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Samia Halaby celebrated in Sharjah with first retrospective in the Middle East

► Explorations of perception through diverse media have made the Palestinian artist a pioneer in the art world



Lasting Impressions: Samia Halaby brings together 180 works from across the artist's career. All Photos: Pawan Singh / The National



Razmig Bedirian

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In the late 1960s, even before she began producing the kaleidoscopic landscapes and kinetic digital works distinct to her, when still-life objects were the focal theme of her paintings, [Samia Halaby](#) ensured her subjects were not suspended in an unjust stasis.

The Palestinian artist would spend hours scrutinising geometric bodies, such as spheres and cubes. She would observe how the light washed over them, causing shadows to stretch and swirl, and strove to convey these dynamics with paint.

Feedback

Her early work, thus, enlivens the inanimate. Spheres emerge from the canvas, mirrored surfaces elongate and compress reflected forms, while rounded crosses give the illusion of depth, honouring the interplay of light and shadow.



Mirror Sphere (1968) by Samia Halaby. Razmig Bedirian / The National

These early paintings open Halaby's first retrospective in the Middle East, *Lasting Impressions: Samia Halaby*, running at the [Sharjah Art Museum](https://www.sharjahartmuseum.ae/) until January 7. The paintings set the foundation to the visual concerns that continue to grip the artist six-decades on. Halaby's explorations of

perception, whether through oil, papier-mache or computers, have made her a pioneer in the art world.

The exhibition brings together 180 works from across the artist's career. The pieces come from varied sources, including institutions and private collectors. Curated by [Inass Yassin](#), it underscores Halaby's style and sensibilities, which warrant her firm position in the pantheon of contemporary Arab artists.



The Studio in Kansas City (1966). Razmig Bedirian / The National

Halaby's art has garnered worldwide interest over the past decade. Her work is part of private and institutional collections, from [British Museum](#) and [Guggenheim Museum](#) to the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit.

Yet, despite this global recognition, Halaby has never exhibited in due scale within the Arab world. *Lasting Impressions: Samia Halaby* aims to overcome this lapse of exposure.

Before delving into her artworks, the exhibition presents two videos that give insight into Halaby "as a person and as an artist," Yassin tells *The National*.

"As a curator, I see it is important to show Samia's character. She is methodical and serious about her work, and yet, her approach also has a sense of humour, sarcasm and fun."



Samia Halaby in her studio in New York. Photo: Samia Halaby

An interesting aspect of how Halaby approaches her work is the renunciation of her own emotions, which she says have been given a glorified place in the conventional narrative of the artist.

"Paintings are not about my emotions," she says. "I think that is propaganda created by the administrative layers of the art world from hundreds of years ago. It has no meaning. Art is about my partnership with society. If it's about me, what a waste."

The exhibition moves forward seamlessly from her 1960s' paintings to the vibrant helices and spirals that dominated her work in the following decade. The works are another stride forward in her studies of abstraction, her visual and scientific interests of how colours interact.



Rainbow Spirals (1973). Razmig Bedirian / The National

"Abstraction has always been part of mankind's culture," Halaby tells *The National*. "Language is an abstraction. We extracted it from nature and adjusted it to our hands and our lips. Abstraction, as a word, is equivalent to extracting. In the Arabic dictionary, it says 'the one freed from the meat on it.' You're extracting the essence of something."

Halaby says tribal art from around the world was well-attuned to the concept of abstraction, "taking from reality something and turning it into a clear symbol we use to communicate." As an art form, abstraction may have found momentum in the 20th century in the US and USSR, but Halaby underscores the fact that its tenets are rooted in the Arab world.

"The first time in history that pure abstraction came was with Islamic, or Arabic art," Halaby says. She adds that though some perceive the form as decorative, it is in fact a reflection of elements found in nature.

"It's about reality," she says. "When you study symmetry in nature, if you're a scientist, you see that symmetry in Arabic art. It doesn't mean that it comes from nowhere. It comes from nature, and it

comes from nature even more than Renaissance art comes from nature. At the same time, it is a religious art, because it is praising the beauty that is created ... by God.

"It's not photographic, but it's a step beyond photographic. It's abstraction. To me, abstraction is the language of the future."



Fire, 1975. Photo: Razmig Bedirian / The National

In her twisting, phantasmagoric paintings of the 1970s, Halaby developed her sense of abstraction by giving the impression that the landscapes were illuminated not from external sources, but from within. This approach gave a certain sheen to the works, often verging on the metallic, though she would only use oils. There is no singular focal point in many of these works. Instead, the eye is pulled along with the methodical motion of the painting.

