

An artist who dares to code: Palestinian painter Samia Halaby opens up about her pioneering digital work

Before becoming known for her bright abstracts, Halaby was programming colours on computers



Samia Halaby, 83, continues to work out of her studio in New York. Ayyam Gallery



Melissa Gronlund
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Born in Jerusalem in 1936, Palestinian artist Samia Halaby is known for her strong, joyful abstractions: chunky shards of colour that abut one another, eliciting excitement and compassion in the viewer. She is also intensely political, working as an activist in support of Palestine and other social justice causes in the US, where she has lived since the 1950s.

But in an online cultural forum run by Sultan Al Qassemi – a new version of his Cultural Majlis series of events being held amid the coronavirus outbreak – Halaby opened a window into a lesser-known part of her practice: her early computer works.

“If Leonardo [da Vinci] dissected a cadaver in the 15th century, why am I so scared?” Halaby said at the virtual majlis. “So I jumped in and started programming.” She began coding in the early 1980s, first on her sister’s Apple II computer and then on the Amiga 1000.



Samia Halaby with her bulky Amiga 1000 in 1987. She bought the computer for \$1000 in a blow-out sale in New York. Ayyam Gallery

“In research for my art history, I realised that the most important things I have seen and respect are those that use the technology for their times,” she said. “All my questions, ever since the beginning of my education, have been looking towards art history to see what things have been done, and how I can add to them and be part of the continuum of culture.”

Images from the time show Halaby at her Amiga: a boxy, hulking object that was nestled into a nook next to a bookshelf. In the 1980s and '90s Amigas were at the height of their popularity. When Halaby bought the Amiga 1000 in 1986, it offered

more colours and higher processing speed than its rivals, but its California company faltered in marketing the machine, and it eventually went out of business.

Halaby bought hers for \$1,000 in a blowout sale in New York's financial district, and began learning to code the Amiga Basic language.

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"I cannot tell you how absorbed I got into it. It took over every part of my life everyday for three or four years," she said. "I felt, and I still do, that programming is a very beautiful language. It imitates how a city works, it imitates so much that is in our life: the moving from part to part [is] what a function does."

She shunned programs that approximated non-digital forms of art, such as faux pencil drawing or oil painting on the screen, and preferred to stay in the space of programming, where every appearance of colour and music came from her instructions. Coding became another way of

exploring abstraction: organising light, colour and shape into formations that provide a new perspective or representation of life.



Samia Halaby in her studio in New York. Courtesy Ayyam Gallery

“These [digital animations] are some of the more profound things I have done in my life in painting, because it’s combining sound and motion and image in an abstract way. The sound is not planned as music, but as noises you hear in the street,” Halaby said. “A car beeps, a train shoots past you. They are not planned as a base rhythm with melody. We move, we see things in motion, we hear sounds behind us, but we don’t see anything connected to them, and we see things way in front of us that don’t have sound, because they are too far away. It’s about seeing the world in an abstract way, which is just as true as any film recording.”

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By the mid-1990s, Halaby had written a program that transformed a keyboard into something akin to a piano, but one that would play sound and colour, live. For these performances, Halaby collaborated with Kevin Nathaniel and Hasan Bakr, two former students from the Yale School of Art, where she taught from 1972 to 1982.

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As the Kinetic Painting Group, they played live sound and animations in art spaces across the US and the Arab region, including at the Atassi Gallery, then in Damascus; Birzeit University near Ramallah; and Darat Al Funun in Amman.

These digital works exhibit the same mastery over form and colour that Halaby displays in her paintings, expanded into the realms of sound and motion.

The computer-generated music at times echoes the reverberations of traditional Arab music, and at other points the percussiveness of African-

American music, all with a distinct, other-worldly computer timbre. Some of her later works in the 1990s, made on Windows, comprised samples of analogue music.

The stunning *Yafa* (1992) – named after the home town that her family fled in 1948 – is a choreography that she created live with concentric circles, slowly growing and receding in size across the screen. It evokes the dynamism of the port city, whose ships, she recalled, would appear in harbours around the world.



Other works connect aesthetics and politics. *Brass Women*, which also began as a live performance in 1992, is an animation comprising relations between forms: splotches of bright colour repeatedly disrupt monochrome colours that spread, almost as paint dragged from a squeegee, across the screen – though that

description is perhaps too narrative for a work that is firmly in the mode of abstract. Made at a time when she was politically active during the civil rights movement, Halaby calls it an homage to African-Americans and Latinos.

“I called it *Brass Women* because I would hear lots of African-American and Latino women talking at demonstrations,” she said. “I loved how mouthy they were – if I may use a word that people think of as an insult – how bold and how assertive and how clear they were in their discussion.”

Halaby’s work will soon be shown in the US at the Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University, where the artist earned her master’s in fine arts and later also taught. It will be Halaby’s first solo exhibition in the country that she has called home for seven decades.

However, her work has been collected by major institutions in the US and elsewhere, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, National Museum of Women in the Arts, and Eskenazi, which owns five or six of her paintings and works on paper, says the museum’s curator of contemporary art, Elliot Reichert.



Samia Halaby's acrylic painting 'Simultaneous Depth' from 2019. Ayyam Gallery

Halaby’s coding years, in retrospect, form an interlude between her early training in painting and her later work in the same medium, which she still makes in her New York studio. Even if it remains lesser-known, she said that her digital work had a lasting impact on her practice. The experience of being able to paint almost endlessly digitally – as opposed to leaving traces on a canvas – gave her insights into the creative process itself, which she recounted in a typically bravura description at the end of the majlis.

“I learnt that as an artist I have a wave motion that is like the wave motion of nature,” she said. “The waves coming into the seashore, whatever wave motion we see – spring, summer, autumn – all the motions, day and night, are in us. And my creative process also has a wave motion. I would paint and paint, and say: ‘Samia, this is a beautiful one, just one more stroke to really put the cherry on the chocolate sundae.’ And then it would be ruined. Every time I tried to improve it, I would ruin it. I would ruin and ruin and ruin.

“And then I would lose my temper. What is this mess? Bam, bam, bam, my intuition would take over and, before I knew it, it would be vastly improved. You go up and down, and up and down. I learnt that about myself. The creative process is a very interesting one. We think we can define it, but it keeps eluding us.”

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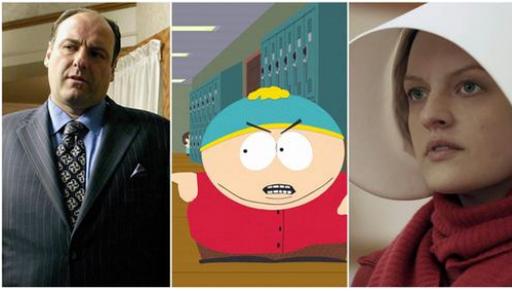


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