

Lebanese artist Huguette Caland's provocations – artist profile

***Art Radar* profiles the versatile Lebanese artist, whose work spans painting, sculpture and fashion design.**

A recently published monograph celebrates Huguette Caland's practice, with a focus on her early works. *Art Radar* reviews the artist's life and practice on this occasion.

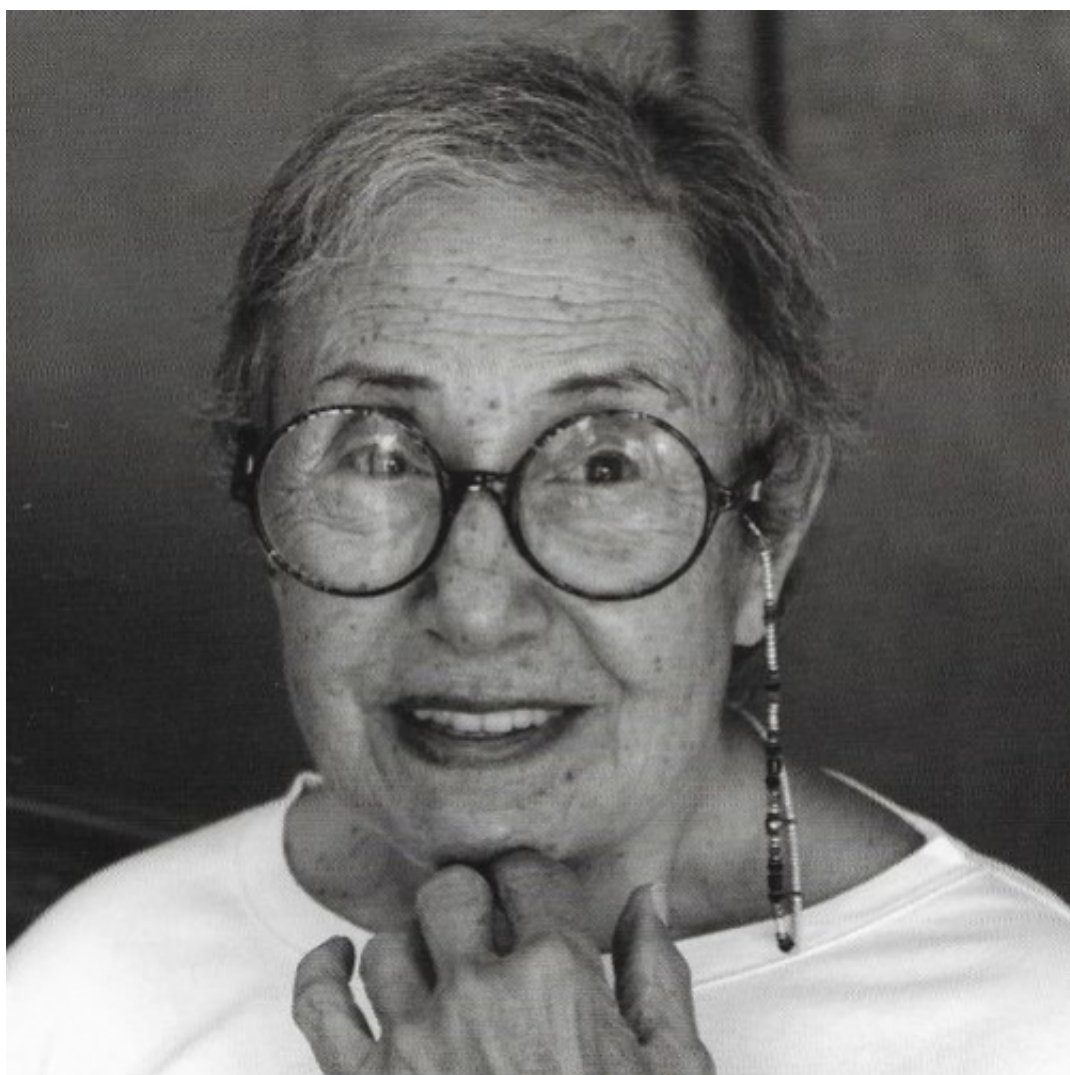


Huguette Caland, 'Apple Green and Green Tomatoes', 2010, mixed media on canvas, 159 x 435 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

