

Art in America

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Huguette Caland

by Austin Considine

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at Lombard Freid

Portraying the nude body and female sexuality has long proved problematic for Middle Eastern artists, particularly women (an ancient problem rooted in, among other things, a long history of aniconism in Islamic, Judaic and Byzantine traditions). But Lebanese artist Huguette Caland's confidence in rendering these subjects, as seen in Lombard Fried's recent survey of her early works, speaks to a not-distant past when such explorations seemed increasingly possible without one's needing to conduct them from exile.

Caland was born in 1931, the daughter of the Lebanese republic's first president, and came of age during a brief window in post-World War II Levantine history when cosmopolitanism flourished alongside the newfound political independence in cities like Beirut, Aleppo and Damascus. The works in this exhibition were created between 1970 and 1985, while the artist (now based in Los Angeles) lived in Paris. But they are a direct evolution of her work in Beirut in the 1960s, during which time she studied at the American University of Beirut and demonstrated an early determination to develop an honest and unsentimental vocabulary for making paintings about bodies.

The exhibition's most compelling works were 11 large-format oil paintings, particularly the six from her 1973 series "Bribes de Corps" (Body Bits). Not strictly figurative, their various bulges and creases clearly allude to the naked body, containing something of Schiele's unflinching, magnified honesty, the sensuous innuendo of Georgia O'Keeffe and the Surrealist comedy of Magritte. The complementary paintings *Madame* and *Monsieur* (both 1980) read like abstract and absurd anatomical diagrams; one isn't sure which body bits are being shown, but yellow tubelike shapes playfully hint at the more private ones.

For all their eroticism and humor, the "Body Bits" paintings are also formal experiments recalling Color Field and Abstract Expressionism. Up close, the red space squeezed between two supple, curved violet shapes burns with the thermodynamic intensity of Rothko's reds. White, Y-shaped seams carved through yellow planes with soft red edges glow like the ghostly zips of a Barnett Newman. Their magnificent colors notwithstanding, the paintings most immediately reminded me of nude images by early modernist photographers like Imogen Cunningham and Edward Weston, in which close-cropped portrayals of limbs and fleshy folds become abstract landscapes of line, gradation, and shadow.

Many of the 10 drawings exhibited in the rear gallery effectively transpose these experiments into more muted pencil tones, to lesser effect. Several untitled drawings verge on the psychedelic; in retrospect, they feel a bit dated—inseparable from pop culture trends of their time, from album cover art to the lumpy grotesqueries of Terry Gilliam's animations for the BBC series "Monty Python's Flying Circus."

At the center of the front gallery hung six caftans, their surfaces hand-illustrated by Caland (she would later make a series of more than 100 others with designer Pierre Cardin). One bold example, *Mirror* (1974), depicts a naked woman's body, rendered simply, surrounded by dotted circles—Klimt-like suggestions, perhaps, of the female egg.

Another, *Crowd* (1970), presents a gathering of anxious, carnivalesque faces, depicted as though they are peering out from openings in the caftan itself. In *Tenderness* (1975), two hands seem to grasp the wearer's body from behind while a third covers the mannequin's mouth (Caland also designed and painted the abstract mannequins on which the caftans were displayed). The caftans aren't as engaging as Caland's best paintings, but their symbolic boldness—the cloak of uncloaked nudity, the crowd beneath the garment, the restraining hands—bespeaks an artist unafraid to challenge convention during a time when so much seemed possible.

