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'We put up a good fight': Palestinian artist Samia Halaby responds to US show cancellation

► In an exclusive interview with The National, abstract painter says she detects 'sentiment shift' among younger Americans following occupied country's struggle



Samia Halaby pictured in 2020 in front of her artwork. Photo: Lara Atalla



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Feedback

Samia Halaby is undaunted after [the cancellation of her exhibition](#) at Indiana University's Eskenazi Museum of Art.

"We put up a good fight," says the Palestinian artist, 87, speaking to The *National* from her home in New York.

"It gives me a lot of pleasure to see that we received more than 14,000 signatures on our petition [to reinstate the show]," she adds. "And then they received a lot of pain. Phone calls, emails ... every piece of press that we've received has been more embarrassing for Indiana [University]. This show was supposed to express my love of the Midwest, but, professionally, it's not the end of the world."

The exhibition had been in the pipeline for three years, the result of a close collaboration between the Halaby and curator Elliot Reichert. It was due to open on February 10, but on December 22 Halaby received a phone call and then an email from museum director David Brenneman informing her of the abrupt cancellation.

The museum stated publicly that the decision was made due to fears for the safety of the artworks. According to Halaby, however, Brenneman admitted it was partly due to pro-Palestinian content that she had posted on Instagram.

Halaby tried to convince the museum not to cancel, but to no avail. When it began returning her artworks, she responded by setting up the petition. Within 24 hours it had attracted more than 5,000 signatures. The university and museum both received numerous calls, according to Halaby, many of them from students.



Samia Halaby's geometric Fifth Cross from 1968 was one of the works due to be exhibited at the university museum. Photo: Samia Halaby

Invited to comment, Indiana University reiterated its statement that “academic leaders and campus officials cancelled the exhibit due to concerns about guaranteeing the integrity of the exhibit for its duration”.

For Halaby, the scale of the response was a surprise – as is the sentiment shift among younger people in the US towards support for Palestine. [Numerous polls](#) show that they are now more likely to understand the occupied country’s struggle as a part of a larger battle around social justice.

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“It’s a night and day change,” she says. “And it’s dividing the society. There is the higher administration and government and the rest of the people. If you get TikTok or Instagram, some of the people I watch are delightful young Americans who speak about Palestine better than I do – better than most – and they are bright, clear and razor sharp and funny. They use humour as a tool and they just have me laughing and

full of admiration.”

It is also a sharp turnaround from the artist’s experience in the US, where she has lived since 1951 after her family fled Palestine during the [Nakba](#). She grew up in the Midwest, studying at the University of Cincinnati, Michigan State University and Indiana, where she stayed on after her master of fine arts degree to teach. When she left Indiana, passing up an offer of tenure, it was to teach at Yale University. There, she was the first woman to join the art department as a full-time member of staff.

Although she has artworks in major museum collections, she has had few exhibitions in the US and never achieved gallery representation in New York. “My whole life in the US as a Palestinian artist has been rejection,” she explains.



The negative space in between shapes is as important as the abstractions in Samia Halaby's 1989 work Worldwide Intifada. Photo: Samia Halaby

