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NEWS RELEASE

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First American museum retrospective for prolific and influential female abstract artist opens June 29

‘Samia Halaby: Eye Witness’ chronicles more than six decades of the artist’s career

East Lansing, Mich. - “Samia Halaby: Eye Witness,” a multi-decade retrospective of one of the most important abstract artists of our time, opens June 29 in East Lansing, Michigan.

The exhibition, organized by the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University (MSU Broad Art Museum), has been planned for more than two years.

“To present nearly seven decades of painting by an important and prolific artist is no easy feat, and it requires years of research, thought and planning,” explained Rachel Winter, who is curating the exhibition for the MSU Broad Art Museum. “This exhibition presents Halaby’s work through the lens of place in order to understand how Halaby’s visual language changed as she moved between the Midwest, New York, Europe and the Arab world, an approach that has been developed in conversation with Halaby over the last two years.”

Featuring more than 60 works, “Eye Witness” chronicles the artist’s journey starting in the 1950s. The comprehensive survey leads audiences through Halaby’s monumental artistic career with paintings, digital work, sculptures and drawings.

Halaby is known for merging artistic styles and movements. In her works, she reconceptualizes the Islamic tradition of geometric abstraction in architecture and Western approaches to abstract painting. She also finds inspiration in nature, particularly in natural elements from Palestine such as the olive tree. Halaby’s art is layered with vibrant colors that convey joy and optimism as she proposes new ways of seeing and being in the world.

“By thinking about the ways that abstraction can help us understand general principles, like motion in a city or growth in nature, Halaby encourages people to find meaning in her work through active viewing,” said Winter. “And we’re excited to have an interactive component in the exhibition that connects to this idea. The exercise will help viewers think about places important to them and then express that through abstraction.”

The exhibition thoughtfully explores the artist's roots — including her connection to Michigan — while exposing audiences to a living artist whose work is held in museum collections around the world including the Guggenheim Museum (New York), the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates), the Art Institute of Chicago, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts (Amman, Jordan), the British Museum (London), the Institut du Monde Arabe (Paris) and Birzeit University (Ramallah, Palestine).

For Samia Halaby, who moved to the U.S. with her family when she was 14, the exhibition is also a type of homecoming. She attended Michigan State University from 1959–1960, earning her master's degree, and it was at MSU that Halaby began painting in earnest with oil on canvas and pursuing her ambition to be an abstract painter more seriously. Halaby also started her teaching career in the Midwest, using her time as an educator to introduce groundbreaking undergraduate studio art instruction to art departments across the region. Later, she became the first woman to hold the position of associate professor at the Yale School of Art.

“My education and teaching years in the Midwest formed a very important part of my maturing as a painter,” she said. “I am pleased that the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University, my alma mater, is preparing a retrospective. It is also meaningful that my paintings will hang in an architectural space designed by the great Zaha Hadid, the first woman to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize.”

The exhibition celebrates the ways in which the Midwest continues to be a powerful locus for creative innovation — and showcases an artist who demonstrates Michigan's cultural diversity.

“We are intentional about representing the communities we serve with our exhibitions and bringing forward conversations of local relevance and global significance,” said Steven L. Bridges, interim director of the MSU Broad Art Museum. “Michigan is home to one of the largest Arab populations in the U.S. Presenting the work of a Palestinian artist in diaspora provides an opportunity to think more expansively about Michigan's history and the contributions to the arts that have happened here and continue to influence future generations of artists.”

This exhibition is made possible through support from the Terra Foundation for American Art and the Eli and Edythe Broad Endowed Exhibitions Fund, with additional support from the Kathleen D. and Milton E. Muelder Endowment for Kresge Art Museum and the MSU Humanities and Arts Research Program.

The exhibition closes Dec. 15, 2024.

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About the MSU Broad Art Museum

The Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University (MSU Broad Art Museum) connects people with art through experiences that inspire curiosity and inquiry. Presenting exhibitions and programs that engage diverse communities around issues of local relevance and global significance, the MSU Broad Art Museum advances the university values of quality, inclusion and connectivity. Opened on November 10, 2012, the museum was designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Zaha Hadid and named in honor of Eli and Edythe Broad, longtime supporters of the university who provided the lead gift for its creation.

About the Terra Foundation for American Art

The Terra Foundation for American Art, established in 1978 and having offices in Chicago and Paris, supports organizations and individuals locally and globally with the aim of fostering intercultural dialogues and encouraging transformative practices that expand narratives of American art through the foundation's grant program, collection and initiatives.



Samia Halaby. Photo courtesy of Shanti Knight.



Samia Halaby, "Angels and Butterflies," 2010. Courtesy of the artist, New York. Photo and copyright: Samia Halaby, New York.



Samia Halaby, "Green Mirror Sphere," 1968. Courtesy of the artist, New York. Photo and copyright: Samia Halaby, New York.



Samia Halaby, "I Found Myself Growing in an Old Olive Tree," 2005. Courtesy of the artist, New York. Photo and copyright: Samia Halaby, New York.



Samia Halaby, "The City (Al Quds)," 1959. Courtesy of the artist, New York. Photo and copyright: Samia Halaby, New York.