



*Domus Berytus*  
**Gilbert Halaby**

Gilbert Halaby

*Domus Berytus*

# Gilbert Halaby

*Curated and organized by*

Muriel Asmar

16.03 - 30.03.2023

Beit Beirut Museum & Urban Cultural Center

*Sodeco Square, Monot*

BEIRUT LEBANON

*“ I do what I do  
so that when I’m on my death bed,  
I can look back & smile.”*

Beirut, 16 March 2023

## Gilbert Halaby text by Marella Caracciolo Chia

There is a little bit of magic these days on the cobbled street of Via Monserrato, a stone's throw from the majestic Piazza Farnese in Rome's baroque centre. This incantamento, as we call it in Italy, has something to do with the sudden appearance, behind a glass doorway leading into an artist's studio, of a series of oil paintings on linen. Bright little houses, the kind that belong in children's dreams, are immersed in the layered depths of forested wildernesses. They are powerful pieces: a harmony of striking colours and shapes from which shadows have been banished. Judging by the small crowds that gather daily in front of the studio to peer into these dreamy landscapes, they are mesmerising, too. The author of this magic is artist Gilbert Halaby.

Our friendship began five years ago with a coup de foudre on my part. For Gilbert, because he is stylish, handsome and full of curiosity and charm, but also for the joyful energy of his artifacts. It began one crisp April afternoon of 2017. I was walking down the S-shaped Via Monserrato, as I so often do, and something unusual caught my attention. I turned around and was confronted with a spectacle: huge branches of fresh cherry blossom were towering over a jungle of cyclamens and ferns that seemed to sprout from a rich mossy parterre. No, it was not a secret garden, though it looked like one. It wasn't exactly a shop either ('non,' Gilbert later explained, 'ce n'est pas une boutique'). Nor was it a home, though its cosy atmosphere filled with artworks and books (and plants!) made it feel like one. It was, quite simply, Maison Halaby: an oasis of peace and culture where friends and shoppers alike were welcomed with a hot cup of mint tea, some fresh Lebanese cakes and, most importantly, a smiling man who has mastered the art

Rome, 2 March 2023

of conversation. At that time Gilbert, who hadn't yet found his painting studio down the road, was mostly focused on the production of his exquisite line of handcrafted leather bags: a joyous exercise aimed at finding the perfect balance between form and colour. Possibly, a prelude to his work as a painter. Gilbert Halaby was born in 1979 in the small Lebanese mountain village of Dhour El Choueir that overlooks the city of Beirut and the Mediterranean Sea beyond it. Memories from his war-torn childhood, however, are surprisingly untarnished. He remembers the game, shared with his friends, of counting the number of scud missiles flying over their heads. Once, one missile fell on his house but miraculously no one was hurt. "All that matters when your country is at war," he told me, "is love, friendship, a strong sense of solidarity and a burning desire for adventure." Once the war was over this burning desire led Gilbert to Beirut, where he studied archaeology, and eventually to Rome, where he found love. For centuries the Eternal city has encouraged writers and artists to give free reign to their talents and pursue their happiness. Gilbert has not been immune to this influence. Which is why when a space, just a few steps from Maison Halaby, became available in 2020, he grabbed it and transformed it into his studio. "All I need to be truly happy now," Gilbert concludes, "is a canvas and a few paint brushes." These paintings, so bright, so light and so deeply magical, are the flowering of this newfound joy.

## *Soliloquy*

## I Recall The Light

I was born in a village on Mount Lebanon during the war - luckily and unluckily, but this is a story to be told at a later date.

I spent my tender years playing around with my friends in the fields and around the village houses. I had the good fortune of meeting many characters brimming with spellbinding stories; those stories helped shape my untamed imagination. It is one of these characters that I remember vividly, and who holds a special place in my memories. The only painter of my village. A beautiful human being, introvert and calm. His daughters were my sister's friends and I used to come up with any excuse to join her when she visited them, just so I could have a peak at his marvellous studio and see him transforming canvases into tales of wonder.

