

# Manazir مناظر Journal

Journal of the Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,  
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

Issue 1  
2019

**Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East**

**edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan**

# Impressum

*Manazir Journal* is a peer-reviewed academic Platinum Open Access journal dedicated to visual arts, architecture and cultural heritage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Created in 2019, the journal is linked to *Manazir – Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region*, a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in these themes. The term “Manazir” refers to landscapes, perspectives and points of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, *Manazir Journal* is oriented towards a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary “landscapes” and “points of views” and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

BOP - Bern Open Publishing

ISSN 2673-4354

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2019.1.1.7>

Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0)

© Manazir 2019

Manazir  
مناظر

Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,  
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

u<sup>b</sup>

UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN  
Präsenzhistorische Fakultät  
Institut für Kunstgeschichte  
Center for Global Studies



UNIVERSITÉ  
DE GENÈVE  
FACULTÉ DES LETTRES  
Unité d'arabe

**Production, Design & Layout:** Joan Grandjean

**Title graphic designer:** Manuel Charpy

**English Proofreading/corrector:** Lillian Davies

**Cover image:** Etel Adnan (1925), *Untitled* (detail), 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

## Editors-in-Chief

Silvia Naef  
University of Geneva

Nadia Radwan  
University of Bern

## Issue Editors

Silvia Naef  
University of Geneva

Nadia Radwan  
University of Bern

## Editorial Team

Joan Grandjean  
University of Geneva

Laura Hindelang  
University of Bern

Riccardo Legena  
University of Bern

## Advisory Board

Leïla EL-Wakil  
University of Geneva

Francine Giese  
Vitrocentre, Vitromusée,  
Romont

Kornelia Imesch-Oechslin  
University of Lausanne

Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel  
University of Geneva

Bernd Nicolai  
University of Bern

Mirko Novak  
University of Bern

Estelle Sohier  
University of Geneva

## Artist's Statement

Samia Halaby<sup>1</sup>

---

### The Political Basis of Abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century As Explored by a Painter<sup>2</sup>

---

#### Abstract

The political nature of abstraction presented from an artist's point of view – one who considers the most advanced task is the exploration of the language of pictures. Such exploration is understood as a separate discipline from the many others that employ pictures for practical functions. The author examines the development of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction as an effect of revolutionary social motion. Historic steps to abstraction, taking shape as rising and receding artistic movements, are correlated to revolutionary motion. The materialist underpinning of abstraction is distinguished from the idealism of Post-Modernism. The paper ends with an examination of contemporary discourse in the Western art world that attempts to erase the internationalism of abstraction and, thereby, marginalize non-Western practitioners.

**Keywords:** abstraction, art history, materialism, painting, revolution

#### Preliminaries and Parameters of Inquiry

An important parameter that guides my thinking on painting is to define paintings as a subset of all pictures, which are visual images on a flat surface distinct from mixed media installation. Pictures are visual images that possess a formal language that is separate from words, and that visual thinking is not first born in words but grows independently of them. While both words and images reflect reality, I see visual images as being closer to reality than words. I see words as more highly developed symbols about which we possess greater social agreement as to their meaning, as is borne out by any dictionary. I cannot imagine a dictionary that defines billions of images. Agreement on the signification of an image is looser by far than that of words. But we do agree that they give us reflections of reality. Word and image form the two primary media of human communication and they are often used together.

As I talk to an audience of academics with certain definitions in scholarly discourse and since I am now distant from this discourse as an artist independent from academia for the past thirty-six years, I would like to clarify some of my terms. I make a strong distinction between what is aesthetic and what is mystical. Many will describe a beautiful visual experience as being mystical. Because the formal language of pictures – how painters talk to each other about their work – is so rarely part of

---

<sup>1</sup> Samia Halaby, artist & activist. Email: [samianhalaby@gmail.com](mailto:samianhalaby@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> The following is an adaptation of the keynote speech held on September 28, 2018, at the symposium "The Arab Apocalypse: Art, Abstraction and Activism in the Middle East", Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

historical and general discourse, the term mystical is often confused with aesthetic experience of something considered beautiful and moving.

