

Harper's Bazaar Recreating Never-Never Land: The Art Collection Of Sara and Nassib Abou Khalil

By Rebecca Anne Proctor, June 10, 2019.



Sara and Nassib Abou Khalil have transformed their Palm Jumeirah apartment into a poetic reality where artworks live and breathe just as humans do, writes Rebecca Anne Proctor.

An Alice in Wonderland type of world awaits all who have the opportunity to enter an apartment on the first floor of Oceania Residences on the Palm Jumeirah. Every inch of brother and sister Sara and Nassib Abou Khalil's abode is meticulously dressed in contemporary art, offering a widespread cast of artists from the Middle East and elsewhere who seemingly play roles in their ever expanding collection.

The thoughtfulness and precision by which the siblings have displayed their art is akin to a stage set—a fantasy world whereby the protagonists are the artists—and Sara and Nassib the directors.

They have even named some of the objects, bringing more to life this rich, multifaceted scene of intriguingly shaped, coloured and textured artistic creatures. “My interest in art started with opera, with music,” says Nassib. “But it’s much more than an interest—it’s an obsession.” He laughs, adding, “a borderline obsession.” It was from his passion and appreciation for the way in which music is staged, its heightened visual and decorative elements, which led Nassib to his love of contemporary art.

“It became contagious and it started flowing in the family. When I moved to Dubai in 2010 I started taking interest in the gallery scene,” he says. “I started following the programme of IVDE and I fell in love with the work of Reza Aramesh. Sara was visiting from London at the time and together we went to Isabelle’s gallery and looked at the available works of Reza and we selected the photograph that is hanging in my bedroom.”

It was 2011 and Action 66 was the very first artwork that Nassib ever purchased. “It all started from there and once you’ve done it once the ice melts,” he smiles. It’s about fantasy and creating another world. The soft tunes of his favourite singer, Maria Callas,

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emanate into the room. Above us are three works by the Tibetan contemporary artist Tsherin Sherpa offering new takes on the traditional mandala and imbued with joyful creatures that imbue the room with a happy energy.

Across from us is Christine Sun Kim with the words "My voice goes on a break every 20 minutes." In both artists' work there are elements of otherworldliness, revealing a fantasy world that has made its way into the present and into the reality that Sara and Nassib have created.



Sara and Nassib Abou Khalil. Above are works by artist Tsherin Sherpa entitled *Untitled (Free Spirit)* (2013); *Tara Gaga* (2016); *This is not a Rorschach (Hey Vajra)* (2015)

"I think I am still a child in many ways and I will always be a child," says Sara. "I still remember that feeling when Nassib took me to my first theatre production when I was just five or six years old and I was so tiny that they had to put pillows on the chair for me to see the stage. With the eyes of a child everything seems so large, so grand, so magical. I still want to have this perception of the world. And this is what visual art and music does for me. It has this element of magic and wonder of never-never land. It's this different universe that I've fallen in love with."

Creating an artistic, highly creative realm where the artworks live and breathe alongside Sara and Nassib has nothing to do with escapism. "We have made this poetic existence part of our reality," adds Nassib.

"Sometimes people say when they go back to work, 'Back to reality.' I enjoy my work very much and I am lucky enough to be as passionate about it as I am about art and opera, but there are many challenges in life and why do these challenges need to be our only reality? Why can't our reality also be about the beauty we choose to surround ourselves

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with? Why do we need to escape reality? We can create it as we wish. When I enter into this apartment I am not entering into a home but a world.”

No matter what is happening on the outside, no matter what trauma or turmoil, art provides a sanctuary and another reality. “It’s a universe and I hope you get that feeling too when you enter into our home,” says Sara.

Middle Eastern art plays an important role in their collection. “That’s where the collection started,” says Nassib. “For the first few years the collection was heavily Middle Eastern. After Reza Aramesh I was captivated by a show by Rokni, Ramin and Hesam—it was like stepping into Alice in Wonderland. During this period I felt very much like Alice who had travelled to a different planet. I then became fascinated with the work of Youssef Nabil. And then one day I was walking in Bastikiya and I saw this fountain made out of dishes standing in the middle of a house by Abbas Akhavan.”

It’s about the liberty in creative expression that they employ to create their own universe. “There’s a lot of freedom in art,” says Sara. “Your voice cannot be silenced in art. There is no oppression and no boundaries and that is something I absolutely love about it.” We look up at Sherpa’s work again. “He’s such a peaceful painter. He uses his voice to create something so wonderful and beautiful,” she muses, remembering how she was led to buy his work one rainy day in London at Rossi & Rossi.

“The gallerist explained how this artist, this Tibetan guy, is always smiling and you can see that in his work. There is so much love and joy in his work as well as resistance but in a peaceful way. I think I found part of myself in his work but also a part of our mother who is my greatest inspiration every day. Just like Tsherin’s paintings she was full of color, love and strength. She taught me to fear nothing and only regret what I didn’t have the courage to do. There is a very strong message in his work when you look in between the lines.”

Sara immediately bombed Nassib with photos, determined that they buy Sherpa’s work. “Art has no nationality, gender or religion,” adds Sara. “My approach is a lot less researched than that of other people’s. I see something and I will fall in love with it and then I’ll do the research. Maybe I won’t understand the work but it will draw me to it.”

Fantasy becomes reality here in the most effortless of ways. In Nassib’s bedroom the commissioned large-scale Mueller work incorporates all of the siblings’ passions into one. “The idea stemmed from my passion for literature, Goethe, music, and especially, the opera Faust, which was based on the play by Goethe,” explains Nassib. “I told Mueller that I wanted a painting where Faust triumphed over Mephistopheles. I wanted a painting where good triumphed over the evil devil.”