It was there and then that I saw the light that was inside of me. Being a boy in a Lebanese village during the war wasn't always easy. Being a painter in the horizons of that boy was an absolute impossibility.

I had no alternative but to suppress that light with a very dark and heavy cloud, as I sought to create a parallel self that would offer me financial stability and the 'manly' future that was expected of me. For being a painter, an artist, in the mountains of Lebanon in the 1980s was considered merely a hobby and never a Man's job.

Despite this, my need to create compelled me to do so in different forms particularly writing during my school years.

I would also paint and create objects of art, but I would always downplay it to avoid being judged by friends and the society I was living in.

Yet that dark and heavy cloud could not blot out the light that had never dimmed inside of me. For it was that light which encouraged me to leave Lebanon and set me forth on the odyssey of the search for Myself.

It took more than 20 years. Now I have finally flung open the windows to that shining light and made great peace with it.

Finally I made peace with myself and became the painter that I always was.

Finally I became my own, friend, father, brother and sister, and I encouraged that light to become tales.

Finally I started to resemble the painter I met when I was a child.

Finally I became that painter I was when I was a child.

29 September 2022  
*Gilbert Halaby*

My dearest boy,

Someone once said that when you reach forty, your demons will eventually shatter the glass dome of your soul and escape. Well, that someone was correct.

However scary those demons might be, especially if they come from a childhood scarred by a ravaging war, I say: make peace with them, or they shall haunt your days until the sun sets on them.

I made peace with them; I knew I ought to; I ought to make peace with them to allow the light to filter in again.

I am returning to you very soon, my dear boy, with the birth of that peace; conceived beneath that marvellous light.

I am returning to you clutching 40 canvases with no sign of shadows on them. Still, only light, a spectacular light, that mid-day light cast across the mountains. The light that makes the cicadas sing loudly, from pain they say, yet I am inclined to believe that it comes from Love — the eternal love of that light, the light that makes colours so pure and bright.

I am returning to you with my homes and their dear companions, the tall and mighty pine trees. Do you still play under those pine trees? Don't answer this question now, we shall have a lifetime of correspondence, and you shall tell me about them.

A great friend once said:

“Always at home. Eventually, we reach our goal - and it is then, with pride, that we can point to the long travels we undertook to reach it. In reality, we were not even aware of the travelling. But we got so far because we believed at every point that we were at home.”



His name is Nietzsche. Do you know him? Well, I suppose not at your age, but you shall know him soon, and you shall love him dearly.

I mention this because the most precious treasure I am bringing back to you is my home - A bouquet of homes, in fact- the HOME that merged in me to become an abstract, and I believe now that it will always be a presence on my canvases. Though I am not lamenting this pain; on the contrary, it's a source of beauty, which is admittedly a cheerful thought. I've learned during the long travels I undertook (as Nietzsche said) that home is the skin that covers my whole. I know and knew too, that home is the person we love. And surely home is everywhere we smile, and we make love; home is where a bird sings to us; home is the embrace of a true friend; home is me and you under that mighty pine tree.

You shall see solitary homes and solitary pine trees on those canvases, my dear boy,

Yes, when you make peace with your demons, you will start loving your solitude, and you will begin to cherish it. That yellow Home on the cliff is happy; he is happy in his completeness; he is happy in his solitude.

