

“Untitled ”, 2009. By Huguette Caland
Spotlight Paper by Madeleine Haas, 2017



Artist's Background

Huguette Caland was born in 1931 in Beirut, Lebanon eleven years after WWI ended. WWI marked the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The League of Nations mandated direct control of Lebanon to France. This information is significant to this artist's personal life and cultural influences as the history of her artist career is explained.

She was the youngest of three children and the only daughter of Bechara El Khoury and Huguette El Khoury. Her mother was the daughter of a family of prestigious bankers, and her father was a Maronite Christian of the mountains of Lebanon. Huguette El Khoury lived a privileged life of a highly powered political family. She received a French education that was typical of the influential people of the times. Both parents were politically against the French government control. Her father had been a lawyer prior to becoming prime minister. He had been a true nationalist. Both parents were fighting for political freedom from France. By the time their daughter was twelve in 1943, Lebanon had recovered freedom from French rule and Bechara El Khoury was voted in as the first president. This change of government occurred while France was occupied by Germany during WWII.

Two years later, the Second World War was over. Young Huguette El Khoury's youth was spent in a period of political unrest. She spent most of her time drawing, writing and reading. At the age of fifteen, visiting France and the United States broadened her education and perspective.

She studied law for a short period of time and her law education was interrupted by a near fatal accident. This occurrence brought her back to her drawing as part

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of her rehabilitation. Unable to attend school, she was given formal art instruction in painting taught by an Italian painter named Fernando Manetti.

A year later in 1948, the Arab-Israeli War started and Lebanon fought on the Arab side. Bechara El Khoury's years in office had great economic growth, but the Arab-Israeli War strained the economy and the influx of 100,000 Palestinian refugees made things worse. This, and talk of corruption started mass demonstrations which forced his resignation in 1952. The same year, Huguette El Khoury married Paul Caland. Their marriage was considered an undesirable union by her family as Huguette remarked, "I was marrying the son of my father's political enemy. His parents were pro-French and mine were pro-Lebanese independence." "The history of the Middle East was shaping as I was growing up. My parents were fighting for political freedom and I soon fought for my own freedom." This defiance serves as evidence of the beginning of her independent actions. From then, she blurred her boundaries in her personal and creative life.

Between 1952 and 1960, she had three children and lived a privileged domestic life. She continued her art making and showed locally. She showed her work to a prominent male Lebanese artist, Aref Rayess. He was impressed and told her that she should learn to draw at that point. He referred her to John Carswell at the American University of Beirut who was giving a class in drawing. A group of artists at the school were from the Art institute of Chicago. They believed that practicing artists should teach art, and that no one should be excluded from the process of making art. They believed art should be taught according to formal not stylistic principles, which was the legacy of Bauhaus. In Beirut, in the 1960's, the Beaux Arts tradition existed.

She continued her art studies between 1964 and 1968. During this period, she left her husband and children; both her parents had died .
"The toughest thing I have ever done was to leave him, my family and homeland to establish my creative freedom. I had been my father's daughter, my husband's wife, and my children's mother."

Huguette Caland was fighting for her identity as a woman and as an artist as she left for Paris. Her early French education idealized Paris as the cultural center for aspiring artists. To the Lebanese, France represented culture in every sense of the word. Huguette Caland was a novelty and quickly identified as a talented and an original artist. "It was such a freedom to wake up all by myself in Paris. I needed to stretch."

She continued to work and show as a professional artist with success. During this period, she met and began a romantic and creative relationship with the Romanian artist George Apostu. He was a sculptor of notoriety. She dabbled with sculpture making, while continuing her female body and erotic drawings and paintings. "One day in 1978, I went to Pierre Cardin's boutique with my lover to

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buy a present for my husband.” After developing a friendship, Pierre eventually asked her to design a caftan line for him. In eleven months, she designed 111 elegant caftans. This was the only time she says that she had a job. “I was story telling my life at that time. My work included entangled nudes and crowds of people.” The caftan became her signature dress as rebellion against the thinness demanded by fashion.

Her lover, Apostu died in 1986, which marked again a time to relocate. Her choice in relocation had been her desired dream. The freedom of expression in the United States called to her. She spent one year in New York and then moved on to the Los Angeles area. Both of these cities were art meccas at the time. Venice, California became her hometown. She felt comfortable with the weather and loved the scenery. She set up a fantastic studio and was surrounded by many artists, musicians and writers. Huguette Caland lived there until 2013 at which time she retired to Beirut.

