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GALLERIES

The Colorful Past of Huguette Caland

by Hrag Vartanian on December 16, 2014

For the last four decades, artist Huguette Caland has largely languished in obscurity. She had a brief flash of fame in the 1970s, when, reportedly inspired by the feminist movement, she left her husband and three kids behind in Beirut, moved to Paris to lead a bohemian life, and designed over a hundred kaftans for fashion designer Pierre Cardin. The work from that transitional period is full of life and energy, informed by her love of colorful and bodily abstractions. Now, the octogenarian painter, who is notably the daughter of Lebanon's first post-independence president, Bechara El Khoury, is on a clear path towards being rediscovered in the art world. In the last year, Caland has been the subject of a number of exhibitions from Beirut to Dubai and London to New Orleans. New York's Lombard Freid Gallery currently has on view an exhibition of her little-seen work from the 1970s and early 1980s.

These years mark Caland's most ambitious period — a time when the then 40-year-old artist started to step away from her reliance on the human form to create a personal language of abstraction. Coy sexual and sensual connotations litter the work, sometimes in obvious ways, like embracing heads and limbs, while other aspects are more coded, referring obliquely to lovers and other figures in her life.



A view of six kaftans designed by Huguette Caland for Pierre Cardin in the 1970s for his 'Nour' series (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic unless otherwise noted)



Huguette Caland wearing one of the kaftans she designed for Pierre Cardin (image courtesy Lombard Freid Gallery, NYC)

The exhibition at Lombard Freid features six of her distinctive kaftans on whimsical mannequins designed by the artist, a number of big, brash abstract paintings, and dozens of Pop-informed colored pencil drawings. The paintings are dominated by strong lines that are eager to burst past the edges of the work. Bright, organic forms kiss on the canvas, conveying a sense of optimism as they float and writhe in the shallow pictorial space. The kaftans are textbook feminist incarnations with their stark sexuality that emphasizes, rather than masking, the female form. It's easy to see the influence of Georgia O'Keeffe and Louise Bourgeois in these shapes, which are clearly laden with the psychology of the artist. Caland's recent work is more quilt-like and largely devoid of human forms, as dots, lines, and patches sprawl across surfaces like maps of an unfamiliar land.

What makes these works from the 1970s and '80s so refreshing is the overarching sense of experimentation. You can sense the artist's newfound freedom in the candy-like palette and energetic lines. The art straddles the immediacy of Pop, the contemplative plainness of Minimalism, the visual allure of Color Field painting, and countless other artistic trends of the period without falling into the abyss of mimicry. Caland's talent comes from her ability to synthesize the world around her into something tantalizing, fresh, and sensual.