

Art Of Desire - Huguette Caland at Tate St Ives

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This summer, Lebanese-born artist **Huguette Caland** will have her first solo museum exhibition in the United Kingdom, at the Tate St Ives in Cornwall. Born in 1931 in Beirut, Caland moved to Paris in 1970, where she lived and worked for nearly two decades. To make the move, she left her husband and three kids behind in Beirut, a decision which she says was inspired by a deep desire to define herself as an artist, rather than being defined by her other traditional female social roles. While in Paris, driven by a new-found sense of freedom and an empathy with the emergent Feminist art movement, she drastically evolved her artistic methods. Leaving pure figuration behind, she developed her now-signature blend of figuration and abstraction, in which abstract shapes and forms blend unexpectedly with references to the naked human body. Throughout the 1970s and 80s Caland experimented freely, exploring the ideas of beauty, eroticism, and social taboos, especially as these subjects relate to the female form. Pulling its works from this decisive time in her

career, and including a number of works that are being shown in the UK for the first time, Huguette Caland at Tate St Ives promises to offer a definitive introduction to the career of this under-represented artist. Spanning the realms of painting, drawing and fashion, it will demonstrate both the seriousness and whimsy of her oeuvre, while spotlighting the unique capacity Caland has to synthesize Modernist and Post Modernist ideas.

Becoming Huguette Caland

Describing her decision to leave Beirut in a recent interview with Detroit Public Television, Caland describes wanting to be known as something other than the daughter of her father; the wife of her husband; the sister of her brother; and the mother of her children. In addition to the usual pressures such labels put on a female artist, Caland felt the extra pressure of her father being a former president of Lebanon. She describes how her childhood friends abandoned her because they were French, and her father was part of the fight for independence. "Lebanon was fighting for its independence," says Caland, "but I was fighting for mine." She traveled to Europe and the United States in search of artistic freedom, but more importantly in search of herself. The humanity that emerged through this process is evident in the work she made during this critical time. Her drawings are erotic and sensual, but at the same time are youthful, humorous, and endlessly loving. Also evident is the global influence she absorbed. Her delicate lines evoke the visual language of illustration; her cotton candy hues bring to mind the legacy of [Color Field artists](#) like Helen Frankenthaler and Mark Rothko; her primitive forms reference the childlike legacy of [Art Brut](#).

Yet the idiosyncratic methods Caland developed also defy any direct connection with any pre-defined position. Her vision is instead defined by the nuance with which she blends the recognizable with the unknown. A perfect representative of this elemental combination is the painting

“Bribes De Corps” (1973), which will be on view in the Tate St Ives exhibition. Two biomorphic, orange forms huddle together in the center of the canvas amid a radiating, red field, with a thin sliver of white left between them. The eye cannot help but imagine this is a picture of an open mouth with dangling tonsils. Then gradually it transforms into perhaps an image of a human nude, bent over and seen from behind. Or it is neither of those things. It is perhaps a representation of something abstract—a picture of relationships; an image of togetherness; a suggestion of forms finding each other within an alien landscape, and growing something pure and new and luminous between them. However you interpret it, or even if you choose not to bother interpreting it at all, the painting is charged with a feeling of simple, personal pleasure, and a profound appreciation of little things—an apt description of the person Caland found when she found herself.

A Loving Embrace

One essential body of work for which Caland has become known—some examples of which will be on view in the Tate St Ives exhibition—is her kaftans. A kaftan is a type of Mesopotamian robe that is common in Middle Eastern cultures. Beginning in 1979, Caland partnered with fashion designer Pierre Cardin, creating a line of more than 100 kaftans. Traditional kaftans tend towards the ornate, employing bright, vivid colors and elaborate, decorative patterns, similar to traditional kimono or Western style summer dresses. Caland created subtle designs based on her unique visual style, often incorporating figurative elements from her paintings and drawings. One kaftan featured the whimsical outline of a naked female form on its back and front; another featured a loving drawing of arms wrapping around it in a gentle embrace; another featured a linear drawing of a split face on the lapel.

As with her paintings and drawings, her kaftans blend the visual languages of figuration and abstraction. They show an array of faces and

body parts melting together, transforming before our eyes into surrealistic landscapes full of bulging mountains and shifting horizon lines. We are not sure if we are looking at something we are supposed to recognize, or if we are gazing into an abstract looking glass. They are ideal examples of the sense of humor that has always guided Caland in her work—looking at them on a mannequin is one thing; imagining them on a human wearer is something else. Donned by the wearer, they swell into supple, organic, living artworks. They amuse and delight with their abstract grace then slowly pronounce themselves as complex incarnations of femininity, full of eroticism, compassion, and humor: the best of what Caland has found during her search for herself. Huguette Caland will be on view [at the Tate St Ives](#) from 24 May through 1 September 2019.

Featured image: **Huguette Caland** - Untitled, 1970. Oil on linen. 54 x 65 cm. Courtesy of the artist. Tate St Ives Collection.

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By Phillip Barcio