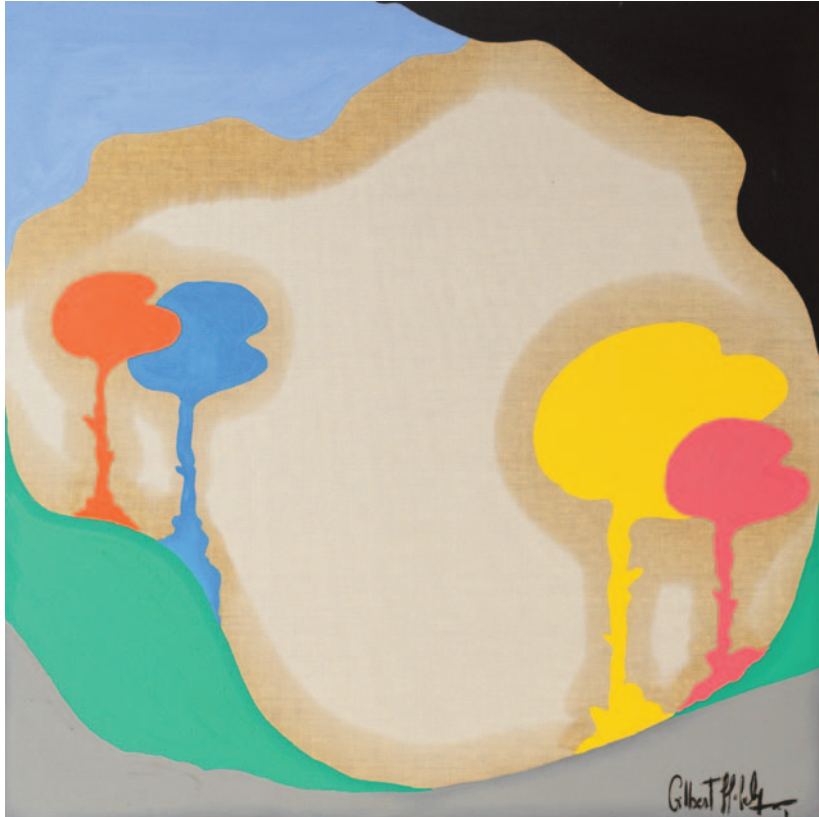
That black pine tree on the other cliff, my cherished cliffs, the cliffs of your mountains, that solitary pine tree is a free soul, a beautiful soul, and a story to be told.

Will you wait for me under that pine tree?

Yours dearly,

Gilbert Halaby

*Shall we?*



*PĪNUS BERYTUS*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 150 x 150 cm



*DECORIS*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 150 x 150 cm

## *Time*

*When Time becomes your friend,  
when you're not afraid of losing him anymore,  
when you know how to stretch him  
like dough in your fingers,  
when you start contemplating his immensity,  
you are part of him like a lover would be,  
Time's on your side don't be afraid of him.  
Love him and he will love you back.  
Time doesn't fly.  
He simply provides the wings for you to fly with.  
When Time becomes your friend,  
you become free.*

Rome, 17 September 2020



*SOROR*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 130 x 200 cm

## *A Smiling Heart*

*Teach your heart to smile.  
Teach it the art of time, the art of life.  
Teach it the joy of dance, the love of patience.  
Teach it love from a bright mind,  
smiles from a twinkling eye.  
Teach your heart to smile.  
Teach it how to hide in a fresh cloud,  
how to hide from attention seekers.  
Teach it how to see through the madness of the  
crowds, how to create heaven on earth.  
Teach it the taste of freedom and  
how free mortals are formed.  
Teach your heart to smile so it may recognise  
a smiling heart in the crowd*

Rome, 8 October 2019



*BONITAS*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 150 x 150 cm



*TENERITAS*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 150 x 150 cm

## *Son of the Sun*

*I told the Sun about you,  
She smiled in quietude. Content.  
I kept talking without a clue,  
Her smile became words so I understood her intent.*

*I told the sun about your morning light,  
She smiled more, and said: He's my son.  
You kept my heart warm with your sight,  
Now I know. You and her are one.*

*She smiled once more and said:  
Compose him verses and let them rhyme,  
Let your ink caress the words in a golden thread,  
Crown his head with your poem for the rest of time.*

*I love you - Son of the Sun -  
I love you until my days are done*

Rome, 9 June 2021



*LUXI*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 90 x 90 cm



*DHOOR*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 90 x 90 cm



## *The Light*

*I write to awaken beauty,  
to paint my days.*

*I write to awaken joy,  
to paint my face.*

*A new word a day, a treasure every day.*

*I write so poems can breathe,  
and rhymes can dance.*

*So poems tickle my face with a bright smile.*

*A new word a day, a sunny fable every day.*

*I write so I can cross the bridge of light,  
so I can walk in the sun.*

*A new word a day.*

Rome, 24 February 2020



*HARMONY*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 100 x 150 cm



*RUPES*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 100 x 150 cm

## *Your Voyage*

*What if they asked you to look back my dear,  
To scrutinize your voyage, your reminiscence?  
When your winter is truly near,  
Will your tales be rich in life or will they be filled with silence?*

