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Eye Witness by Samia Halaby: A Case Study

Eye Witness by Samia Halaby is a retrospective collection of the Palestinian abstract artist's work from undergraduate up until present day. The exhibit is composed of more than sixty works, from her first foray into abstract art in the 1960s to her most recent works. The variation between pieces is great in medium, size, technique, and dimension, providing a truly thorough depiction of her evolution as an artist. Some pieces focus on capturing elements of the natural world, while others attempt to portray a specific place using only colored shapes of different sizes. This retrospective exhibit of Halaby's work throughout her life not only showcases her evolution and approach to abstraction, but also speaks to her activism and love for Palestine. It is a testament to her work in both the greater contemporary art sphere and the political landscape surrounding her homeland.

An overarching goal of her work is to capture her perspective and experiences of the world through abstraction. The result of this is paintings inspired by brief moments like watching a woman cross the street or observations like the way light reflects onto metal. In a review of this exhibit, author Sarah Sharp explains that Halaby works "not from photo references or models, but largely seeking to re-create sensory experiences of her life in paintings, including attendant sounds, the feeling of the wind, and the visual interactions of shapes and colors" (Sharp). One piece that particularly sticks out is titled "Sun" (Halaby), a large canvas loaded with short brush strokes, in groups parallel to each other but perpendicular to other groups, with vivid yellow, orange, and pink hues, and even



some blue at the periphery of the painting. The transparency of the many layers of paint creates both depth and movement, the painting seems to be buzzing with energy, or perhaps nervousness. The title does give some guidance as to what may have inspired the piece, and that is an intentional choice by Halaby. Most of her works have similarly illuminating names, which "discourages engagement on a purely aesthetic level, pushing viewers to consider the compositions material origins," she said in an interview ("Samia Halaby on painting, programming, and being Palestinian").

Other notable pieces are *Aluminum Steel*, which was inspired by the way light reflects off metal, and *The City*, which depicts a dynamic Jerusalem that seems to be glowing from the inside in the midst of a dark, cold night. The Middle East serves as one of Halaby's greatest inspirations because not only is it where she grew up, she feels deeply for the conflict that has been affecting the region for decades. She has witnessed the both political and military conflict over land disputes and self-determination between the state of Israel and the people of Palestine, which has over the years occasioned the deaths of thousands of civilians. She spoke to this, in the caption of another one of her works titled *Occupied Palestine*, "It is as though I am here to witness the last moments in the life of this beautiful and ancient city of Jerusalem…My Jerusalem is being murdered. And I make this painting feeling the pain and beauty of Jerusalem" (Sharp). This excerpt illustrates the unique way that Halaby's artwork interacts with her political activism. Her pieces don't have explicit, glaring messages in big bold words, she focuses more on depicting the injustices and pain she sees in their own right. She focuses on expressing the beauty she sees in her home, and her feelings are evident in the forms and colors of the painting. Halaby's specific political opinions can be found on her social media, but her artworks are not centered around criticizing whom or what she disagrees with. The messages of her pieces are testaments to her love and sympathy for her country, something most people can relate to. Her activism comes from the fact that she is Palestinian, making art about Palestine, and it is being seen by the rest of the world. In an interview, Halaby said that

“the arts have really become something important because it is seen as a way to export Palestinian thought. There is a great deal of need for us Palestinians to make the world aware of our existence, because right now, we are being heavily bashed by Israel. The feeling is that art helps re-humanise us” (Sand). For a country of people who have been oppressed for decades, the desire just to be seen is significant, especially when the rest of the world is desensitized to the news of their continual suffering. Halaby wants Palestinians to be seen beyond the hardships they face as a country.

However, Halaby has been penalized as an artist for taking a stance on such a hot-topic issue like the conflict between Palestine and Israel. In fact, that is what happened with this exact exhibit. *Eye Witness* was initially planned to be a joint showing in 2024, located at Indiana University Bloomington’s Eskenazi Museum of Art in the Spring, and located at Michigan State University’s Broad Art Museum in the Fall. However, IU canceled the show in December of 2023. The university halted the exhibit, which had been in the works for three years, claiming concerns for security and pointing to Halaby’s pro-Palestine social media posts in the midst of the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict. Supposedly, Halaby’s art would have served as a “potential lightning rod” on a college campus that was already experiencing high tensions because of the conflict in the Middle East (Meador). This action by IU’s administration received mass pushback, even from international groups like CIMAM (International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art) and especially from students. The exhibit went on to be displayed at Michigan State University in the fall. The exhibit’s main topic was not the war in Gaza, in fact, a good portion of the art had nothing to do with Palestine. Many works were created in inspiration of the city and its natural landscape, and some pieces focused on the oppression of Palestinians by Israel, but not all. The exhibit was intended to be a retrospective collection of Halaby’s work, and growing up in Palestine was essential to her journey and is a large subject of her art. Halaby has talked about this experience of being reduced to her political stance or where she is from. While some of her art is about her heritage, it should not be viewed just

through the lens of where she is from, as her work transcends borders. In an interview, she said, “Say I’m Palestinian from now to kingdom come. I’m Palestinian. Yell it from the highest mountain…But my art is international. It’s a Palestinian doing it, and that’s a political statement” (“Samia Halaby on painting, programming, and being Palestinian”). Halaby’s art is not made only for Palestinians, or only for people to analyze in the context of Middle East, but because she is from Palestine, people will always view her art as political.

This is where nuance is required: Halaby is a Palestinian artist, who makes art about Palestine, but she should not be reduced to just that. This is a frustration she has cited before, saying that in the US, “there is a tendency to put women and minority and black Americans, especially Arabs, into a cubby hole” (“Samia Halaby on Painting, Programming, and being Palestinian”). Even though where she is from is a big part of her identity, and contributes significantly to her artwork, she is not just a Palestinian artist. Her artwork should not be excluded from the mainstream and placed in a specific Arab art section, because while it is Arab art, it is not just that. Halaby describes the way her work transcends her heritage, saying that “the proper addition to the whole monument of art history is not me and my personality. It’s what’s happening in contemporary society, what I can see in the social consciousness of my time” (“Samia Halaby on Painting, Programming, and being Palestinian”).

Works Cited

Halaby, Samia, “Sun”, 2015. MSU Broad Art Museum, East Lansing MI.