A monograph published early this year by Skira Editore, entitled "[Huguette Caland: Everything Takes the Shape of a Person, 1970-78](#)", represents a long-awaited critical recognition of the early works of Lebanese contemporary artist [Huguette Caland](#) (Beirut, b. 1931). Caland's nuzzling provocations have in fact received "attention at the later stages of her life and career", Aram Moshayedi, a writer-curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, writes in the introduction to the volume, "despite the supporters that have surrounded her for decades."

The prodigious career of the Lebanese contemporary artist spanned nearly

fifty years, during which she became an internationally-recognised painter, sculptor and fashion designer. The female body, eroticism and her own preoccupation with desire represent the topics that the artist had put forward for discussion, in particular, in her prolific output of the 1970s that “paved the way for interests the artist maintained throughout her career”, writes Moshayedi. It is a rich body of work consisting of paintings and ink drawings that challenge the concept of beauty and engage with otherwise taboo themes.



Portrait of Huguette Caland. Photo: L'Or Iman Puymartin.

Born into a cosmopolitan, political family, Caland was the only daughter of Bechara el Khoury, the first President of independent Lebanon. She began painting at the age of 16 under the private tutelage of Fernando Manetti, an

Italian artist who resided in Lebanon. After her father passed away in 1964 (she had previously lost her mother), she liberated herself from the social constraints of her status. She then enrolled at the American University in Beirut (AUB) to pursue her artistic ambitions.



Huguette Caland, 'Faces and Places II', 2010, mixed media on canvas, 91.4 x 288.3 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

Caland's body of work is as colorful as her incredible life, threaded around the aspirations of a fiercely independent woman. Her career grew incrementally after she had her first solo exhibition in 1969 at Dar al Fan in Beirut, at a time when the Middle Eastern city was both cosmopolitan and glamorous. In 1970 she moved to Paris, where she spent part of the year, travelling back and forth to Lebanon where her husband Paul and three children remained. The couple never divorced. Not even when, after having spent thirteen years in Paris partaking in what has been labelled a bohemian lifestyle, she developed a personal and professional relationship with the Romanian artist George Apostu. The artist "made an indelible mark on her work", notes Moshayedi in the introduction to the volume. A few months after Apostu's death, Caland left Paris in 1987, this time to settle in Venice, California, another centre of creativity. Although she returned to live in her native city, Beirut, in 2013, the Venice studio has been retained and is actively involved in numerous projects and exhibitions going forward.



Huguette Caland, 'Untitled', 1986, oil on linen, 54 x 65.4 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s – up until the eruption of the civil war – Caland was part of a modernist movement in Lebanese art that was shaped in a period of global social and political upheaval. When in Lebanon, her house in Kaslik, then a small town north of Beirut, was open to visitors such as renowned artists Helen Khal, Aref el Rayess, Shafic Abboud and Adonis, among others. But it is only recently that her artistic practice has been discovered by a new generation of curators fond of her little-seen work from the 1970s and 1980s. Caland was just honoured with a solo exhibition at the [Institute of Arab and Islamic Art](#) in New York. In the last few years, she has been the subject of numerous solo and group exhibitions

from Beirut to Dubai, and London to New Orleans. In 2017, 23 of her pieces, including 18 erotic pen and ink drawings were prominently on display in the Arsenale building at the [Venice Biennale](#).

Since the publication of her first monograph by [Skira Editore](#), *Art Radar* has delved further into the artist's practice.

“Everything takes the shape of a person”

In her early works, Caland emphasised her ability to be sexually suggestive and wittily ironic, while at the same time painting a political critique of beauty and the female body, and otherwise taboo themes. It is no surprise (then) that in Paris she is said to have espoused a bohemian life.



