

Huguette Caland

LOMBARD FREID GALLERY

Was there a single, absolutely straight line in this wonderfully loopy exhibition of the early works of Huguette Caland? Compositions circle back on themselves, forms wobbled, the corners of squares puckered, bisections meandered ever so slightly like rivers through unsteady topography. Encompassing abstract and figurative painting, drawing, and textiles, this efficient show bracketed fifteen productive years—beginning in 1970, the year that Caland, who was born in Beirut in 1931, moved to Paris, and ending in 1985, just before she left for California (like her compatriot Etel Adnan), where she would live until recently relocating. We found an assured artist, swiftly dispensing with any anxiety over the postwar conditions of a woman painting—playfully confirming and contorting our expectations head-on.

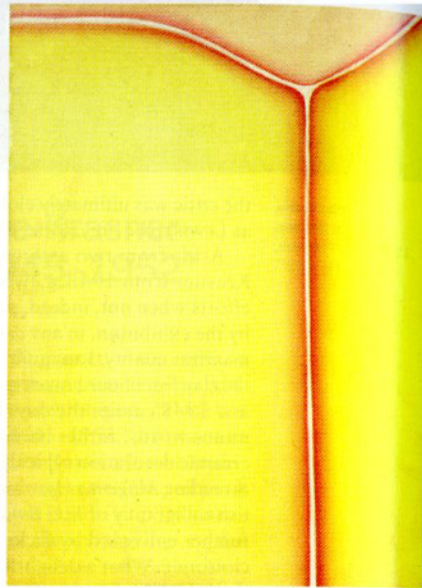
Both in situ and chronologically, the show began with just such a work: *Tête-à-Tête*, 1970, features an odd, catlike face (a pale, lumpy squash of a head; a yellow bone-shaped nose; blue olive eyes, a pink slug mouth) doubled in horizontal reflection, though not exactly. A tête-à-tête is a private meeting or intimate conversation, often among lovers. Its literal translation is “head to head.” Though in Maori and Inuit cultures this signifies a form of affectionate greeting, the idiomatic equivalent in English implies something quite different—aggressive, close competition. One should consider all of these semantic axes when viewing Caland’s art, not least of all erotic proximity: There’s the undeniable appearance of a sideways vagina that the two pink lips create at the center of the feline face. And in the adjacent *Exit* from the same year, tête-à-tête takes on another meaning altogether when a penis floats next to a head whose cartoon eyes ogle it askance.

A 1973 series of canvases in the same gallery might have been seen as purely abstract, were it not for this company and their title: “*Bribes de corps*” (Body Fragments). How does Caland manage to make these appear both as elegant abstractions demonstrating a mastery of color (the visual jolt of a purple/red cohabitation was a personal favorite) and as clever send-ups of physical metaphors about composition, and even about the psychoanalytic part-object? Here, shapes evocative of Philip Guston and Georgia O’Keeffe butt up against one another like . . . upturned bums. And then there’s the blazing scape of *Red II*, 1974, which appears to be the lower torso of a zaftig figure, the space between the legs a delta that reaches the soft curve of the stomach, the navel a waxing gibbous above. In many of these canvases, the palpable tension between two forms put in close proximity to each other gives the layered, zipper-like divisions separating their rounded shapes a magnetic thrum.

The show’s first room also introduced a cluster of six caftans designed by the artist in advance of a collaboration with the fashion innovator Pierre Cardin (himself no stranger to the spheroid form). This article of clothing, displayed here on mannequins also made by the artist, brilliantly refers back to Caland’s own autobiography; it simultaneously calls upon Ottoman history and Parisian haute couture in the 1970s and provides a blank—and whole—body to cover. Caftans, of course, also mask most of a figure’s contours, a fact Caland wittily acknowledges in one piece by embroidering an outline of a naked body to scale. The effect was that the artist’s creations attended their own exhibition, forming a circle of elegant, witty provocateurs.

The almost-mirroring of *Tête-à-Tête* (and many of the “*Bribes de corps*”) was found again in the back room in *Untitled*, 1985, a colored pencil-on-paper drawing in which two female profiles come face-to-face; they meet in an optical elision (seen often in Picasso’s portraits) in which their silhouettes form a single woman’s head, facing forward and flattened against the picture plane. Several other abstract drawings evoked the bulbous wrappings of Louise Bourgeois sculptures and promised Caland’s continued interest in working with fabric; delicate and wispy in contrast to the bright paintings, these pieces encouraged you to lean in closer to catch their secretive discourse. How could one resist?

—Prudence Peiffer



Huguette Caland, *Bribes de corps* (Body Fragments), 1973, oil on linen, 19 x 13 1/4". From the series "Bribes de corps," 1973.