

INTERVIEW



"ESSENCE OF ARAB," 153 X 203CM, ACRYLIC-ON-LINEN CANVAS, 2007.

Samia Halaby
on painting,
programming
and being
Palestinian

By India Stoughton
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Samia Halaby gestures to the enormous glass wall at the entrance of the Beirut Exhibition Center. She's explaining her approach to abstraction, which for the past 50 years has served as her preferred means of capturing the realities of the world around her.

Through the window, lorries trundle along the dusty reclaimed land where the exhibition space is built.

Poised atop a horizontal plane, their rectangular shapes, Halaby points out, are not dissimilar from the line of books on the nearby shelves, their covers facing but. The sunlight falling on the bare expanse of wall above the shelf echoes the snowy tops of the mountains that form the horizon line behind the trucks.

Her approach, Halaby explains, is to look at the general rather than the specific, seeking patterns in her surroundings. It might not always be possible for viewers to identify the material origins of Halaby's abstract paintings, but it would be a mistake to assume they don't exist – or to imagine her work is purely decorative, driven solely by the aesthetics of color and form.

In "Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Inspiration," the retrospective currently on show at the Beirut Exhibition Center, the diversity and scope of Halaby's engagement with abstraction and its capabilities is revealed.

Born in Jerusalem in 1936, the artist fled Palestine with her family in 1948. She spent three years in Beirut, before moving to the U.S. in 1951. Halaby has lived there ever since, but exhibits frequently in the region, where she is hailed as one of the foremost pioneers of abstract art.

Halaby worked with the show's curator, Maymanah Farhat, on the selection of pieces, most of which are on loan from private collections. The first major retrospective of the 78-year-old artist's work, it reveals the extent to which she has pushed the boundaries of abstraction throughout half a century of experimentation and innovation.

"I think it gives people a whole new view of my work when they see the whole group, myself included," she says. "You always see the popular aspects of certain artists, or their periods. We know Jackson Pollock as this, or Mondrian as that and then we see a retrospective and we begin to comprehend the process of a whole lifetime of work."

In Halaby's case, the vibrantly colored, geometric abstracts for which she is best known are supplemented by more playful pieces – fluttering, frilly hanging sculptures that transpose her interest in form and perspective into three dimensions, and her fascinating experiments in digital art, which began in the mid-1980s.

"Rain," made in the 1990s, is a fascinating and unexpectedly sophisticated example of Halaby's kinetic computer-generated art. A moving abstract painting made up of lines and blobs of color that grow, shrink and overlap each other, its beauty is remarkable given the basic tools available to the artist at the time. Set to a percussive soundtrack, the work is a rolling, hypnotic series of slowly shifting tableaux, as mesmerizing as a slow-moving storm.

"I started for a very good reason," Halaby recalls of her experimentation with digital art. "I was challenging myself, and I thought, 'The great artists I've studied about and admired all used the technology of their time' ... When I first approached it, it was 1984, and my sister had an Apple, one of those first ones. I used this very simple language called Logo, which was made for children. I just was taken by the possibilities."

"I found it very hard to get any direct information and I found the ready-made programs to be not at all what I wanted ... So I decided, 'I'm going to program,' – and I did."

"I spent hours and days first reading and understanding and I found

programming to be very beautiful ... You plug in numbers and quantities and values and then they come out into something else. Each function is a process. Then there's program logic, and it reminds me of how traffic goes through the city. It's just so beautiful in its own way."

"People would say, 'Well, you're not painting.' It's not having my hands dirty with color. It's what happens in the mind. I type something and then it happens. I look at it and then I judge whether it's good or bad, then I change it, so it's back-and-forth, just like hanging a painting."

Halaby has always loved numbers, she says, and the precision in her geometric canvasses suggests a mathematical approach to space and form. Her accomplished grasp of the use of color in manipulating perspective is evident in a series of powerful trompe l'oeil works, such as the 1977 oil painting "Blue Trap in a Railroad Station."

Diagonal lines of color traverse the canvas, from a distance appearing as raised bars, like bannister rails. The canvas resolves into 2-D only when viewed from extremely close up.

Like many of Halaby's works, the piece is titled in a way that discourages engagement on a purely aesthetic level, pushing viewers to consider the composition's material origins.

"My titles give people a handle. I do it on purpose," Halaby says. "I don't want to be exclusive. I'm very down to earth as a painter. I'm like everyone else, and why not open the door so they see?"

A back room containing some of her more recent and most experimental pieces points to the artist's side projects, instances where she has branched off from the abstract art that characterizes the main bulk of her work.

A self-portrait of the artist inside an olive tree and a beautiful, petal-

like painted collage, entitled "I of Palestine: Three Mothers and Three Exotic Birds under an Olive Tree," points to her roots, her work as an Palestinian rights activist and her political leanings, aspects of her character that are effaced from her abstract work.

"I don't believe that painting is about me," she says, "or about the personality of the artist ... The proper addition to the whole monument of art history is not me and my personality. It's what's happening in contemporary society, what I can see in the social consciousness of my time."