My Impressions/Analysis

During her years in Venice, she worked on minutely patterned textile like compositions. Her style had gradually changed over time from figurative erotic art to abstract minimalism. Huguette Caland considered herself as a “line” person. Line has been the core of her 50 years of art production. Line and the ability to work in a wide range of medium are constant throughout her career. Her work appears effortless in execution yet requires great discipline. Earlier work from the 1960’s and 1970’s are often humorous or erotic with a soft and delicate touch. In the 1960’s, at the beginning of her career, she painted and sculpted erotic semi-abstract body shapes, which seemed influenced by Georgia O’Keefe and the women’s political movement. Minimalism and abstraction were introduced into her practice, which carried into her collaboration in the late 70’s with the Pierre Cardin caftan collection.

There is no doubt that her diverse background in Lebanon and experiences of the French occupations of Lebanon have influenced Huguette Caland’s work dramatically. Byzantine geometric shapes, brilliance of color and handsomely woven rugs that draped her childhood home cannot be missed as influencing her body of work. Her courage to cross over cultural morés of her homeland is clearly evident in her works of the 60’s and 70’s.

Gustav Klimt is often mentioned as an influence in Huguette Caland’s work, both having a similar conveyance of feminine sensuality with simple lines and shapes. Both used the mosaic brilliance and play of repetitive metallic geometric shapes.

I selected this artwork because the beautiful magenta invited me to look and question the artist’s process. I assumed this piece was an ancient artifact rather than a contemporary painting dated 2009. The description indicated that it is

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paint on stretched canvas. After much research, it is very clear to me how little we know by reading the words title, artist, medium, date.

Huguette Caland’s art making process for Palm Spring’s Art Museum’s “Untitled 2009” is very straight forward and a good example of the physical process of a large number of her works,

There’s no preliminary drawing on her canvas pieces. Large white unstretched canvas is laid on a very large table. Watercolor and water are mixed in large quantity and poured on the canvas and spread around the canvas freely using a large flat brush. The canvas pigment is left to dry. After drying, another layer of the same color or a different color is layered, if she chooses. Sometimes the base color layer may have more than one color creating a tie-dye effect. She often preps more than one base canvas at a time.

When she’s ready, she picks one of the prepped canvasses and lays it out on a flat table once again, then sits and starts her design. This organic approach is meditative and spontaneous. No pencil is used. Simple sharpie markers and fabric pens are used to create her repeated delicate lines. Grids are constructed with repeated marks. Crosshatched texture and small lines create the appearance of worn fabric tapestry or carpet. The lines almost appear to be stitches rather than applied by pen. In the piece in the Palm Springs Art Museum, silver pen over a magenta background gives an elegant appearance of painted silk with small organic floral shapes. This effect adds a lightness to the working of the lines. The slight hint of lapis also adds to the interest as one scans the detail.

Compare & Contrast Artwork

My travels to Turkey came to mind when I was critiquing both “Untitled 2009” by Caland and “Osho 2015” by Faig Ahmed. The exposure to fantastic rug weaving, Byzantine tile in mosques and brilliantly beautiful colors overlapping throughout the country made a large impact on my art viewing. I was drawn to both artists because of my personal experience in Turkey.

Both pieces represent in some way weaving, textile repetitive patterns, and brilliant color in extreme detail. Ahmed’s woven rug (Osho) clearly represents half traditional and half contemporary cultural rug making art. Caland’s (Untitled) appears to be a tattered rug or tapestry with evidence of stitchery or cross-hatching mimicking the appearance of woven canvas.

The artists’ contemporary work evokes the memory and influence of traditional cultural art. Faig Ahmed was born in 1982 and raised with freedom of creative expression while Caland was born in 1931 with none. Both artists gave up the traditional to move creatively forward, and both continue on with art that blurs distinction of ancient art making. Caland’s artwork becomes non-representational

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using Byzantine geometric shapes and repetitive lines, while Ahmed uses hand-woven traditional cultural forms, and a combination of computerized sketching and use of traditional weavers looms to finish off the modernized flowing of a wall hanging. Both processes include meditative intricate work ending up with completely different outcomes. These artists continue their art making because both say they must. The questioning and blurring of traditional cultural restraints empower artists' creative possibilities.

'It's a delicate balance. You have to be sensitive to changes while keeping your identity while remembering your roots.'

Museum Owned

The “Untitled 2009” by Huguette Caland is a gift of the artist, courtesy of Aidis Browne Fine Arts. “Untitled 2009” fits into the category of contemporary art at the Palm Springs Art Museum. The Museum has purchased works to enlarge the contemporary art collection over the last decade, and this piece fits into that category.

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