

Huguette Caland's Mediterranean dream

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Here, a plump orange circle splashes onto the white canvas. There, washes of bluish grey, cream and jade are superimposed, creating an oneiric landscape reminiscent of the Mediterranean horizon. Standing in the centre are six custom-designed mannequins dressed in hand-embroidered heavy silk kaftans, each telling a story. On one dress, exquisitely fluid lines trace the shapes of two arms – the imprint of an embrace. On another, cartoonish lines of the female body are drawn, both playful and evocative. Huguette Caland's exhibition at Lombard Freid in Chelsea, New York, is simply a burst of light and energy.

Caland's work is filled with this childlike awe with the colours of the world, with emotionally potent memories and the characters of life. While her sensual lines and warm colours evoke avant-garde movements from surrealism to abstract expressionism and Georgia O'Keeffe's American modernism, each work reveals a world unique to Caland, filled with the scents and textures of Beirut, moments of love, family, war, exile and freedom. Threaded throughout is the incredible story of a fiercely independent woman born in 1931 who thrived in post-independence Beirut, moved to Paris then Venice, California, and continues to paint obsessively, defiantly.

Caland was born in Beirut at a time of both hope and upheaval. Her father, Bechara El Khoury, was post-independence's first president. In the 1960s and early 1970s, Beirut was an intellectual and artistic hub – a place of relative peace, democracy and freedom of expression, where many Arab nationalist ideals took shape in an atmosphere of openness and exchange.

Caland herself, while married at a young age, took part in this free-spirited society and started an NGO, Inaash, dedicated to the Palestinian population that had migrated to the country. When her father died in 1964, Caland liberated herself from her social environment and chose to dedicate her life to her art – studying at the American University of Beirut and eventually leaving her husband and children behind to live a bohemian life in Paris in 1970, where she had a lasting affair with the Romanian sculptor, George Apostu.



Huguette Caland's silk kaftans are in keeping with her evocative artwork - all fluid lines and feminine forms. All photos courtesy of the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery, NY

It is during that period that Caland began working on the series on view at Lombard Freid Projects: Bribes de Corps. The artist painted abstract evocative forms that illustrated a rich inner world, an intimately feminine exploration of life and love. Resolutely removed from politics – both from the civil war that ravaged the country from the mid-70s on and from the feminist movement that many women of her generation were part of – Caland chose instead to focus on lyricism and nature, humour and humanity. Art was a means of free expression, an escape from everyday life. “There was a moment where my mother just removed herself from the world around her and started working all day, every day,” explains her daughter Brigitte. “She hasn't stopped since.”

Caland's style ranges wildly from moment to moment. There are the vivid colours and thick abstractions of her oils, in which simple lines and masses of colour make for delightfully minimal compositions. There are cartoonish characters in busy paintings in which lines and

masses of colour make for delightfully minimal compositions. There are cartoonish characters in busy paintings in which lines and colours clash, creating a playful human cacophony. For her intricate drawings, the artist creates subtle textures in pastel tones, shaping eyes, lips and organic creatures that are strangely soothing. Her six kaftans, hand-embroidered by a sheikh in Beirut in the 1970s, showcase her talent for lines and patterns and her whimsical humour. Later, as the civil war raged and she struggled to live from her art in Paris, Caland created a custom series of kaftans for Pierre Cardin.

There lies the power of her work: in the resilience, thirst for freedom and lust for life, in the luminosity of her colours and paintbrush, in the simple curves of her forms and her meditatively stark compositions, in the charm that erupts from each character or shape. Her oeuvre is filled with the generosity and lusciousness of the Mediterranean Orient, with the bright sea and imposing mountains of her childhood, with the rich sophistication of the East.

While the young artist evolved in a creatively bubbling Beirut surrounded by the likes of Aref Rayess, Helen El Khal, Shafic Abboud, Janine Rubeiz, Adonis and her Bauhausian teacher John Carswell, her own aesthetic and approaches have always been fiercely individual. “My hand is independent to my spirit,” she has repeatedly stated. Caland was part of a modernist moment in Lebanese art and of a period of social and political upheaval where all traditional dogmas were turned upside down – but her work was a reflection of her inner landscapes, visions and dreams, not a provocative manifesto.

As some critics have noted, Caland is indeed related to Niki de Saint Phalle and Georgia O’Keeffe, who also explored natural forms, intimacy and bright colour palettes, celebrating femininity in its exultancy. In her concern with the organic, the sensual, the personal and the handmade, she is also linked to feminist artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Spero, Eva Hesse and Judy Chicago, but her work carries none of the tortured darkness or political violence that characterises them. Despite a complicated childhood marked by a sports car accident, a lifelong struggle with her weight, the death of her beloved father and the tragedy of war and exile, her work holds a lightness and everlasting wonder for life.

It is for its luminosity, brightness and freedom that Caland moved to California in 1988, where she built her bunker-like studio and home in Venice. Built as a “cathedral” for creating, it consists of a concrete modernist facade and open space where trees, flowers and paintings mingle joyously. Her bedroom floor is a salmon red; her drawings, paintings and sculptures fill the house and garden; the front door is painted bright green. Everywhere are traces of her adventures, from love letters to family photos and traditional Palestinian embroidery. Caland continues to work assiduously, finally enjoying worldwide recognition after all these years – with a major retrospective at the Beirut Exhibition Centre, a presence at New Orleans’ Biennial Prospect 3 and curatorial requests from major institutions such as the Centre George Pompidou, the Bibliothèque Nationale and the San Diego Museum of Art, which all hold her works in their collections. As for the artist, at the age of 82, she maintains her everlasting joie de vivre: “I love every minute of my life,” she says. “I squeeze it like an orange and I eat the peel, because I don’t want to miss anything.”

