

Huguette Caland, Gelims of Northern Iran: What will I make here and who will my teachers be?

My writing desk faces big windows that look down on a sun-bleached city below. To my far right is the blue of the Arabian Gulf. Closer inland is the fort around which this city sprang up, only about five decades ago. To my left is one of the oldest mosques in the city. At the start of my day, I open my notebook and watch the men file in and out. From my vantage point, my cadastral view, I can see the red carpet peeking out from the mosque's archways. Being privy to this view only and not allowed entrance, I have imagined my own body lined up shoulder to shoulder with others, then kneeling. Knowing that this will never happen has made my imaginings more intense.

I came to Abu Dhabi sure that I would not make work about my new country. I did not want to be that writer, that artist. So far, I have succeeded.

What I did not expect is that I would want to write so much about leaving. Sometimes I want to say, "I am an economic refugee of the United States living in Abu Dhabi" but I don't because it sounds too dramatic. I am still parsing out that word "refugee"—is it rightly only claimed by those who flee war and overt violence? And to what extent have my own choices lead me here—I am a poet and educator who dared to not cross over into the private sector or partner up with someone who did—my husband is also an artist and educator. So isn't this all of my own doing and refugees do not choose to leave?

In Abu Dhabi I am looking back over my shoulder, wondering how I got here and how long I will stay. I think about the likelihood of a sustaining job waiting for me “back home” in three years. There may need to be an economic and political revolution in order for that to happen. Though I miss my friends and family, I don't lament the unlikelihood of sure return—it helps me as I try to sink into where I am now and learn something while here.

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My first book was about migration and arrival—but not my own. It was about my father, an Estonian refugee of WWII. The book's title, *Threads*, came from the image I had that the refugee was held to the people around them with only the most precarious of threads, like fragile kite strings about to break. My father's presence was never very sure. What was sure was a certain anxiety about belonging and love's bonds.

If my first book was about my father's tentative arrival, then am I experiencing some symmetry or echo: to want to say something now about my leaving? And not being tentative about that leaving?

To my parents, upward mobility was real. And so they would have never imagined that I would leave the U. S. in order to have a good job. How quickly the reversal happened: in exactly one generation. My parents, both from working-class roots, benefited from the racialized—they are

both white—abundance of the post war period. My mother was a public school teacher. My father was a heating and ventilating systems draftsman. Only my mother held college degrees. Still, they bought property and went on vacations. We never lacked for clothing and food. My mother and grandmother sewed us clothes from fine fabrics so that we would look nice for less. We were encouraged to go to state schools and had to help pay off our tuition by taking jobs while in school.

Then my young adulthood was marked by the deregulation of Reaganomics, a formula that certainly worked for some, but not for educators and artists like me whose parents could not support them indefinitely and who had no trust fund or investments to draw on.

It is important to pause here and say something about poverty and complaint.

Poor people have been suffering for much longer than those of us experiencing this one-generation middle class downward mobility trend I articulate. And I am aware of the affluence I possess: I have two advanced degrees, I've published several books, I make art, I write whatever I want, I teach and do so joyously. I've written before on what I call the affluence of the artist. It is real. I am grateful for my life and all the shapes of the pathways I have been walking, even making.

But if generations of middle class people could once afford to be cynical and detached about politics and economics, I am writing here to say that policies are lived, felt experiences. And the policies that hurt the middle

class have long been hurting the poor. I think it is time to understand that widely felt pain.

Saying "there are others who have it worse than me" might allow a person to take stock and feel thankful. But if saying this shuts feeling down, providing temporary personal relief, or a kind of guilt that prevents an outward-looking gaze, then I think this comparative gesture is mostly a harmful form of individualism and it perpetuates a limited sociological imagination.

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Considering all of this leads me to interdisciplinarity and what poet Anne Waldman has deemed "being a magpie scholar": to study economics, history, politics, and fiction at the same time. To study mark making, poetry, public policy. I am pasting together a kind of imagination in order to face questions, here, whose subtexts are identitarian: Who should be here teaching? Who is relevant to the region? How I carry with me certain histories of western imperialism while I also bring a precarious class status and no particular love for my home country whose economic policies nearly rang me completely dry. In this, do I share certain ground with students here from all over the world?

Arriving, I have no desire to make a record of discovery. Abu Dhabi is unfolding slowly for me and the slow pace is fine. And Abu Dhabi may always be partially folded for me—comprised of many surfaces that will remain out of view. Yet here, from these new coordinates, I may have

something more to say about the place from where I came.

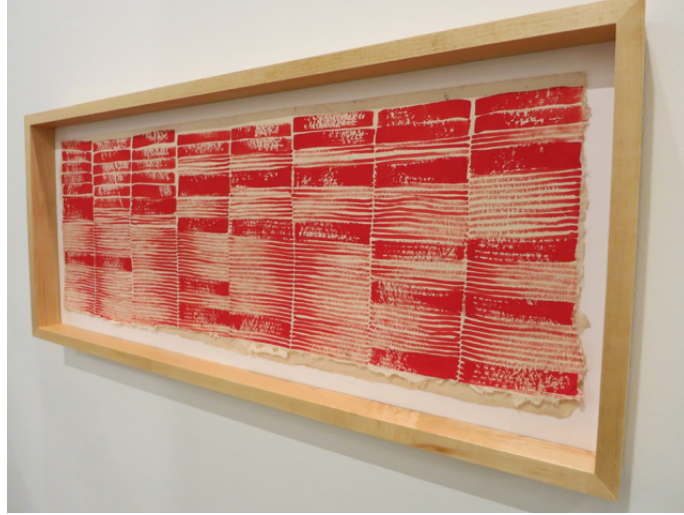
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I recently wrote about [the ocular migraine, the pixel, and the role of touch in seeing](#). Looking out my window on the site below—on my encouraged access to the beach and my no access to houses of worship (and I nearly wrote “houses of workshop”—I am teaching poetry workshop this semester!), I am thinking of the “no sight/site” of some economic migrants. But I do not want to conduct a sociological study, I do not want to write a call for economic reform, and I do not want to write a nostalgia for some idea of homeland.

