

# The dialogue of shapes and colors

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**Sfeir-Semler returns with an exhibition and two parallel tours which unfold in the gallery space in Beirut: *d e-coding colors (1982-2022)*, which puts into perspective the works of Samia Halaby, a living Palestinian-American artist and working in New York, and for *the Age of Lebanon* , tracing the work of artist Farid Haddad over the last fifty years of his artistic practice between Lebanon and the United States.**

Born in 1936 in Jerusalem, Halaby completed her education at Indiana University in 1963, then pursued a career in academia, becoming the first woman professor at the Yale University School of Art in 1973. She began exhibiting her work in 1965. For her most recent exhibitions, Samia Halaby participates in the Singapore Biennale (2022), in group exhibitions at the NYU Gray Art Gallery (New York, 2020) and the Katzen Art Center (Washington, 2019). His work is also shown in solo exhibitions at the Birzeit University Museum (Ramallah, 2017) and the Beirut Exhibition Center (2015). His works are included in a number of public collections including the Guggenheim Museum (New York), the Barjeel Art Foundation (Sharjah), the Art Institute of Chicago, the Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris) and Mathaf (Doha).

Farid Haddad was born in 1945 in Beirut. He grew up in the years before the civil war, at an important moment in the development of Lebanese and Arab modernism. He completed his studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, then moved to the United States in 1975. He is now professor emeritus at New England College. Her work has been shown in Paris, Rome, the United States, Beirut, Kuwait, and Sharjah, and was most recently included in the traveling exhibition, *Manifesto of Fragility: Beirut and the Golden Sixties (2022- 2023)*, organized by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath. Haddad's work is held in international private and public collections, notably that of the Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, as well as in the collections of the AUB, the Sursock Museum, the Dalloul Art Foundation, and the Collection Saradar. The exhibition takes its name from the painting-collage work (in nine parts): *Where do you want me to go? (for the age of Lebanon)* (2018-2019). It covers the artist's earliest works, produced between 1971 and 1977, as well as his most recent works, dating from the years 2017 to 2022.

Haddad's work is very diverse, both in terms of styles (from minimalism to constructivism and colorfield to freer experiments with abstraction) as well as the mediums she invests and the techniques the artist uses. : paintings, collages and drawings are displayed on the picture rails, crossed by geometric compositions, strategies favoring the play of association and work with color which introduces a poetic dimension into his work. The work of color goes in the direction of greater visual intensity in the work of Samia Halaby. Indeed, the geometry is

also more insistent and the texture more present, to the point of being diluted in the digital material in his works from the 80s, and in a multidimensionality combining different formats and volumes.



Farid Haddad, for the age of Lebanon, 2023, Exhibition view, Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut. Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg.



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Apart from the fact that they both lived and practiced in the United States, the two artists have in common the fact of conceiving their work, in the dialogue that they both practice with form and color, as an exploration of the formal as well as lyrical possibilities of abstraction, and to have established an aesthetic vocabulary which sometimes relates to a real syntax. We thus learn that, when most of his American contemporaries, such as Joan Mitchell, Frank Stella, Clifford Still or Ellsworth Kelly build their paintings around central shapes, Halaby adds his curved or geometric shapes one after the other, like the letters of a word, referring to ancestral techniques of calligraphy or arabesque, thus designing its own alphabet, so that it would be possible to speak, in the almost literal sense of the expression, of a plastic writing . We could similarly say that the signs which form an index of shapes and colors, which the

works of Farid Haddad make it possible to establish, similarly evolve into a structural and combinatory grammar associating syntagms and paradigms. Also, the practice of collage, which is anchored in his fundamental work using painting as a basic material, is developed thanks to these fragments of painting. Thus obtained, they will be used to define new units which will constitute new syntaxes. What seems immediately obvious is that the two artists undoubtedly have in common a methodology developed over the years and solidly tested. That of Farid Haddad is almost relentless and can last several months. Likewise with Halaby, the color, which seems to spurt spontaneously from the brush, in fact obeys an almost mathematical scenario. In the mid-1980s, she went so far as to develop her own computer program on an Amiga computer to create moving shapes on the screen. We could thus, without exaggeration, take up the title of the exhibition: "de-coding colors" which would be placed in the conceptual framework of computer language and which would refer to the attempt, that of the spectator or reader of images, to decode this language which has become, here, an aesthetic language.