Advances in the art of explorative picture making does not mean that imitating earlier methods do not produce beautiful pictures as would be for example the making of an Impressionist landscape in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, the beauty of pictures executed as variations of known historical methods might be admired differently from explorative ones. New explorative modes may seem strange, even uncouth to many on first experience. In the following paragraphs abstraction will be positioned as the most advanced exploration in picture making, today mostly done as pigments on a ground that is as painting, and that what sparked and fed this advance was working class motion such as the Paris Commune, the struggle for the eight-hour day, the Soviet revolution. And the industrial union movement in the United States.

### **What is 20<sup>th</sup> Century Abstraction?**

The aesthetics of abstraction are present in daily life but most people practice it without having a name for it. Two gardeners may consider the attributes of similar rose bushes, exchanging what is essentially an aesthetic discourse about color and shape. I once heard two Arab women talk about the attributes of color, shape, rhythm, and materials of woven rugs and wall hangings that are totally abstract, admiring some and criticizing other, all the while unconscious that they were evaluating what is essentially visual abstraction. All four individuals would proclaim they know nothing about abstract painting. Yet they engage in discourse on the aesthetics of visual abstraction and almost always agree as to what is right and beautiful. Abstraction, like earlier, i.e. figurative modes, is a reflection of reality and results from our experience of it. As an abstract painter, I am highly aware that I move in spaces with gravity and light, measuring my surroundings by walking and seeing, having been myself, like everyone else, molded like clay by this same space. Our steps measure distance and the beating of our heart measures time. We comprehend time, space, and motion through advancing technology and now we have extensive common knowledge of scientific advances such as Einstein's theory of relativity. These experiences shape concepts developed in the practice of making abstractions.

Our visual experiences provide information that we store in memory. For example, as we experience trees, thousands of them, at different times and places, we store a universe of visual information. A picture of a particular view at a particular time captures only one aspect of the multitude of experience. On the other hand, when we see an abstract image that substantially taps into this storehouse, we feel a connection developing, a whisper of future communication, and relief that this storehouse in our minds has taken concrete form, has gained the power to help us communicate. If no one recognizes my abstract paintings in this way, then my paintings have failed. This recognition does not have to be in words. It is enough that people know that they like something. Expression in words in reaction to abstract pictures is difficult.

Abstraction imitates reality. It imitates the general principles in nature not the appearance of them from one side at one moment in time. Abstraction incorporates motion: ours and that of our surroundings. Abstraction takes into consideration relativity of space, light, size, distance, and our location. Abstraction excludes mechanical or digital vision with a lens or computer program such as photography, architectural rendering, and virtual reality. Abstraction frees the artist from presenting images as might be seen by a camera. It frees the artist from the task of freezing themselves in one position committed to one view. The artist can look at the world and contemplate its visual beauty while moving through life. A large accomplishment of abstraction is freeing art and artists from having to praise those who rule society or illustrate their activities. In abstraction, a landmark accomplishment is the capacity to deal with general principles freed of particulars and, remarkably, freed from illustrating words.

In abstraction, luminosity replaces directional light, the interaction of color replaces shading, and relativity of depth replaces the measurable space of perspective. And most important of all, visual methods to reflect the general principles of reality replace narrative content. Kazimir Malevich's *Eight Red Rectangles*, (fig. 1) 1915, next to Leonardo's *Last Supper*, (fig. 2) 1498, demonstrates all of these principles through the distinct differences in their formal language.

Abstraction is present in every picture of mankind, since the very beginning, as a basic ingredient of the language of pictures. Composing any image is an exercise in abstraction. But pure abstraction in pictures occurred first in the panels of Islamic architecture and centuries later in 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction. However, these two occurrences differ in their formal language substantially. This paper will not attempt in this context to properly describe the abstraction of Islamic panels but will continue focus on the political nature of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction.



