

Exhibition February 19 – August 25, 2025
Sabatini Building, Floor 4

Huguette Caland

A Life in a Few Lines



Self-Portrait in Smock, 1992. Private collection

**MUSEO NACIONAL
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Huguette Caland: A Life in a Few Lines is the first major retrospective in Europe to be dedicated to Huguette Caland (Beirut, Lebanon, 1931–2019), an artist whose life and work spanned decades, continents, and media, defying the aesthetic and social conventions of her time. Through almost three hundred works, including drawings, paintings, sculptures, collages, and multimedia creations, this exhibition offers a comprehensive and exhaustive narrative based on Caland's artistic language and life story, both intimately linked through the concern at the heart of her work: the experience of the self in its encounter with others and with the places it has known.

One outstanding example of this is her *Self-Portrait in Smock* (1992), where a Caland stripped of facial features identifies herself as an artist through her painter's smock, which is smeared not only with swaths of paint but also with what seems to be a telephone number. This work thus reflects how she saw the relationship between art and life: "The media I used for art is mostly my own life."

Caland's works, which feature many formats, trace out an existence that led her from her native Lebanon to the utopianism of Paris and later to the art scene of Venice, California, before her final return to Beirut. While steeping herself in these different environments, Caland created her own vocabulary of pictographic forms and configurations that challenged both the stability of the linguistic sign and foundational binary oppositions in Western art and thought, such as abstraction and figuration, masculine and feminine, figure and background, and the singular and the collective.

The daughter of Bechara El Khoury, the first president of Lebanon after the country's independence in 1943, Caland began her artistic career in 1964, after his death, with the monochrome canvas *Soleil rouge / Cancer (Red Sun / Cancer)*, titled to reflect its simultaneous representation of an exciting new beginning but also the devastating cancer that had devoured her father. The works she created during this first phase of her career already



Soleil rouge / Cancer (Red Sun / Cancer), 1964. Private collection



Exit, 1970. Huguette Caland Estate

show some of the motifs that were to appear in her painting over the decades, such as autobiographical references, strong vertical and horizontal axes, forms resembling Arabic letters, cross-stitches, dots, and stripes. An example of this early work is *Exit* (1970), in which a motley crowd of more or less recognizable faces (and body parts) from the artist's circle is packed together with hardly any breathing room.

In 1970, Caland settled in Paris in search of greater creative freedom and new stimulation. There she developed what is probably her most celebrated series, *Bribes de corps* (*Body Bits*), where she eroticizes volumes or fragments that insinuate—sometimes literally—dangling breasts, swollen buttocks, labia, and cleavages of ambivalent sex. These volumes make up an erotic landscape of flesh with vibrant fields of color and delicate lines that expand, overflow, retract, mutate, and contort, in what art historians and critics have often interpreted as a playful response to gender binaries and their logic but which could be further understood as an exploration of alternative systems of identification and referentiality.

Toward the end of that decade, the playful exuberance of her earlier works is replaced by more menacing, less seductive figures. In *Madame* (*Madam*) and *Monsieur* (*Sir*) (1980), the sexual ambivalences of the earlier *Bribes de corps* crystallize in a facial form that speaks equally to other, perhaps more interior parts of the body as opposed to those that manifest at its surface. This drift toward darker creations has been related to the worsening political situation in Lebanon. In *Guerre incivile* (*Uncivil War*) (1981), one of the few works by Caland that explicitly references contemporaneous historical events, we see a representation of the Lebanese Civil War where the allusions to the body conjoin the pleasure and sensuality seen in previous works with newly amputated limbs and agonized faces. During the late 1980s, after a journey through the French region of Limousin with her lover, the Romanian sculptor George Apostu, Caland took an interest in landscape, which she also understood as a body.



Self-Portrait (Bribes de corps) (Self-Portrait [Body Bits]), 1973. Private collection



Guerre incivile (Uncivil War), 1981. Private collection

To represent it, she combined the sinuous lines of some of her early works painted in Beirut with the gentle undulations of the *Bribes de corps*, as seen in the canvases *Landscape (Limousin)* (1984). In *Espace blanc (White Space) I and II* (1984), Caland explores the dynamism of the figure-ground relation, undoing the hierarchy that prioritizes the figure to instead emphasize the white space of the canvas.

Another noteworthy result of her time in Paris was her incursion into fashion design with the creation of *Nour* (“light” in Arabic), a collection for the atelier of Pierre Cardin that included Arab garments, abayas and kaftans, and domestic articles inspired by Islamic art. Before these creations, she had already made the kaftans *Foule (Crowd)* (1974) and *Miroir (Mirror)* (1974), on which she had embroidered the provocative mouths, breasts, and other anatomical forms from her paintings, bringing together once again her life—she wore these dresses in public in every city she lived in—and her art. The same boldness is found in two series from the 1990s whose central feature is pubic hair: *Homage to Pubic Hair* (1992) and *Christine* (1992).

