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Steven Naifeh at his Abu Dhabi exhibition in 1975. Courtesy Steve Naifeh

Steven Naifeh's return to art

[Nick Leech](#)

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The last time Steven Naifeh's work was exhibited in Abu Dhabi, there were no art galleries in the city and Saadiyat Island was the site of an experimental hydroponic farm.

The two-day show, which was held at the Embassy of the United States in August 1975, featured 15 works, including paintings and sculptures made from white Formica, influenced by the work of contemporary abstract artists such as Frank Stella and the British op artist Bridget Riley.

The works were created by Naifeh while he was staying in Abu Dhabi with his parents. Naifeh's father George worked as first secretary for cultural affairs at the American embassy and his mother taught English at a local Emirati girls' school. Their apartment, which stood facing the sea on Abu Dhabi's Corniche, served as the 25-year-old's studio.

The local English language newspaper at of the time, the UAE News, gave the one-man-show a glowing review under the title "American Arab's Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures". "I cannot wait to see more of his work and have a strong suspicion that in 10 years or so anyone who was lucky enough to have seen this exhibition will be boasting," wrote the reviewer, Barbara Hughes. "Let us hope that we shall see his work in public buildings here in Abu Dhabi as well as in the homes of private collectors."

At the time, it would have been impossible to guess at the circumstances surrounding Naifeh's return, but the artist's life and the reviewer's prediction have come together in ways that now seem uncanny.

For the first time in 39 years, public and private collectors visiting Abu Dhabi Art will have the opportunity to appreciate Naifeh's work on UAE soil.

Not only are the works being exhibited in a gallery built near the site of Saadiyat Island's former greenhouses, but the capital now has its own international art fair and will soon have a Louvre and a Guggenheim, part of whose permanent collection is about to be seen in the capital for the very first time.

If the capital is unrecognisable from the city where Naifeh spent his university holidays, the man also returns transformed.

In 1975 Naifeh was still a student, considering a future in either law or the arts. Not only did his career develop to span both fields, but Naifeh is now an internationally recognised and exhibited artist, a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer and a significant collector and patron of the arts in his own right.

"I can't wait to see the city again because it must be a completely different place," the 62-year-old explains. "This will be the first time I've been in Abu Dhabi since that first exhibition."

Naifeh now describes his earlier work as "derivative" and "juvenile" but admits that in many ways his artistic concerns, which involve a desire to explore the "kinship" between the traditions of Islamic geometry and those of 20th-century western abstraction, have remained constant throughout his career.

Even at his first Abu Dhabi exhibition, Naifeh made these connections, exhibiting his abstract sculptures and paintings alongside two volumes of a reprinted 19th-century French text, *L'Art Arabe*.

"These two fields of art are incredibly important to me [and I hope to] marry them in a way that will allow the average viewer to look at them and, without being steeped in the art history of either movement, see them without seeing them as either medieval Islamic or recent international, but as both at the same time."

Naifeh ascribes these aesthetic preoccupations to his education, his upbringing and his background. An Arab-American whose grandparents were born in a part of Syria that is now Lebanon and Jordan, Naifeh was born in Iran and grew up in both America and the Middle East thanks to his father's career as a diplomat.

Before he first came to Abu Dhabi in 1974, the young Naifeh spent time in Oman, Jordan, Iraq, Pakistan and Nigeria. It was as a 15-year-old, living in Lagos, that Naifeh studied painting with Bruce Onobrakpeya, one of the leading Nigerian artists of the 20th century, but it was as a 10-year-old, living in Libya, that he first started to realise his passion for art. "I was a very odd kid," Naifeh explains. "Unlike most kids, who want whatever 10-year-olds want, I wanted a Roman head. We lived in Libya and they were available and for \$25, my parents were able to buy me a funeral stele.

"When I was 13 years old I wanted a Gandhara Buddha and then when I was 21 years old I wanted an Andy Warhol. When everybody else was asking for baseball mitts or a starter car at age 16, I was building this smallish collection."

It wasn't until 2000, however, that Naifeh started collecting in earnest, by which time he had abandoned his painting career. "I worked from when I was 10, in Libya, until I was 25 in Abu Dhabi. That was really the last year."

Despite having studied art history at Princeton and Harvard Universities and briefly working at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, Naifeh was studying law at the time of his first Abu Dhabi show.

It was a decision that proved to be one of the most important in Naifeh's life because it was while he was studying at Harvard Law School that Naifeh met Gregory White Smith, who was to become his partner and co-author for the next 40 years.

It was a personal and a professional relationship that resulted in two highly successful professional ranking business, which helped to fund Naifeh and White's writing careers, and five New York Times best-sellers that included two biographies, Jackson Pollock: An American Saga (1989) which won the Pulitzer Prize for biography and autobiography in 1991, and Van Gogh: The Life (2011).

"The Jackson Pollock book and the Van Gogh book took 10 years a piece and between writing those, which were 10- to 16-hour-a-day projects, and running businesses with 50 employees in two offices, there was really no time to work on my art career," Naifeh recalls.

It was during this time that Naifeh and White also renovated Joye Cottage, a 25,000 square foot property in Aiken, South Carolina, that had previously belonged to the New York financier William C Whitney. As part of that restoration, Naifeh and White created a new performing arts space that in 2009 became the home of Juilliard in Aiken, a week-long arts festival that is held in March each year.

It was also during this time that Naifeh and White started to amass an art collection that includes works related to Van Gogh, neoclassical sculpture by artists such as Canova, British portraiture including works by Joshua Reynolds and Henry Raeburn, and paintings of the Barbizon School.

After a lifetime of artistic and cultural overachievement, Naifeh and White's relationship came to an end in April of this year when White finally died of the illness that had plagued him for decades.

"Greg had a brain tumour from the day I met him in 1974 at Harvard Law School. It's very odd when you think that Greg had this brain tumour for 40 years. His brain was literally riddled with tumour, it was in eight different places in his brain, and he was constantly going in for medical operations," Naifeh explains.

"I think in the last 15 years, he just knew he wasn't going to live a full lifespan. He had 13 brain operations and multiple chemotherapeutic programmes, so he pushed me to go back to painting because I think he wanted me to undertake something that we didn't do together.

"The art is the only thing that I've done without Greg and thank God it's here, because I really can't see myself writing another book without him."

Naifeh returned to the studio in 1998, and it is works from this period that are being shown by New York's Leila Heller Gallery at Abu Dhabi Art, including the wall-mounted *Saida I: Black*, a work of enamelled canvas from 1998 and *Saida XXXVI*, a copper-plated steel sculpture that resembles the forms of a traditional Islamic fountain.

Typically, Naifeh is working on several projects at the same time as he prepares to come to Abu Dhabi for the first time in four decades. As well as discussing the future of his art collection with curators from various international museums, Naifeh is in the process of reissuing the book he and White wrote about the renovation of Joye Cottage.

"I'm writing the last chapter and it's so weird, it's the first time I'm writing final prose for publication without him," Naifeh explains. He is also looking forward to the publication of the last article that White wrote, about Van Gogh, which is about to be published in the December issue of *Vanity Fair*.

"There's a wonderful phrase in one of Van Gogh's letters to his brother, Theo. He says something like, 'the problem with most people is that they don't love enough art enough. They should love more art more.'"

• Abu Dhabi Art runs from November 5 to 8. Visit www.abudhabiartfair.ae for more information.

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