



ArtintheCity speaks to artist Samia Halaby, currently on show in Ayyam Gallery, DIFC



From March 13 until April 28, Ayyam Gallery Dubai is exhibiting "Trees and The High Rising City," the solo show of seminal Palestinian artist Samia Halaby. At this stage in her oeuvre, Halaby has revisited many of the aesthetic breakthroughs that first distinguished her illustrious career. Yet, although her latest canvases draw from earlier experiments, she explores the angular perspective of architecture alongside the textures and variances found in nature, a daring, rarely seen, feat in abstraction.

This collection of late work speaks of an artist who has continuously searched for new ways to visually interpret the world around her. ArtintheCity spoke to Halaby about her new body of work.

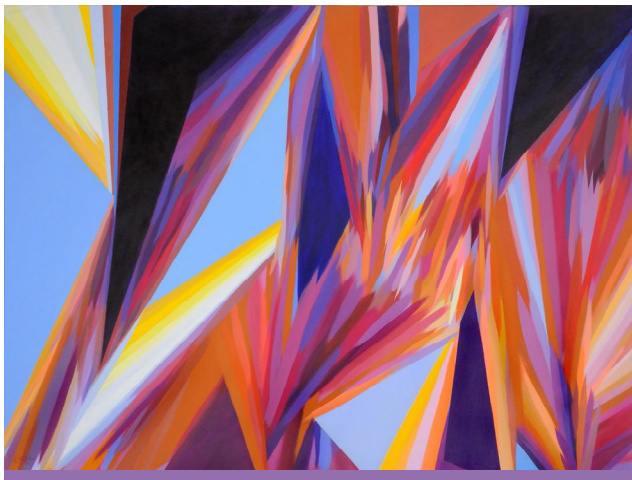
ArtintheCity: This exhibition contains paintings made in 2010, and six newer works made in 2011. The earlier paintings are much more 'constant', containing homogeneous elements and the titles often refer to aspects of nature as in 'Thunder Measuring Space'. Although the works are completely abstract, did you take experiences of nature as your point of reference for them?

Samia Halaby: To me abstraction is about nature and reality. We have no visual reference other than the mental storehouse of images that we have seen throughout our life. I believe all abstraction is about reality. Your observation that the earlier works are much more 'constant' is accurate. I noticed this to be true of my own abstractions as well as abstract painting in general.

It became my ambition in 2011 to break that tradition and take abstraction one step forward

combining things that create pliable space with things that are made of hard surfaces. For example trees and pedestrians in motion create a pliable soft space, one that is in motion and is made up of multiples of small parts; while buildings in a city, or mountains and rocks, are harder spaces with few or no movable parts. The combination of the two is always available. I take note always of the beauty of trees in the city at night especially when illuminated by artificial light. I see them combining with the glitter of lights. I see the many-colored clothing of people moving in and out of city spaces and I see the tall cliff like buildings as the back-drop to all of it.

My ambition was to have all this present in an abstract painting at once. I know that this subject matter was the love of the Italian Futurists who contributed wonderful notions of simultaneity, yet they never managed to combine all this in a truly abstract painting. When abstraction began its baby steps with the paintings of Kazimir Malevich, the subject was much simpler than the ambitions of the Futurists.



AITC: The newer paintings mark a significant shift in your approach, combining geometric elements with more organic shapes. You have spoken 'a fear of failure' when making this work, and breaking a lot of your own rules. Can you elaborate on how you broke some of your own rules?

SH: My thoughts about abstraction always referred to how it is a pictorial art of 4 dimensions (horizontal, vertical, depth, and time) whereas earlier pictures were of 3 dimensions such as Renaissance pictures. Perspective in them is the ultimate expression of these 3 dimensions. Abstraction has no perspective because perspective is a seeing of space from one point of view at one time; while abstraction incorporates time. Thus using perspective is a contradiction in abstraction. It destroys it.

For this reason I always rejected the use of truncated shapes preferring frontal rectangles and squares. I did not want to refer to 3 dimensional space. Using truncated shapes such as parallelograms whose corners are not 45 degree angles is not perspective but it does imply it. I am thus breaking my own rules by using these shapes even though I am not using the principles of perspective such as diminishing size, or cubic volumes, or shading.

Furthermore, the combination of the organic painterly elements with the hard geometry was a break with typical abstraction where normally either the one or the other were used exclusively. Such a break involved my going it alone without having had any precedents to rely on. I believe that painting is a social event and that we as painters are not making a personal individual, expression about our own subjectivity. Thus it is important to know history and to build on it. This time, in these new paintings of 2011, I felt that I was taking an unfamiliar step in a new direction and though it is a miniscule step, we never know if the future will vote with us or

against us.

AITC: Was this rule breaking a liberating process for you, and once the paintings were complete, was there still a sense of fear at how they would be received, or did you feel like they were successful? And what was it that pushed you to challenge yourself like this?

SH: This rule breaking was not a liberating process. It was hard work and challenging. But then when you repeat yourself too much, it becomes boring. To bore myself in painting would be like giving up something precious – like giving up the creative process to which I feel addicted. I never have fear about how my paintings will be received; my fear is about failing to find something new in the painting. I do feel that in these paintings of 2011 I have opened a new path of exploration.



AITC: Viewing your new paintings, I feel that balance is important to them – a balance between a flurry of brush marks and more controlled geometric shapes, and between intuition and intellect. How do you strike this balance, and was it something which at times was lost, to then be regained?

SH: Your question is interesting and insightful. Yes, balance is important as you say it “a balance between a flurry of brush marks and more controlled geometric shapes, and between intuition and intellect.” And, yes, I did lose this balance at times. Often working tightly on the hard edges would lead me to freeze, to fear applying the organic brush marks freely over the pristine flat shapes; and conversely, when getting into an automatic, intuitive mode of applying brush marks freely, I would find myself tending to overdo it, to overwrite the hard geometry to the point of eliminating it.

AITC: All the paintings here are of a large scale. Can you discuss the way scale affects the way you approach painting, do you work in a very different way when making smaller paintings, and how does this affect the levels of planning done prior to starting a work?

SH: When I was a young painter, I used to plan paintings carefully. Now I work with only a general intention. The absolute size of the canvas is important. The bigger the painting the harder it is to do. When the painting is smaller than the comfortable reach of my arm, I overcome it with ease. When it is large, then I have to force my will onto it. Sometimes it

resembles an argument or a battle with another thinking entity. Asserting my aesthetic will over a large painting is an important challenge. There is good reason why murals establish the value of a painter. I am, however, most comfortable working on something that is not taller than I am. I would love to do a long long painting that would continue endlessly down a wall. A one hundred meter painting that is maybe one meter high hanging at the level of my arms would be perfect fun. I and the viewer would then take a walk together enjoying visual ideas appropriate to our normal human motion -- walking.

AITC: You have long been a political activist. Do you feel that your work has a political side to it, given that abstract art like Futurism and Constructivism did have strong political roots? Or is this a side of you that you keep separate to making art?

SH: My decision to be an abstract painter is a political one. To me the past one and a half centuries present a wave motion between revolutionary materialist painting and idealist painting. My admiration is with the materialists and the revolutionaries. I think Impressionism was the first revolutionary step towards abstraction; Cubism and Futurism were the second steps; Constructivism was the third step; and Abstract Expressionism was one of the many more recent ones. I do not admire Art Nouveau nor Surrealist nor Pop nor Post Modernist painting. I see them as confirming conservative thinking. Abstraction contributes to human culture. It contributes visual principles capable of general content applicable to many specifics. This is a valuable new addition to visual language.