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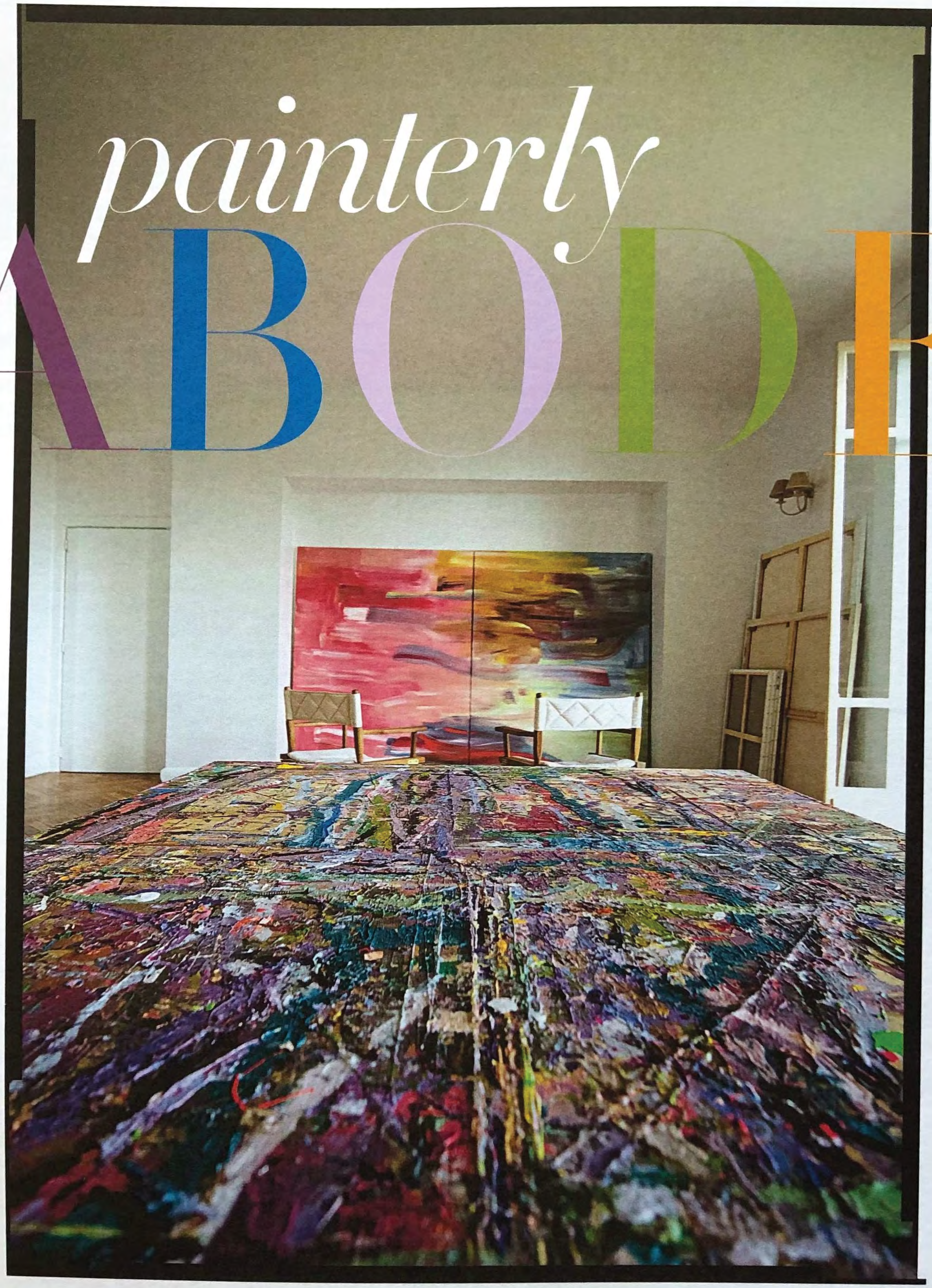