Huguette Caland, from the series “Bribes de Corps”, 1973, oil on linen, 120.6 x 120 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

In an old interview between the artist and Lebanese author Hanan al-Sheykh, originally produced for Télé Liban in 1974 and made available for the first time in English in Skira’s monograph, Caland explains what it meant for her to have artistic ambitions:

I never said I had any political ambition. Everything is political, I think, everything done consciously becomes political. And if there is

consciousness and talent, than it becomes political and artistic. I don't think you can separate one thing from the other, I mean, art is politics, and politics is an art. There are no borders.

In her paintings from the 1970s, “everything takes the shape of a body”, to quote one expression Caland used in the interview. “Maybe because I have seen so many!” she pointed out. Her canvases depict bodies in a simplified visual style, often exposing exaggerated features of the human body painted in warm colours. Caland herself was preoccupied with her own body, being engaged in a struggle with her weight from an early age.



Huguette Caland, 'Self Portrait', from the series "Bribes de Corps", 1973, oil on linen, 89.5 x 69.8 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

There is much eroticism in Caland's early paintings of exaggerated human bodies. In her conversation with al-Sheykh, she admitted she had no explanation for this attitude:

I don't know if there is an explanation. I never sit down in front of a drawing or a painting and think, "I'm going to paint something erotic." Erotic means life, there is no life without some form of eroticism. You can't separate eroticism from life.



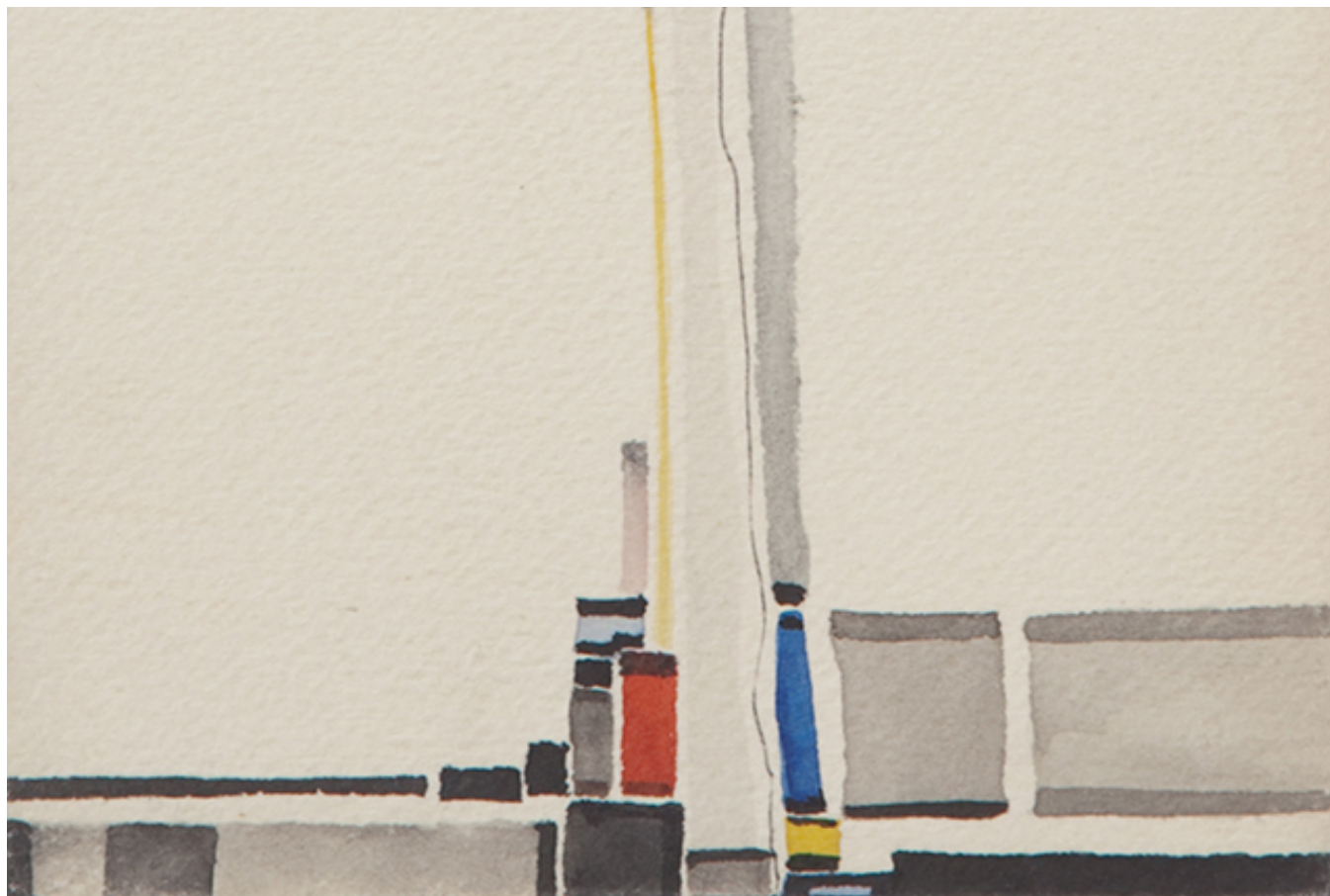
Huguette Caland, 'Untitled', 1984, bronze sculpture, 76.2 x 60.9 x 35.5 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