Figure 1: Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition (with Eight Red Rectangles)*, 1915, oil on canvas, 58 x 48.5 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Figure 2: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1498, tempera and gesso, 4.57 x 8.84 m. Convent of S. Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy.

## The Political Nature of Abstraction as Demonstrated by Art History

Current discourse divides visual art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into two Western conceptions: Modernism and Post-Modernism. All of the abstraction born of powerful working-class revolution is termed Modernism. In this paper the more appropriate term of "20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction" is used, as this terminology does not obscure abstraction's international nature.

In the history of art, advancements occur at times of social and economic renewal. This is also true of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction, though its revolutionary working-class basis is hidden by concepts such as the 'avant-garde' or 'advanced art.' The notion of the 'artist genius,' whereby one or two strong artists are credited with great discovery leading to an art movement, is another such concept. In short, individual genius is used to replace the powerful influence of social motion, especially when the ideals of that social motion are antithetical to those currently holding power.

## The Correlation of Revolutionary Motion with Innovation

The correlation of revolutionary social upswings with creative invention beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century may seem like unrelated incidences. However, I think careful examination betrays cause and effect rather than incidence. In Western art history, the concept that revolutionary social and economic development is the cause of renewal in art is normal practice. We understand that Leonardo da Vinci is a product of the rise of the Italian bourgeoisie and of the birth of capitalism. We are never taught that Leonardo created the Renaissance. Although, clearly, his painting and thinking are outstanding amongst a general social rebirth that affected all the arts and sciences. For the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century however, the notion of heroic individualism and 'artist celebrity' leaves little room for the more scientific approach where the arts are studied within the environment in which they grew.

Important correlations between revolutionary social movements and artistic periods include: the Paris Commune with Impressionism; the Midwestern struggle for the 8 hour-day giving birth to May Day correlating with the Chicago School of architects and the structural advancements to skyscraper design; the Russian Revolution of 1905 with Cubism and Futurism; the Soviet Revolution of 1917 and



the birth of pure abstraction; the Mexican Revolution and the Mexican Muralists; the U.S. Industrial Union movement of the 1930s and 1940s and Abstract Expressionism; and finally, touching my life, the Palestinian working class uprisings of the late 1960s to the late 1980s gave rise to the Liberation art movement beginning in Beirut during the 1970s and continuing with the Intifada in historic Palestine till the early 1990s.

### Steps towards Abstraction

Artists of the great movements of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction discovered and practiced a vital historical step towards a renewed formal language of pictures. The Impressionists accomplished an important first step to abstraction by giving pictures the power to generalize. Details were dramatically reduced and instead replaced by attention to atmospheric conditions. An attitude of working directly from nature was adopted by the Impressionists, which allowed color and light to become central considerations of greater importance than verbal narrative. Atmospheric luminosity replaced precision and detail in defining place, time, and season. In many Impressionist paintings, the way parts related to each other helped identify the whole, even those parts that alone are unrecognizable. In some Impressionist paintings, groups of brush marks were organized to imitate groups of things in nature. This was a first in the history of pictures: that a group of marks – by the nature of their grouping – imitate relationships of groups of objects in reality.



Figure 3: Robert Delaunay, *Champs de Mars, La Tour rouge*, 1911, oil on canvas, 160.7 × 128.6 cm. Art Institute of Chicago.

