

We, the undersigned Commissioners of the City of Bloomington Arts Commission, strongly oppose the recent action of Indiana University and the Eskenazi Museum of Art to cancel the exhibition of works by the Palestinian-American artist Samia Halaby, and we question the University's stated reasoning for doing so.

Today – February 23, 2024 – was scheduled to be the opening celebration of Halaby's exhibition at the Eskenazi Museum of Art. By canceling the exhibition, Indiana University has denied its faculty, staff, and students and the local public the unique opportunity to view in person the works of a pioneer of abstract painting. Collections of Halaby's paintings are held at the Guggenheim, the British Museum, and the Art Institute of Chicago among other notable art museums, such is the quality of her work and the resounding recognition of its value to the artistic world. Indiana University has done its community a great disservice by canceling the exhibition and harmed its reputation by claiming that it cannot guarantee "the integrity of the exhibition throughout its duration," a responsibility that should be well within the capabilities of the institution.

It is unlikely, however, that the cancellation of the exhibition was solely down to the stated issues. There has been little obvious care taken by the University in the communication toward Halaby, an alumni and former faculty member of the University, regarding the cancellation, and there have been no significant details given to the public about how or why this decision was made. Is it possible, then, that the University canceled the exhibition to distance itself from Halaby's personal statements about the war in Gaza and, in effect, censor Halaby's political views, including those posted on social media shortly before the decision was made? Is it possible, then, that the University found it preferable to limit discourse on campus about the war? While we should lament being denied the opportunity to see Halaby's work, the erosion of artistic freedom that results from this decision and the growing movement to suppress challenging exchanges of expression is the far greater disservice inflicted upon our community, and we should be deeply concerned about it.

Halaby's statements are hardly unique; hers is a strong voice in a worldwide chorus of objection to violence. Her expressions reflect the political position she has publicly held throughout her adult life and form a core aspect of her identity as an artist and a Palestinian in diaspora. Her position and the beliefs and opinions behind it are not newly discovered; as the decision-makers recognize, they were well-known by the University when this exhibition was conceived and contracted. A renowned artist on the international stage, Halaby has been used as a means to raise the visibility of the University and the Museum and to characterize these institutions as broad-minded, inclusive, and politically and culturally aware. The cancellation of the exhibition and the rejection of this artist as part of the University community now have the opposite effect, showing the country and the world a university—and by association a city—that is close-minded, exclusionist, and easily swayed by apparent political pressure.

It is disturbing for Indiana University to bask in the reflective glow of Samia Halaby's success, highlighting her status as an alumna and a former professor, and then to unequivocally reject her because a known, core aspect of her identity is in sudden misalignment with political pressure. To make this decision and to keep the rationale behind it suspiciously opaque disrespects both this artist and our community, turning that reflective glow into a glaring, critical light. As a number of the undersigned are ourselves alumni of the University, this about-face and abrupt, seemingly politically motivated withdrawal of support is especially chilling. It calls into question the University's claims of "commitments to cutting -edge research, scholarship, arts, and creative activity" and the Bloomington campus's commitment to "full diversity" and "academic freedom."<sup>1</sup> While it is clear the University will not reverse its cancellation of Halaby's exhibition, we ask that the leadership of the University not go further down this dangerously slippery slope of yielding to external pressures and to instead hold fast to its commitment to diversity and the values of *Lux et Veritas* carved into the limestone walls of its institution.

In signing this statement, we confirm that the above is our position as volunteer Commissioners and members of the Bloomington community, and that it does not necessarily reflect the position of the Department of Economic and Sustainable Development or the Administration of the City of Bloomington.

Sincerely,  
Bloomington Arts Commission

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<sup>1</sup> "Mission for Indiana University Bloomington." Indiana University Bloomington. <https://bloomington.iu.edu/about/mission.html>. Retrieved 13 January 2024.