*An intrigued youth sits beside you,  
Eager to savour your stories, your encounters and your words,  
From far away lands an indelible view,  
Do you have what it takes, or should he lend an ear to the birds?*

*Wake up now! the shadows are hovering mournfully.  
Pen poems with mortals near and far,  
When on your deathbed, you shan't look back remorsefully,  
The horizon is pure, brimming with rhymes and not a scar.*

*Read, drop a line, recount and leave a trace,  
Listening to you, that youth would smile in grace.*

Rome, 29 December 2020



*PRUDENTIA*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 150 x150 cm



*BEATITUDO*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 150 x 150 cm

*“Painting is for me a horizontal voyage that makes me  
rise to the Heavens.  
Sculpting is a vertical one that draws me  
back down to Earth.”*

Rome, 23 May 2023



*SOLIS*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 130 x 200 cm

## *Precious Spring*

*What if I gave you wings,  
Where would you fly to?  
To your heart, to your precious Springs?  
That sacred voyage is overdue.*

*Fly in solitude my dear,  
The clouds will keep you company,  
They are mellifluous and crystal clear,  
Listen keenly to their noiseless symphony.*

*The embrace shall be overwhelming,  
Set foot in that mesmerizing universe,  
Don't fear, adventure is always daring,  
Return to us adorned with your life verse.*

*As it rivals the most iridescent star,  
I can behold your smile from afar.*

Rome, 15 January 2021



*PINUS*, Rome - 2022, Oil & collage on linen, 150 x 150 cm



*ADSRGO*, Rome - 2022, Oil & collage on linen, 150 x 150 cm



## *My mighty mountains*

*That ruinous wind came from behind the mighty mountains,  
my mighty mountains.  
That unlit wind came to frighten me,  
from behind my mountains.  
I am obscured by his dark thoughts,  
and for the first time perturbed.  
I trust that my mighty mountains will stand strong and tall.  
I am certain that their trees will blossom again and their birds  
will build nests in their pines again.  
But I'm terrified to watch their suffering, they will shut their  
eyes throughout this malign storm.  
I'm breathless because I'm incapable of hugging them with my  
eyes, and petrified because I'm uncertain when I will be able to  
fly over them again.  
I want to salute them and salute my people living between their  
soft hills, under red rooftops and in the shade of their oak trees.  
I want to tell them, the storm is over and the mighty moun-  
tains have opened their eyes once again.  
My mighty mountains.*

Rome, 15 June 2020



*COGITATIO*, Rome - 2022, Oil & collage on linen, 100 x 100 cm



*PINUS III*, Rome - 2022, Oil & collage on linen, 100 x 100 cm

## *Wait*

*Let me reach your heart.*

*Let me touch it,*

*Let me write on its walls,*

*Let me embrace it,*

*Let me reach your heart, before you speak.*

*Let me dance with your fantasies, a carnal dance, lips locked.*

*Let me breathe in your ears,*

*Let me smell your neck and touch your cold spine,  
before you speak.*

*Wait.*

*Let me reach deep inside your heart.*

*Let your groans be the words for now.*

*Let the scent of your inviting sweat be the words for now.*

*Let the pink of your voluptuous skin be the words for now.*

*Wait.*

*Let me touch your heart, before you speak.*



*DOMUS*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 150 x 150 cm



*VISITORS*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 60 x 60 cm

*“ When you’re twenty you long  
to conquer the world.  
When you reach forty you begin  
to conquer yourself.”*

Rome, 21 July 2019



*DOMUS BERYTUS*, Hydra - 2022, Acrylic on linen, 130 x 400 cm

*“ All we have in our lifetime is time.  
We have it in abundance.  
Every material thing will belong to us  
for a limited period of time.  
Nature will reclaim it,  
as she will eventually reclaim us.  
It is upon us to decide what to do with our only true  
possession, time.  
I say: become a better human being.  
How?, you ask?  
Raise your intellect and use it for the better good.”*

