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VISUAL ART

Samia Halaby

Born in Jerusalem in 1936, Samia Halaby is a leading abstract painter and an influential scholar of Palestinian art. Recognized as a pioneer of contemporary abstraction in the Arab world, although based in the United States since 1951, she has exhibited throughout the region and abroad. Halaby is widely collected by international institutions, including the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York, Abu Dhabi), the National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), the Art Institute of Chicago, L'Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris), the British Museum (London), and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (Al Rayyan, Qatar). Halaby was the first full-time female associate professor at the Yale School of Art.

There has recently been a renewed interest in her oeuvre, and historians of new media are currently re-evaluating Halaby's experiments with computer-based painting in the 1980s, which she created programs for and performed live at Lincoln Center and at the Brooklyn Museum, in New York, and categorized as kinetic art.

Halaby's writings on art have appeared in *Leonardo*, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, and *Jerusalem Quarterly*, and most recently in the edited volume *Jerusalem Interrupted: Modernity and Colonial Transformation, 1917–Present* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2015). Halaby's independently published survey, *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Paintings and Sculpture in the Second Half of the 20th Century* (2002), is considered a seminal text of Palestinian art history. In 2014, Booth-Clibborn Editions published the artist's second monograph, *Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Innovation*.

Selected solo shows include Ayyam Gallery, London (2015, 2013); Ayyam Gallery, Dubai (2011); and Ayyam Gallery, Beirut (2010). She has participated in recent group shows at the National Academy Museum, New York (2015), Broadway 1602 Gallery, New York (2014), and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (2014). Halaby's first retrospective was held at Ayyam Gallery, Dubai (Al Quoz) in 2014, and traveled to the Beirut Exhibition Center in 2015.



"Cliffs," 2014. Acrylic on linen canvas, 180 cm x 180 cm.

All images reproduced here courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.