The second step, which was taken by the Cubists, was also monumental in its accomplishment. The entry of time as a fourth dimension of pictorial language is as visible in their paintings as it is in their words. However, gravity, perspective, and shading are still present. Cubist paintings present various views of a central compositional element (such as a still life or figures) and unify these disparate views to hint at the dimension of time. More profound than the notion of multiple views and sequencing of time was the externalization of ideas about how any shape or volume might relate to the space surrounding it by utilizing extensions of its general shape. These extensions were thought of as dynamics of shape and volume. It is an idea later talked about by Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov in explaining Rayonism. They described their Rayonism as a concretization of imagined rays of light bouncing between parts of an ordinary object. Robert Delaunay's *Champs de Mars, La Tour Rouge*, (fig. 3) 1911, shows clearly this understanding of space. In place of background sky or city or landscape behind the Eiffel tower, it is treated as a set of parts that affect their surroundings thereby totally hiding the background. This treatment is a disruption of the traditional logic of foreground and background normal to perspective.



Figure 4: Umberto Boccioni, *The City Rises*, 1910. oil on canvas, 199 x 301 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The Futurist painters expanded the idea of time by exploring simultaneity. By merging the many things that take place at any one time in the excitement of city life, they challenged the logic of chronological narrative, of measurable space and perspective. Umberto Boccioni's painting, *The City Rises*, (fig. 4) 1910, represents this stage of growth in abstraction building on the advances accomplished by the Cubists.

The step that completed the birth of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction was taken by the Suprematists during the high years of the Soviet revolution. Painting was completely freed from perspective and shading,



and the understanding of the relativity of space, time, and color allowed for the first pure abstractions of the 20th century as seen in Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist painting: *Eight Red Rectangles*, (fig. 1) 1915. Narrative and the illustration of verbal content are completely removed from abstraction. Artists need not praise the bourgeoisie or document their pastimes. They could deal with the general principles of nature and reality, a historic step in the making of pictures.

However, as a warning to those who might want to see history as tidy as our narratives about it, pictures continue to be made in all previous methods of the various steps to pure abstraction.

## **The Rise and Recession of Revolution Affecting Painting**

The political basis of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction is further demonstrated by observing the correlation of the rise and dissolution of the most progressive movements in art with rise and recession of revolutionary motion. Examining the work of Suprematists and Constructivists during the upswing and downswing of the 1917 Soviet Revolution demonstrates this point. The example of the great Soviet painter Kazimir Malevich is most persuasive because the quality of his work was high at any point in his artistic life. Examining his oeuvre is a visual document of the rising Soviet revolution, its exciting progress, its peak accomplishment, and finally its bureaucratically imposed coldness. He lived through significant times, had a progressive attitude, and embraced the revolutionary motion of his time. His work progressed from Impressionism, to Cubism, to authoring the first truly abstract paintings of the 20th century with the Soviet Revolution (fig. 1), then receded during Soviet bureaucratic coldness to make paintings using the historically known space of three-dimensional illusion.

Another proof, if one is needed, of the role of revolutionary optimism is how it influences a whole group of artists with progressive attitudes all at once and in similar ways. Impressionism is not the personal feelings of its practitioners, nor is Cubism personal expression of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, nor does Constructivism emerge from the 'inner necessity' of Vladimir Tatlin. The Mexican mural movement is not the private expression of Diego Rivera, nor is Abstract Expressionism the individual invention of Jackson Pollock. In each illustration, the movements were spurred and energized by working-class revolution and in each case a whole group of progressive artists rose and receded with social motion.

An example of this that I had the opportunity to experience from its edges was the revolutionary rise of the Liberation art of Palestine and its recession. Having interviewed over 44 artists in order to write my book *Liberation Art of Palestine*, I saw the profound change in the artists as they embraced the cause both in their activism and in their art.

During the first part of the Palestinian liberation movement in Beirut in 1979, I could see the artists building the social infrastructure for the liberated arts. Bypassing established arts administrations, artists took control of all functions from writing the books to establishing galleries and museums, conducting open critiques, encouraging young artists and helping them find education opportunities, seeing to their education, creating exhibitions that travelled internationally (especially to Eastern Bloc countries), to establishing a union. Their enthusiasm bubbled over often entreating anyone who had taken brush to canvas to join them. They were zealous, charming, and inclusionary. They saw beauty and wanted everyone to share in it.

