

# Lebanese modernist master Huguette Caland makes British debut

"I left because I wanted a career," says Huguette Caland, about her decision to leave Beirut to go paint in Paris. "I felt I was strong enough to confront the world."

In 1970, at the age of 40, Caland left her children and husband – to whom she remained committed – and rented a studio on her own in France. There, she dedicated herself full-time to the sensual and light-filled canvases that she had begun in her garden in Beirut.

"She left everybody and she went away. It's an amazing thing for a woman in the Middle East," says her daughter, Brigitte Caland, who was 15 when her mother left. "Retrospectively, when I think about things, she had her path and she did what she wanted to do, because she had this sense of freedom."

In a now depressingly familiar cycle, the exquisite canvases, finely tuned drawings and Pop-esque embroidered abayas that Caland made were overlooked for years. "At one point, she totally gave up," says Brigitte, a professor of languages at American University of Beirut. "She said, I'll just work for myself, not for any recognition."

Now, just in the space of the past few years, attention has returned to her work like moths to a flame: she was included in the Hammer Museum's 2016 Made in LA biennial, focusing on the Los Angeles art scene, where she lived for years without being part of its history. The Sharjah Biennial currently hosts two rooms of her paintings and abayas, in a section at the Sharjah Art Museum curated by Omar Kholeif; and an exhibition of her works from the 1970s and 1980s opens on Friday at Tate St Ives, the UK

institution's easterly coastal outpost.

## Turning to art

If the art establishment's slow pick-up of Arab artists – particularly female ones – is a well-worn narrative, so too are the coming-of-age stories of women Arab artists, chafing at society's conventions. It slightly feels like flattening out the particulars to tell of Caland's bid for, as her daughter terms it, "freedom" at the age of 40. But the artist's move from Beirut to Paris was remarkable: she turned her back fully on one way of living, and just as fully embraced the new – from what she wore to where she lived.

*She started wearing abayas – she bought a few and designed some, and started wearing them. We now have 170 of her dresses and they became a piece of work. They became paintings.*

### **Brigitte Caland**

closet and gave everything away," Brigitte continues. "She started wearing abayas – she bought a few and designed some, and started wearing them. We now have 170 of her dresses and they became a piece

Caland was born into high-society Lebanon. Her father was Bechara El Khoury, an important Arab nationalist who served as the country's first president from 1943 to 1952. She married a man from French-Lebanese family, Paul Caland, and had three children with him in her 20s. After her mother died, she nursed her father while he was sick. After he passed away, Brigitte says: "she felt that she had accomplished her responsibilities to the end, and she was free of her life".

"The day her father passed away, she did the three days of mourning in black, and then she opened her

of work. They became paintings. She cleaned her brushes on them, they have phone numbers and appointments on them, they are a part of her life."

These abayas accompany her paintings in exhibitions, and indeed they continue one of her artwork's main theme: the exchange between a supple, open body and the line that hems it in.

## **Creating an open house for other creatives**

Caland's work is marked by bright, curved forms that often meet, touching lightly, in the centre of canvases. Painted in a luminous palette of blues, greens, pinks and yellows, the work evokes certain body parts ("It was not the most popular thing to hang in a living room in the Middle East!" laughs Brigitte) and more broadly, a feeling of sensuality and possibility, of a playful body at ease.

She achieves extraordinary gradations of colour in her paintings, but just as important is the thin black line that wends through her work. In her drawings, it often begins in one corner of the page, and sketches almost without stopping different forms, profiles, noses, eyes, bodybuilder legs and thick arms, and then finishes at the other corner, like a single-track shot making its way through the contours of a crowd.

Many people who visited her now legendary house in Los Angeles, use the metaphor of the line to describe that space as well. She designed the house herself, and eschewed doors, allowing people to move without stopping throughout the home. Near the end of the Lebanese Civil War, Caland left Paris for Los Angeles. One of her sons was already living there, and she bought land from the abstract painter Sam Francis – the last tract available on the road – which the artist Ed Moses, who became a close friend, negotiated.

It became an open house: a key meeting point for creatives in the Los

Angeles art scene, as well as the Arab diaspora. Caland painted everywhere. She made a fresco on the kitchen walls, and she would sit on the floor or at her easel and draw and paint while people came in.

“People would pop in and chat, it didn’t stop her from painting,” Brigitte recalls. “She would answer, not answer.”

## **Her legacy in the art world**

She painted portraits of her friends in the art world there, often giving paintings away to visitors – something that is making the current project of assembling a catalogue raisonne of her work quite difficult. She continued making abayas there too. While living in Paris, she went to Pierre Cardin’s shop in one of her trademark robes, and, being taken with her style, he asked her to design a line for him. She made abayas for Cardin, with Pop-like eyes embroidered body parts and painted colours, as well as for herself, even designing the mannequins who would wear the items.

At the Sharjah Art Museum, they hang like versions of Caland herself, next to a video that her granddaughter made about her life.



Artist Huguette Caland. Courtesy Tate St Ives

The designer moved back to Beirut in 2013, when her husband became sick, in an echo of the moment that first brought her to leave. She still lives there, with her daughter, Brigitte, and her work has moved away from the bodily forms to more almost gridded paintings of colorful forms that bear a certain resemblance to the digital idiom later known as the new aesthetic. The curves that marked her earlier paintings are traded for straighter edges, and bear down into intricate patterns of spots, stripes and zig-zags.

Now, at 88, she is working less, but her quick-witted personality has not changed, says her daughter. "If she says something, she says exactly what she means to say – and we will all laugh with her."

*Huguette Caland is at Tate St Ives until September 1. You can also see*

*her work in the UAE at the Sharjah Biennial, where it is installed at the Sharjah Art Museum until June 10, 2019.*

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