

News



Eskenazi School reputation is damaged after IU cancels Palestinian artist, letter says

By AUBREY WRIGHT

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Seventy-five faculty and staff in the Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture + Design spoke out after the cancellation of Palestinian artist Samia Halaby's exhibit. (Courtesy of Elizabeth Housworth)

Faculty and staff of the Eskenazi School of Art, Architecture + Design say the school is experiencing collateral damage after Indiana University [canceled Palestinian artist Samia Halaby's exhibit](#).

Seventy-five staff and faculty signed a letter on Feb. 7 which says the cancellation compromises IU's reputation as a "haven of creative expression, academic freedom and human rights."

The Eskenazi School — though separate from the Eskenazi Museum of Art that would have shown Halaby's exhibit — has suffered. Invited artists have pulled out of collaborations with the school, and faculty candidates are no longer interested in coming to IU.

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The series informed us that in the wake of the cancellation, the plans never to return to IU. We can only anticipate further challenges facing faculty, students, and others who should participate in an academic environment with such tight administrative control over creative activity and research.

According to a university spokesperson, the administration cancelled the exhibition using "concerns about governing the integrity of the exhibit for its duration." However, no specific, credible threats have been publicly identified. The fact that the exhibition was comprised entirely of abstract paintings, drawings, and digital artworks suggests that the source of the administration's concerns lies not in the work itself, but in Halaby's long, public history of activism for the Palestinian people—actions that we are proud to honor for which the institution was planned. This leads us to believe that the administration's decision was a function of current political pressures to suppress Palestinian voices.

The university administration is entrusted with upholding and protecting the open discourse that is the foundation of IU and of credible institutions of higher learning. We believe that the administration's cancellation of Halaby's exhibition undermines the university's stated mission to uphold academic freedom, to protect constitutional rights to free speech, and to affirm our commitment to all members of our community. We have and will continue to work to ensure that our campus remains a place of open inquiry and intellectual exchange, and we will continue to support our faculty and students in their efforts to engage in the public sphere.

In the Eskenazi School, our research and creative activity speak to our faith in the artist's responsibility to further the human experience, offer new perspectives, foster empathy and respect, and contribute to the greater good, including to ongoing challenges or controversial issues in the present. Our longstanding work includes the creation of a memorial and relief in Mexico, Indiana as the site of the state's last known lynching; photographic documentation of the abandoned site of Japanese American internment camps; video installations honoring the stories of Ukrainian refugees in Estonia; ceramic surface decoration incorporating and intermingling racially-charged imagery, sustainable and affordable housing initiatives in towns from Indiana to Mexico; participation in

global coalitions to promote ethical sourcing of materials and humane treatment of workers in the fashion and jewelry industries; and countless other critical and sometimes unquantifiable undertakings.

As a unit whose origins date to 1855, the Eskenazi School celebrates and shares our university's historical commitment to academic freedom, global awareness, diversity, and the arts. When Samia Halaby earned her M.F.A. in our painting department in the 1960s, it was already considered one of the nation's leading programs, proudly considered the energy in a faculty member in the 1970s when they established her painting in what is now the Grandstand Gallery. Fifty-four years later, the Eskenazi School faculty's heartbreak that we are not able to welcome our alumna and former faculty member back home as a special honor and to celebrate her as a world-class artist.

We remain committed to the reasons behind the show's cancellation. If there are indeed legitimate threats, we propose that IU postpone or shorten the exhibition to ensure that adequate safety measures can be put in place. It would be reasonable to start by consulting with our 100-year-old Michigan State University, which has done so in considering the same issue and is proceeding with the exhibition of Halaby's work later this year. We would look forward to welcoming Halaby back to the community to which she already belongs as an alumna and former faculty, and in so doing, confirming that IU is a place where all forms of creative expression can thrive.

Reshadi Ibrahim	Uzlaa Tariq	Kenneth Smith	Sam Press
Heather Akou	Ed Bernheim	Shannon Cherry	Sam Mansour
Sara Vard	Ahmed Dawood	Daniel Marner	Jeff Smith
Tim Kennedy	Hannah Chabam	Tyler Krunder	Melanie Pennington
Sarah Wilkinson	Nadia Al-Jawad	Kelly Wilson	Bernie Gilmer
Hussain Mohammed	Billy Smith	David Drelich	Siva Anita
Megan Young	Pran Chahal	Thomas Langston	Ellie Ford
Ellen Campbell	Su A. Chan	Jennifer Riley	Lulu Lucinda Martinez
Ryan Farley	Chae-Garbin	Laura Brock	Betsy Gault
Myeong Kim	Johanna Winters	Mary Dreyer	Kim Durbin
Abigail Caldwell	Tyler Pennington	Alison Spaulding	Amos Clark
Scott Bandy	Jessica Jones	Martha Mardale	Brigid Scullion
Deborah Christensen	Karen Adams	Dan Weaver	Alexis Fungstad-Ludsh
Chana James	Taraa Mui	Billy Shephard	Caroline Heppner
Nalagapan	Great Lovelace	Chris Cullinich	Samuel Boers
Melissa-Melissa Smith	Chakirah	Hea Khay	Tim Mather
Calvin Ibo	Elizabeth Elch	Dorcas Bulwe	Nell Wierchunas
Colin Westraab	Tasha Tangeman	Jessica Wu	Carissa Carman
Tommy Gleason	Ran Huang	Chris Reinhart	Alexander Landerman

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Fashion Design Program Director Heather Akou said the group wants to see the exhibit returned to IU, maybe displayed for a shorter time. IU cited security concerns when canceling the exhibit, so the letter suggests collaborating with [Michigan State University](#), where Halaby's work will show later this year.