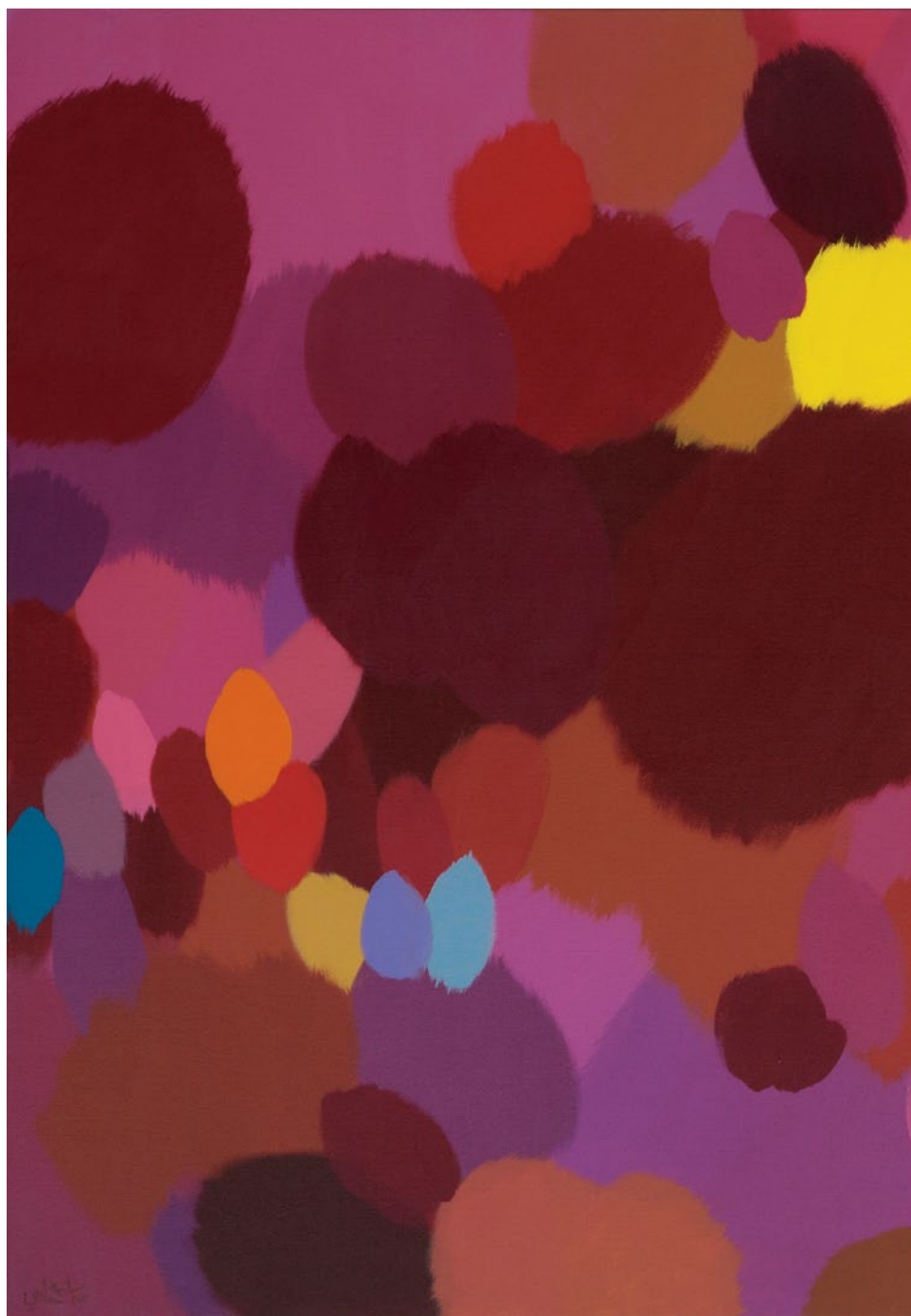


"Women," 2014. Acrylic on linen canvas, 122 cm x 167.5 cm.

Following page: "Turning Landing," 2014. Acrylic on linen canvas, 153 cm x 203 cm.

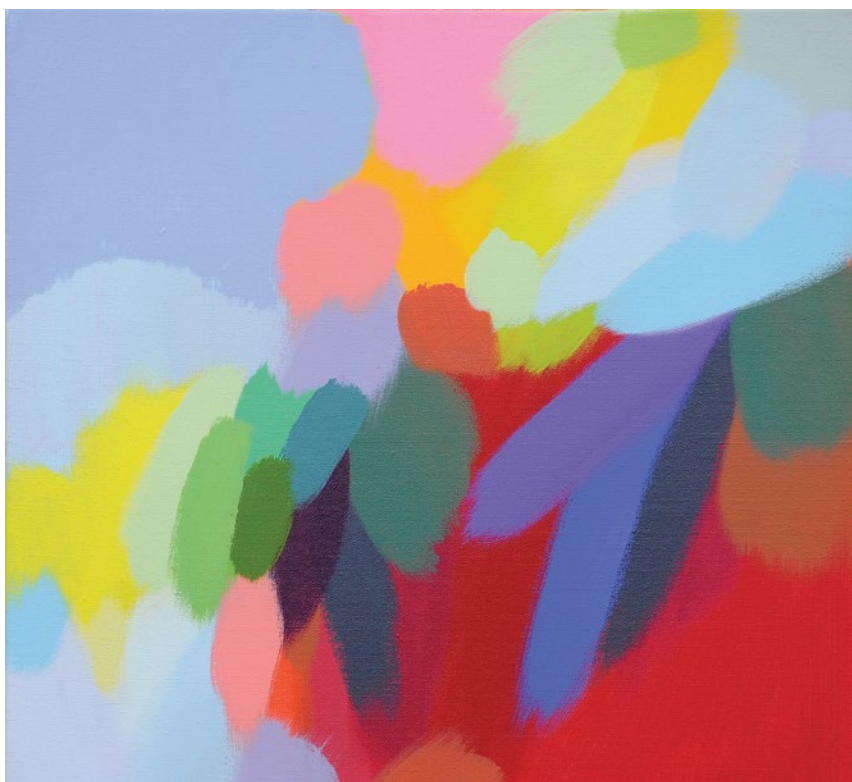








"Takheel I," 2013. Acrylic on linen canvas, 122 cm x 167.5 cm.



ARTIST STATEMENT

Abstract Pictures

We move in spaces with gravity and light, measuring our surroundings by walking and seeing, having been ourselves molded like clay by this same space. Light and color fill our visual field, while words fill our thoughts and interpret our experiences. This is how we evolved and how we are now in this twenty-first century. All the time, everywhere, our heads are full of words. We select words to name what is happening, to describe what has happened, and to talk about the future.