Samia Halaby, de-coding colors, 2023, Exhibition view, Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut.

Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg.

Two exceptionally rich bodies of work come together in the space of the Sfeir-Semler gallery to the point that we say to ourselves that this exhibition could easily have done two separately. But we must believe that what was also important here is the dialogue that it is possible to listen to and weave between the techniques, the know-how, the visual languages, the aesthetic research and, more broadly, the worlds of the two artists. This exhibition, whose purpose is above all eminently aesthetic, nevertheless also opens the door to questions relating to the status and reception of abstract painting today.

In the 50s and 60s, when abstract art was hegemonic in the West, it was criticized for turning its back on the debates of its time. Thus were born, in France, for example, but also in Spain, trends such as new figuration and narrative figuration which had the project of "narrating" contemporary events and experiences by being instances of "narration". Western abstraction was therefore no longer perceived, at this stage of its history, as sufficiently political.

At the same time as an artist and academic, Samia Halaby also defines herself as an activist. A Palestinian living in exile, she opposed all forms of repression and segregation, particularly that of the Palestinian people. In her book *Liberation Art of Palestine* (2001), she documents the art of the Palestinian revolution based on interviews with Palestinian artists in the occupied territories. In her art, however, Halaby distances herself from politics, even though she defines her art as inevitably linked to social realities. The thing is not only totally legitimate (who said that art has to be political?) but also understandable if we admit that his work, just as it is intended as an exploration of the very meaning of The abstract aesthetic is also, and in doing so, attentive to the history of abstraction, which is also inseparable from its own history and that of the political context in which this history is rooted. But the story that Halaby's painting develops is, first of all, aesthetic.

Likewise, in her preface to Farid Haddad's exhibition, curator Sarah Rifky invites us to consider the artist's work in its link with politics: "If these early works testify to his interest in minimalism and constructivism, they also reveal that he reckoned with political sentiment in Lebanon and the Arab world at that time, as expressed in the titles of his works: LIBERATION, OPPOSITION, FLAG, AFFILIATION (...) The lithographic drawings are a continuation of the previous series – one print is simply titled: *DEFEAT* ." (Sarah Rifky). This indeed shows that the artist interacted with the political context of his country, but the essential point is perhaps not there.

The truth is that art is never an autonomous entity located outside of any political dimension: its production depends on demand, as does its display. They respond to market demand. And this reality is in itself political, since it takes into account networks of influence and authorities. Thus, while placing the work of the artists it exhibits in a broader understanding of plastic issues and the historical importance of abstraction, both internationally and regionally, in echo with the Arab modernity that it invites also to be rediscovered, the Sfeir-Semler exhibition can also be considered within the framework of a more broadly institutional interest once again focused on the pictorial heritage and which today constitutes an important turning point. Also labels like that of "contemporary abstraction", contributing to forging a renewed vocabulary around artistic fact, are interesting to question.

But to return to the artistic adventure in question here, because it is one, this exhibition is also important because it introduces two artists, whose work demands to be known, to a public which does not know them little or not: Samia Halaby, whose work is exhibited for the first time at the Sfeir-Semler gallery in Beirut, and Farid Haddad, whose work is the subject of current interest, both from the point of view curatorial as well as art history, and which, for

many, constitutes a real discovery. *For the Age of Lebanon* is the artist's first solo exhibition in Beirut in over forty years. He presents a unique collection of works from the early 1970s, shown here for the first time.



Farid Haddad, *for the age of Lebanon*, 2023, Exhibition view, Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut.

Courtesy of the Artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg.

SAMIA HALABY, *de-coding colors*

FARID HADDAD, *for the age of Lebanon*

Until April 15, 2023 at the Sfeir-Semler gallery in Beirut

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