

VOGUE

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SEPTEMBER

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY
karl lagerfeld



Break

After nearly 60 years of identifying the essentials of abstraction, the great contemporary Palestinian artist Samia Halaby's latest work is now guided by intuition

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AWAY

Samia Halaby greets me from the first landing of warped stairs that lead to artists' lofts in an old Tribeca building. The stairs are worn from years of use, like most structures in this part of New York, where 19th century low-rise buildings and cobblestone side streets provide a glimpse of the city's past. Halaby has lived here since the 1970s, long before celebrities flocked to the lower Manhattan neighborhood. I look up at the abstract painter, smile, and say hello as I begin to climb the stairs, performing a sort of ritual we've practiced for years.

It's an unusually cold spring day. Halaby wears black slacks and a knitted navy blue sweater. The textured pullover is one of many the octogenarian has made in her spare time, and includes a hint of abstraction with red epaulets that she crocheted and added to the shoulders. The bright fabrics accentuate her short silver hair.

I've come to speak to the artist about the notion of late work, an idea I've had since writing an essay for her solo exhibition at the Beirut Exhibition Center in February. As a pioneering abstract painter in the Arab world, Halaby's

work has been the subject of several important exhibitions in recent years, including a 2015 retrospective at the Beirut Art Center. Collected by international museums since the 1970s, she is celebrated for a type of abstraction that draws from a range of sources, including Islamic art and the experiments of early 20th century art movements like the Russian avant-garde.

Displaced from her native Palestine in 1948 when she was 12, Halaby immigrated to the United States in the early 1950s, and was educated in the American Midwest at a time when abstract expressionism was popular but female abstract painters were marginalized. A renewed interest in her work is currently underway in the Middle East, as historians document the contributions of regional artists to international abstraction, and in New York, where curators are beginning to assert how women artists were often ahead of the curve.

Today, Halaby has a significant following, and regularly travels to the Arab world for events like Art Dubai. When she returns to New York she retreats into the quiet of her studio, far from the collectors and journalists who vie for her attention or the art students who patiently wait to be photographed with her. "I come here and no one is

OPPOSITE THE ARTIST IN FRONT OF HER WORK "ANGELS AND BUTTERFLIES" (2010). SHE WEARS A TUNIC BY REEM AGRA, PUMPS BY BRUNATE, AND A RING AND BRACELET BY IRADJ MOINI



SAMIA HALABY IN FRONT OF HER WORK "AN ARABESQUE OF TREES" (2003). SHE WEARS A TUNIC AND NECKLACE OF HER OWN DESIGN, AND SHOES BY THIERRY RABOTIN
TOP RIGHT "RIVER AND CLIFF" (2016) **OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT** "AIR" (2016); "CITY BY THE SEA" (2014)

At this stage in her career, the artist moves effortlessly between painting styles, sometimes producing different series simultaneously. In March, she debuted three related bodies of work at Ayyam Gallery in Dubai. "Illuminated Space" featured paintings that explore how color can be used to create a sense of space while also describing different ambiances of light. When first preparing for the exhibition in 2014, Halaby explored abstract forms inspired by the shapes of plant life, then furthered this experiment with works that describe how light radiates in particular settings. Alluding to the various scenes she experiences in lower Manhattan every day, buildings appear as large geometric shapes, as though viewed from above, while brush marks

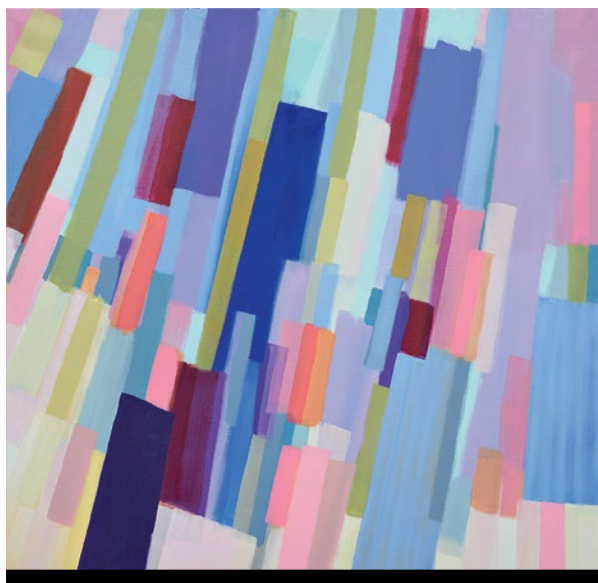
paying attention, which is good, then I can recede into my comfortable do-nothing-days and be lazy at night and paint and think on my own," she told me over the phone a few days earlier, when I asked if she had recovered from a month-long trip abroad.

