

SELECTIONS

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SELECTIONS

ARTS / STYLE / CULTURE FROM THE ARAB WORLD AND BEYOND

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• THE EVOLUTION OF DUBAI DESIGN DISTRICT • THE MANY WOMEN OF NAJLA EL ZEIN • IN THE LIBRARY WITH SAMIA HALABY •

ART ISSUE

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**BEIRUT****Samia Halaby:
Palestine's pioneer of
abstraction in Beirut**

by India Stoughton

Samia Halaby,
Takheel II, 122 x 167.5 cm,
acrylic on linen canvas, 2013

Born in Jerusalem in 1936, Palestinian artist Samia Halaby has been based in the United States for over 60 years. Her family was forced to flee Jaffa in 1948 and spent three years in Beirut, before moving to the U.S. in 1951. A pioneering abstract artist, one of the first to use computers to generate digital art, and a passionate activist and advocate for Palestinian rights, Halaby was the first woman to serve as a full time associate professor of art at Yale, where she taught from 1972 to 1982.

She has exhibited extensively in the U.S., as well as closer to home in Amman, Damascus, Aleppo, Ramallah, Bethlehem and Beirut. This February, the Beirut Exhibition Center is hosting the first major retrospective of Halaby's work, curated by

art historian Maymanah Farhat. Entitled *Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Innovation*, the exhibition includes more than 50 pieces, among them paintings, drawings, hanging sculptures and computer-generated kinetic works. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Halaby's ongoing mission to further abstraction, which she considers to be materialist, a different way of capturing reality.

Organised chronologically, the exhibition includes some of the innovative artist's most experimental work, beginning with pieces from the 1960s reflecting postwar American trends, among them paintings exploring abstract expressionism and Joseph Albers' studies of colour relativity. Through her chronological arrangement and subdivision of the work according to specific series, Farhat aims to emphasise Halaby's radical approach to formalism.

Perhaps most interesting, in light of contemporary technology and the ever-expanding world of digital art, are Halaby's kinetic paintings, designed to convey sound as well as visuals. These works were created using computer programs that artist designed and wrote herself in the late 1980s, long before digital art became a recognised medium.

Halaby's bold lines, striking compositions and stunning eye for colour ensure that her work is accessible and aesthetically engaging, but there is a depth and complexity to her themes and approaches that merits a more profound reflection.

Taking her inspiration from nature or the urban environment, Halaby is able to employ colour, form and light to encapsulate a sense of motion, space and time, creating works that appear to move beyond the standard three dimensions. While teaching at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1964, Farhat explains in the monograph that accompanies the show, Halaby decided to abandon the abstraction she had developed at university. When she stumbled across a 15th century painting by Flemish artist Petrus Christus, *Virgin and Child in a Domestic Interior*, it captured her imagination and changed the direction of her work. A tiny detail -- an orange resting on a windowsill near the subjects -- caught her eye and inspired her to devise a formal change. Using geometric models, Halaby painted whole series of works in which an object was captured from all possible angles, sliced open and reshaped on the canvas.

Halaby's ground-breaking fusion of pre-modern abstraction -- particularly geometric motifs found in Islamic art -- with modern figuration and abstraction, and her innovative approaches to material and technology have deservedly earned her a reputation as one of the region's foremost contemporary painters. This timely retrospective serves as a fitting tribute to a prolific and ceaselessly inventive talent. ♦



Samia Halaby, *Standing Blue Pair*,
86 x 34.5 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2003