

AGENDA

LEBANON

DANCE

'The Dress'

Theatre Monnot,
Grande Salle
November 4-14, 8:30 pm
+976 1 202 422
The Beirut Dance Company performs in a work conceived by Nada Kano, which deals with intimacy and our inner lives.

ART

'Masks, Last Era'

Alice Mogabgab Gallery,
Karam Building, Achrafieh
Street, Achrafieh
November 3-26
+961 1 204 984
Painted in Lebanon in 2009, Fadia Haddad presents a collection of masks representing the haunting themes of her life.

'Memories and Images by Asia Hobeika Wassabki'

Piece Unique Gallery,
Aris Kanafani Street, Saifi
Village, Downtown
Until November 11
+961 1 975 655
This exhibition relates an important period of Wassabki's life, plunging the visitor into a space filled with colors and creativity.

'Chronicle of a City'

Agial Art Gallery, Hamra
Until November 6
+961 1 345 213
Salah Saouli's apocalyptic paintings depict cars—the ever present witnesses to, and often participants in, Beirut's history.

Philip Taaffe, Christine Streuli, Timo Nasser

Sfeir-Semler Gallery,
Tannous Building,
Karantina
Until November 13
+961 1 566 550
The work of these three artists converges around the meanings and possibilities of patterns, shapes and surfaces.

LECTURE

'Religion: An Obstacle to Peace?'

Music Hall, Wadi Abu
Jmeel, Beirut
November 4, 7:00 pm
+961 1 371 236;
+961 3 807 555
Renowned Oxford University professor of Contemporary Islamic Studies Tariq Ramadan presents a lecture on religion as part of the "Politically Incorrect" series.

'Carbon Democracy: How do Oil and Politics mix?'

AUB, Auditorium B1,
College Hall,
Riad al-Solh, Beirut
November 8, 6:00 pm
+961 1 340460;
+961 1 350 000
Columbia University's Timothy Mitchell will perform a lecture on the intermingling of the politics of oil and the Middle-Eastern political system.

THEATER

'Requiem for Arts by Abdo Nawar'

The Sunflower, Sami al-Solh Boulevard, Badaro
November 10-14, 8:30 pm
+961 1 381 290
Abdo Nawar's satirical play deals with the different representations of art in Lebanon and how it is anchored in the culture.

Just a thought

Art is always and everywhere the secret confession, and at the same time the immortal movement of its time.

Karl Marx
(1818-1883)
German political philosopher and revolutionary

INTERVIEW

Samia Halaby and the politics of abstraction

The Palestinian-American artist discusses the material basis of her five decades of non-representational art

Annie Slemrod
Daily Star staff

BEIRUT: We have grown used to abstraction. Picasso's Cubism populates college bookshops everywhere, as do imitation Calder's. It's easy to think the value of abstraction, in its various forms, is simply aesthetic. Samia Halaby has made it her mission to tell us otherwise. The celebrated Palestinian-American artist's newest set of large-scale paintings – a series she calls "Dances in the Canal" – are presently on display at Beirut's Ayyam Gallery.

The bright colors and bold brush strokes of these acrylic-on-canvas works seem to leap across their canvases. The paintings dominate the gallery's walls – 2009's "Color Saturation" is a massive 168 X 229 centimeters.

"Large work is important as a definition of capacity," Halaby says. "When you have a small piece, you can dominate it, you can see it all. Your hands are bigger so you can work it. "But when it's big, it's man against the environment, so to speak. You have to force yourself on it. You have to keep backing up. To put ideas on it – a brush mark this big," she indicates the length of a finger, "is a bold stroke. But to be bold in reality is a different matter. You need a big brush ... It demands more from the artist."

Halaby is an engaged personality – a trait that expresses itself equally in her work and her politics. No surprise, then, that a conversation about one veers into the other.

"Abstraction is very material," Halaby says. "Futurism was born out of the Soviet Revolution ... [the Futurists] are destroying the Mona Lisa ... They are saying 'Painting the image of the ruling class is not our business.' They are following the general principles of reality which were begun by the Impressionists."

Halaby says she follows the tradition of the Materialists, who focus on what is happening in the real world. This is in marked contrast to the Surrealists, who suggest "reality is not so important ... Let's look at our bellybutton. Let's be selfish."

Born in Jerusalem in 1936, Halaby and her family were forced to leave in 1948. Eventually they moved to the US, where she studied at several universities and where she became active in Palestinian politics. She is connected with such organizations as Al-Awda, Artists Against Occupation, and Defend Palestine.

Long before Palestinian filmmakers, artists and cultural workers called for a cultural boycott of Israel in April 2006, Halaby herself boycotted the Israeli state – refusing to exhibit or work with Jewish Israeli



"Thunder Measuring Space" 152 X 203 cm, acrylic on canvas, 2010.

artists. She doesn't think much of the argument that art might be a forum for dialogue, choosing not to work with even dissident Israeli artists.

"If an Israeli artist comes and is very pro-Palestinian, I say 'If you want to stay in Israel and be pro-Palestinian, don't exhibit it with me, work against your government,'" Halaby explains.

