Indiana University art museum cancels career retrospective of Palestinian artist Samia Halaby

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In a shameful act of political censorship, Indiana University abruptly canceled a retrospective exhibition by Palestinian artist Samia Halaby that had been scheduled to open February 10. The exhibition would have been the first retrospective of the artist's work in the US. Its cancellation is part of a wide-ranging and systematic campaign to silence artists who oppose the genocidal onslaught against the Gaza population that Israel is carrying out, with the full support of the imperialist powers.

"Clearly, the intent is to suppress Palestinian voices at this very time," Halaby told the online art publication *Hyperallergic*. "If that were not their intention, why not accept my offer to meet with them and clear matters? Why did they not speak up during the three long years of preparation?"

Halaby, now 87, was born in Jerusalem during the British Mandate of Palestine. At the time of the *Nakba* in 1948, when she was 11 years old, her family fled to Beirut and later settled in the US, in Cincinnati. Halaby studied at Michigan State University, earned a master's degree at Indiana University and later became the first female professor at the Yale School of Art.

Halaby is primarily an abstract artist, although she occasionally has worked in figuration. Her often brightly colored canvases have affinities with those of abstract expressionists such as Clyfford Still and Hans Hofmann, Russian constructivists like El Lissitzky and Italian futurists like Giacomo Balla. In the 1980s, Halaby taught herself how to write computer programs and began creating digital art. She also has designed posters and banners for antiwar organizations. More widely shown in Europe and the Middle East, Halaby's paintings nevertheless are in the permanent collections of the Guggenheim Museum in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Art Institute of Chicago.

In late December, Halaby received a call from David Brenneman, the director of Indiana University's Eskenazi Museum of Art, where the retrospective was to be held. Brenneman told the artist that employees had raised concern about Halaby's Instagram posts expressing outrage at the devastation of Gaza and terming Israel's acts genocidal. After this phone call, Halaby received a two-sentence note from Brenneman formally canceling the retrospective without providing an explanation. Many of Halaby's paintings were already at the university, including works lent by museums around the country.

In promotional materials created only a few months ago, Brenneman praised Halaby's "dynamic and innovative approach to art-making" and claimed that the exhibition would demonstrate how universities "value artistic experimentation." These comments ring decidedly hollow in the light of Brenneman's subsequent about-face.

A spokesperson for the university told publications such as the *New York Times* that "academic leaders and campus officials canceled the exhibit due to concerns about guaranteeing the integrity of the exhibit for its duration." No evidence of any threats to the artwork has emerged. The university's implied concern for the exhibition is a transparent and cynical lie. University officials are attempting to cover their cowardly capitulation to political pressure.

In November, Representative Jim Banks of Indiana, a Republican, threatened Indiana University with the loss of federal funding if administrators overlooked alleged antisemitism on campus. This fraudulent crusade against antisemitism at the universities is an attempt by Congress to silence opposition to the genocide and stifle criticism of US imperialism. It has forced University of Pennsylvania President Liz Magill and Harvard University President Claudine Gay out of their jobs, making way for personnel more eager to uphold state interests.

After receiving Brenneman's note, Halaby wrote two letters to University President Pamela Whitten, asking her to reinstate the exhibition. She voiced her dismay at the

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unexpected cancellation, which had suddenly ended years of collaboration. “Equally distressing is that this notice coincides at a time when Palestinian civilians are being massacred, starved and displaced by the millions in Gaza,” Halaby wrote. “What is being inflicted on the people of Gaza carves a deep wound.” Whitten has not deigned to respond to the artist.

Madison Gordon, the artist’s grandniece and a trustee of her foundation, drafted a petition to demand that Whitten reinstate the exhibition. “In the absence of any response from the administration, it is apparent that the University is canceling the show to distance itself from the cause of Palestinian freedom,” she wrote. “For 50 years, Samia has been an outspoken and principled activist for the dignity, freedom and self-determination of the Palestinian people. Rather than using this moment to show solidarity with a marginalized artist, Indiana University administration has chosen to silence the 87-year-old Palestinian artist.” The petition had nearly reached its goal of garnering 12,800 signatures as of this writing.

In response to this outpouring of support, Halaby issued a statement expressing “admiring gratitude.” Some of the signatories, the artist noted, were “special close friends and friends of friends, some are colleagues and acquaintances, some met me at openings and some follow me on my Instagram, many are admirers of my work, many upset by suppression at universities, and many are young people who feel angry with the insensitive reaction to the massacre in Gaza and the West Bank.” To everyone, she went on, “I owe respect for supporting me, a Palestinian who is proudly outspoken for Palestine. Your courage and solidarity is truly beautiful.”

Halaby proceeded to explain her general aesthetic outlook, asserting that she considered herself “a Palestinian internationalist artist. I keep current politics out of my paintings. I put it in my posters and my discourse. I have made many banners and posters that bluntly and clearly describe my political stand.” She observed that “many young supporters who signed the petition are in search of an anchor, and are glad to know there is a history behind where they want to go.” Interestingly, the artist then suggested: “Start your investigations with the Paris Commune and its relationship to the Impressionists, then jump to the Constructivists and the Soviet revolution, and continue from there to the Industrial Union Movement and Abstract Expressionism in New York.”

The National Coalition Against Censorship, an alliance of nonprofits, also sent a letter to Indiana University on January 11 to express its concern about the cancellation and urge the university to reinstate the exhibition. “Since the abstract works in the show are highly unlikely to be viewed as controversial, it would indeed seem that it is the artist’s pro-Palestinian advocacy and activism that provoked the university’s concerns,” the Coalition wrote.

The show at Indiana University, which was intended to include about 35 paintings, prints and drawings from throughout Halaby’s career, was to have been the first of a two-part series. The second part is still scheduled to open June 28 at Michigan State University’s Broad Art Museum.

Halaby’s retrospective is one of many exhibitions that have fallen victim to censorship targeting Palestinian and pro-Palestinian artists. In November, the Museum Folkwang in Essen, Germany, canceled part of an Afrofuturism exhibition because of guest curator Anaïs Duplan’s pro-Palestinian posts on social media. Days later, the Lisson Gallery in London canceled an exhibition by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei after he posted comments about the conflict in Gaza on X (formerly Twitter). Nor has the art press been spared these attacks. David Velasco, editor in chief of *Artforum*, was fired in October after the magazine published a pro-Palestinian open letter.

Wealthy collectors and corporate bigwigs have been the immediate instigators of many of these instances of censorship. They are acting on behalf of the homicidal Netanyahu government and its imperialist backers, which include the governments of US President Joe Biden, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, among others.

This censorship is coupled with Israel’s detention and murder of Palestinian artists, as well as its systematic destruction of museums, schools and libraries. This horrific barbarity is aimed not only at eliminating the witnesses to the Zionist state’s crimes, but also at eradicating the Palestinians and their culture. The targeting of the most sensitive and talented representatives of the Palestinian nation is a crime against all humanity. To defend culture, end the genocide and bring its perpetrators to justice requires opponents of the war to turn to the working class in a struggle against imperialism and for socialism.

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