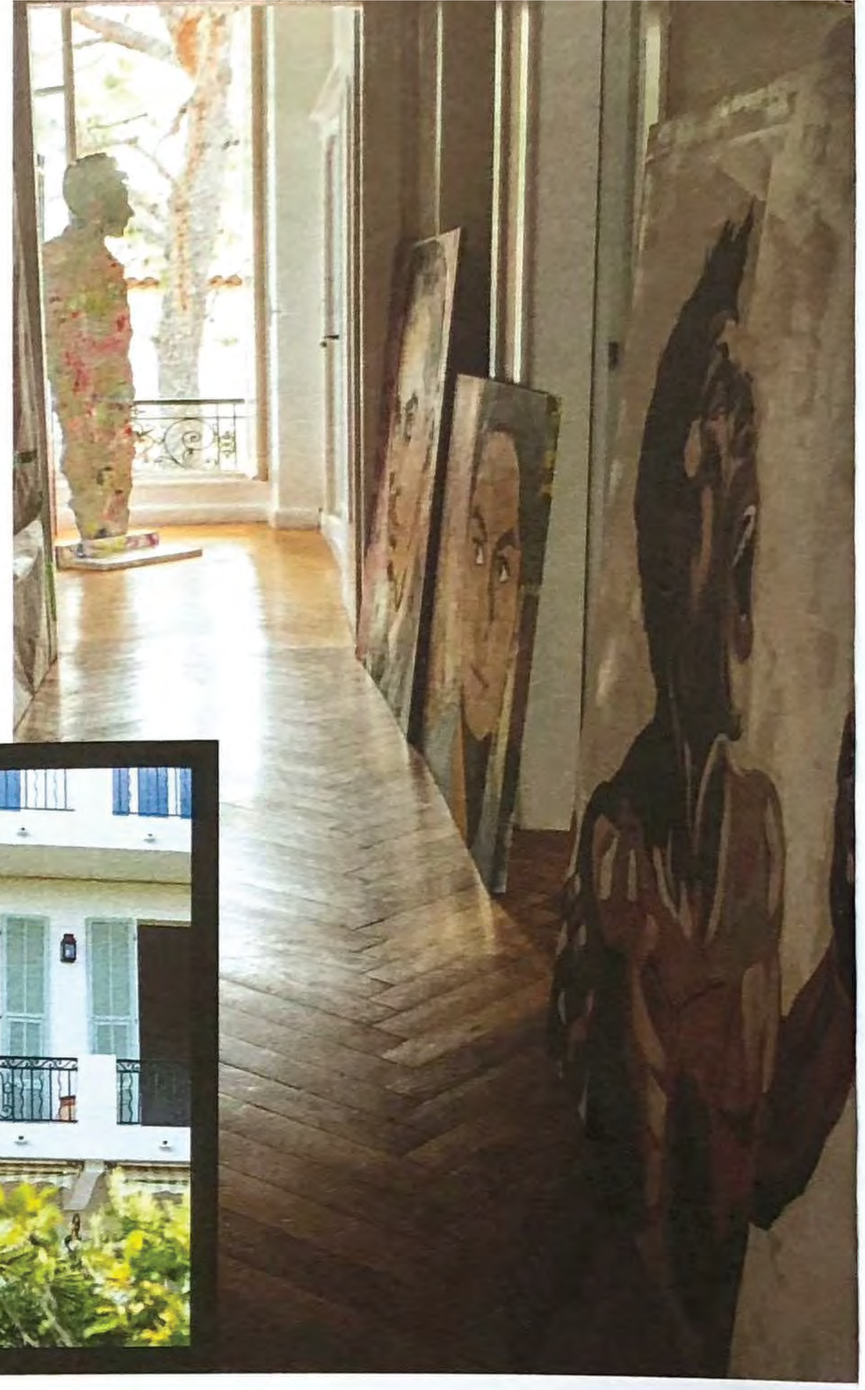
Old-world charm abounds in the Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat studio of Franco-Iranian artist **Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar**. *Ayesha Shaikh discovers how the space fuels his creativity*

Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar with his 2018 painting *Howl With an Appetite for Expressing Strong Instincts* from the *Oneness Wholeness* series; Facing page: A close-up view of Behnam-Bakhtiar's Cap Ferrat studio featuring a table covered in scraped paint

In the idyllic French peninsula of Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat an alluring place informs the practice of Franco-Iranian artist Sassan Behnam-Bakhtiar. It's here that his vision comes to life in the swirling, allegorical figures that bedeck his art, from paintings and collages to sculptures. The all-white space glistens against the sapphire blue of the Cote d'Azur, port and Monaco, with silhouetted Aleppo pine trees, the Cap's signature plant, swaying on the side.

