

Indiana University Cancels Major Exhibition of Palestinian Artist

Samia Halaby, an 87-year-old artist, has been outspoken in her support of Palestinians during the Israel-Gaza war.



By Zachary Small

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The first American retrospective of Samia Halaby, regarded as one of the most important living Palestinian artists, was abruptly canceled by officials at Indiana University in recent weeks.

Dozens of her vibrant and abstract paintings were already at the school when Halaby, 87, said she received a call from the director of the university's Eskenazi Museum of Art. The director informed her that employees had shared concern about her social media posts on the Israel-Gaza war, where she had expressed support for Palestinian causes and outrage at the violence in the Middle East, comparing the Israeli bombardment to a genocide.

Halaby later received a two-sentence note from the museum director, David Brenneman, officially canceling the show in Bloomington, Ind., without a clear explanation.

"I write to formally notify you that the Eskenazi Museum of Art will not host its planned exhibition of your work," Brenneman wrote in the Dec. 20 letter, which was reviewed by The New York Times.

A few months earlier, Brenneman had applauded the artist's "dynamic and innovative approach to art-making" in promotional materials, where he said the exhibition would demonstrate how universities "value artistic experimentation."

The show's cancellation is the latest example of the heavy scrutiny that artists and academics have faced since the war began in October. Magazine editors have been fired, artists have seen their work censored and university presidents have resigned under pressure.

"It is clearly my freedom of expression that is under question here," said Halaby, who earned a master's degree at Indiana University and later taught students there. She said concerns about her exhibition had been raised by a museum employee.

The retrospective, which was to open Feb. 10, had taken more than three years to organize in partnership with Michigan State University's Broad Art Museum; agreements were already signed with grant-making foundations and museums that lent artworks to Indiana University from around the country. Halaby was also preparing to unveil a new digital artwork for the exhibition, in addition to previously unseen works like a 1989 painting called "Worldwide Intifadah."



"Worldwide Intifadah" (1989). Samia Halaby

Steven Bridges, director of the Broad Art Museum, said his institution was still planning to host the exhibition this year.

A spokesman for Indiana University, Mark Bode, said in a statement on Wednesday that "academic leaders and campus officials canceled the exhibit due to concerns about guaranteeing the integrity of the exhibit for its duration."

In November, Representative Jim Banks of Indiana sent a letter to the university saying it could lose federal funding if administrators condoned antisemitism on campus. In December, the university suspended a tenured political science professor after the student-led Palestine Solidarity Committee that he advises hosted an unauthorized event.

Halaby became a celebrated artist by combining the approaches of Abstract Expressionism and Russian Constructivism with the social activism of Mexican muralists in the early 20th century.

She described her work as following the traditions of Palestinian "liberation art" and remained politically outspoken throughout her career. She made history in 1972 as the first woman to hold the title of associate professor at the Yale School of Art. She was also on the forefront of digital art, teaching herself how to write computer programs in the 1980s.

Reviewing her work in a 2006 group exhibition on Palestinian artists, the New York Times critic Holland Cotter said one of Halaby's wall pieces looked "like a cross between a floral bouquet and camouflage material."

Her paintings now hang in the permanent collections at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Art Institute of Chicago, though most of her exhibition history is with cultural institutions in Europe and the Middle East. She recently had a retrospective featuring more than 200 artworks at the Sharjah Art Museum in the United Arab Emirates.



"Our Beautiful Land of Palestine Stolen in the Night of History" (2016). Samia Halaby

"The political situation now is extremely tense, and such an exhibition could have brought people together with the nuance of Samia's work," Nadia Radwan, an art historian who specializes on artists from the Middle East, said about the canceled show at Indiana University. "She belongs to the Palestinian diaspora, but she is also a very American abstract artist. Her recognition came late in life."

An online petition demanding that Indiana University reinstate the exhibition has received thousands of signatures. Madison Gordon, the artist's grandniece and trustee of her foundation, said in the petition that Halaby's appeals to the university's president, Pamela Whitten, went unanswered.

"The university is canceling the show to distance itself from the cause of Palestinian freedom," Gordon wrote. "For 50 years, Samia has been an outspoken and principled activist for the dignity, freedom and self-determination of the Palestinian people."

Halaby said she was disappointed by the university's decision. She was raised in the Midwest and believed that having her first major American retrospective there would bring her career full-circle.

"I thought I had found a little bit of something I could call my home in Indiana," the artist said, "and it turned out to be totally false."

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