



BELOW:
PAINTER SAMIA HALABY.
LEFT: COLOR



living large

BY MAHA MAJZOUB

EMPRESS OF ABSTRACTION **SAMIA HALABY** REVEALS MAMMOTH, VIVID PAINTINGS IN CULMINATION OF AN ILLUSTRIOUS 50-YEAR CAREER

Samia Halaby is the kind of artist I always dread to write about, or even work up the nerve to say hello to without coming off as a ditsy imbecile and perhaps be politely asked to leave the premises. One can never be prepared enough to talk to the likes of Samia Halaby. I don't know why I continue down that road of self-inflicted suffering by accepting the daunting task of interviewing the veteran artists.

I enter Ayyam Gallery in Beirut Central District where Halaby was displaying her latest body of work. I gaze at the colossal, bold canvases. Twelve of them lined the six walls of the contemporary art space. They dominate the minimalist embellished venue. I come a bit closer to the artworks. Most of the acrylic paintings were executed in 2010, all bubbling over with color, and as expected Halaby's intense abstract brushstrokes are imposing. The effortlessness with which she looks at natural shapes such as trees and leaves or her life-size interpretation of thunder brush aside any initial hesitation I had about meeting her.

When I pull up a chair next to Halaby, I quickly berate myself for assuming she would be aloof just because **she was the first fulltime female associate professor at the Yale School of Art** or is one of the most established Arab artists and scholars of her time and has been painting for 50 or so years. Halaby might be a prima donna, but there is not a hint of a diva in her. She is one

of the few and far between artists who heartily appreciates you bringing along a sample copy of the publication you are interviewing them for; one of those who ask about your background and make the meeting feel like a friendly conversation instead of a structured Q&A interview.

With a voice a little less shaky than I expected, I begin by asking her how this exhibition stands apart from former

endeavors in the course of her coveted long career. It is not different, says Halaby, who has worked with oil most of her life, as well as hot wax, print, and computer. To her, the paintings present new experiments while traversing several stages of her oeuvre. *"It's more of what I've done before. You take a path and you travel a direction and you don't know where it will take you. Ideas become thicker and more complex*



THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:
DAMAS,
SKY (DETAIL)

'LARGE PAINTINGS ARE TRULY THE TEST OF THE ARTIST.'

with more dimension and depth along the way, and I feel as though it is not only a step forward but also an expression of an entire career. So I definitely consider them my mature expression," she points out. The one aspect in which her latest series, which she calls "Dances in the Canal", is certainly different is that many of the canvases are 168 X 229 centimeters. *"I know. They are very large,"* Halaby concurs with a chuckle. *"Large paintings are truly a test of the artist,"* she explains. *"We as human beings have a finite size. We're bigger than a magazine and we feel we*

command it," the Palestinian artist says, gesticulating at the recent issue of RAGMAG on the coffee table where we were seated. *"But when we're doing a painting, we're doing it for a wall and it commands us in its size. So it's much more difficult and very demanding. I've done big paintings before but this has been consistently a year of large paintings."* That Halaby is too modest for someone of her caliber is an opinion you will formulate briefly after sitting down with her. The seasoned artist's work is housed in several museum collections worldwide, such as the British Museum,

the Guggenheim Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago. She has curated several exhibitions across the world including the U.S., where she has been based since migrating from Lebanon in 1951.

Far but not away

Halaby has been exhibiting the world over since 1970. Not only has she been featured in many avant-garde shows of Arab art, she has also been instrumental in generating interest in art from this part of the world. **"Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World"** at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. in 1994 is one shining example. In 2003, she guided a group of curators from the ArtCar Museum in Houston Texas throughout Palestine. That is how the exhibition **"Made in Palestine"**, one of the highlights of her career, came to fruition in Houston Texas at the Station Museum. Halaby has been a political and intellectual activist long before that. Aware of the Palestinian revolutionary movement taking place in Lebanon during the 1980's, she was in touch with artists in Beirut whose work was ►



'TO BE POLITICAL IS THE RIGHT AND RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERYBODY.'

developing into a distinguished school of **"Palestinian Liberation art"**. She would also start visiting her homeland beginning 1995 and launch projects with local artists, one of which was a series of drawings of the iconic Palestinian olive trees *"because they have been treated like Palestinians themselves"*, she tells me. She has also tackled the 1956 massacre at Kafr Qasem village. Jerusalem, Halaby's birth city, is also revisited in many of her pieces. She also categorically refuses to exhibit or work with Jewish Israeli artists, arguing that even the pro-Palestinian dissidents would better help the bereaved people by working against the Israeli government. And she is not afraid to be identified as a political artist. *"To be political is the right*

and responsibility of everybody," Halaby says, adding that she has made very conscious political choices in her art. *"Because I am a Palestinian I also want to do hardcore political stuff."*

The world is my canvas

Away from the quagmire of politics and activism, the world is moved by Halaby's masterful active colors. *"Where color is concerned, in abstraction we imitate nature... I really like how the city looks at night and trees in a city illuminated with artificial light and colored neon signs going on and off. There is something in that color world. And I keep trying to capture different color worlds,"* she says. Halaby also credits her *"good education in color"* for

her powerful art, adding that one has *"to take a step away from what comes readymade in the tube."*

"The other thing is that as an abstract painter through my own studies, I found that famous critics of abstraction have completely befogged the issues of abstraction," Halaby goes on to say. *"When I read what the [abstract] artists say I hear them saying that their art is based on reality not on the imagination, fantasy, dream... but the world outside which we all see. So my abstraction is based on that reality and I have carefully formulated attitudes so that for example my abstraction imitates nature and social organization and I think people recognize that."*

People would also recognize her for her extensive writing, which includes *"recent degenerate art in the New York galleries,"* being treated as *"a minority"*, and being a Palestinian Arab painter. She also has her hands full with three books at the moment, one of which is a reprint of her 2002 Liberation Art of Palestine, with more pictures. So she is not resting on her laurels anytime soon. And though Ayyam has just published a monograph that chronicles her artistic development, Halaby says this is not the end of the road. *"I'm glad to put everything in there but I don't want it to end there. So I'm telling people I will do one when I hit the 60 year [mark]. It is not over yet,"* she says half jokingly ■

'WHERE COLOR IS CONCERNED, IN ABSTRACTION WE IMITATE NATURE...'



LEFT: WHITE
BELOW: ISLAN