The second part of the Palestinian resistance known as the Intifada took place within the borders of historic Palestine where those who embraced the movement expressed it with various levels of intensity depending on the level of political oppression they lived under. Those living directly under Israeli rule resisted more mutely than their counterparts had in the liberated zones of Lebanon. Visiting Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and all parts of historic Palestine two or three times a year, between 1995 and 2005, gave me an opportunity to interview the Liberation artists living



Figure 5: Mustafa al-Hallaj, *Those Who Deter Revolution*, 1990, composition board engraving 5/10. Private collection.  
© Samia Halaby.

within the borders of historic Palestine while they were still full of the energy of the movement. The subsequent ten years also gave me the opportunity to observe its recession and the substantial return of artists to the habitual. However, something of the uprising was indelibly knit into the fabric of society and the arts. One example of the power of revolution eloquently said by Palestinian painter Sliman Mansour (b. 1947):

I felt that it was impossible to draw the Intifada. In reality it was too strong.. Before, I used to think that I was important and could help create an Intifada. The Intifada ended that ego trip and I learnt that I am a man like all others and I began to realize that not each painting had powerful influence on people.<sup>3</sup>

The Palestinian Liberation art movement was a late blossoming of revolutionary art in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just as Palestinian society was emerging into nationhood, beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Palestinians suffered British settler colonialism followed by Zionist occupation backed first by British, then U.S. imperialism. An anarchic variety, reflective of transition from feudalism into capitalist organization, dominated painting during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When the Liberation artists came onto the scene during the 1960s, they adopted painting modes developed by 20<sup>th</sup> century revolutionary movements. The primary influences on their work, in addition to the history of Arab art, were Cubism and Mexican Muralism. They rejected total abstraction in favor of using popular symbols familiar to the rising masses.

In Beirut, a leading artist and spokesperson for the group was the Palestinian printmaker Mustafa al Hallaj (1938-2002). Awareness of revolution and the difficulties faced by revolutionaries is exemplified in his woodcut (fig. 5), 1990, where scores of small figures tug at and attempt to deter the forward motion of the revolution symbolized by a charging horse and horseman.

<sup>3</sup> Sliman Mansour. Interview by Samia Halaby, November 12, 1999.

## Wave Motion in the Growth of Abstraction

Each of the movements of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction was followed by a period of regression, fantasy, and idealist thinking. However, the accomplishments of abstraction are not negated by this regression, only temporarily delayed. A cursory overview might help my point: Impressionism was followed by Art Nouveau; Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism were followed by the anarchism of Dada and by the fantasies of Surrealism. Abstract Expressionism was followed by nationalist Pop Art with its American flag and hamburger. And, in critical discourse, how 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction (Modernism) is described as being followed by Post-Modernism, reflects the same see-saw throughout history of art. These ups and downs are a reflection of current class power struggles globally.

## Philosophical Underpinnings of Abstraction and Post-Modernism

The difference in the philosophical underpinnings of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction and Post-Modernism is a difficult aspect to explain. In philosophy as a discipline, 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction is materialist, connected to the material realities of its milieu, while Post-Modernism is idealist, its artists not attending as to how they connect to reality visually and more concerned with philosophical or anthropological statements which they interpret utilizing mixed media.

In connection to abstraction we can examine the writings of the Soviet artists (or what is called the Russian avant-garde in avoidance of the word 'Soviet'). Their statements were exciting though unclear, written by enthusiastic individuals who did not fully understand the profound social upheaval they were experiencing but loved it wholeheartedly. Though they lacked clarity, their writings rarely fell into mysticism or idealism. Their critics outside of the Soviet Union were cool, undisturbed idealists, almost purposefully misunderstanding this new art. The critics' reaction is understandable. Consider how shocked you might have been if you were living in 1919 and saw a Malevich painting. Both Olga Rosanova and Kazimir Malevich described the derisive laughter their exhibitions elicited. When Malevich and his fellow Suprematists described their work as "non-objective," they meant that they would not paint images of objects as seen by a camera. Consequent bourgeois criticism converted their ideas into the opposite of their intentions, implying that "non-objective" meant their work had no basis in objective reality, thus converting material conviction into idealist intentions.