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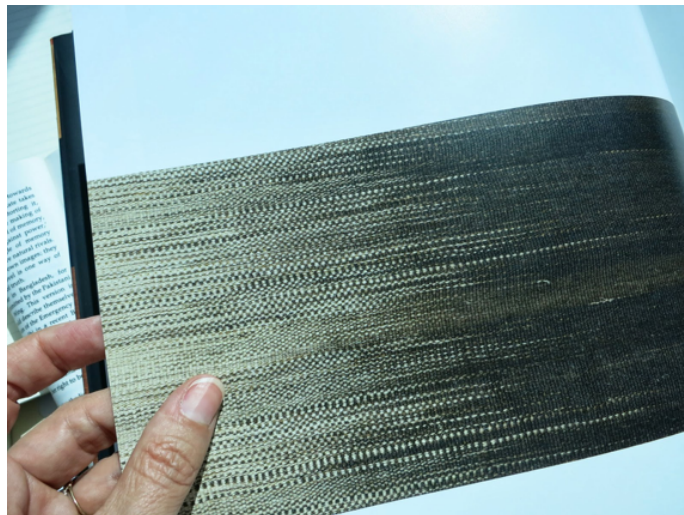
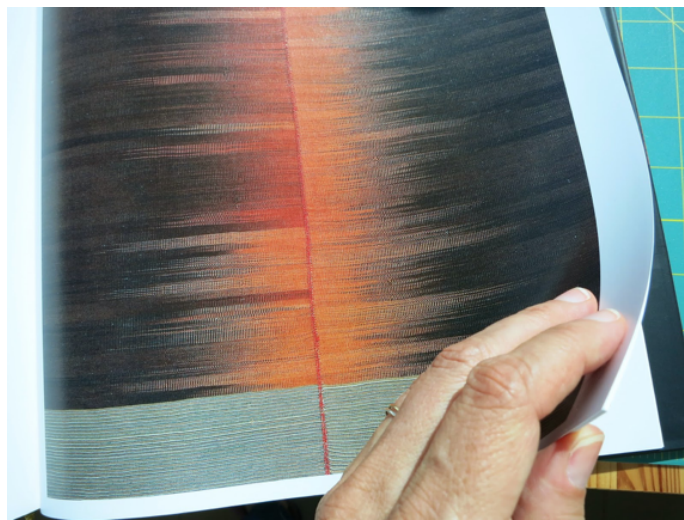
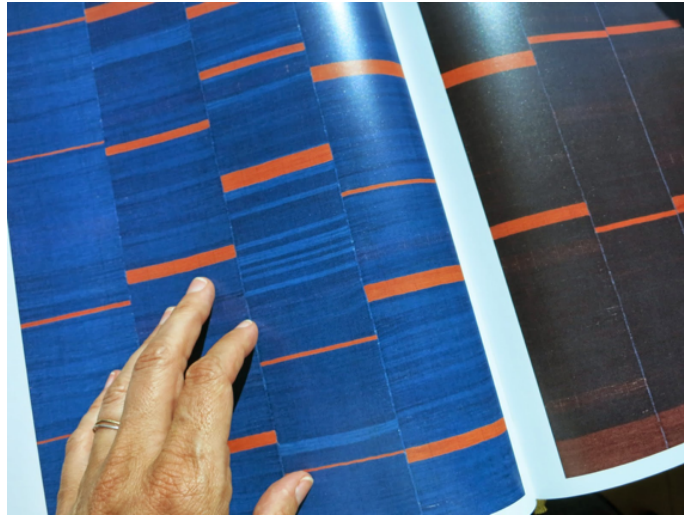
Today I began absolutely overflowing with desire for art—a physically experienced desperation, this craving for art work, not unlike the feeling of restless legs at night.

I am overflowing in part because of Huguette Caland’s work. Her repeated intensities: line, color block, gesture, the city grid, or marks accounting for time and story—





Another deep desire: to learn the makings and patterns of the stunning gelims—flat woven rugs—from northern Iran: color blocks, minimalist compositions so perfectly imperfect, both cool and warm, made by women in mountain villages. I found them so compelling that looking, I found I had to run my fingers over the pages of the book in order to believe the beauty I was seeing—



Today I came to my desk in order to decide what visual work to make. I wanted abstraction. I wanted to write the no-book. I wanted to land in the space of no words. Where to start? Annoyingly, at first, my question birthed a new question: What am I doing here? I sat and stared. I could not translate this question or any particular answer into lines, colors, marks.

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Caland: daughter of the first president of Lebanon, whom I learned about at the glitzy, fun, and sometimes confusing Art Dubai fair this weekend. She lives in California. She has lived in Paris. But she is *from* Beirut. She is from *this region*. Her work is bright, it is textile, filled with repetitive gestures and marks. She used to be a fashion designer. She works with unstretched canvas either on her work table or on her lap.

The women weavers of Iran: upon "discovery," Werner Weber laments that the only thing the weavers would talk about were their mothers and grandmothers—not specific techniques. I love their minimalism of response: a deep respect for teachers and secrets and maybe even tricks.

Would I have encountered this book elsewhere? And Caland's work?
Maybe, but in Dubai this intersection is much more likely and I'm grateful.

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How a person who leaves bring back a vision to the place where they are from and how some never leave and never tell while I am looking back at the present asking:

What will I make here and who will my teachers be?