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INNER LIFE

## Her magical world

Artist Huguette Caland lives in her most vivid creation: her Venice home, rich in reminders of her journey from Lebanon to Paris to California, and beyond.

June 19, 2003 | Anne-Marie O'Connor | Times Staff Writer

It's hard to decide whether the Venice home of artist Huguette Caland is more diary or memoir.

There are the antique framed sepia photos of a childhood as a member of the Lebanese political elite. There are the erotic drawings ("I was very naughty") that mark her metamorphosis from runaway wife to independent artist in Paris. There is the enormous hallway collage, patterned with love letters from a doomed affair.

And there is the house itself, a visual magic carpet ride that takes you from her father's ascendance as Lebanon's first president after independence from France, to her marriage to the nephew of a family political opponent, to her sudden decision to one day pack up and wander the world, leaving a husband and three children back in Beirut.

An episodic journey, yet Caland, 72, seems to have left little behind. Her luscious bedroom floor, stained a luminous salmon red, echoes the salmon in her family's heirloom woven carpets. The mural she painted in the kitchen, however modern, evokes the mosaics the Byzantine Empire left in Lebanon and echoes the crosshatches of embroidery on traditional textiles throughout the house.



Photograph by Francesco Carli for Artforum

Her art studio opens before you like a chasm as you walk through the vaulted front door and follow her collection of paintings and sculptures up the stairs.

Like a diary, her home records intensely personal moments of her life: the sensual, the painful, the joyful. Like a memoir, she has edited and sifted, turned away from darkness and toward the light. It is a fairly open book: Even her bedroom and bathroom have no doors.

This quintessential artist's house is the fulfillment of the promise that seemed to lie behind her move to the American West, where Caland sensed that mavericks such as herself would not be shown the door, but embraced and celebrated.

Here, as her grandchildren play in the courtyard and Venice artists such as Ed Moses come calling, she has married the past, present and future of her rich odyssey and turned it into a visual narcotic that leaves even the most jaded visitor under the influence.

No wonder that so many seem to linger here, on long afternoons that stretch into evening, as Caland brings out platters of cucumbers, baby carrots and yellow tomatoes on celadon platters, and begins the story of how her life led her into the heart of bohemian society in Venice.

"California is a blessed place," she says. "I feel totally at home in Venice. I have good friends. I know many artists. You have a mixture of people. I like the way things move. I was told it was a cultural desert, but it's not. You can be an intellectual here, a writer. I wouldn't live anywhere else in California but Venice. I feel it's a blessing for me."

Caland's block has not quite risen to yuppie Nirvana. As you drive, you notice the high walls of a neo-Hollywood compound. You pass the unreconstructed suburban box with the "No War" sign and the box with the American flag. A British woman's yard is a menagerie of fake geese, pink flamingos, deer and grinning dwarfs. In other words, a typical Venice street.

Caland stands watering near the front garden -- a haven of lavender, lemon and wildflowers -- under her home's facade which, like a traditional Moorish compound, is an all-but-unbroken wall. The massive walls in the back yield to sliding glass doors, high windows and a moat-like, 75-foot-long pool running along the eastern border of the compound.

"It's not like a Lebanese house. It's not like a French house," she says. "It's more like a chateau fort, the big constructions of medieval times where you had the dungeons and the water near the house."

How the design of the house evolved is a bit more straightforward than Huguette's life story.

When she began to plan the house eight years ago, she told her architect, Neil Kaufman, "I want my house to be like a cathedral. It is my institution. I spend 90% of my time in the house."

Kaufman told her that neighbors wouldn't like a blank front wall, but she waved that away.

The room facing the street would be her studio. "I didn't want the people down the street seeing me work," she says. And as an artist, "I don't want differences of light."

Using Kaufman's plan, she and the contractor, Paule Michel Nahas, worked out many of the final details. She scotched the plan's interior doors. Except for a small guest bathroom downstairs, there is not a single one -- not even to her master bath.

"I don't ever want to feel claustrophobic in my house," she says.

She made other changes. Caland had the floors elaborately stained to highlight the dramatic broad grain. The windows were moved higher, Caland says, and the stairs were turned into towers so they would not eat up interior space. In keeping with the plan, the 4,600-square-foot home's modern lines were complemented with industrial-style materials like plywood floors, something Kaufman had done in the past.

"When you walk into it, it's pretty powerful," Kaufman says.

But the spare lines of the finished home might seem austere if the remarkable, highly personal details did not breathe life into the lush interior. The front door, made of thick, fortress-style vaulted planks from India washed with vivid green paint, appears antique. On the wall facing the door, there is a painting intermingled with scraps of her passionate letters, in French, to a lover. She sighs.

"He gave me back all these letters before he died to save them from the war in Lebanon," she says.

Above her workbench is another painting, from her neo-Byzantine period, of a small figure floating on the canvas toward a distant silhouette. It is her, as a child, levitating toward her husband-to-be, Paul Caland.

"We are suffused with Byzantine art in Lebanon," she says. "You're not even aware of the influence. It is unconscious."

Her studio is the largest room in the house. It holds her current work -- rhythmic lines on raw canvas that have the feel of native cloth, done in browns, earth tones and blues -- that is hung on three walls of the room. She opens an antique dresser in the studio and shows the photo of her wearing a white dress in her wedding, in 1952, to a handsome man of French-Lebanese parentage. It was a politically incorrect union -- her husband's uncle published a pro-French newspaper and her uncle published the pro-independence daily, though both have since merged.

"I was beautiful," she acknowledges, studying the photo, "but I was fat. In the Muslim area they blessed my body. In the Christian area, I was fat."

In front of her is one of the traditional caftans that became her signature dress, and her rebellion against the thinness demanded by fashion. This one is a piece of art, with a woman's naked body embroidered onto the white canvas, that she says she showed at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.