Caland also embarked in Paris on a project that departed from her habitual languages and concerns. The series *L’argent ne fait pas le bonheur, mais il y contribue largement (Money Doesn’t Buy Happiness, but It Contributes Greatly to It)* is made up of 366 small square canvases painted between 1994 and 1995. In these works, commissioned by the Paris branch of the Safra National Bank, Caland transforms the precise linearity of her erotic drawings and the polished surfaces of her sensual paintings into coarser, often kitsch, registers. Behind the humor of both the written word and the image, we can find, among other things, a political and economic critique of the role played by currency in the failure of so many national aspirations, as well as a more personal reflection on the relationship between artistic practice and money.

Having settled in Venice, California, at the end of the 1980s, where she was confronted by the incomprehension and



L'argent ne fait pas le bonheur, mais il y contribue largement : Il est possible de s'amuser avec l'argent (Money Doesn't Buy Happiness, but It Contributes Greatly to It: It Is Possible to Have Fun with Money), 1994. Huguette Caland Estate

indifference of a predominantly male art scene whose interests lay elsewhere, Caland's production shifted direction once more. In a series of self-portraits from the early 1990s, she started to use collage to incorporate fragments of letters from her files of correspondence, giving written language a central place and once more blending her personal sphere (her letters and her relationship with her milieu) with her artistic practice.

From this artistic investigation came the masterly monochrome piece *Nude Letters* (1991), where the writing is illegible. We could see the series *Silent Letters* as naturally developing out of this work with language: here, the writing is refined until it is reduced to linear, self-contained abstract compositions, a far

cry from the explosions of color and the evocations of bodily forms of her earlier phases. These “mute” letters can be read as a way for her to reconcile herself to an art scene that did not seem to pay much attention to her contributions and, in a more general sense, as a way of dealing with larger systems of patriarchy.



Nude Letters, 1991. Huguette Caland Estate

Caland was prolific until the end of her career: in the early 2000s, now suffering from health problems, she reflected on old age by identifying herself with Rocinante, Don Quixote’s broken-down steed, whom she portrayed in chromatically explosive canvases. In these and other later works, hatch marks, dots, and grids are used to give the backgrounds the textile appearance of *tatreez*, a Palestinian embroidery technique with which Caland came into contact through Inaash, the NGO she cofounded in 1969 to provide Palestinian



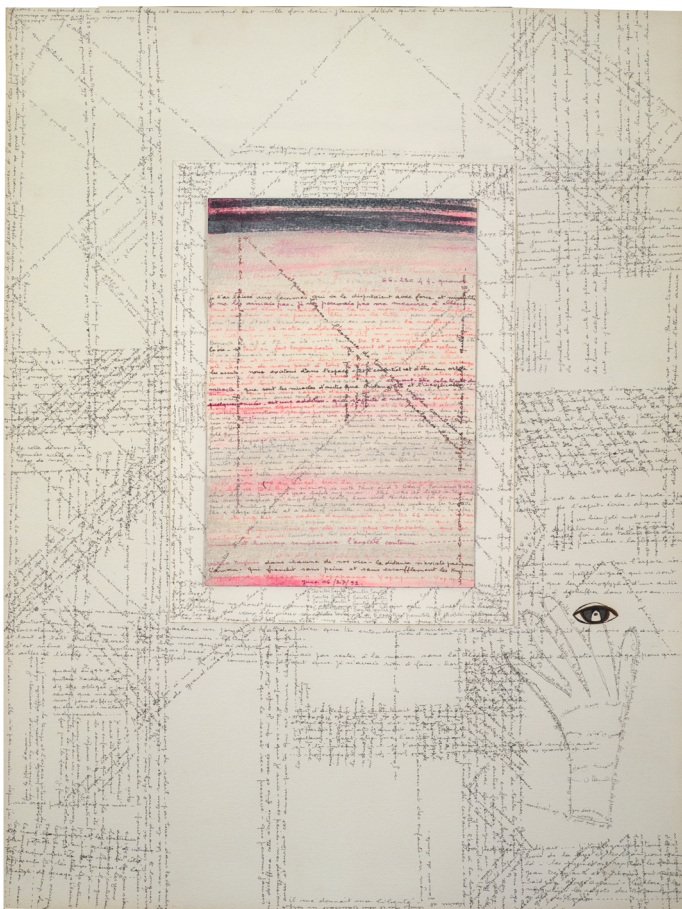
Rossinante Under Cover VI, 2011. Collection of Marguerite Steed Hoffman

refugee women in Lebanon with paid work, helping them to achieve financial independence, while preserving their cultural heritage.



Le grand bleu (The Great Blue), 2012. Private collection

Before beginning what was to be her last journey, this time to her native Beirut, she conceived a series of large canvases as though in response to a premonition or as an expression of longing. Here, the Lebanese house, with its unmistakable red roof, becomes a recurrent motif, inhabiting fantastic landscapes that exist halfway between memory and imagination. Boats and the blue of the sea also appear in her works from this period, as in the simple compositions *One Boat* and *Two Boats* (2011) or the large-scale canvas *Le grand bleu (The Great Blue)* (2012), a metaphor for death understood as simultaneously a journey out and a return home.



Une vie en quelques lignes (A Life in a Few Lines), 1992. Private collection. Photographer: Mansour Dib. (This work is not on display due to the war in Lebanon, but its importance is central to this exhibition, to which it gives its title.)

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía

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Exhibition rooms in all venues
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NIPO: 194-25-004-9

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