

Exhibition: Samia Halaby

*New Paintings*

Location: Ayyam Gallery London

Preview: 9 October 2013, 6-8pm

Dates: 9 October – 30 November 2013



Ayyam Gallery London presents an exhibition of paintings by pioneering Palestinian artist Samia Halaby, who is widely credited with inspiring the new school of abstraction in contemporary Arab art. Parallel to her artistic career, Halaby is an active political campaigner for Palestine, as well as a scholar who has been instrumental to the documentation of Palestinian art, publishing her landmark text *Liberation Art of Palestine: Palestinian Painting and Sculpture in the Second Half of the 20th Century* in 2002.

Over the past fifty years, Halaby has built upon historical abstraction in painting, such as that of the Russian Constructivists, merging this with traditional Arabic arts and Islamic architecture. Her rich and varied oeuvre is characterised by a compelling energy and an unceasing commitment to experimentation; in the mid 1980s, Halaby taught herself computer programming in order to create a series of digital kinetic paintings with sound later using her programmes to perform live with percussionists. At the age of 77, she continues to produce work that challenges conventional approaches to painting and this latest exhibition at Ayyam Gallery London displays new abstraction emblematic of her innovative approach.

The artist cites the inspiration of her paintings as the rich visual material which surrounds her in everyday life; she explains, *"When I see something beautiful, I always stop and memorise it...I watch things change relative to each other in shape, size, and colour and these memories become the subject of my paintings."* New work *Clouds and Trees* (2013) is rooted in her memories of the distinctive clouds and landscape of Indiana, which she admired as a student at Indiana University in the early 1960s. The light-filled abstraction, with its subtle gradation of colour, captures the vibrancy of green trees growing upwards to a sky scattered with cumulus clouds.

Though stemming from her own experience of the visual world, Halaby believes the nature of abstraction allows viewers to recognise their own memories and experiences within her work. She states, *"Abstraction is not about the artist or his or her individualism, but rather about the far more difficult and thus more satisfying ambition to invent a visual language capable of containing exchangeable knowledge. Of course, the uniqueness of painting is that this shared knowledge is a*

*visual one.*” Within the show, *Takheel 1* and *Takheel 2* (both works 2013) were titled after a friend highlighted the fact that she had unconsciously used the colours and formal qualities of embroidery made in the mountain villages of Palestine, a style which is referred to as ‘Takheel’.

Informing her approach is a strong awareness of painting’s history, with Halaby naming both the Renaissance and Impressionist periods as epochs which have influenced her production. The only work in the exhibition which has been shown previously, *Homage to Leonardo* (2012), draws upon Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* (1495–1498), a work which captivated the artist when she first encountered it in 1964. Halaby reimagines the space of da Vinci’s famous work in a kaleidoscope of vivid colour, using bold brush marks to indicate regions of movement and light. Four vertical blue lines cross the length of the picture plane, emulating the diagonal hatching employed by da Vinci in original sketches, whilst suggesting a new notion of infinite space.

## Notes to Editors

### About the Artist

Born in Jerusalem in 1936, Samia Halaby lives and works in New York. She has taught widely at institutions including in the USA at the Cooper Union, the Yale School of Art, Indiana University, University of Michigan, Kansas City Art Institute, University of Hawaii; and short courses at Birzeit University, Palestine and Darat al-Funun in Amman, Jordan. Halaby’s work is housed in numerous international museum collections including in the USA at The Art Institute of Chicago, Detroit Institute of Art, Cincinnati Art Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, The Guggenheim Museum in New York, Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii, Mead Art Museum in Amherst, The National Gallery of Art in Washington, The National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, Nelson Rockhill Gallery of Art in Kansas City, Tamarind Institute in Albuquerque and Yale University Gallery in New Haven, and internationally in The British Museum, Institut du Monde Arabe, France, Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, UAE and in the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts. She is the author of *Liberation Art of Palestine* (2002). In 1986, she created a computer program for kinetic paintings, which resulted in several audio-visual presentations including a tour of Syria, Palestine and Jordan and a performance accompanied by live musicians at New York’s Lincoln Center in 1998.

Recent selected solo shows include Ayyam Gallery London (2013), Ayyam Gallery DIFC, Dubai (2011), Ayyam Gallery Beirut (2010) and Ayyam Gallery Damascus (2008), Tompkins County Public Library, Ithaca, New York, USA (2006), Artim Gallery, Strasbourg, France (2001), Skoto Gallery, New York, USA (2000) and Sakakini Art Center, Ramallah, Palestine (2000). Recent selected group shows

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include The Area Gallery, Paris, France (2009), WAH Center, Brooklyn, USA (2009), Institut Du Monde Arabe, Paris, France (2009), Clinton Foundation, Little Rock, USA (2008), Metropolitan Museum of Tokyo, Japan (2004), The Station Museum, Houston, USA (2003) and Musee du Chateau Dufresne, Montreal, Canada (2001).

## **About Ayyam Gallery**

Founded by collectors and cousins Khaled and Hisham Samawi in Damascus in 2006, Ayyam Gallery sought to nurture Syria's burgeoning and dynamic contemporary art scene through landmark non-profit initiatives such as the Shabab Ayyam Project, an incubator for emerging artists. Expansion into Beirut and Dubai enabled Ayyam Gallery to broaden its scope from the promotion of work by Syrian artists to those from the wider Middle East region. In doing so, Ayyam Gallery has established itself as one of the foremost exponents of Middle Eastern contemporary art to the international community.

Today, Ayyam Gallery is recognised as a leading cultural voice in the region, representing a roster of Arab and Iranian artists with an international profile and museum presence, such as Abdunnasser Gharem, Khaled Jarrar, Nadim Karam, Safwan Dahoul, Samia Halaby, Sadik Alfraji, Afshin Pirhashemi and Khaled Takreti. A number of non-commercial exhibitions, as well as the launch of initiatives like The Young Collectors Auction, have further succeeded in showcasing the work of Middle Eastern artists with the aim of educating a wider audience about the art of this significant region. Ayyam Gallery Damascus currently functions as a studio and creative haven for artists who remain in the war-torn city. In early 2013, Ayyam Gallery launched new spaces in London and Jeddah.

## **Exhibition Facts**

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Location: 143 New Bond Street, 1st Floor, W1S 2TP

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