

NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP

January 11, 2024

Pamela Whitten, President
Office of the President
Indiana University
Bryan Hall 200
107 S. Indiana Ave.
Bloomington, IN 47405

Sent via Electronic Mail to iupres@iu.edu

Dear President Whitten:

As a nonpartisan organization dedicated to freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry, the National Coalition Against Censorship is deeply disturbed by the Indiana University (IU) administration's December 2023 decision to cancel *Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy*, a retrospective exhibition of the renowned Palestinian-American abstract painter, which was to open in February at the university's Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art. We urge Indiana University to reverse its decision and move forward with presenting the exhibition as planned.

Samia Halaby: Centers of Energy has been three years in the making and was to feature the work of Samia Halaby, an IU Alum and former tenured faculty member. The New York-based Palestinian-American artist's career has earned her accolades and groundbreaking academic placements across approximately six decades. Halaby's work is known for its experimentation with geometric forms, abstraction, color, and for incorporating kinetic movement and emergent technologies. *Centers of Energy* is to feature over thirty works spanning her career—several of which come from the collection of the Eskenazi Museum of Art (EMA). The exhibition was to coincide with the release of a monograph, and act as a precursor to a solo exhibition opening at Michigan State University's Broad Museum in June.

However, it is our understanding that on December 20, 2023, Halaby was informed by the IU administration and EMA leadership that the exhibition would be canceled on account of unspecified "safety concerns" relating to "guaranteeing the integrity of the exhibition throughout its duration." According to the artist, museum leadership also noted that her posts on Instagram influenced the decision to cancel the exhibition. The artist's subsequent requests to IU to reconsider its decision have gone unacknowledged.

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 artist has

NCAC PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

Actors' Equity Association
AICA-USA
American Association of School Administrators
American Association of University Professors
American Association of University Women
American Booksellers for Free Expression
American Civil Liberties Union
American Ethical Union
American Federation of Teachers
American Jewish Committee
American Library Association
American Literary Translators Association
American Society of Journalists & Authors
Americans United for Separation of Church & State
Association of American Publishers
Authors Guild
Catholics for Choice
Children's Literature Association
College Art Association
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund
The Creative Coalition
Directors Guild of America
Dramatists Guild of America
Dramatists Legal Defense Fund
Educational Book & Media Association
First Amendment Lawyers Association
Free Speech Coalition
Global Alliance for Behavioral Health and Social Justice
International Association of Art Critics United States (AICA-USA)
International Literacy Association
Lambda Legal
Modern Language Association
National Center for Science Education
National Communication Association
National Council for the Social Studies
National Council of Churches
National Council of Jewish Women
National Council of Teachers of English
National Education Association
National Youth Rights Association
The News Guild-CWA
PEN America
People for the American Way
PFLAG National
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Poets & Writers
Project Censored
SAG-AFTRA
Sexuality Information & Education Council of the U.S.
Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators
Student Press Law Center
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Office of Communication
United Methodist Church, United Methodist Communications
Women's American ORT
Woodhull Freedom Foundation
Writers Guild of America, East
Writers Guild of America, West

a robust history of speaking out in support of Palestine and has been actively posting about the humanitarian and political crisis of Palestinians since mid-October, following Israel's military response to the October 7 Hamas attacks. The cancellation came the day following a particularly impassioned post in which Halaby speaks out against decades of violence against Palestinians and calls upon unions to join in protest against the sales of munitions to Israel.

We are aware that presenting an exhibition featuring a vocal pro-Palestine activist can be challenging in this politically polarized moment. However, a US public university should be able to meet this challenge. Instead, IU has betrayed principles of academic freedom and canceled the retrospective of a well-established artist solely because of her political views. This is what we expect of cultural and academic institutions in totalitarian states, not in this country.

When IU invites academics, intellectuals, artists, journalists, and others to campus, it does so under the assumption that principles of academic freedom govern its auditoria and exhibition spaces. Such principles are torn to shreds when an exhibiting artist is blacklisted because of their political viewpoint.

If IU has indeed received credible specific threats from those who disagree with Halaby, such threats should be handled by law enforcement and not be allowed to hold the university hostage. Otherwise, any threatening heckler who disagrees with the ideas of an artist—or, for that matter, a professor or other speaker—will be given the power to control academic programming and curricula.

Though the heated nature of the current moment creates pressures to silence certain positions on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, an artist's personal politics is not a credible rationale for canceling an exhibition. Not only does the cancellation trample upon academic freedom, it is also likely to be found to violate constitutional principles. As a public university bound by the First Amendment, Indiana University may not censor artistic expression on campus simply because its artist is politically outspoken. If the reason for the cancellation of Halaby's exhibition was indeed related to a specific security threat, the university should do what it must to ensure the safety of all ideas and perspectives on campus. We urge you to take appropriate measures and reschedule the exhibition as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Elizabeth Larison
Director, Arts & Culture Advocacy Program
National Coalition Against Censorship

cc: Brenda Stropher, Chief of Staff, Indiana University
W. Quinn Buckner, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Indiana University
David Brenneman, Wilma E. Kelley Director, Sidney and Lois Eskenazi Museum of Art