

Artist Spotlight: Samia Halaby

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By Lara Arafah

Recently I sat down for tea and nuts with Jerusalem-born Samia Halaby, a Palestinian-American artist whose works are on view in the Grey Art Gallery's current exhibition, *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*. "If I wasn't an artist, I would be a mathematician," she said. Her mathematical mindset and intellectual approach to art making are apparent in her work. While studying for her B.A. at the University of Cincinnati, she was drawn to the work of abstract painters such as Mondrian as well as Bauhaus masters Kandinsky and Paul Klee. Samia earned her M.F.A. at Indiana University. During her studies there, she was exposed to Cubism and Russian Constructivism. Her admiration for both was initially purely for aesthetic reasons but later came into sync with her leftist political and social views.

As Halaby pursued a career in academia, she developed her art practice. She started teaching at the University of Hawaii in 1963. A year later, she taught at Kansas City Art Institute. Two years after that, she received a grant from the university to travel to several countries in the Middle East. During that trip, which expanded her knowledge of the roots of abstraction in Arab art, she was drawn to the patterns and symmetry of Middle Eastern architecture. "My fascination [with Arab abstraction] first entered in a conscious way into the space of my helical paintings, although I feel that it was also present in the way I selected sections of a larger still life drawing to render into painting," she wrote.^[1] Halaby went on to teach at the University of Michigan before returning to Indiana University as a professor.

In 1972, Halaby took a position at Yale School of Art, where eventually she became the first full-time woman faculty member in the department. She moved to New York in 1976 and has lived in Tribeca since then. Her travels and her exposure to multiple cultures have impacted both her personality and her work. Halaby wrote, "capitalist education and propaganda attempt to confine artists of oppressed nationalities to study and practice within the boundaries of the history of their national origin. This imprisons us in the past and stunts our participation in contemporary development. It denies that our history is the history of the society we now live in and that that history is international."^[2] Although her political activism is imbued with Marxist thought, her work has always remained separate from her



<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Samia-Halaby-Two-Diagonals_cropped.jpg>

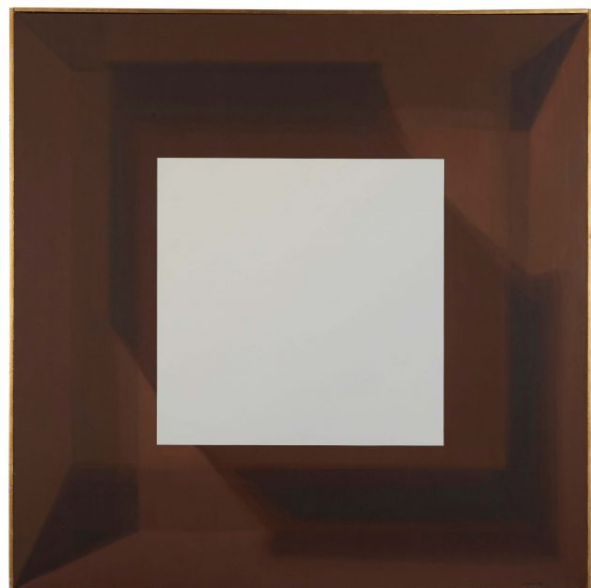
Samia Halaby, *Two Diagonals*, 1968, Oil on linen, 35 x 35 in. Collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah, UAE

politics. For Halaby, both abstraction and illusionism reflect reality, but at different stages of social development: “each reflects the visual knowledge of the society that produced it.”^[3]

Two Diagonals (1968) and *White Cube in Brown Cube* (1969)—both on view in *Taking Shape* at the Grey—derive from her Geometric Still-Life period of the late 1960s. For this series, Halaby was inspired by a painting she saw at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. In these works, she explores how to portray three-dimensional objects on a canvas and how the edges of objects are understood visually.

She probes the depiction of a space that lies beyond the horizontal and the vertical, creating the illusion of depth and volume through shading, tone, and line. “Very important was a wish to satisfy my curiosity about how we really see by examining with great care not only shading but edges as well. I felt hypnotized by the problem of painting edges where a sizable surface is foreshortened into a simple line in a painting. In my education Cezanne was said to be the master of edges. . . . To my dismay, I found that he used a broad line around still life objects,” she explained.^[4] During this time, she painted in isolation at a house that was available to faculty members of the Kansas City Art Institute, where she was teaching. These works show Halaby’s mastery in depicting how light and shape work together, expressing the way she sees the world. Through abstraction, she drops the viewer into reality.

To create these works, Halaby made her own geometric objects and examined them under various lights, analyzing the visual role shadows play in understanding an object. *Two Diagonals* shows two cylinders with multiple light sources. One of the light sources is blue, casting faded blue highlights on one cylinder and a brighter, sharper blue on the other. These works demonstrate the important role of color and the influence one hue has on another. During this period, Halaby examined spheres, cylinders, and rings before moving on to the cube. *White Cube in Brown Cube* probes the relationship



<https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/LR_SamiaHalaby.jpg>

between reality and illusion in a concrete object while also exploring the concept of space. Using one-point perspective, Halaby

positions viewers looking into a larger brown cube with a smaller white cube inside it. The brown cube's edges meet the edges of the canvas, thus abstracting the space even further. There are no clues to clarify the space or scale. The white cube appears to float freely in the picture plane. The white cube's edges signal the reality of surfaces seen from a specific angle. Deriving from two light sources, shadows overlap inside the brown cube, while the white cube appears fully illuminated. In the end, we are simply left with perspective and shadows, which tease us with illusions of reality but also yield an abstract result. According to the artist, "*White Cube in Brown Cube* is a visual statement about the empty canvas and its potential to contain concepts of space."^[5]

"Abstract painting deals with the general, which includes illusions of natural principles, physical motions, distribution patterns, light conditions, social organizations," she explained. Halaby's work has evolved consistently over time. In the 1980s, she collaborated with a group of musicians to form the Kinetic Painting Group. In their performances, Halaby coded on an Amiga computer in her studio; soon after, she transitioned to a PC to create moving paintings while the musicians played. The group performed at the Brooklyn Museum in 1994 and Lincoln Center in 1998. She was also involved in 22 Wooster Street, an artist-run gallery space in lower Manhattan, where she curated *On Trial: The Yale School of Art*, an exhibition bringing artists together in solidarity against sexism and racism at Yale. Later that year, Halaby was the first artist from North America to participate in the Havana Biennial. Today her work is found in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Mead Art Museum, and the Arab World Institute in Paris, among other public institutions.

[1] M. Farhat and S. A. Halaby, *Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Innovation* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 2014), 12.

[2] Samia Halaby, "Reflecting Reality in Abstract Painting" *Leonardo* 20, No. 3 (1987), 241

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Farhat and Halaby, 33.

[5] Samia Halaby, unpublished artist statement on *White Cube Brown Cube*, 2014.

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