A poignant example of an abstractionist saying that his work was not personal feeling was a famous remark by the painter Mark Rothko, who it is said that at a party he told the critic Harold Rosenberg: "I don't express myself in my paintings; I express my not-self." This remark is still being interpreted in a myriad of idealist ways. In fairness, abstraction in painting is hard to understand, and even in Rothko's time fifty years after the birth of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction he faced accusations that his paintings were empty, that he only painted colors, and that he had an identity crisis.

With the discourse of Post-Modernism, the term 'deconstruction' became very popular and it always contained a sub-discourse that implied that Modernism would be de-constructed, superseded. The sudden appearance of critical discourse implying that formalism was *passé* and that verbal ideas were supreme began to appear. Some critics even bragged that this was a return to Western values. Actually, those critics, regressive as they may have been, were telling the embarrassing truth. It is as though they were saying "we stole the idea of abstraction, but let's not encourage it." And now, the use of anthropological methods in the making of visual ideas as well as in critical style is the most recent regression from 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction. The book *Fashionable Nonsense* by Alan Sokal and

Jean Bricmont makes a shy but definitive criticism of the fantasies entertained by a good portion of contemporary criticism.<sup>4</sup>

### **'Feeling' and 'Inner Necessity' in Arts Propaganda**

In arts propaganda, individualism is lauded. Artists are told that painting is feeling, self-expression, and that we artists paint uncontrollably out of inner necessity. I would laugh inwardly thinking that when I have inner necessity, I run to a certain little room one finds in most affluent houses. The propaganda of self-expression is aimed at all artists practicing in capitalist society; it is hugely damaging.

The individuals who believe abstraction is extracted from and reflects reality are mostly artists. During the great Abstract Expressionist period in American art, most critics could only describe abstraction as spiritual and strictly cerebral. This even while the entire sweep of art history seems to completely contradict such fatuous ideas. I could not imagine ancient and medieval art patrons urging the artist to self-expression. Can you imagine the Papacy commissioning Michelangelo to express his 'inner necessity' all over the Sistine ceiling? Can you imagine the ancient Egyptian pharaohs encouraging their crafts-people to create out of their personal feeling? The arts belonged to those who controlled society and they did not care about the heralded great masters nor the humble craftspeople that made their pictures. Only capitalism in its last stages and foggy horizons promotes such ideology.

I went back to check the notion of 'self-expression' and 'feeling' in history and found the early indications of such attitudes appeared in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantic painting. Charles Baudelaire expressed in writing initial ideas for this seriously damaging bit of thinking. In his critique "The Salon of 1846" he wrote: "Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subjects nor in exact truth, but in a mode of feeling. They looked for it outside themselves, but it was only to be found within."<sup>5</sup> Though these ideas first appeared in Romanticism, they advance to excess by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They have become an invitation to selfishness and pointless indulgence, robbing the painter of the rigor and intellectual challenge of understanding history and building on it. In essence, it is an invitation to self-negation.

