



The brightest abstractions

By Natasha Tohme

Palestinian artist Samia Halaby unveils her latest body of work while reflecting on her prolific career

Samia Halaby isn't your average 74-year-old. Sitting at the reception desk of Ayyam Gallery, the silver-haired artist keeps herself busy at a computer while she awaits my arrival to discuss her upcoming solo exhibit, "Dances in the Canal," at Ayyam in Downtown Beirut. That she is able to master the computer at such an advanced age is impressive, except that she's been a computer buff since the early '80s when the technology was just starting to take off. "When the computer came about, I was very fascinated," says Halaby. Forward-thinking with a razor-sharp mind, the artist embraced the abstract approach to art when she was still a university student back in the late '50s.

"I made the decision early on to place myself on the leading edge of art, so I studied art history and as I saw the development of art, it's abstraction that will be our future," says Halaby, in an effort to explain why her series of paintings about Palestine – where she was born in 1936 – are so abstract that they don't depict her homeland. Pointing to a painting called "A Dedication to Palestine," she says, "It could be Palestine, but it could be Italy or anywhere else in the world. Abstraction is about the general, and the general is more intelligent than the particular."

If Halaby sounds scholarly, well, she is. After obtaining a Master's of Fine Arts from Indiana University in the United States, where she's lived since 1951, Halaby held academic positions at a number of prestigious universities, culminating in a 10-year tenure at the Yale School of Art. An art historian, she has published a book on contemporary Palestinian art called *Liberation Art of Palestine* (2002). Yet, Halaby is best defined by her own art, which can be found in the permanent collections of such notable museums as the British Museum, the Guggenheim Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago.

One of the Arab world's most innovative

abstract painters, Halaby possesses a style that has evolved over the years and can be categorized into phases that include still life abstractions, graph paper plotting to create complex curves and abandoning shading for brush strokes in vivid shades. "I decided that there is a limitation with shading. Color is able to say a great deal when you don't have shading," says Halaby, who also pushed the boundaries by getting rid of the classic painting frame during one period of her career. "In Renaissance paintings, the frame of the picture is a window through which we see the world. I was challenging that, because the square isn't part of the abstraction, so I started cutting up canvases and putting them on the wall. Then I started painting three-dimensional canvases stuck together."

Halaby admits that while the free-form paintings were creative, they were not commercially successful. She eventually took some of the unsold pieces and framed them on linen backgrounds that she felt inspired to paint. "I got excited because now there were two edges – the interior and the exterior edge, but I got criticized for doing that."

The various phases of Halaby's long and illustrious career have been chronicled in a book titled *Five Decades of Creativity and Innovation* that Ayyam – which has represented Halaby since 2007 – published to coincide with her upcoming exhibition. Halaby describes her latest body of work for the show as her most mature, even though her new paintings bear a strong resemblance to her earliest works. "It's interesting how when we're older, we return to stuff we did when we were practically teenagers."

Samia Halaby's "Dances in the Canal" exhibit runs from October 7-November 27 at Ayyam Gallery, Beirut Tower, Ground Floor, Zeitoune St., Downtown Beirut, tel. 70.535.301, www.ayyamgallery.com