



the artist Samia Halaby in her studio in New York. Courtesy Samia Halaby / Ayyam Gallery

Abstraction is all about reality for artist Samia Halaby

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At first glance, Samia Halaby's 1982 canvas titled *Tribeca* bears absolutely no resemblance to the Lower Manhattan neighbourhood in New York City. It is a seemingly abstract collection of squares and rectangles, of which about half are black and brown and the others, floating on top, are painted in bright colours such as yellow, purple, red, green and blue.

However, when Halaby explains her artistic thinking, the painting magically springs to life.

"Although the critics traditionally have tried to separate the two from each other, to me, abstraction is about reality," she says. "But reality is not necessarily a photographic image. If you take 10 seconds turning your head from left to right, all the shapes and forms that you see cannot be captured in a photograph or a realistic image. When you walk down the street in New York, where it is so busy, to preserve your life you have learnt to look in certain ways and your eyes jump from blocks of colour, that is the rhythm you see in my paintings and explains where I place the squares."

Thus the typically hectic nature of inner-city areas such as Tribeca, where Halaby has lived and worked in a loft apartment since 1976, is expressed within the language of abstract art.

The rhythms of life, the waves of the ocean and the people flowing in and out of the city exist simultaneously in Halaby's paintings.

She follows general principles of motion and captures the variety of environments that she has immersed herself in over 50 years of painting. And when the work is collated in one show – as it is in the Ayyam Gallery in Al Quoz until the end of the month – the effect proves that Halaby is one of the most important international abstract artists of her time.

Samia Halaby: Five Decades of Painting and Innovation, is the first major retrospective to be organised for this renowned artist who was born in Jerusalem in 1936 and is also an outspoken activist for Palestinian rights. Curated by the art historian Maymanah Farhat, this comprehensive survey features more than 50 of her artworks from categories that are defined in the accompanying monograph. The paintings represent every period of the artist's oeuvre, which orbit around the subject of abstraction.

Tribeca is from a one-year period called Autumn Leaves and City Blocks, where Halaby compares meticulous studies she made of fallen leaves, in which she identified tiny shapes within the veined organic forms to the "truncated rectangles in city blocks and pentagonal land shapes between roads and highways".

Both, she explains, signified growth and so spawned a series of paintings of urban areas.

Farhat, in the process of curating the show, says that she was finally able to understand Halaby's work by realising her use of materialism. "Abstraction has always been presented as something intangible or so based in theory that it is not accessible, but Samia makes it completely accessible," Farhat explains. "She works from a materialist perspective, trying to recreate the sensations rather than the exact thing. So she is interested in how our eye understands light and how we comprehend the leaves falling from the trees and puts it there for the viewer to extract anything they can from it."

In the enormous exhibition, which can take a couple of hours to take in if exploring all the corners of the gallery, Halaby's explorations into visually representing these sensations are clear. She works through distinct modes such as geometric forms, helices and cycloids and a personal favourite: diagonal flight.

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