"We would look forward to welcoming Halaby back to the community to which she already belongs as an alumna and former faculty, and in so doing, confirming that IU is a place where all forms of creative expression can thrive," the letter said.

The "Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy" exhibition was canceled Dec. 20, 2023 due to security concerns by campus officials and academic leaders, an IU spokesperson said. The exhibition was [set to open last weekend](#) after three years of preparation at the Eskenazi Museum of Art as the first American retrospective of Halaby's work.

Though the exhibit was canceled in December, Halaby's grand-niece made the first public announcement with a [petition](#) to reinstate it. More than 15,300 people have signed.

Read more: ['Warning! Dangerous Art!': Teach-in draws in more than 100 attendees](#)



One of Palestine's foremost artists and a pioneer of abstract painting, Halaby was educated in the Midwest after fleeing Palestine in 1948. She was an IU MFA student in the '60s and later a faculty member.

on her career, and our students and faculty are missing out on that opportunity.”

Since the cancellation, three featured artists in the McKinney Visiting Artist Series have pulled out. Artists Nina Sarnelle and Selwa Sweidan said they would withdraw and forfeit compensation and plane tickets in [a letter to President Pamela Whitten and Provost Rahul Shrivastav](#).

“Now, more than ever institutions like Indiana University need to support academic freedom and Palestinian voices,” the two artists wrote. “Instead, we find institutions canceling engagement with Palestinians, shutting down solidarity groups, and abusing the term ‘antisemitism’ to justify sweeping censorship.”

The other artist, Theresa Ganz, said on [social media](#) she was withdrawing because IU’s claims about security concerns are “clearly suspicious.” She said she cannot participate in the McKinney Visiting Artist Series in good conscience.

“To speak and share my work as a Jewish women while a Palestinian woman is being silenced would be to give cover to those who like to imply that anything Palestinian is automatically antisemitic,” Ganz said. “This mentality is nothing less than nihilistic ethno-nationalism.”

Read more: [Palestinian artist Samia Halaby's work to show at Buskirk-Chumley Theater after IU cancelation](#)

In addition to collaborating with artists, Akou said hiring faculty has been challenged, as candidates worry about limitations to their art and scholarship.

“Considering the long-term impact, I’m really concerned,” Akou said.

Research and art in the Eskenazi School speak to an artist’s responsibility to represent the human experience, foster empathy and offer new perspectives, the letter said. The school has shown controversial and uncomfortable art in the past, such as memorials of Indiana’s last lynching and video installations honoring Ukrainian refugees.



The exhibit would have included abstract work from Samia Halaby’s time at IU as an MFA student and faculty member. (Courtesy of Madison Gordon)

Akou said she can’t speak on behalf of all signers, but she’s questioning whether freedom of expression and scholarship are allowed at IU.

The university canceled the exhibit because of safety concerns, but IU hasn’t provided evidence of threats of property damage or violence. If the concerns are real, she said, then who decides what is too controversial or if security is needed?

“It shouldn’t be up to the individual to decide whether something may or may not be controversial,” Akou said. “If we’re going to avoid self-censoring, we need more clarity from the administration about what the threats are and what they are willing to support.”

Read more: [IU president Whitten comes out against controversial tenure bill](#)

protested and spoken out since the cancellation became public. Free speech organizations, including the ACLU and the National Coalition Against Censorship, have [condemned IU administration's decision](#). The International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art Museum Watch have also criticized the cancellation.

Indiana University has declined multiple requests for interviews.

Shrivastav addressed some questions about Halaby at a Bloomington Faculty Council meeting Tuesday.

The budget for installations like Halaby's often exceed \$250,000, not including support from grants and sponsorships, Shrivastav said at the meeting. The university returned \$93,000 in funding from the Terra Foundation for American Art and the National Endowment for the Arts. The remaining fixed costs of about \$102,500 are being covered "centrally," he said.

He said the museum will announce programming for reflection and learning this spring "to provide critical space or confront the implication of this and other challenging issues of today." A spokesperson said in an email statement there are no current plans to display Halaby's work in the future.

Read more: ['Deeply disappointing': Anti-censorship groups call out IU's cancellation of Palestinian artist's exhibit](#)

Shrivastav said at a faculty council meeting in January that the university was being cautious by canceling the exhibition. He said the protest would have been a "lightning rod" for protests in the middle of campus. He did not cite any specific threats to Halaby's exhibit despite being pressed by faculty.

"Anytime where you feel the risks are higher than the reward, we have to rethink that situation," Shrivastav said. "We have had instances where we were fortunate we didn't have violence, but we certainly came pretty close to having violence. "

This story was updated at 4:20 p.m. to include Provost Shrivastav's statements from the Bloomington Faculty Council meeting Tuesday.

Aubrey is our higher education reporter and a Report For America corps member. Contact her at aubmwrig@iu.edu or follow her on Twitter at [@aubreymwright](https://twitter.com/aubreymwright).