But Halaby admits that people do tend to try to read her work through a lens of politics and Palestine.

"There is a tendency to put women and minority and black Americans, especially Arabs, into a cubby hole or a pigeon hole," she says. "They try to remove us from the mainstream ... Then when we have a mainstream show at the Museum of Modern Art, they have an excuse why these artists are not included. So it's racist in its own way."

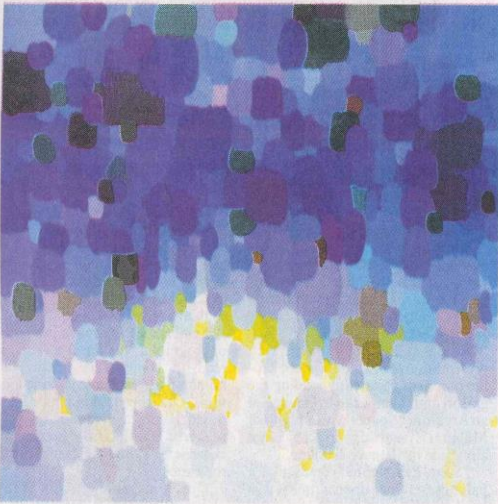
"You have to overcome these [stereotypes] but, for me at least, by being subjected to them I become conscious of them and I think about them ... Once you see that there are borders or boundaries, automatically you see what's outside the boundaries, so in a way you move the boundaries by being aware of them."

"Say I'm Palestinian from now to kingdom come. I'm Palestinian. Yell it from the highest mountain," she says. "But my art is international. It's a Palestinian doing it, and that's a political statement."

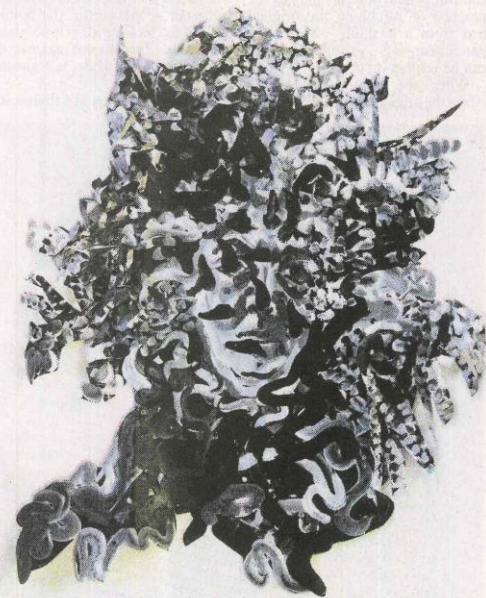
"Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Inspiration," curated by Maymanah Farhat, is on show at the Beirut Exhibition Center until Feb. 26. For more information, please call 01-920-000, ext. 2883.



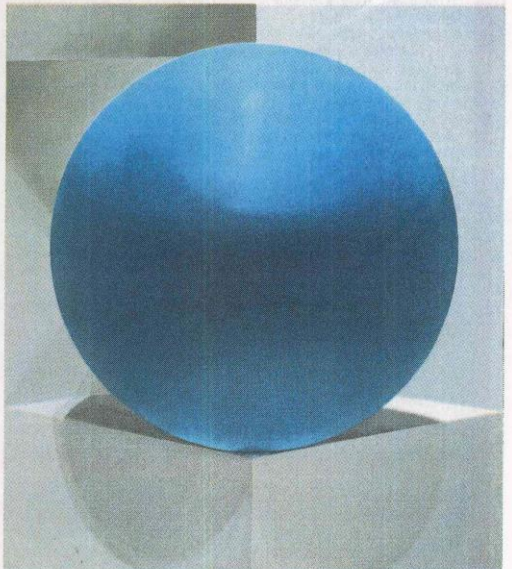
"Little Palestine," 117 x 68.5cm, acrylic-on-canvas, 2003.



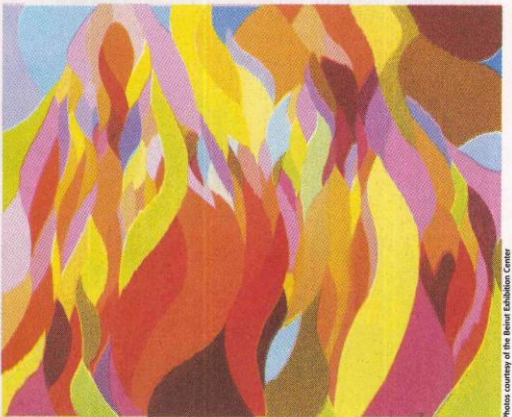
"Cliffs," 180 x 180cm, acrylic-on-linen canvas, 2014.



"I Found Myself Growing in an Old Olive Tree," 95.5 x 76cm, 2005.



"Green Sphere," 66 x 55cm, oil-on-canvas, 1966.



"Women," 153 x 183cm, acrylic-on-canvas, 2014.

Photos courtesy of the Beirut Exhibition Center