

HUGUETTE

John Carswell

HUGUETTE CALAND was born in Beirut in 1931, one of the three children of Béchara el-Khoury, the first president of Lebanon. When she was a child she travelled with her mother to France, and at the age of fifteen to the United States. Her education was French, and she was studying law at the Université Saint Joseph until a serious accident driving a sports car put an end to her formal education.

From the age of fourteen she was always drawing and her room was full of drawings of people and crowds. She lived an isolated introspective life; she was heavily overweight, and extremely self-conscious of it. The difficulties she experienced at that time, she now admits, gave her a taste for difficulties to overcome. Her first painting lessons were with an Italian, Manetti, who had her as a private pupil for six months, and who encouraged her to continue. Her parents were distantly interested; indeed, her mother had real talent of her own, expressed in a fantasy world of embroidery for table-cloths and serviettes. But Huguette Caland had to face up to the problem of having a normal life and yet weighing more than a hundred kilos. She went to many exhibitions, she decided the only choice for her was to write or paint. At this time, she wrote about people, in almost cinematographic manner. There was always a certain detachment, she expressed no hope, but this was relieved by a tragic sense of humour, even in the worst situations. In spite of her basic pessimism, she could not stop laughing; for her, painting was to become a way of forcing issues.

Her mother died in 1960, and for four years she had the responsibility of looking after her father. He was suffering from cancer, and was very much aware of being cut up. They had a very close relationship and she has vivid memories of being so near to someone who was dying so slowly. They were both aware of what was happening, and neither of them cheated. It was a very authentic way to die, and helping him to do so seemed to be the only civilized solution; generally people care so much for living they lack the capacity to help others to die. When the end came eventually, everyone pitied her; but she felt no remorse, for at least she knew she would be an artist. She no longer wanted to write; her taste for difficulty indicated that painting would be more of a challenge: after all, it was much easier to take a paper and write than prepare a painting. She felt that her body participated more in painting, and gave tangible physical emotions, like the bearing of children.

To begin with she wanted to make a large painting; she felt very well sitting in front of a large canvas with a big brush and some red paint. She conceived this painting as a picture of cancer eating away the flesh, but as it developed she discovered it was much more like the sun; perhaps cancer was not so frightening after all. She felt all the time something eating the canvas; the final impression was far from morbid. Soon after this she went to study at the Art Department in the American University of Beirut; she felt the desire to know what she calls "the cooling side of art", so that she might have a range to her emotional expression. For her she learned most from a course in Basic Design. Nobody interfered with her work, nobody said do this, do that. She discovered that drawing was finally a question of personal discipline.

At the same time she tackled another problem, that of losing weight, and she found that her gymnastic exercises gave her a great deal of physical control. Anyone can draw if they follow a disciplined approach; ultimately, drawing has become a very important part of her work.

As far as painting was concerned, she has no particular stylistic prejudices. Abstraction or figuration are not issues; it depends on the scale you look at things. After all any object enlarged enough becomes abstract. She is attracted to big surfaces, and the quality of white – “white is never enough explored”. As the result, whether it is a painting or not, there is the factor of mocking; she mocks herself. She finds it impossible to give importance to mere facts; the best escape is to mock. To take things too seriously is to treat life with a gravity it does not deserve. She still finds it impossible not to laugh at people who take everything seriously; at the same time, she does not care for superficiality.

She finds it impossible to plan what will happen; one must be honest and work; you cannot believe in anything you do, if you do not work. And you must make time for work. It is impossible to disassociate her painting from her feelings for persons. She has time for those who are close to her, but apart from that there is no time for anything else but work. Is she influenced by other people’s opinions? Yes, she likes it when her children’s friends come to see her paintings; their reactions are more important than those of adults, as they don’t judge.

