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Samia Halaby: Radical optimism in art and political commitment for Palestine

Palestinian artist and activist Samia Halaby shares her constant research for beauty in the face of the political struggle for the liberation of Palestine.

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"I see the beauty in many places, many times, and I have always wanted to interrupt conversations to point out what I see," says Palestinian artist Samia Halaby. "I learned not to do so, and share beauty through painting."

Today in her eighties, Samia Halaby is a pioneer of abstract painting and a central figure in Palestinian art, with an artistic career that started in the late 1950s and was also accompanied by a strong commitment to the liberation of her country.



Samia Halaby is a pioneer of abstract painting [Samia Halaby]

Halaby recently participated at the light art festival Manar Abu Dhabi (from November 15, 2023, to January 30, 2024) where she presented works where painting and light met.

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"Etched in my memory is the light of the city of Yafa dominated by sunshine and the blue sky. Memories of gardens and flowers and my mother's gentleness and her friends, early days of her youth and gaiety"

Samia Halaby's beautiful and painful memories

The artist left Palestine in 1948, with her family, when she was only 11 years old, but she acknowledges that those years were formative for her.

Those first memories are the deepest for her: "They constitute a bedrock that allows me to fly because I know where I will land."

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Alongside traditions and friendship, she brought with her from Palestine many visual memories: "Etched in my memory is the light of the city of Yafa dominated by sunshine and the blue sky. Memories of gardens and flowers and my mother's gentleness and her friends, early days of her youth and gaiety," she recalls.

"But Palestine also brought an enduring pain, one that leads us to hold more precious the traditions and friendships that we maintain despite the distances and separation."

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She says that what she sees with her eyes has always been a path to follow, an aesthetic pleasure: "Sometimes I am brought to stillness, not wishing to move, at the sight of a particularly beautiful set of colours or shapes," she tells *The New Arab*.

Between 11 and 14 Halaby lived in Beirut, as her father took the family to Lebanon before going to help defend Palestine, hoping to bring the family back home eventually.

"Years later I recovered and realised that deep in my feelings those were meetings of men wailing, and with the realisation, the pain receded replaced by understanding"

The memories of men gathering in her house to talk about the struggle deeply informed Samia's political awareness.

"Everyone shared opinions and expressions of pain and loss," she remembers. "Anytime any discussion of politics took place thereafter brought me pain. Years later I recovered and realised that deep in my feelings those were meetings of men wailing, and with the realisation, the pain receded replaced by understanding."

In the end, the entire family moved to the US, where it was difficult to adapt, and where she was profiled. She doesn't feel Palestinians have it easier these days: "At present, we are blamed for our own victimisation. I am accused of being antisemitic, of being guilty of my oppressors' crimes, the oppressor who stole and still lives in my house in Yafa," she says. "Of course, I became active politically."

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Pioneering abstract painting

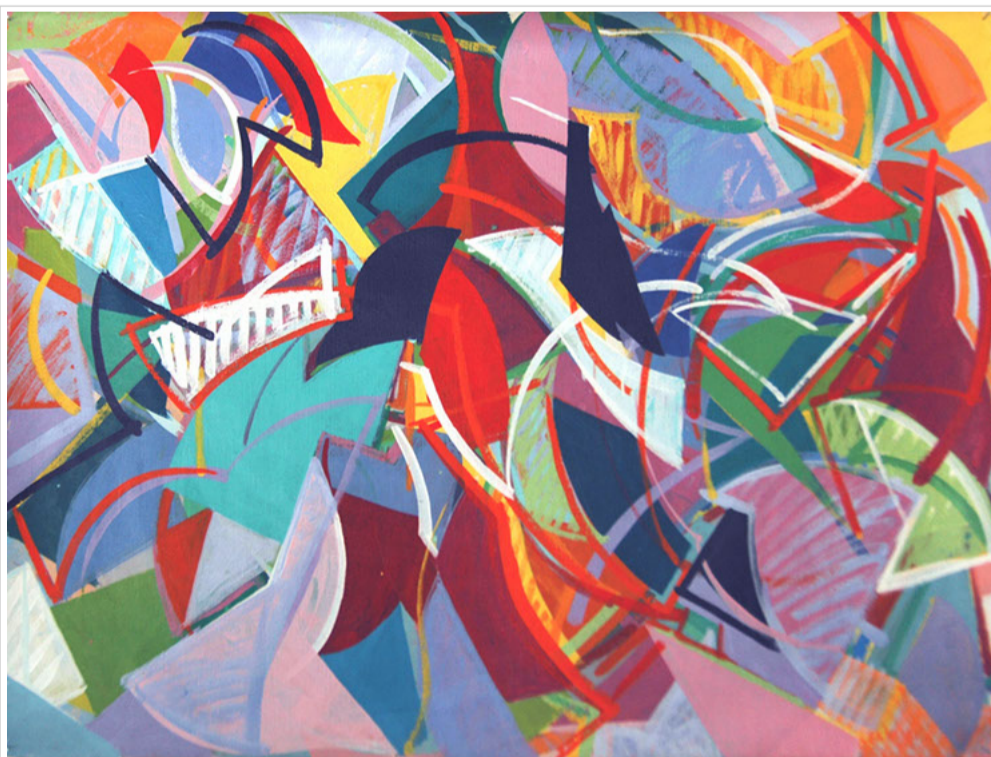
A pioneer of abstract painting, Halaby didn't feel she was at the forefront of a movement when she started experimenting with digital art as early as 1986 when the personal computer became accessible.