As I step inside Halaby's cavernous but sparsely furnished loft, an irregularly shaped painting attached to the skeletal frame of a rectangular stretcher catches my eye. "I thought of placing it on the floor when I first took it out," she explains, "but then decided to mount it." I sense that the painting's current display won't be its last and imagine it as a floating mass in the center of the room. The circular brush strokes of the acrylic on paper and canvas work recall the colorist dots of post-Impressionist painter George Seurat. Broad meandering lines cascade over these vibrant foliage-like sections, twisting and turning like the gestures of modern dancers.

"I want to return to that way of painting," Halaby tells me as we look at "An Arabesque of Trees" while having tea at her kitchen table. "I'm in the mood to do softer, brushier things, which allow for new discoveries since the painting develops freely."

map the symphonic chaos of people and cars. "I love the dissonant mix of neon lights and trees illuminated by artificial light," she says when I ask how New York factors into her work. "Often, when I used to walk on the now demolished old section of the West Side Highway, I would see things that brought the abstract expressionists to mind. I think the same textures of the city influence me. I love the colors of my neighborhood, especially in the evening. I love the transition from evening to night. I am deeply influenced by the change that takes place when city lights begin to retouch the colors of sunset hues."

Halaby's recent compositions are reminiscent of her "Autumn Leaves and City Blocks" series (1982-83). The same principles of abstraction guide "Illuminated Space," as she focuses on the interactions of shapes and the implied movement of angled forms. Looking at examples from both periods, however, reveals a significant difference. Early compositions inspired by what she refers to as "man's simple geometry" show how urban environments unfold as densely layered, interlocking shapes, indicating that growth patterns also occur outside of nature. "City by the



Sea” (2014), for example, references similar processes yet the frenetic energy that is visible in her earlier paintings has been replaced by the assuredness of late work. After nearly 60 years of working through various experiments, identifying the essentials of abstraction, Halaby is now guided by intuition. She agrees when I mention this, adding that although her recent compositions are more complicated, they are not as tightly planned.

We migrate to the back of her loft when Halaby suggests we look at a series of mid-1980s works. In her studio, we sit on metal stools in front of a large wooden tabletop. As I admire the paint-splattered floor, she seems to read my mind and says, “Sometimes I walk and think, ‘How many times have I cleaned this floor, and scrubbed this studio, or fixed it all by hand?’” Locating a large portfolio on a nearby shelf, she shows me two futurist explosions of color. In both works, intersecting lines and layered shapes seem to move with the force of a riptide. I am reminded of the deliberate brush marks that map the flow of water or a changing sky in Impressionist paintings, and invoke the father of the movement, Claude Monet, as we return to discussing late work.

“Intuition in *late work* happens *after* you have FREED YOURSELF from your education and knowledge”

“To me, late Monet is full of information,” Halaby remarks with admiration. “It’s dense. It’s clearly the work of someone who has lived a long time, and has been thinking.”

For the next hour we study the few examples of Halaby’s new series that remain in her studio. I suggest that there are parallels between these paintings and Monet’s late work but can’t seem to properly describe the similarities. “When I was young I was muscular in my painting, and I think he was too,” she says, rescuing the idea. “In his late work, Monet paints the essence of things – I am not talking about spiritual essence, I’m talking about how he sees through all the details of his surroundings and looks at the general realities in his field of vision, and then he accents those generalities. There are no details, I think the details are filled by the viewer.”

Monet’s late period occurred during the early 1900s, which was within the last two decades of his life in northern France, where he oversaw an elaborate garden that was a source of endless inspiration. Although Monet’s deteriorating eyesight changed his approach to painting, his late work is considered masterful. Halaby’s

explanation of late Monet could easily be applied to her recent paintings. There is a sense of freedom reflected in both, combined with a deep understanding of abstraction derived from years and years of observation.

“In late work we give up a level of conscious control in favor of intellectual knowledge,” she explains. “It isn’t subjectivity that one relies on but intuition, it’s the intuitive knowledge that we’ve accumulated over time.” The departed Palestinian cultural critic Edward Said similarly described late style as an indication of “a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor.”

As our conversation concludes, I ask Halaby if she identifies with the idea of breaking away. “The fact is that whatever we see, we’ve been educated to see that way,” she replies. “Maybe intuition in late work happens after you have freed yourself from your education and knowledge. Or maybe, because you’ve processed your knowledge, you see what is around you with fresh eyes.” □

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