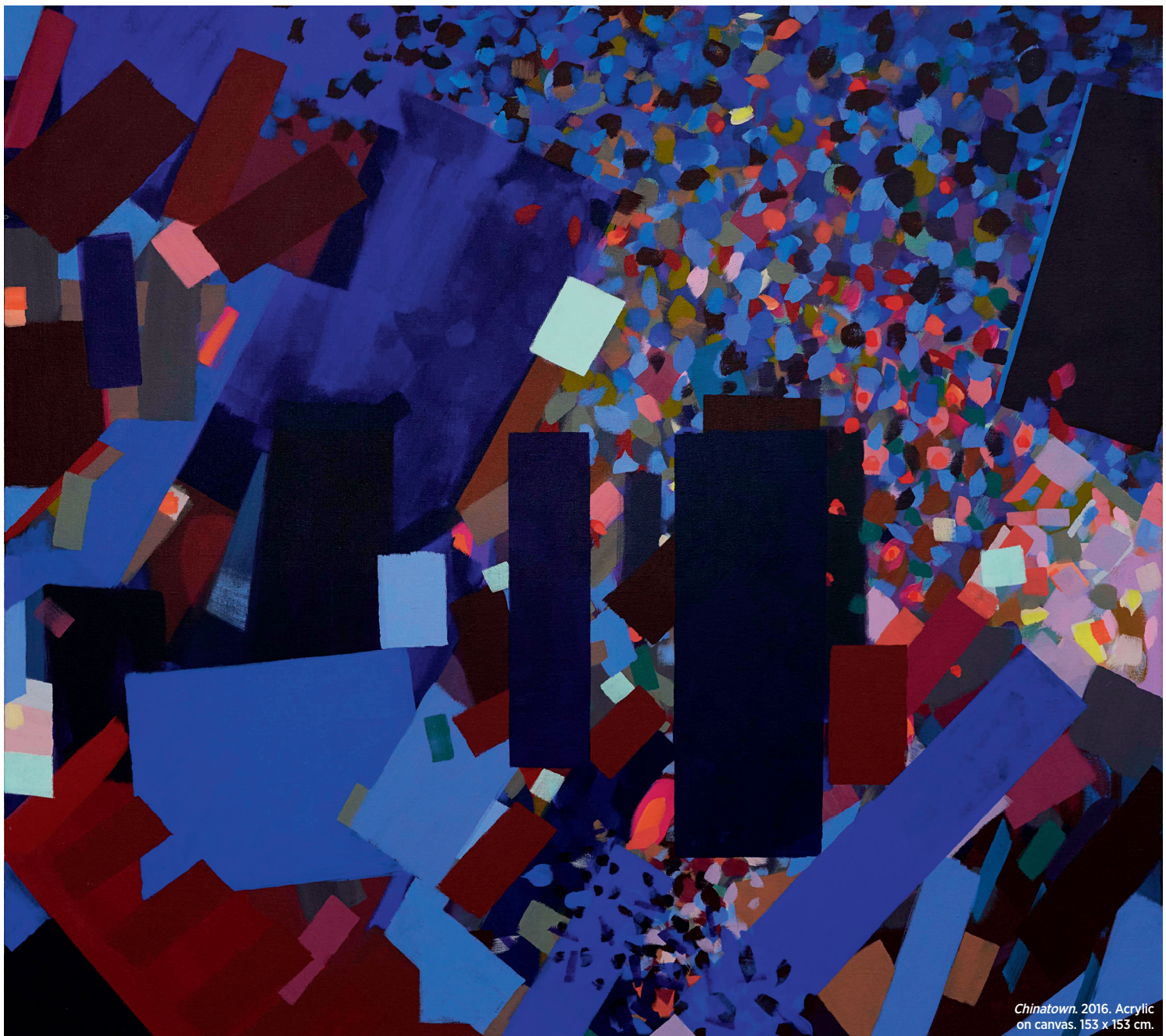


ILLUMINATED SPACE

*A visit to Samia Halaby's studio in New York reveals the artist's intimate works that currently make up Halaby's current exhibition at Ayyam Gallery in Dubai, writes **Maymanah Farhat***



Chinatown. 2016. Acrylic on canvas. 153 x 153 cm.

In the weeks leading up to her 80th birthday in December, abstract painter Samia Halaby was busy preparing for back-to-back solo exhibitions while also working towards the release of two new publications. At this late stage in her celebrated career, Halaby shows no signs of slowing down—if anything she seems to have increased her creative output.