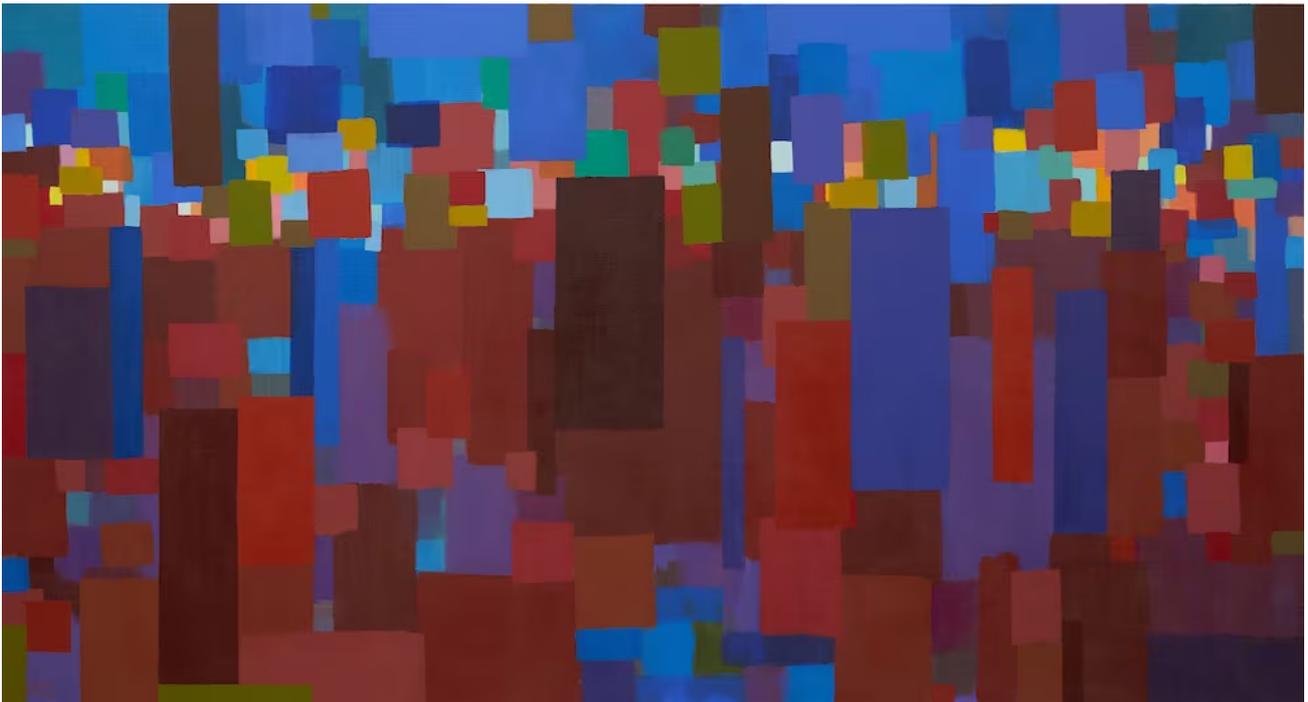
Serious interest in her work has come in recent years from institutions and figures in the Arab world. The Barjeel Art Foundation has long been a supporter, and during the Covid lockdown [shed light](#) on her digital abstractions, previously a little-known aspect of her work. Last year she had a major [retrospective](#) at the Sharjah Art Museum and she has signed with the highly-respected Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut.

Her precise, colour-filled abstract paintings are now being understood both as part of the lineage of the Abstract Expressionism movement in America and as politically-engaged work that connects with other movements abroad. For Halaby, her juxtapositions of colour allow her to speak in the abstract about the relations between people, states and power in society, anywhere in the world.

The Eskenazi Museum of Art show would have contained 35 works, concentrating on the period in the 1970s when she made some of her best work and stretching into the present day. It centred around three major paintings that were donated to Indiana University and express the universalism and dynamism that Halaby sees in political struggle.

In *Worldwide Intifada* (1989), separated shapes jostle across the horizontal canvas, each containing abstract colours and shapes that ring out in energy. The empty space in between the shapes is as important for Halaby as the jostling beauty of the filled sections, showing how negative space can be controlled by what is around it.

Another work inspired by Palestine that was to be in the show, *Our Beautiful Land Stolen in the Night of History* (2016), alludes to the tawny brown earth of the country, and reflects in its aesthetic her experimentations in the digital realm.



Our Beautiful Land Stolen in the Night of History, from 2016, pictures Palestine as a landscape. Photo: Samia Halaby

The cancelled show is scheduled to be followed by a sister exhibition, *Samia Halaby: Eye Witness*, at the MSU Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University campus. Curated by Rachel Winter, the show is due to go up on June 29 this year and MSU has confirmed to *The National* that the exhibition will proceed as planned.

The two organisations collaborated on the catalogue, which has already been produced and will be a major contribution to the study of Halaby's work. "I'm pleased about the catalogue – that at least something of the work and the accomplishment is concretized," she says.

The furore over the recent cancellation has also been heartwarming. But Halaby reflects: "It's really hard to know that, [despite] whatever we're doing here – the demonstrations that brave people are doing over and over again everywhere in the world – still the killing is going on. It's still heartbreaking to see the children and the weaponisation of starvation and disease. The pain keeps going."

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PALESTINE ART EXHIBITIONS