### **Influence and Derivation**

An insidious propaganda is the accusation of 'influence;' of being influenced by other artists and of somehow deriving your work by imitating those who have the originality to express their inner feelings. One hears an implied accusation: "You are not original therefore you are a failure. Your work is derivative." Thus, what is a necessary historical process - influence and knowledge - are denigrated in the service of unique individualism. Cut off from the proud ambition of building on the great monument of human civilization, each artist goes searching for private intellectual territory, something they are themselves 'interested in' that makes them unique - makes them worthy in the eyes of critics and the capitalist collector.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (Gordonsville: Picador, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Most critics and art historians of the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century describe abstraction as idealist, mystical, formal, spiritual, based on another reality, and not based on natural shapes and forms. They imply that illusion is the right and the natural way to imitate reality. The two powerful American art critics, Clement Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro, describe abstraction as having no relation to material reality and that besides being 'apolitical' it is 'alogical,' that is outside the bounds of logic. Jeanne Willette, "Charles Baudelaire and Art Criticism", *Art History Unstuffed* (August 13, 2010), accessed 10 August 2018, <https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/ baudelaire-art-criticism/>.



## Abstraction is Capitalist Decadence

And finally, a painful punch comes from the left and from Soviet bureaucrats who declared abstraction as being capitalist decadence. This outlook denies the great art of the Soviet revolution, its proper position as the culmination of Impressionist and Cubist exploration. According to Serge Guilbaut in his book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, U.S. Intelligence serving the U.S. ruling class was then easily able, through hidden methods, to persuade the world that abstraction belongs to New York.<sup>6</sup>

## Abstraction is not Western

While working-class bureaucrats were denying abstraction, imperialists and the bourgeoisie were claiming 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction as their own. Thus, the claim that abstraction is Western, and not the fruit of a creative wave of optimism riding working-class motion, means that any artist anywhere in the world who feels the optimistic pull of abstraction is imitating the West – and thus shamefully derivative. This last idea deserves a lot of attention because it redirects all artists towards dead-end pathways.



Figure 6: Samia Halaby. *Homage to Leonardo*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 224 x 421 cm. Private collection, Dubai.

Having successfully persuaded the world that abstraction is Western, its true heirs, artists all over the world, are accused of being derivative if they build on it. Artists of oppressed nations are essentially left with nothing by arts propaganda: our roots are severed and we must go looking for national history in an age where nations are no longer viable. If we focus on revolutionary art we are accused of imitating the West, of being derivative.

This propaganda inadvertently promotes negative attitudes towards capitalist art. The artist has to separate the great accomplishments of capitalism, especially during its early revolutionary

---

<sup>6</sup> Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

beginnings in the Italian Renaissance, from the propaganda of its extreme decay. The artist must instead see that knowledge of Renaissance art is essential as is all art history, and that this is not reduced by Western propagandistic theft of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction.



Figure 7: Samia Halaby, *New York Avenues and Japanese Clouds*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 153 x 203 cm.  
Collection of the artist, New York.

### **As a Palestinian**

I now shift my point of view from the general to the particular. That is, I am shifting from viewing the sweep of art history and arts propaganda to how I see myself within them. I will briefly describe how I, as an Arab painter, am seen to fit in contemporary mainstream art in contrast to how I see myself as being a natural part of the internationalist culture of abstraction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I was removed from the Arab world at age 14 and, for a time, I adjusted to life in the Midwest of the United States. The power of the Arab world inside me made itself apparent in the 1960s when first Iraqi, then Palestinian students, excited by the growing liberation movements at home, began to arrive at universities of the Midwest and infected me with their spirited resistance. I was then a young professor, and as a result my youthful anguish about Palestine developed into political consciousness.

Reactions to me and my painting from Westerners generally affected me by inverse example. Zionist imperialist occupation of Palestine politicized me. It led me to analyze the forces that caused my eviction and continued separation from my homeland. My father's choice to settle us in

the U.S. forced me to measure the hostile propaganda and racism towards Palestinians (and others) by the yardstick of my Palestinian reality. It is clear that governments and the media lie copiously. In such a situation, one learns to read between the lines, in not only political propaganda but also capitalist scholarship.