Inside the studio, old-world charm abounds with solid wood time-worn parquet floors and wrought-iron balustrades lining the terraces, evoking a Parisian chic mood. "I'm an old-school type of guy," says Behnam-Bakhtiar, who moved to Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat from London in 2010 and never looked back. "It's a place where you can still feel the energy of the bygone times. I like that it's minimal and *épuré* as it helps me to fully focus on my process."

A soft sea breeze drifts in through the floor-to-ceiling wooden windows of the 250-square-metre space that's filled with natural light and speckled with Behnam-Bakhtiar's works—the old, the new, and the ones in-the-making. Paints crowd into a wooden shelf and vintage fabric-shade wall sconces that came with the space remain



Clokwise, from right: A selection of artworks by Behnam-Bakhtiar with a portrait titled *Insight 03* in the foreground; The artist painting in his studio; Behnam-Bakhtiar on the studio's terrace

"TODAY, I'LL CONTINUE WORKING ON THE ABSTRACT PATH THAT I THINK IS THE BEST TOOL TO BRING OUT MY FEELINGS, EMOTIONS AND VISIONS"

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOIC THEBAUD

affixed. Leaning against the walls are sculptures and paintings from his latest *Oneness Wholeness* series (2017-18), brightly-coloured abstract works with rhythmic strokes that connote a reassessment of his *oeuvre* and life, and a departure from his black-and-white photography that featured collage cut-outs with traditional Iranian motifs. One section of the studio is dedicated to storage, where Behnam-Bakhtiar prepares works for shipment, and the other features his latest works, including a striking self-portrait from his *Aftermath* series, which is a meditation on the human condition. "I usually spend most of my time here and need to constantly see my works-in-progress," he notes. A few wooden and cotton director chairs are strewn around and sitting in the centre is a table covered in scraped paint, a technique he often employs in his work. "My wooden tables see so much of my process," he states. "My *Oneness Wholeness* series is the biggest testament to this unique technique I've developed. I put several months behind each painting in order to achieve what you can see on the finished canvas," he adds.

These superbly textured, exuberant works are a lesson in the scraped-paint technique, one that requires patience, repetition, strength, and of course, a lot of paint and mixing. He creates great visual impact using this method, turning his works into critical and self-referential pieces of art. They take up to several months to complete, sometimes even years if he's not content with them. "I've had small paintings that took a year to finish and I think patience is an important aspect of my work today," he shares. "I need to see a part of me in my work and the connection between it and my living self. Once that's established, I move to the next."

During the past decade, Behnam-Bakhtiar has worked in various styles including sculpture, portraiture, collage, installation and photography, with the last two years seeing him lend special focus on Abstract Expressionism. He made his work public for the first time with the *Oneness Wholeness* series, shown at Saatchi Gallery, London, from May till June this year, followed by another solo exhibition past September, where he presented sculptural works and a sound installation to mark the legacy of polymath Jean Cocteau at the historic Villa Santo Sospir. "Today, I'll continue working on the abstract path that I think is the best tool to bring out the feelings, emotions and visions I've had in my head and make them tangible on a surface, and readable for my audience," he notes. "My abstract works are highly tied with the life messages and learnings I bring out, so form an extremely valuable yet personal process for me as an artist."

Behnam-Bakhtiar's body of work deeply draws on his Middle Eastern heritage, and he shows great reverence for Iranian iconography and people, as in his noted 2016 *Invincible* series that depicts Iranians as warriors. "I've taken many valuable lessons and teachings from my Iranian roots, which can be seen in my work throughout the past decade," he shares. "This was a great seed in my process that today, has evolved into my abstract works combined with their life messages, and focuses on our humanities." It's in Behnam-Bakhtiar's studio that he and his art become one. He's now busy preparing for a solo exhibition that will take place at Setareh Gallery in Dusseldorf, Germany, next fall. Another peek into his studio is in order soon to see what he dreams up next. ■ *Sassanbehnambakhtiar.com*

Below: A view of Behnam-Bakhtiar's studio with paints crowded into a wooden shelf, a table covered in scraped paint and artworks leaning against the wall; Left: Buckets of paint dot the studio space

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