"There are sincere people who work against their government and there will come a time in the future when Israel will collapse – the sooner the better – and many Jews will stay. They will have to adjust to a Palestinian Arab state, and we will be friends with them."

"So if they want to start making that friendship early let them start by working against [Israel]," she adds.

She acknowledges that, as a diaspora Palestinian, she can afford to take such an uncompromising stance. "There are [Palestinian] artists who live inside [Israel] who have conditions of life that are very difficult and I do not judge them."

Halaby's Ayyam exhibition corresponds with the publication of "Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Innovation," art historian Maymanah Farhat's 384-page study of the artist's work.

A look through her oeuvre reveals that she has occasionally strayed from the abstract, notably with a 1999 set of drawings of the victims of the 1956 Kafr Qasem massacre, and a group of paintings of the famed Palestinian olive trees, which she began composing while in Palestine in the late 1990s.

She says that these series are documentary, not what she calls the "cutting edge of research art ... [these] are for our children and our future ... so that the Kafr Qasem massacre would be dignified and remembered ... The olive trees

are very political because [they] are treated as Palestinians themselves. They are trying to destroy our economy, and [olive] oil is our economy."

One of the olive tree paintings, "I Found Myself Growing inside an Old Olive Tree" (2005) is especially haunting. Halaby's face peers through the tangled branches of an olive tree, gazing directly at the viewer. The painting has a hallucinatory quality.

Halaby smiles a bit, and notes that it was painted in the middle of the night while in the throes of jet lag.

The documentation of Palestinian's cultural memory is of

great importance to the artist.

"The American media, supported by Zionist ambitions of the Israelis and some sectors of the Jewish population, really want to erase us out of memory," she says. "They can't do that but they try, and it is important for us to un-erase what they are erasing."

In aid of this un-erasing, Halaby has lately begun her own documentary research. She discovered that people have what she calls "memory markers."

"The nakba is one of those landmarks, being so shocking many Palestinians and Arabs and others seem to feel as though there was nothing

before the nakba and [Palestinians] started from zero." This jives with Golda Meir's now infamous 1969 remark that, before 1948, "there were no such thing as Palestinians."

Halaby has documented the pre-1948 Palestinian art scene in Jerusalem in a 40-odd-page essay entitled "The Pictorial Arts of Jerusalem during the First Half of the 20th Century." It's destined to be published in "Aborted Modernity: Arab Jerusalem and Colonial Transformation 1917-2006," a collection edited by Lena Jayyusi.

Halaby lives in the present. In the 1990s, she designed her own computer programs for an experimental series that transformed live music into graphic art in real time. In many ways, however, her sensibilities hail from a different era.

She speaks passionately about the Russian Revolution. "It must have been quite an experience when anywhere you went there are people enthusiastic and going mad with joy about building a new world. You are picked up by this enthusiasm about building a new culture and there is renewal in all the fields of art."

Though it has been relegated to the annals of failed historical projects, Halaby still speaks fondly of solidarity among oppressed peoples in the global south. "It is," she says, "part of my experiences from the 70s, 80s and 90s."

Halaby's 1985 artist book "To Nihau from Palestine" expresses her sense of camaraderie with "native" Hawaiians. She composed the book's paintings when she was teach-

ing at the University of Hawaii.

Halaby's statements on abstraction nicely sum up how abstraction fits into her political philosophy. "[Nihau] is an abstract painting that deals with the general, that deals with how things are and how things move. I mean, there are principles in it that deal with the general, and if you understand the general then you understand that the case of Palestine is the same as the case of Nihau. So in that way it's very political."

Halaby has experimented with various forms throughout her lengthy career – creating three dimensional figures, taking some time away from the rectangular frame, and working with smaller canvases.

Near the end of the conversation, Halaby flips through Maymanah Farhat's thick study of her work. Photographs of herself as a young artist fly past, as do reproductions of her art – from early student work to her current abstractions.

Her pieces at Ayyam resemble some of the student work, in their apparent effortlessness and strong sense of color – although Halaby has clearly matured as an artist and her current paintings have more spatial complexity.

"There is an unconsciousness that emerges at the early part of one's education," she muses. "I have come back to that ease. In some way you get too old to really care. So you are going to do what really comes."

Samia Halaby's paintings are on view at the Ayyam Gallery in Downtown Beirut until November 27. For more information, call +961 1 374 450/51.

Ancient treasure Egyptian scroll from 1350 BC among artifacts on display at British Museum



LONDON: The Egyptian deity Osiris, sitting left, is adored by a scribe, Nakht, and his wife, Tjuyu, in an illustration inked onto a papyrus scroll, dating to the late 18th or 19th dynasty (about 1350 BC), as part of a new exhibition at the British Museum Tuesday. The exhibition brings together treasures from the museum's collection of Egyptian artifacts, including fragile papyrus scrolls that are rarely shown in public.