"The light source is not striking on the objects," Yassin says. "Rather, it is emitting from the centre to different places in similar ways. The idea of this light distribution is inspired by Arab and Islamic art."

These varied approaches of abstraction were utilised as Halaby painted city blocks and scenes from railway stations, which she likely encountered in New York, where she has been living since the 1970s.



In the mid 1980s, Halaby began producing digital artworks through the Amiga 1000 personal computer. Pawan Singh / The National

In the 1980s, Halaby began utilising a medium that few artists at the time were considering: Computers. Her studies of abstraction and the visual field all fed her digital output. Her computer of choice was the Amiga 1000, released by Commodore International in 1985.

With long-drawn soundscapes, interspersed with glitching ticks and clicks, the *Kinetic Paintings* seem like a natural progression for Halaby's intent of inducing motion within her art, while exploring the possibilities of colour. Lasting Impressions has an entire section dedicated to Halaby's kinetic paintings, some of which were produced in collaboration with musicians and percussion groups.



In her papier-mache series, she portrays dancers, landscapes, and exotic birds in three dimensional forms. Pawan Singh / The National

Over the following decades, Halaby has continued to find new ways to evoke motion and visual dynamism while breaking from the two dimensionality of the canvas. In her papier-mache series, she portrays dancers, landscapes, and exotic birds in three dimensional forms that physically grow out of the frame in strips and tatters or occupy the centre of the gallery space, suspended from the ceiling.



Relativity of Light and Dark, Samia Halaby (2008). Pawan Singh / The National

One pair of acrylic paintings in the exhibition show her aptitude for perceiving shades of colour. *Light Between*, painted in 2007, features multicoloured strokes and is hung in vivid contrast to *Relativity of Light and Dark*, painted in 2008, which seems almost like a monochrome blueprint of the previous artwork.

"She managed to depict how a colourful painting with varying amounts of light and shadow would appear in black and white," Yassin says.



Jerusalem, My Home (2014). Razmig Bedirian / The National

Halaby's 2014 work *Jerusalem, My Home*, meanwhile, captures how sunlight ebbs and flows on top of the Dome of the Rock. Parallel to her abstraction methodology, she depicts the dome in a clean arched form against a patchy, blue sky. The varying splotches of yellow, cream and grey evoke a shimmer comparable to how light strikes the famous golden dome.

Halaby's art can be segmented into two disciplines. While her formal interests as an artist are expressed in her abstract works, she has taken a different approach to highlighting the plight of Palestinians living under Israeli rule.

Halaby was born in Jerusalem in 1936. She and her family were expelled from their home in Yafa in 1948 in the midst of the [Nakba](#) and the creation of the state of Israel. A few years later, the family moved to the Cincinnati, Ohio, with Halaby eventually moving to New York in the 1970s.

In spite of the distance, Halaby remained devoted to her homeland, taking part in activist initiatives supporting the Palestinian cause. In her art, she has sought to uncover tragedies that Palestinians have faced under occupation, most notably with the series of drawings on the Kafr Qassem Massacre, which is on display as part of Lasting Impressions.



Halaby depicts the wave of killings that took place in the Kafr Qassem massacre in pencil. Pawan Singh / The National

The blood-curdling massacre took place on October 29, 1956, when Israeli border police killed Palestinian civilians who were returning from work during a curfew they were not aware of. In less than two hours, the Israeli police killed 49 people, including a woman who was pregnant.

Through gripping works produced with coloured pencils, Halaby depicts the wave of killings that took place that day. The drawings are accompanied by captions giving the names and ages of those who were killed in each wave. The works are based on interviews that Halaby conducted with the survivors of the massacre.

While Halaby may strive to detach her emotions from her abstract works, she doesn't "separate herself from the subject of Kafr Qassem."

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"I use Renaissance-style painting in my Kafr Qassem because I want to utilise something with which I can tell a story," Halaby says. "In Renaissance painting, they use directional light, reflective light."

This is in contrast to the principles she applies in her other oeuvre, which depends on the relativity of light, colour and abstraction.

Halaby's devotion to her native [Palestine](#) extends beyond the realm of art. Through the Samia A Halaby Foundation, she has sought to support working-class Palestinian women and children. Most recently, the foundation is helping fund developers working on an educational app tailored to Palestinian children.

"They are not getting Palestinian culture," she says. "So, we're trying to provide an app that talks about the main cities in Palestine so they learn about history."

Lasting Impressions: Samia Halaby will be running at the Sharjah Art Museum until January 7