solo exhibition by the regional artist Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar. A French painter of Iranian descent, he had recently held successful solo exhibitions in Dusseldorf and London, and has long been a face on Monaco's buzzing art scene.

"His understanding of life, humanity and connection to nature reflects the visions of the old masters who resided here," says Cap Ferrat's Mayor Jean-Francois Dieterich. "His creative style and techniques are reminiscent of the old French artists – the way he brings in movement, light and colour. It's as though he came from another time, with a real connection to the peninsula."

Entitled *Rebirth*, Behnam-Bakhtiar's forthcoming exhibition – set to open in June – features two public installations and more than 30 new paintings. Across the pieces are

themes of connecting with nature, living in harmony, and realising one's internal potential. A shift in tone from his previous show, *Extremis*, which focused on the artist's "dark and traumatic past", the new body of work depicts scenes and landscapes from Cap Ferrat, while expressing "movement, light, feelings and memory, as well as their impact on one's life, spiritually, psychologically and physically".

"My past is anything but normal," he says. "I endured a series of unfortunate events, which pushed me to focus on the simple yet important things. Once you are stripped of your freedom and everything you possess, you start to think of life differently. While I was pushed towards this change by my circumstances, I believe that anyone can have the same awakening – we all have the ability to understand life and speak its language."

Rebirth's oil paintings feature Behnam-Bakhtiar's signature *peinture raclée* technique – an intricate style of scraping, relaying and spreading numerous blends of colour over particular points. The result of a seven-year experiment in trying to express the energy he felt, *peinture raclée* is the artist's way of com-





municating and connecting with his audience. The paintings provide abstract reflections of local landscapes that are, in many ways, meaningful to the artist himself, such as *Transcendence*, which was inspired by the artist's experience witnessing water evaporate during sunrise. "It seemed as though I was witnessing a soul gathering," says Behnam-Bakhtiar. "It was heartwarming... as if nature was speaking. The colourful flowers in the background and the green trees under the dark blue and orange sky made me want to paint it, so I did." Other paintings in the series, such as *Trees of Paradise*, *Falling Rose of Light*, and *Forest of Life*, further reflect the peninsula's picturesque environment, and his experience of it, including the rocky shorelines, the tall, centuries-old Aleppo pine trees, and the raw French Alps, which take on a different character with the shifting seasons.

"Understanding our connection to nature is a very good step toward realising that we are not alone, and that there is a limitless source of energy on this Earth, waiting to be used," says Behnam-Bakhtiar. "We just need to connect with it, and in order to do so, we need to first connect with ourselves."

Reflecting the themes of the paintings, two public installations will be placed at different points in the city, including the Place Des

Ancienne Combattants D'A.F.N. and the Espace de la Théâtre sur la mer. The treated wrought iron sculptures feature the human figures depicted in his *Rituals* series and are intended to serve as gentle reminders to connect with life and nature.

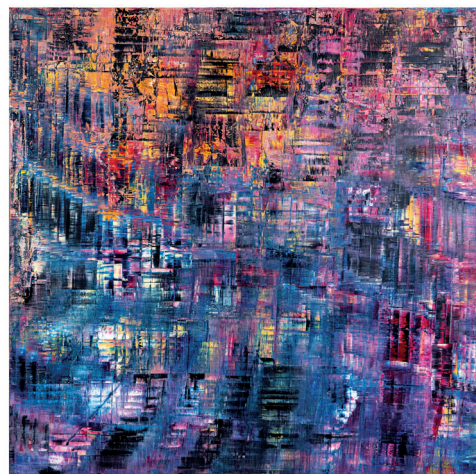
"The new pieces are filled with movement and light, which has always been an important part of my work," says Behnam-Bakhtiar. "I have focused on bringing to life what I see all around me in nature. As an artist, to depict this beautiful movement and nature's dance is primordial, and you can see this through my eyes in these new works."

He hopes that the *Rebirth* series will inspire an inner awakening for those observing the pieces, leaving them something to think about and perhaps even triggering a positive change in their lives. Waking this dormant energy is, after all, the basis of the exhibition's title.

"The new artworks will remind us of the importance of living in harmony with nature," concludes Mayor Dieterich. "There is value in understanding that the social world is not everything – taking a step back from that is beneficial to our wellbeing in so many ways."

Rebirth will take place from 4 June to 30 June 2020 at the Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat Cultural Space (Villa Namouna). – **RIMA ALSAMMARAE**

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ABOVE: Jungle Love 2018, oil on canvas. OPPOSITE PAGE FROM TOP: A view of Villa Cuccia-Noya, where the private view of *Rebirth* is taking place. The villa is owned by the distinguished art enthusiast and collector Basil Sellers.