We learn words early, and they cost only the effort of saying them. Cheap, immediately available, easy to learn, they are excellent items of exchange. They are present in all parts of our thinking, our actions, our production, and all disciplines of human thought. But much of what we experience cannot be described and shared with only words. The language of scientific symbols and graphing as well as the language of pictures accompany our human descriptions. Often they all work together as the most effective communication.

Pictures lack the specificity of words and scientific symbols yet have the power to describe space and relative color that words cannot. Pictures most often contain parts that can be named with words. A realistic image, even a photograph full of easily named objects, will possess attributes that the proverbial “one thousand words” cannot describe. But in comparison to words, pictures are expensive, heavy, and difficult to exchange. Recent technologies have mitigated the stodginess of pictures through print and digital media. We can now instantly share photographs through the web, even while photography is only a small part of the range of pictures mankind produces.

We are hard put to experience our surrounding free of words. But in spite of this, records of our experiences have historically begun with pictures, not words. Words, first as pictographs, then as syllables, and eventually as letters, grew in the fertile soil of pictures, as did scientific data and graphing. Pictures are nearer to actual experience than are words, even while our visual experiences are easily preempted by words. Children draw before they spell.

Our visual experiences provide information that we store in memory. The richness of this storehouse cannot be expressed in words any more than can the general aesthetic feeling of a beautiful

Facing page

Top: “Water Lilies,” 2013. Acrylic on linen canvas, 145 cm x 145 cm.

Bottom: “Convergence,” 2013. Acrylic on linen canvas, 45 cm x 45 cm.

sunset or the sensation of being hungry or in love. For example, as we experience trees, thousands of them, at different times and places, at varying distances and levels of energy and aging, we store a universe of visual information about trees that is not easily expressible in words or graphs or photography or film. It is a storehouse based on a length of time, unlike a particular view at a particular time captured in a photograph or a painting.

When we see an abstract visual image that taps into this storehouse, we feel a connection developing, a whisper of future communication, and relief that this storehouse in our minds has taken concrete form. Because, as an abstract painter, I search for areas of my knowledge where words do not exist, sometimes attributes, the source of which I am not conscious, appear in a painting. Others may recognize visual material in my paintings that they themselves have experienced and can see with greater clarity, and they can show them to me persuasively. Once I was working on a painting all in reds with a few bits of shocking yellow and green. A friend walked in and was deeply moved, saying that it was Palestinian embroidery. I had unconsciously used the method Palestinian village embroiderers use to accent the mostly red embroidery called takheel, thus the title of the painting Takheel I. But the final test of the pudding is in the eating, and if no one recognizes my abstract paintings, then my paintings have failed. This recognition does not have to be in words. It is enough that people know what they like.

Visual abstraction is present in daily life, but most people seem unaware of it. Two gardeners may consider the attributes of similar rose bushes, exchanging what is essentially an aesthetic discourse. I once heard two Arab women dialogue about the attributes of color, shape, rhythm, and material of woven geometric rugs and wall hangings, selecting what is superior and what is inferior, all the while unconscious that they were evaluating what is essentially visual abstraction. All four individuals would proclaim they know nothing about abstract painting. Yet they discourse on the aesthetics of visual abstraction and almost always agree as to what is most beautiful.

Abstraction grew in pictures in earliest times, but pictures that are strictly abstract developed first in medieval geometric abstraction in Arabic art, and later under the influence of the Soviet revolution in the twentieth century. In both cases, time as a dimension in pictures was central. I consider them both my aesthetic ancestors and hope to build on their accomplishments.

The first critics to describe twentieth-century abstraction, not understanding its essence nor the essence of the revolution that gave it birth, called abstraction in paintings purely a product of the brain, cerebral, and not related to nature or reality. Separating abstraction from reality thus made it easy to define as spiritual

and disconnected from reality. Arabic abstraction, as expressed, for example, in the geometry of the Dome of The Rock or the Great Mosque of Damascus, is so foreign to aestheticians and art historians that its profound relationship to nature is completely disregarded and it is described as decorative.

In essence, academic discourse to date on abstraction calls it either cerebral or decorative, completely missing the most important and beautiful of its attributes, its ability to imitate nature's general principles rather than nature's appearance. And it does so by externalizing our own visual experiences of the world over the passage of time. This understanding and analysis allows me to say that what I paint is an abstraction that describes the world, one that reflects it and makes an illusion of it in a way that is not lens-based and therefore not photographic, one that incorporates time as one of its formal dimensions.

—Samia Halaby



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