Rome, 22 July 2019



*SOLITUDO IV*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 50 x 50 cm



*UNITAS*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 50 x 50 cm



## *Upskill Your Soul*

*YES upskill your eyes to behold beauty,  
Upskill your eyes to relish splendour,  
Upskill your eyes to discern the light,  
Upskill your eyes to wanderlust  
in a symphony of marble.*

*Yes your eyes.*

*Upskill your eyes to metamorphose into  
a better poet,  
to scrutinize the beauty in other poems.  
To take delight in what other souls left behind.  
Upskill your soul.*

Rome, 14 December 2019



*ANIMO*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 50 x 50 cm



*SERENUS*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 50 x 50 cm



*COERULEUM*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 50 x 50 cm

*The more you lust after  
The more you compromise,  
Your heart will suffer  
And your days filled with lies.*

Rome, 16 July 2021



*MERIDIES*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 50 x 50 cm



*SOMNIUM*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 50 x 50 cm

## *Kiss me*

*Will you be there when I awaken?  
Caressing my forehead with your eyes,  
Guarding my dreams so by the shadows  
I am not taken,  
Holding my heart and watching  
the night as she dies.*

*Kiss me, wet my lips  
And let the morning chant a love hymn  
He is for the night a bright eclipse  
Love me, and let us rejoice in him.*

*Not now my dear,  
Fear him, my Love is my arrow,  
Convey your son Hypnos and disappear,  
Irresistible for Cupid not to borrow.  
Your voice is the reason I glow endlessly  
Don't ever stop echoing your undarkened melody.*



*SOLITUDO II*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm



*SOLITUDO III*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm



*CONCORDIA*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm



*SUBLIMIS*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm

*“In life one should always try  
to Keep a good doctor close  
(Just in case)  
But a good librarian closer.”*

Rome, 12 October 2021



*VENTO*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm



*MADRE E FIGLIO*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm



*CANTO*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 40 x 40 cm



## *Your smile*

*It's that smile,  
With it you walked into my heart.  
It's the colors of that smile.  
They changed the colour of my veins,  
the rhythm of my breath,  
the dance in my step.  
It's the curve of your lips,  
With it you made me leap into orgasm.  
It's the taste of your smile,  
Which rewrote my birth,  
Shaped my future,  
And thrust me into a scented reality.*

Rome, 21 December 2018



*NOX*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 30 x 30 cm



*ALBA*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 30 x 30 cm



*TERRA*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 30 x 30 cm



*TRAMONTO*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 30 x 30 cm

## *Eternity*

*When I lay on your chest and you hug me,  
it's eternity.*

*When I kiss your neck and smell your skin,  
it's eternity.*

*When I feel your breath on my face and your lips  
touching the tip of my nose, it's eternity.*

*When you tell me stay, don't leave yet,  
it's eternity.*

*When I whisper I love you in your ear,  
it's eternity.*

*Your scent in the morning is eternity.*

*Your smile is eternity.*

*Your heartbeat is eternity.*

*I love you.*



*SOLITUDO*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 30 x 30 cm



*POESIA*, Rome - 2022, Oil on linen, 30 x 30 cm



*CANTICUM*, Rome - 2023, Oil on linen, 30 x 30 cm

Don't let them pigeon-hole you for their inability to understand your world. It's easier for average people to put a label on you rather than taking the time to listen to your story, and find leisure in encountering your imagination.  
Create as much as you want, and in any form you like.  
Enjoy the metamorphosis in your hands because creating for oneself is the only noble way of creating.  
Few people will follow your thoughts, but they are more than enough."

Rome, 26 August 2020

*Will you wait for me under that pine tree?*



# Que du Bonheur!

16 March 2023

Copyright © 2023 by Gilbert Halaby

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author,

Gilbert Halaby, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, write to the author, at the address below.

Via di Monserrato, 21  
00186 Roma

*Gilbert Halaby*

[muriel.asmar@gmail.com](mailto:muriel.asmar@gmail.com)

Tel: +961 3 176 669