'Stateless' film from Kurdish director tells universal Mideast story

ROME: A tragic love story set amid the massacre of Kurds in Iraq in the 1980s aims to highlight the importance of courageous women in Muslim societies, the film's director said at the Rome Film Festival Tuesday.

Fariborz Kamkari's "The Flowers of Kirkuk" tells the tale of Najla (Morjana Alaoui), an upper class Iraqi forced to choose between love for a persecuted Kurdish doctor and the traditions of her family.

The film – said to be the first international production in Iraq since the Gulf war – explores the theme of individual responsibility in the face of crimes against humanity, and the rebellion of one woman in a Muslim society.

Iranian-born Kurdish director and screenplay writer Kamkari said by telling a tale

that explored the rights of women in the Middle East, his film told a universal story about Muslim societies.

"I have known lots of women in the Muslim world who have the strength to change and who fight daily against the rigid social laws that constrain them," he said at a press conference at Rome's 2010 film festival.

Moroccan actress Morjana Alaoui said that she believed "The Flowers" could play an important role in promoting an image of a strong, combative Muslim woman.

"The film shows a different image of women, a more modern Muslim woman. Usually we see women portrayed as downtrodden, but for us it was important to show that some fight to

change things," she said.

Kamkari noted the parallels between Najla and real-life cases of women who fall foul of Islamic law, particularly Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, an Iranian mother who has been sentenced to death for an "illicit relationship."

"I see some similarities between the film's protagonist and Sakineh: the film is about a woman who doesn't follow the law set out for Muslim women but tries to change it, eventually sacrificing herself for love," he said.

Festival press claim that "The Flowers," produced by Italian, Swiss and Iraqi film companies, was the first international production to be shot in Iraq since the Gulf war.

The film's story was inspired

by the experiences of the Kurdish director, who was born part of a Kurdish minority in Iran and now resides and works in Italy.

"I felt I had to tell the story of what I lived through, transforming it from personal to collective memory in the hope that the things I lived through would never happen again," he said.

Although the film's international production and multi-ethnic cast has led cinophiles to label it a "stateless" film, Kamkari said he had looked to Italian cinema for inspiration in

portraying brutal details from Iraqi history.

"[Roberto] Rossellini taught me how to tell the story of a war, how to narrate a huge event through the personal stories of protagonists," he said.

"The film tries to tell the roots of what happened in Iraq, the dark years that we have lived through belong to a period of the country's history that has been ignored by the media and cinema," he added.

The population of Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region

of Iraq, was devastated during the 1980s Iran-Iraq war and massacres by the Iraqi Army.

"For more than 80 years Iraqi people have been victims of a dictator. The country has been built through blood-baths," Kamkari said.

"We cannot continue to turn our backs on the country's history, he stated. "The Flowers' is rooted in that dark time and I hope others will begin to have the courage to tell stories about this and other crimes against humanity." – AFP

HOROSCOPE

Aries (Mar. 21 – April 19)	Taurus (April 20 – May 20)	Gemini (May 21 – June 21)
You have a gut feeling that something is not right. Even though it all looks good on paper, you are not being told the entire story. Make sure that all is out in the open.	You have recently become aware of how to beat the system without getting caught. This is a time when your integrity and ethics are being tested. Do something innovative and daring.	You get the feeling that things are starting to improve today. Don't let the little setbacks bother you or disrupt your new found attitude. Your determination will see you through.
Cancer (June 22 – July 22)	Leo (July 23 – Aug. 22)	Virgo (Aug. 23 – Sept. 22)
You will want to think everything through before taking action. Large investments like real estate are highlighted today. Slow down the pace and don't rush into anything.	You are projecting your feelings of love onto a person that you think you desire. At closer inspection, it will be "love at first sight." You will begin to feel better after a short ailment.	You are tired of wasting your time with a particular individual. You won't make a change today but you will certainly have to confront them. A significant discussion or exchange of information is likely.
Libra (Sept. 23 – Oct. 22)	Scorpio (Oct. 23 – Nov. 21)	Sagittarius (Nov. 22 – Dec. 21)
If you will become a bit more selfish today about giving of yourself, those around you will be surprised at the courage you have to say "no." Appreciate who you are today.	You are especially perceptive to the flow and ebb of market forces and will make the correct decisions today. Stand by your choices and don't let people convince you out of them.	You willingly offer your services to people today while assuming that they cannot figure things out by themselves. By doing this, you will deplete your own resources. Today will be hectic.
Capricorn (Dec. 22 – Jan. 19)	Aquarius (Jan. 20 – Feb. 18)	Pisces (Feb. 19 – Mar. 20)
Others are being especially critical of the way you do things today. This is a result of you not living up to your end of the bargain. Stability and permanence satisfy a deep emotional need.	The way you think about your relationship with someone will improve as a result of your communication with them today. You will find out how much you value the individual.	You have noticed that you are not up to speed lately and do not have the mental strength that you normally have. This will pass but in the meantime, try to go easy on yourself.



Iranian-born Kurdish writer and director Fariborz Kamkari at the Rome Film Festival Tuesday.

AFP/Andreas Solora