A few years ago, while the Jerusalem-born artist and scholar was preparing her second monograph, she began reorganising her lower Manhattan home where she has lived and worked since the mid-1970s. In the span of a few months, she eliminated all nonessential furniture, mainly antique tables and chairs that once greeted guests but took up valuable space. As she entered one of the most prolific periods of her career, Halaby's Tribeca loft became 90 percent atelier. At the back, where she usually paints, three sizeable walls host a rotating display of works in progress. A spacious tabletop attached to archival cabinets is used for book layouts and drawings. An adjacent part of the apartment divided between the kitchen and dining area is frequently taken over by mural-sized works and freshly stretched canvases awaiting compositions. Halaby often evaluates her newest large-scale paintings while sipping Turkish coffee at a round kitchen table that was a gift from her late father.

Scattered throughout the artist's rectangular, second floor apartment are hanging works such as long, sea-weed-like cutout objects that beg to be touched. Her artistic mark is everywhere. On the kitchen floor is a floating Suprematist composition painted in red and grey. Covering her bed is a colourful geometric quilt that she sewed using an old Native American technique. A blue and green abstract picture that Halaby painted while teaching at the Yale School of Art hangs nearby. Much of her art has been produced in this space, although more than two decades of teaching at American universities influenced how she works, and frequent stays in the Arab world offered her endless imagery to draw from.

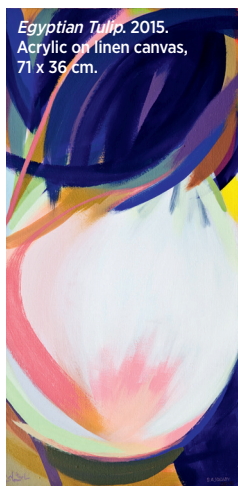
In early 2015, Halaby began a series that takes the ambience of her New York apartment and the daily activity of her neighbourhood as reference points for how light is depicted in abstraction. At various times of day, Halaby sits at a desk next to large exposed windows that face a narrow city block lined with early twentieth-century structures. Through the iron bars of a fire escape, she sees a triangular intersection near the border of Tribeca and Chinatown that is surrounded by a hodge-podge of low and high-rise buildings and a few trees. This view has served as an inspiration for Halaby in the past while the sights



Brick City at Night. 2015. Acrylic on canvas. 92 x 92 cm.

and sounds of Canal Street, the main artery of Chinatown, have figured into a number of her abstract compositions. When she goes out, her eyes immediately scan the intersection, registering interactions of shape and colour, as buildings, stoplights, and a steady stream of cars and pedestrians contrast in different forms of light.

One of Halaby's new publications, *Growing Shapes*, includes a vivid description of how she experiences abstraction in real time as she walks through her neighbourhood. The book is an expanded second edition of a collection of essays and commentary that she produced in the 1990s, and features reproductions of her works from later periods in addition to instructional drawings. *Growing Shapes* is reminiscent of Josef Albers' *Interaction of Color* (1963) in that it reveals how scientific concepts are essential to abstraction. "General principles of life and movement are visible to our observation," Halaby writes. "We see the same principles acting on different things in different situations, locations, and times." This is demonstrated in



Egyptian Tulip. 2015. Acrylic on linen canvas. 71 x 36 cm.



Light and Space. 2015. Acrylic on linen canvas. 180 x 180 cm.

recent paintings like *Light and Space* (2015) and *View from a Fire Escape* (2016). Both works were created with an empirical approach to abstraction, or what Halaby refers to as "strategies of looking [that] can be manipulated and used consciously."

Light and Space emphasises how we tend to focus on certain aspects of an environment without giving it much thought, largely due to "habit and self-preservation." As Halaby observes, "We have formulas for avoiding stationary and moving objects, and most of what we look at is approximate to our own horizontal level." Circular brush marks in the centre of the painting form a dense area of colour with evenly distributed hues that appear to float in mid-air. "In this painting, I try to

imitate a bit of the notion of focus, and things focused upon," she explains. The background is composed of larger, softer areas of colour that reinforce this illusion of depth. The sensation of encountering a blossoming tree on a busy thoroughfare with all its coalescing elements comes to mind.

In *View from a Fire Escape* (2015), Halaby renders a nocturnal scene as a series of overlapping geometric shapes. A thin orange rectangle that appears as the closest object to the viewer represents a dim interior light while a middle ground composed of deep purple and blue quadrilaterals alludes to the darkness outside. Smaller pink, yellow, and orange squares stand in for the glow of storefronts in the distance. Other works of the series, such as *Brick City at Night* (2015) similarly explore the properties of light and how tonal variations can be used to illustrate degrees of illumination. Halaby looked to the paintings of Mark Rothko and Ad Reinhardt when experimenting with colour luminosity based on relative saturation.

Additional paintings detail the soft and hard edges of urban settings, perhaps most effectively in *Chinatown* (2016). Earlier examples like *Egyptian Tulip* (2015) reflect the artist's initial interest in biomorphic forms, which she quickly set aside in order to revisit "the space made by light" that surrounds her. ■

A selection of the more than two-dozen works that Halaby created over the last two years are featured in *Illuminated Space* on view at Ayyam Gallery, 11 Alserkal Avenue until 31 May. ayyamgallery.com