



**Joanna Ahlberg, ed.** *Huguette Caland: Tête-à-Tête (Drawing Papers 145)*. New York: Drawing Center, 2021. 183 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-942324-33-4.

**Claire Gilman, curator.** *Huguette Caland: Tête-à-Tête*. New York: Drawing Center, June 11–September 19, 2021. , , .

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*Huguette Caland: Tête-à-Tête* brings together an impressive selection of over forty years of the late artist's work. Organized in loose chronological order, the exhibition at The Drawing Center comprises a large room of early- and mid-career works, a back room of later works, and two biographical films downstairs (fig. 1; <https://tinyurl.com/3suzynba>). The more subtle organizational thread, however, is the use of juxtaposition and separation that deftly draws out Huguette Caland's distinct approach to line across paintings, works on paper, caftans, mannequins, and ceramics.

Born in 1931 in Beirut, Lebanon, Caland enrolled in American University of Beirut's fine arts program at the age of thirty-three. Six years later, she left her husband and children behind to fully pursue a career as an artist in Paris, where the exhibition begins.[1] In the first room, a salon-style display of both works on paper and paintings lends the presentation a playful feel. Wall labels track Caland's subsequent relocations, from Paris to Venice, California, in 1986 and from Venice back to Beirut in 2013. Refreshingly, the exhibition does not link these geographic moves to Caland's artistic maneuvers. Rather, the blended presentation of different media serves to underscore the

constancy of the artist's practice and her commitment to a poetic principle explored through line. For instance, examples of the artist's best-known series, *Bribes de corps* (Body Bits), made during the early and mid-1970s, are sandwiched between whimsical pen drawings of her husband, lovers, and self-portraits. While the *Bribes de corps*--characterized by cleaving masses of color that evoke breasts, buttocks, vulvas, and lips--suggest physical weightiness and volume, Caland's pen drawings are light and spirited, with figures often floating in negative space or balancing atop one another. Presented together, the works demonstrate Caland's ability to use minimal lines and subtle grooves to produce playful, suggestive, and erotic imagery. In one of the *Bribes de corps* on view, Caland has overlaid her typical curvaceous fields of color with wiry black line figures in an acrobatic balance (fig. 2; <https://tinyurl.com/2s4jub5w>). The work underscores the relationship between her energetic pen drawings and more typical examples of her *Bribes de corps*, through this unusual occasion of their fusion.

Moments of physical separation, too, bring out connections across different periods of the artist's work. In the first room, a table display of Caland's

sketchbooks from the late 1980s to the early 2000s includes bright colors of gridded lines that form city buildings, sidewalks, and patches of land. In the artist's works from the mid-2000s in the back room, Caland explicitly invoked place in large works on unstretched linen. Titles like *Appleton* and *Bodrum* refer to the site of her dream home in Venice and the name of her brother's boat in Turkey, respectively. To make these works, Caland folded and unfolded different sections, using an "exquisite corpse" method to conjure urban topographies out of disparate patches of lines, circles, and grids that she worked and reworked until the components appeared blended together. At the time of their making, Caland was researching Palestinian textiles and Byzantine art, and the exhibition proposes parallels between these references and Caland's use of pattern, jewel tones, and graphic composition.

In the case of Caland's two *Silent Letters* works on view, their separation was less satisfying. In these unusually restrained works, both from 1999, Caland painted rows of horizontal black lines that faded toward the end of each stroke as the brush grew drier. According to the artist's daughter, Brigitte Caland, this repeated gesture signified her mother's desire to communicate something while also wishing to contain it. In curator Claire Gilman's catalogue essay, she connects this ambivalent impulse to the artist's subsequent look into Palestinian embroidery and Byzantine aesthetics, suggesting her Middle Eastern heritage to have been this unrealized element. [2] The installation mirrors this speculation, placing one of the *Silent Letters* works in the first room with Caland's early- and mid-career work and one in the second room with her late-career work. The exhibition otherwise avoided identity-based logic, using a playful installation to underline persistent values and principles. However, this treatment of an aesthetic anomaly flattened the artist's complexity as opposed to generating new possibilities for understanding.

Downstairs, *Huguette Caland: Outside the Lines* (2019) provided captivating footage of the artist at work as well as interviews with family, friends, and scholars. From childhood until the end of her life, Caland reappears as a maverick combating new challenges, struggling with the public eye as the daughter of Lebanon's first postindependence president, pursuing an artistic career at age thirty-nine, and navigating the male-dominated L.A. art scene. While the film lends insight into her remarkable life, the greater exhibition did not overindulge in her profile.

Although she worked boldly and lived unconventionally, Caland reflects a broader generation of female artists who only gained recognition later in life.[3] In the past five years, her work has been exhibited at major venues including the Hammer Museum, the Venice Biennial, the Sharjah Biennial, and the Centre Pompidou. The presentation at the Drawing Center marks Caland's first solo exhibition at a major institution in the United States. Not quite a retrospective, the show sets an important precedent for how institutions and curators can deepen understanding of the artist's practice, who, though under-recognized, worked persistently and prolifically over many decades. Most successfully, the presentation was able to embody a certain fluidity and flexibility. An accompanying catalogue of 183 pages mirrors this sensibility, bringing together Gilman's curatorial statements, an art-historical essay by Hannah Feldman, and a speculative exchange between Marwa and Mirene Arsanios. Just as Caland used lines to eschew boundaries, *Tête-à-Tête* motions for an open investigation rather than sealing the story.

#### Notes

[1]. With the exception of one work from 1967 produced by Caland while studying at AUB.

[2]. The Drawing Center, *Huguette Caland: Tête-à-Tête* (New Hampshire: Puritan Capital, 2021), 28.

[3]. Two examples include Etel Adnan and Saloua Raouda Choucair, female Lebanese artists who have recently risen to prominence.

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