

This is the revenge of female artists

The Octogenarians

Marie Tomb

They are in their eighties and nineties, and their work has never been in such high demand. This group of veteran Modern female Lebanese painters with distinguished careers, including Yvette Achkar (b. 1928), Etel Adnan (b. 1925), Huguette Caland (b. 1931), and Helen Khal (1923-2009), have witnessed an unprecedented surge of interest in their abstract works over the last few years, suggesting that Modern female Lebanese painters are finally being given their due.

Increasing in Monetary and Cultural Value

While these artists were “prominent in their own circles [in their day],” says gallerist Saleh Barakat, “it is only recently that they’ve been recognized.” The beginnings of this late recognition – the crowning of careers over half a century in

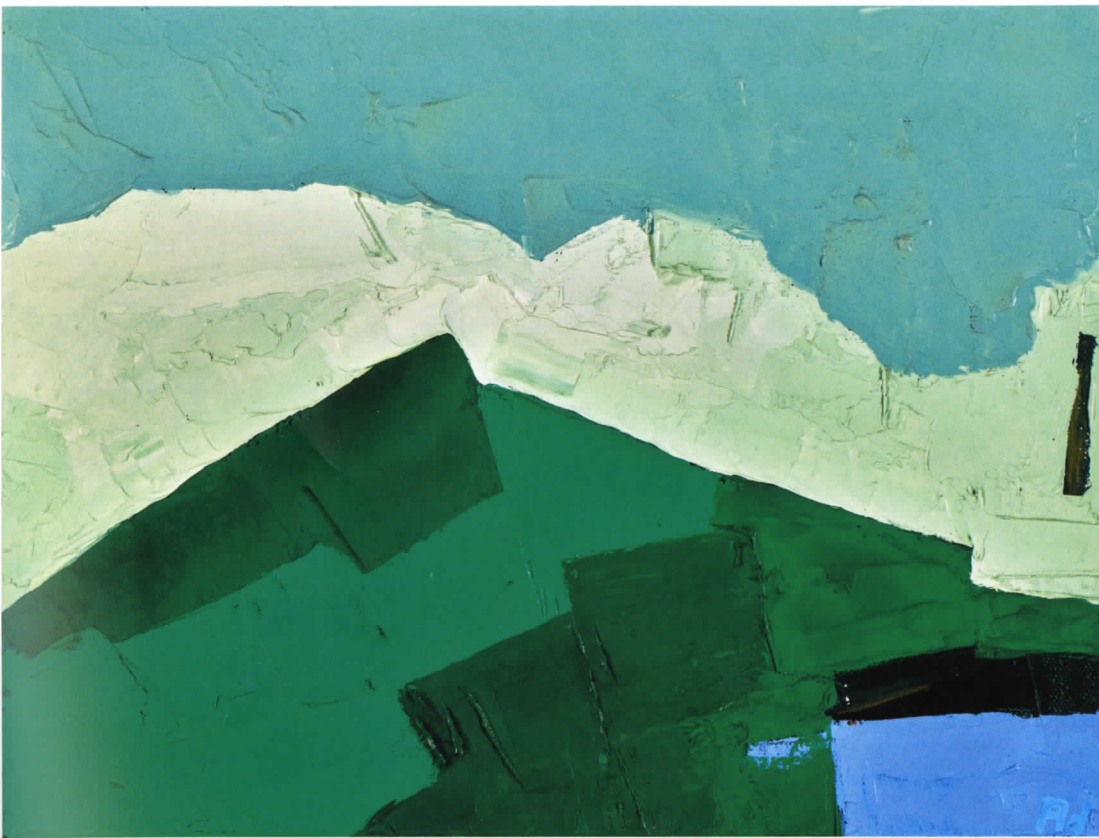
the making – could already be sensed in the late 2000s, but it was only around 2016 that the four painters became omnipresent on the Middle Eastern auction circuit. “It’s not a worldwide phenomenon yet, but people beyond Lebanese borders are definitely interested in these artists,” says Beirut-based art dealer Gabriel Rizkallah. Appetite for their work has spread from the Lebanese market to sales by Christie’s and Sotheby’s in Dubai, Doha, and London. “The majority of their collectors remain Lebanese nationals living in the country or abroad,” Beirut-based auctioneer Nada Boulos Al Assaad remarks.



Yvette Achkar



Yvette Achkar, Oil on canvas, 70x100. Sold for \$62,500 at Arcache, November 2018



Etel Adnan, Oil on canvas, 22.9x30.5, 1984. Sold for \$65,000 at Sotheby's, October 2018



Etel Adnan

The prices of these four artists have been consistently rising in Beirut auctions, and soaring abroad. As of 2006, Achkar's works had not broken the \$10,000 bar at auctions, but this March one of her paintings went under the hammer for \$125,000 at a Christie's auction in Dubai. Meanwhile, Khal's prices have increased by two thirds over the past five years, although her estimates and results are volatile. This April in London, a painting from the 1960s by Adnan was sold by Sotheby's in London for almost triple its already high estimate, the sale eventually

surpassing \$169,000. Around the same time, a 1973 Caland painting commanded over \$242,000. The same work was sold for \$149,000 by Christie's in Dubai four years ago. Still, not all of the four painters' works are valued alike, which "likely reflects the worldwide vogue for abstract art," says Rizkallah. For instance, collectors generally prefer Khal's abstract works, which are reminiscent of Mark Rothko, to her figurative painting, and Caland's avant-garde abstracted body parts from the 70s to her recent tapestry-like paintings.