"A Muslim man made it and he blushed when he saw what he had to do," she says.

There is a brown velvet divan that displays the rich needlepoint of women from the Sabra and Chatila Palestinian refugee camps, the site of the infamous 1982 massacre of nearly 2,000 refugees by Christian Phalangist militiamen while the camps were surrounded by Israeli soldiers then occupying Beirut.

Caland used plywood and Formica for two long tables in the dining area off the kitchen, and her paints and papers are spread out there. There are identical drawing tables elsewhere in the house. Around the table are her sculptures, framed nude studies and a series of lively, highly stylized erotic drawings with dozens of entangled people, drawn in Paris.

"I was storytelling my life and the people in my life at that time," she says.

Off the dining room, a small sitting room -- like a handful of intimate rooms: the kitchen, her bedroom and bathroom -- is defined by strong color. The walls are marigold yellow and the plywood floors are stained black. The windows open to the pool.

The tower leading upstairs is a gallery of works by such Venice artists as Ed Moses, Kenny Price, Laddie Dill. Upstairs is her bedroom, the warm, beating heart of the house, with its salmon floors and family pictures, decorated with orange nasturtiums one day, red roses the next. A sad-eyed antique Greek orthodox icon of Christ gazes down from one wall. An Ed Moses abstract in black, white and gray hangs over the fireplace.

Her bedroom closet holds a small gallery of paintings of her father, Bechara el-Khoury, and mother, Huguette, and of the painter who did them, Helen al-Khal. Huguette runs her hand over her dozens of caftans -- one in pink with traditional Palestinian embroidery, another in gray wool with a scarf and cape.

If her home is like a cathedral, her doorless bathroom is a tiny chapel and, in a weird way, a shrine to her hard-won physical self-acceptance. Two square windows throw intense light onto an enormous wood-framed mirror and a long mirror over the sink. The intense luminosity made the salmon stain in the floor too strong, so she coated it with a glaze of ultramarine blue, creating an arresting wine wash with purplish undertones. Mirrors line a side wall over the sinks, creating a scrutiny as thorough as any three-way department store mirror. Few people, regardless of their age, would care to face themselves this nakedly every day. But Caland was one of the oldest to appear, along with scantily clad beauties like Elle McPherson, in the Hollywood vanity tome "Women Before 10 a.m."

She adopted the caftans that line her closet as a step toward that self-acceptance. Her body did not fit the haute couture clothes her French-Lebanese husband preferred, especially after bearing three children.

"The big drama was when I changed my look," she says. "It was almost a cause for a divorce. My clothes changed my life. I could really enjoy my life."

The next drama was when she told her husband she was leaving for Paris -- a decision she made, at 39, while hanging her work in an art show.

"I didn't give him time to think about it," she says. "He would have had a tendency to be a very macho guy like everybody else. I said I was leaving, and five days later, I left."

"When I left Lebanon, I left everything," she said, "my life and a beautiful home, everything."

She also shed some powerful baggage. She rejects the religious divisions that made her Maronite Christian family part of the ruling class, but would soon tear the country apart. Her father, though forced to step down during his second term in 1952 by his political critics, left a lasting legacy. Two brothers became ministers.

"I wanted to have my own identity," she says. "In Lebanon, I was the daughter of, wife of, mother of, sister of. It was such a freedom, to wake up all by myself in Paris. I needed to stretch."

She began to work and show as an artist. One day, she went to Pierre Cardin's boutique "with my lover, to buy a present for my husband," she says.



Photographs by FRANCIS OGBURN Los Angeles Times

**JUDICIOUS COLOR**  
Heirloom rugs set the tone for the richly hued salmon-red plywood floors in Caland's master bedroom.

Cardin approached her and, eventually, asked her to design a caftan line. For the next 11 months, she designed 120 elegant caftans -- the only time in her life, she says, she has ever had a job.

By 1987, her film producer son, Philippe, had moved from New York to Los Angeles, and he told her she should check it out.

Caland says you must inhabit a house slowly. Soon after she moved in, she went to the memorial service of a dead friend. On the empty kitchen wall, she began to write of her despair over her friend's death, and her rudeness to a friend who tried to console her. Some of the writing is still barely visible under the elegant mural that now dominates the kitchen.

Today, she doodles on a painter's smock embellished with little mosaic-like grids and a long letter in French to her deceased mother that begins, "My dearest, I'm still OK ... "

"It was tough to adjust to Venice," she reflects. "I was not young. I was not a bimbo. People kept asking, 'Why did you leave Paris?' What do you say to that?" Now, "I love the small community. There is a quality of life in Venice. You don't feel like you're in a big city. It's not Beverly Hills. It's not overwhelming."

Caland may have crossed some bridges, but she hasn't burned them. Her husband still lives in Beirut, but her children and grandchildren have coalesced around her. Her daughter, Brigitte Caland, has made a life within walking distance of Caland's house with sculptor Robert Wilhite who designed Caland's plywood chairs. Another son, Pierre Caland, a businessman, shares a Bel-Air house with his German wife. Philippe lives in her guest house with his wife and children. Even her contractor moved nearby, from the Valley.

It's easy to see why they gravitate to her, as she sets out an arugula salad with orange and purple edible flowers and pours white wine.

The home she has created is a testament to her personal journey, not a reflection of any architectural convention.

"It's very nice to have all my children and grandchildren here," she says, sitting under an arbor of trumpet-like belladonna flowers and cutting a peach tart into little slivers for her grandchildren. "I never thought I would end my life in Los Angeles. Sometimes you feel like you've lived such a long time. It's like a train running down a track. I love Venice. I love every minute of my life. I squeeze it like an orange and I eat the peel, because I don't want to miss a thing."