"It was a bit like entering a quiet place, entering alone. It was as though all locations of my brain were lit up and every day and every hour had to be spent obeying this delicious absorption."

While the effort was solitary, she was deeply aware of art history. Imagining how she could contribute to its future, between 1986 and 1987 she started realising her celebrated kinetic paintings on the Amiga computer teaching herself computer programming.

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"I had been long been fascinated by computing," recalls Halaby. "Art history teaches us that the greatest art was always made using the technology of its time. I thus I asked myself why I was still making oil paintings and thus I went out shopping for a personal computer and found the Amiga."



For Jean Gordon, 1990 [Samia Halaby]

Art and politics

Halaby is a political activist, but she keeps her battles outside the artistic realm. For her, an artist can't explore painting while simultaneously showcasing political themes.

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"I never tried to mix political commentary with research into the language of painting," she says to *The New Arab*.

"Based on what I saw as political painting in New York I found that if the political subject was not acceptable to the administrative layers of capitalist norms, it would remain forever hidden in the artist's studio."

The artist believes that to be seen by others, art had to hide its message or make it acceptable and thus it became regressive: "Mixing art and politics is messy and truly harms both," she explains, making a comparison with the field of numbers: "I cannot imagine asking to have research mathematics and bookkeeping intermixed."

The real question for her is why artists want to combine the two in the first place: "Is it not better to just be forthright and clear and make bluntly political art and show it in the streets and share it wherever and whenever we can?" she argues.



At the same time, she has often used for her abstract paintings titles evoking Palestine, and other oppressed countries. For example, the work titled *For Niihau from Palestine* has a written paragraph related to it with a political message but the painting is an abstraction.

When asked what is there in the painting that relates Palestine and the Island of Niihau — a place where Hawaiians are enslaved — her response was that abstraction is about general principles of nature and growth and that she has noticed that both Palestine, Niihau, and many other places are colonised and imperialised by similar, sometimes identical methods.

Manar Abu Dhabi

The video installations Halaby presented at Manar Abu Dhabi were kinetic paintings on LED screens. Those were first exhibited in the 1990s: "The context is a powerful vehicle for art that is seldom under the control of the artists," says Halaby, who liked the fact that Manar Abu Dhabi placed her Kinetic Paintings in public spaces.

"In Abu Dhabi, the audience is more casual, and their reaction ranged from disinterest, curiosity, pleasant surprises, or full enjoyment all of which are free and voluntary," she notes. "It is a great context, one that expresses respect for the work by the presenter and raises it to a rare and unusually high level."

She recounts that when she and Kevin Nathaniel, the musician she worked with to re-contextualise these pieces, first saw the billboard-sized panels at night on the beach, they began to dance to the music emanating from them. Many of the attendants at the beach overseeing the artwork joined them.

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Her former student at Yale, Nathaniel was Halaby's collaborator also in a performance held at Abu Dhabi Art, happening at the same time as Manar.

"Kevin began to visit my studio to play his numerous percussion instruments while I was developing my Kinetic Painting Program," says Halaby.

Throughout the 1990s the duo performed together and with his many musician friends throughout New York's off-off-Broadway scene.

"How could I celebrate when my heart was grieving and still is?"

"The recognition of our work as 'high art' is totally recent," she notes. "But mind you, we were never making art, we were making painting and music we loved."

The Abu Dhabi Art performance had sound and image intermingling as if coming straight from the subconscious. Before the performance, she addressed the public saying that it would be a crime of silence not to mention the current situation in Gaza.

The artist says she expected criticism and negative reaction, even while she knew that many in the audience would approve.

She also knew that some would criticise her if she did not talk about Gaza. "In the end, how could I not have? How could I celebrate when my heart was grieving and still is?" she says.

Her last words before starting the performance, however, were about the beauty you could find even in the most painful times, and that art reveals to us.

"The optimism in my art is a radical one," she concludes.

Naima Morelli is an arts and culture writer with a particular interest in contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. She is also the author Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia, un'introduzione and The Singapore Series: a contemporary art reportage

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