Dots, lines, and patches of the later abstractions

Once settled in Venice, California, Caland lived in an extraordinary house, [“which has two towers and a living room that spills out to a large terrace](#)

[with a lap pool](#)”, wrote *The New Yorker* in an article dated 2017. The residence became a gathering place for local artists, and although she lived a stimulating social life there, she struggled professionally. She had only a handful of exhibitions in the United States while residing there, reported the magazine.



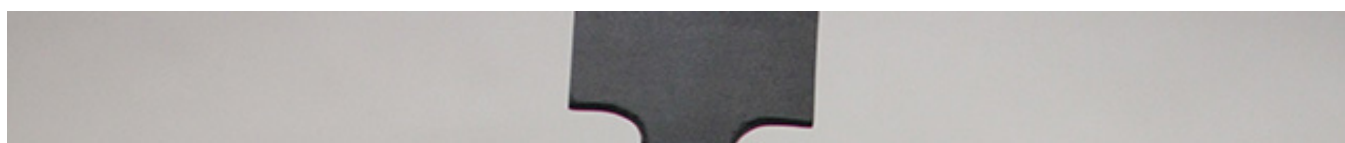


Huguette Caland, 'Homage to Pubic Hair', 1992, mixed media on paper over panel. 25.4 x 12.7 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

In the decades that followed, eroticism and sexuality appeared to be less of a preoccupation. Caland's language of abstraction became largely devoid of human forms, as dots, lines and patches sprawl across surfaces like players of a dancer's choreography.

Caftans for French fashion designer Pierre Cardin

As some critics have noted, Caland's prolific talent evokes avant-garde movements from Surrealism to Abstract Expressionism and Georgia O'Keeffe's American modernism. In fact, the artist designed a collection of clothing for the famous French fashion designer Pierre Cardin in line with the rules of these aesthetics.





Huguette Caland, Dress 1 layer B, 1979, caftan designed for Nour Collection, Pierre Cardin, mixed media on fabric, center-back length 127.5 cm_50 in. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

It was during her studies at AUB that Caland began the first prototypes for her embroidered, hand-painted gowns – the caftans that have become her signature style and that she began wearing following the death of her father. Struggling with the weight of her body, which at one point, weighed more than two hundred pounds, she stated in the previously mentioned interview:

I never used to find something that fit, every dress was a catastrophe, every time I went shopping with or without my mother, I suffered. And maybe this is why, all my life I dreamed of dresses, or clothes, this is why I love Arabic clothing, because they conceal the body more than others. When I decided I would dress like this, I turned the page and never went back because it meant much more than fashion and clothes.







Huguette Caland, Foule front, thread on fabric_center-back length, 1970, 137.1 cm. Image courtesy Huguette Caland.

As versatile artist, Caland designed many caftans for Pierre Cardin, each work revealing Caland's unique world, combining Middle Eastern and French patterns, textures and elegance.

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