How I was treated by other activists (Palestinian and otherwise) forced me to think through yet another stumbling block on the road to being a painter of my time. For example, at the opening of a small exhibition of Palestinian artists, a brave young activist asked me: "where is Palestine in your work?" I was surprised, and since I felt no confusion about the path that I had taken as painter I inverted the comment and began an analysis of who might want Palestine in my work. There are three main social groups that might want Palestine in my work, those being: the bourgeoisie who would like to box me into a convenient subcategory; the Arab bureaucrats who cover their shameful obeisance to imperialism with a fig leaf of 'identity;' and the revolutionary freedom fighter who wants to liberate Palestine. Of course, I sympathize with the last category and serve that purpose with my applied political art.<sup>7</sup> But in connection to my explorative painting, to such questions I respond with an affectionate counter-question: "If you fall severely ill, would you want a doctor who only knows the history of Palestinian medicine?" And I ask you also, my audience here in Switzerland: "If you fall severely ill, would you want a doctor who only knows the history of Swiss medicine?"

I always kept my painting separate from my applied and documentary work. Other than titles referring to Palestine and or other liberation movements, I devoted my painting to exploring abstraction as the most advanced art of our time, one that I am persuaded will be an important path for explorative painting in the future. It is the most important of my visual work, and the most political. That political base, the revolutionary motion of the working-class, is the most profoundly significant force of our time. Although that persuasion was strong in me, many matters arose that challenged it, and all through my life I have had to rethink and strengthen my understanding.

From all this I began to understand that pictures are of many types, like different visual languages, which range from explorative first interpretations of reality to more highly developed systems of visual symbols that become more useful to human production the more we streamline them and the more we agree on their meaning. One such streamlined visual language, for example, is highway signage (not to mention words and scientific symbols). Many useful technologies emerge from pictures. Their usefulness is great enough to make them a crucial part of the production of things that feed, house, and keep us healthy. I see pictures as useful within mankind's civilization. With the growth of all the ideas I have so far mentioned came a persuasion and clear decision that I would keep a separation between the applied, the documentary, and the explorative artwork that I make. For me activism was energizing, and after long days of meetings and/or demonstrations, I came home to create some of the most inventive and progressive ideas of my own career. The energy of seeking liberation liberated my creative process.

## In Conclusion

My explanation of the political basis of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction shows that advancement in art history is empowered by international working-class motion. Those who hold power are clearly frightened by its attributes, and so they try to obscure its truths by first owning them, then discrediting them, all through arts propaganda. Understanding and reclamation of 20<sup>th</sup> century abstraction's international and revolutionary underpinnings is an undertaking for all artists who hope to add to the great monument of human history.

---

<sup>7</sup> Samia Halaby, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* (Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing, 2016).

### Bibliography

Bricmont, Jean and Alan Sokal. *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*. Gordonsville: Picador, 1998.

Guilbaut, Serge. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Halaby, Samia. *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre*. Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing, 2016.

Halaby, Samia. *Liberation Art of Palestine. Palestinian Painting and Sculpture in the Second Half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. New York: H.T.T.B. Publications, 2001.

Mansour, Sliman. Interview by Samia Halaby, November 12, 1999.

Willette, Jeanne. "Charles Baudelaire and Art Criticism." *Art History Unstuffed*. (August 13, 2010), accessed 10 August 2018, <https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/ baudelaire-art-criticism/>.

### Biography

**Samia A. Halaby** was born in Jerusalem, Palestine in 1936. She is a visual artist, scholar, and activist. Rounding out her sixth decade as a painter, she continues to explore abstraction and its relationship to reality. She has exhibited in galleries, museums, and art fairs throughout the US, Europe, Asia, and South America. Her work is housed in private and public collections around the world, including the Guggenheim Museum (New York and Abu Dhabi) and the Institut Du Monde Arabe (Paris). Halaby has authored and contributed to a number of books, notably: "Liberation Art of Palestine" (2001), "Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre" (2016), and "Growing Shapes: Aesthetic Insights of an Abstract Painter" (2018). She is the subject of two monographs and numerous reviews.

---