International Interest Rises Again

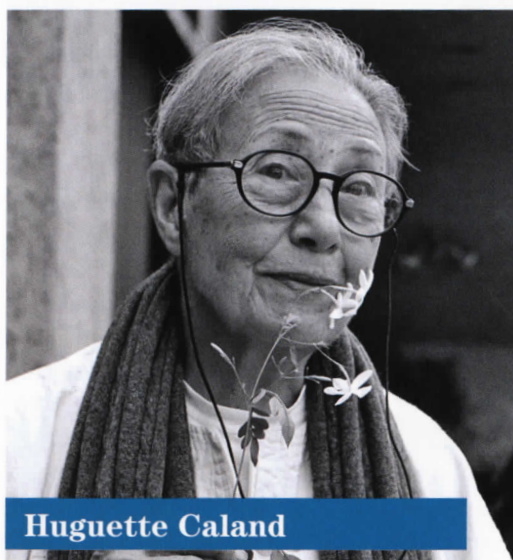
This newfound interest in Modern female Lebanese painters can furthermore be tied to the international resurgence of interest in Modern female artists, which bears witness to the "unprecedented international fame of female artists such as Hilma af Klint [or] Louise Bourgeois, for example," notes Barakat. "This is the revenge of female artists," concurs Rizkallah, "and, at the same time, a fashion." As well as, perhaps, a matter of investment.

MARKET

Indeed, besides being the echo of a larger trend that appears to be supporting female artists, the meteoric rise in the prices of Achkar, Adnan, Caland and Khal could also be linked to the increasing rarity of their works: Khal passed away in 2009, and Achkar has, for the most part, not been producing for several years. Adnan and Caland remain active, but their careers are considered nearer to their end than their beginning. For Boulos Al Assaad, however, it is “the fact that these are women artists marked an era that makes collectors fantasize, not the idea that their production is about to come to a halt ... Then again no one wants to acquire works that will be worth nothing in a few years, and these are confirmed artists.”

Others hold a more cynical attitude towards some of these four painters’ most ardent fans. Numerous art buyers are known to keep a list of artists worth investing in, those who are currently popular, and collectively rush to acquire them, resulting in bidding wars. “Many are on the lookout to invest, and get a return on their investment once they resell the works, in the near future, with a certain capital gain,” Rizkallah says. Moreover, now that the market for

Modern male Lebanese artists, such as Paul Guiragossian and Shafic Abboud, has stabilized, Barakat notes, “we are witnessing the next speculative wave. But once the couple [of] dozen people who are interested in these [female] artists acquire works, prices will find equilibrium.” So far, Achkar, Adnan, Caland and Khal have quickly gone from being ignored by auction houses to commanding figures denounced as overpriced. Still, Boulos Al Assaad says, “it is auctions houses’ estimations, overall, that should serve as a reference, rather than record hammer prices.”



Huguette Caland

This year a 1973 Caland painting commanded over \$242,000. The same work was sold for \$149,000 by Christie’s in Dubai four years ago



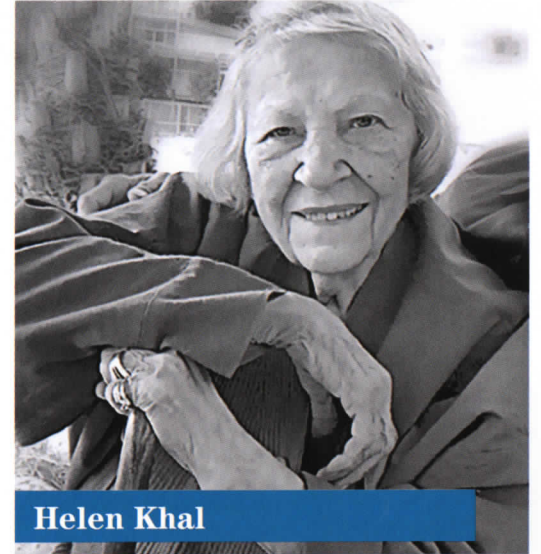
Huguette Caland, Good Luck, Acrylic, Colored and silver pens on loose canvas, 120x210, 2009. Sold at Christies for \$162,500, March 2018



Helen Khal, *Seascape*, Oil on board 56x47. Sold for \$28,000 at Bonhams, May 2019

Another Measure

Auction results are not the only barometer of an artist's stature: the hype for Modern Lebanese female artists is also strong within the world of art galleries and private dealers, where prices often hover around the auction houses' mid-range estimates. Institutions play a crucial role in building up an artist's profile. Exhibitions and acquisitions by major museums can make an artist irresistible in the eyes of collectors. Adnan, for instance, saw her career soar after being exhibited at Kassel's Documenta 13 in 2012. Among many other prestigious shows,



Helen Khal

the U.S.-based artist had a solo exhibition at San Francisco's SFMOMA last year, and at Paris's Institut du Monde Arabe in 2016. U.S.-based Caland also enjoys international exposure, and, notably, is having a retrospective at the Tate St Ives that started in May.

In the long run, what certainly matters most, rather than the figures artworks reach, is artistic recognition and the acknowledgment of a career that has historical importance, especially for female artists, who have often been granted less consideration and value than their male peers. There remains "much to be done, as several exceptional artists remain in the shadow," Barakat reckons. For artists born in the 1930s. One thinks, for instance, of Nadia Saikali (b. 1936), whose works have very recently started piquing collectors' interest at Beirut auctions, or of writer and artist Laure Ghorayeb (b. 1931). Then come Modern female painters from the following generation, such as abstract painter Afaf Zurayk (b. 1948), all of whom are still waiting in the shadows – although one suspects not for long.

** All auction figures include buyer's premium.*

