Regrets too few to mention
Pat McDonnell Twair
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Pat McDonnell Twair visits Huguette Caland, the woman behind LA's historic Sovereign Threads exhibition of Palestinian embroidery (see *TME* October 2006) at her unique Venice, California home.

Susan Twair

If artist Huguette Caland had a theme song, it would have to be 'My Way'. The daughter of the first president of Lebanon, Bechara El Khoury, inaugurated in 1945 when she was 13, she broke family conventions in 1952 when she married Paul Caland, the nephew of the publisher of the pro-French daily *Le Jour*, a rival of her uncle's pro-independence daily, *L'Orient*. "It didn't matter," she states dismissively, "the papers eventually merged."

Caland studied art at age 16 with the Italian artist Fernando Manetti, but it wasn't until her daughter and two sons were born that she became a full-time student at the American University of Beirut in 1964, graduating four years later with a degree in Fine Arts.

It was a tumultuous period: the Arab world was recovering from the disastrous June 1967 war with Israel. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians took refuge in Lebanon and the privileged Maronite Christian woman began to wonder about the homeless masses languishing in camps in her country. Who were they? How were they surviving? What were their stories?

It took hours of appeals, red tape and bending of regulations before the Office of Palestinian Affairs permitted Caland and other concerned wives of Lebanese leaders to talk to women in the camps.

"We had to gain the confidence of the Palestinians. We went to the camps in the morning and took sick people to hospitals and tried to set up kindergartens. In the afternoon, I worked at my art studio."

In 1969, Caland became the first president of INAASH, the Association for the Development of Palestinian Camps. This organisation continues to sponsor kindergartens and youth centres while setting up cooperatives in which women produce embroidery for international markets.

From the start, Caland realised the desperately poor refugee women needed to earn money for themselves and their families. The best way to achieve this, she reasoned, was for them to produce traditional Palestinian embroidery for wealthy people who appreciated the intricate handiwork. Asked how many Palestinian women were initially involved and how marketing of their embroidery was carried out, she dismissed the question with a wave of her hand: "I don't like numbers and I wasn't involved with those details."

She does remember the first efforts at reproducing regional embroidery designs were pathetic.

"These women were too traumatised or too far removed from their villages to reproduce traditional embroidery. The little samples we gave them to exercise on were disheartening.

"But," she proudly notes, "their progress grew by leaps and bounds as they began to earn money for their handiwork. Slowly these uprooted women gained self-respect and independence from their husbands." Lebanese society had for the most part shunned the Palestinian refugees. But in 1970, when Caland had a one-woman show at Dar El Fan, an upscale Beirut cultural centre, she arranged for two buses to transport the refugees to attend her exhibition. It was, she remarked, probably the first time they had been

invited to a Lebanese social gathering. In 1970, women's liberation was a movement rumbling throughout the West, but it hadn't lapped up on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean. Nonetheless Caland was about to liberate herself from the confines of upper class Lebanese society.

Her first step was to abandon the haute couture Parisian fashions her French/Lebanese husband preferred. Thenceforth, she wore only her signature garment, a kaftan she designed and often embellishes with sketches, faces, calligraphy or whatever strikes her fancy.

"The big drama was when I changed my look," she recalled. The kaftans almost prompted a divorce. It was then the artist told her husband she was leaving for Paris. She departed five days later.

At age 39, she left everything: "My life, three children and a beautiful home. I wanted my own identity. I was tired of being the daughter of, the wife of, the niece of, the sister of."

Caland thrived in Paris. Her artwork sold. While shopping in Pierre Cardin's boutique, none other than the designer himself approached the kaftan-clad Lebanese and remarked: "I like the way you dress."

She replied: "Me too." Cardin commissioned her to design 102 kaftans under the Nour line which were presented in 1979 at Espace. Each hand-woven woollen or silk creation was sewn with linings and finishing touches worthy of the House of Cardin.

"It took me 11 months to produce the kaftan collection," Caland smiles. "It was the only job I had in my life."

This tell-tale remark signifies Caland does not regard the hours she expends daily on painting, designing and creating fashions as work. Nevertheless in May, Caland's multi-media painting, 'City', sold on at a Christie's auction in Dubai for $20,400.

Caland's works are on view at her galleries in Beirut and Paris. She notes that: "Only at this stage in my life are Arabs becoming aware of my work."

The third act of her life began when she moved to Southern California in 1988 at the urging of her filmmaker son, Philippe.

This time, her work of art became the residence/studio she built for herself in Venice, a beach city that has been home to artists, actors and nonconformists since it was founded in 1905.

The unique fortress-like cement compound Caland commissioned architect Neil Kaufman to design on a single-residence lot took six months to conceive and 18 months to construct. Its uniqueness makes it a Venice landmark that was featured by *The Los Angeles Times* in a two-page spread.

From the moment a visitor is admitted through the antique green-painted wood plank door, Caland's presence prevails. Her paintings, a collage of love letters returned from a long-ago lover, sculptures, skylights and a crosshatched, vibrant green mural in her kitchen pronounce this is the home of an artist.

There are no doors in her sun-splashed home except for the door to the guest bathroom. Oriental rugs are scattered on plywood floors that have been stained in salmon and blue hues. A few of the famous Cardin kaftans hang in one of two walk-in closets each of which is the size of an apartment living room.

Local artists are attracted to the lovely home where Caland serves the food of her childhood. Her daughter, two sons and six grandsons live nearby. "I love Venice," she remarks while painting a canvas for an upcoming show in Dubai. "I love every minute of my life."

A 75ft lap pool serves as a moat on the eastern border of her compound – she swims 20 to 40 laps daily – which may explain why she styles her hair in an ultra-short cut.

Her studio is the largest room in the 4,600sq ft dwelling. It features 18ft ceilings, gallery walls and track lighting as well as tables which support her large canvases of works in progress. In one corner is a chaise lounge adorned with pillows covered in the embroidery of the Palestinian refugee women she championed nearly four decades ago.

It was the embroidery on these pillows that caught the eye of the director of the Los Angeles Craft and Art and Folk Art Museum when she visited Caland's home. This evolved into the historic, first-ever 'Sovereign Threads' 2006 exhibition of Palestinian embroidery in Los Angeles in July.

What goes around comes around. Not only did Caland put the museum director in touch with curators of Palestinian embroidery, but the daughters and granddaughters of women whom Caland helped in 1969 have benefited from the Los Angeles exhibition. The museum sold their needlework and all proceeds went back to the women of the camps. ■

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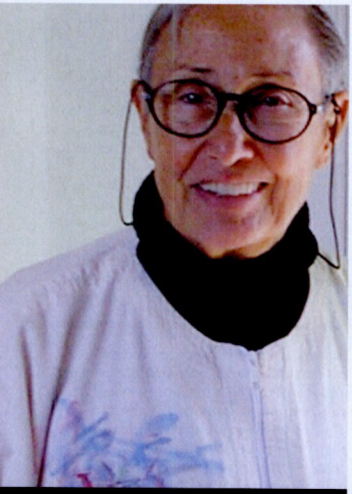

FROM THE MOMENT a visitor is admitted to Caland's Venice Beach house, her presence prevails. A vibrant green mural in her kitchen pronounces that this is the home of an artist