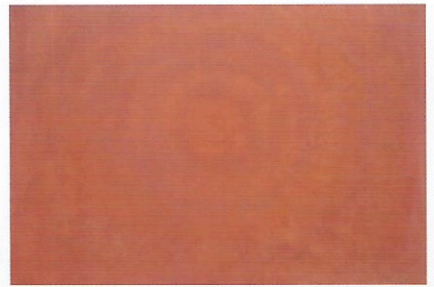
In recent years she has spent an increasing amount of time in Paris, not simply for the sake of being in France, but to detach herself from her background. Nothing obliged her to go, but she felt the necessity of fabricating more difficulties; Paris presents such difficulties because it is a big city; it gives more taste and texture to life. Lebanon is a very soothing country; it is a little glass of water and one cannot expect a big storm to arise in it. But she admits she has found no tempest in Paris either, except within. There, it is sufficient simply to go out in the street. She is not interested in feelings of national identity; she feels detached from oriental things; and certainly would not be attracted to an ugly object just because it is oriental.

All of the above was written in 1986 from notes made during a conversation with Huguette in her studio at Kaslik, surrounded by her paintings; it is really her talking. She was searching for words to describe her experience as an artist, to convey something of the powerful mystery her painting has become for her.

I had been a friend from the very beginning, and knew the story behind the very first painting in the exhibition, a mysterious and almost cosmic abstraction. She showed it to Aref Rayess, a well known Lebanese painter. He was impressed, and told her now she should learn how to draw. He suggested a young man (myself) recently arrived at the American University of Beirut who was giving a course in drawing.

This was an inspired idea, for my fellow teachers were all from the Art Institute of Chicago, and in turn they had inspired me. They believed art should be taught by practising artists and no one should be excluded from the process of making art – anyone, and everyone should be encouraged to try. Art should be taught according to formal, not stylistic principals; this was the legacy of the Bauhaus.

In Beirut in the sixties, where the European Beaux Art tradition persisted, this was a novel approach, and might have been tailored for Huguette at that stage. We also lived in close proximity to each other twenty miles north of Beirut, me in a crumbling Lebanese house in a



fishing village and Huguette in her parents' house in Kaslik, across the bay at Jounieh. Here at lunch on Sundays the cast consisted of Huguette, and Paul her husband, and their friend Mustafa from college. And the children and other guests, like myself.

In retrospect it is obvious that her work belongs to three distinct periods, and clearly influenced by her environment. In the first phase in Kaslik living with her family, she built a studio at the bottom of the garden. It was a period of defining herself and making decisions which were to govern the rest of her life. It was also a period of intense self-examination, scrutinising her personal relationships and her own physicality. What was so extraordinary was that she conducted this interrogation quite openly, as it were in full view. When she was a university student in Beirut, Paul, Mustafa and herself were close friends and the dynamics and interaction of this trio persisted, to the extent that Mustafa became virtually a member of the family. As Huguette began to define her own unique personality as an artist, it was inevitable that it led to a renunciation of her immediate environment. Nadine Begdache has vividly described the actual moment when she calmly announced that that she was leaving her country, her husband and her children to seek a new environment.

It was natural that she should gravitate towards Paris. For the Lebanese, France represented culture in every sense of the word. For the French, Huguette was a novelty, and they were quick to recognize her undeniable talent and originality. She made many new friends, amongst them the Romanian sculptor Georges Apostu, who took her under his wing, and introduced her to working in three dimensions. It was also in Paris on a visit that Mustafa tragically died of a heart attack. The same fate ended her relationship with Georges Apostu, and ended the second chapter in her life.

When she was a student at the American University of Beirut she had discovered that as far as art was concerned, there was another fast emerging centre besides Paris. This was the moment that New York became the Mecca for all serious artists, with Los Angeles a close second. She moved to the United States, and in 1987 established herself in California. She flourished, and Venice became her permanent home. Once more she built herself a studio, and has worked there indefatigably ever since.

In retrospect it is easy to see how logical her development was. By being relentlessly honest with herself, brick by brick she has built a monumental body of work, expressing her unique view of the world. Effortless in execution, her paintings are the product of extreme discipline. Grave, they are often wildly funny; erotic, they still manage to remain tender. Her paintings do not look like anyone else's, for a simple and enviable reason – she is nobody but herself, the rare discovery of the real artist.