

# Canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD

**AYK: What was your first reaction to the US presidential election?**

SH: I thought, 'I'm leaving, where am I going to go?'

**AYK: Did you make a poster for the latest Women's March in Washington?**

SH: I didn't, my activism came to a halt ten years ago when I decided that I'm old. I began focusing on my paintings and drawings of the Kafr Qasem massacre, for my book.

**AYK: What is political about your work?**

SH: I'm very committed to Palestine, to Arab nationalism and to left-wing politics. I don't have to be on the fence, in order not to offend anyone, that's my opinion.

**AYK: Is America still the home of democracy?**

SH: Democracy and the land of the free are buzzwords. But there's more democracy here than Iraq or Libya...

**AYK: But is it a true democracy?**

SH: What's democracy if you can walk down the street with a hoodie and be shot dead just because you're black and wearing a hoodie?



Photography by Ali Y. Khadra. © Canvas

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**samia halaby**  
#aboutamerica





# samia halaby

Born in 1936 in Jerusalem, Palestine. Lives and works in New York

## **I know you have various bodies of work. Can you explain how they came about?**

As a painter or picture maker, I'd like to be at the leading edge of invention. So that does not leave room for practical day-to-day politics and issues. On the other hand, I'm going to take my Palestinian-ness and Arab-ness with me everywhere I go, I'm very committed to Palestine, to Arab nationalism and to left-wing politics. I don't have to be on the fence, in order not to offend anyone. If someone wants to be offended, then let them be, that's my opinion. So I have the posters and banners which I've carried in marches as one category of work and the set of documentary drawings like the olive trees, as another. There's also a new set of drawings that will be on exhibition at Ayyam Gallery and at Birzeit University in the West Bank, which is about the Kafr Qasim massacre. A book just came out, I wish I had it in my lap to show you.

## **Do you think your art would have taken a different trajectory had you stayed in Palestine?**

My educational opportunities are much greater here than they are for Palestinian artists under Israeli occupation. The kind of mental pressure they experience, the kind of fear that is enforced on them, especially on those living directly under the Israeli government, the difficulties they face, from having their studios pilfered or completely burned down... It's the same for artists from Lebanon, Iraq and Libya. Life has been very, very difficult in the Arab world. Even being in America, we may face a lot of horror here soon and there's always been racism and Islamophobia. But at least my opportunities to learn and my freedom to express myself are greater here.

## **What's your take on the current political situation in the US?**

Well, when I first started hearing the verbiage coming out of the presidential candidates, one of whom is known to be really anti-Arab, I started thinking 'I'm leaving. Where am I going to go?' So I decided that I would go to Barcelona in Spain. But then in the end, you know, it's hard to move, I'm 80, my family is here and it's difficult to just pull up sticks and leave. But the atmosphere here has got lots of people frightened. One good thing for me is that I'm old and probably less of a threat than young people might be. However, the resistance is growing and that's really satisfying.

## **Did you make a poster specifically for the latest Women's March in Washington?**

To be honest, I didn't, my activism came to a halt about ten years ago when I took the decision that I'm old, and it's time to start documenting my artwork. Then I began focusing on my painting and also the drawings for the book on the massacre. We've had really good reviews and people are enthusiastic. I have friends who are working like beavers trying to get it into libraries. It's substantial and important, and my political work has been going in that direction recently. The book will last, and confront the Israeli lie of trying to erase us and our history.

## **What would you say the current situation says about Americans?**

We need to think of it in terms of a struggle – the country and the land were stolen from the Native Americans. When you get to know Americans at a grassroots level, especially if you go to the Midwest, there's a lot of potential and many wonderful people who will surprise you. What you hear about Americans outside America is usually only true of the upper middle class and the ruling circles. It's not necessarily the truth.

# I'm going to take my Palestinian-ness and Arab-ness with me everywhere I go.



## **How do you view your role as an artist in the diaspora?**

In my painting, and as a thinker, regardless of who I am and what my background is, I'm connected to the entire globe and the history of the entire picture-making tradition; that's where my intellect lives and I won't limit it for anybody, not for being Arab, not for living in New York. Though even as an artist, I have never allowed anyone to describe me as anything but a Palestinian Arab woman. Not a Middle Easterner, a Palestinian Arab woman, or an Arab Palestinian woman, or whatever you want to say – both of those adjectives are super-important.

## **Is America still the home of democracy?**

[laughs] Democracy and the land of the free are just buzzwords. But there is more democracy here – I mean, people have to be realistic – than there is in Iraq or Libya, there's more democracy here than there is in Israel. For Jews and for Israelis, there's more democracy here than there is for Palestinians, but it is not a true democracy. People are losing their democratic rights in America, slowly but surely. I mean, if you are a black person here, life is very difficult. The number of African-American youths who are shot by the police is devastating. There are different degrees of democracy here. I mean, what's democracy if you can walk down the street with a hoodie and be shot dead just because you're black and wearing a hoodie?

## **What do you think artists from the region can do?**

Artists are like everybody else and in some ways I don't think they are different from other people in their proclivity to be political. They vary in their social commitment and their social position. I don't think being an artist gives you a particular capacity to do something that is different from that of a worker or a filmmaker. It is your location or position in life that really determines that. Students, who are not yet committed to a certain job, are more free and more likely to be politically active, then when you get to the yuppies and low-level management, they're afraid to be political. So artists are no different, they aren't their own category.



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