

Now in Her Eighties, Huguette Caland Is Celebrated for Her Sensual, Feminist Art



If her body caused her pain, she set about making it a source of primary pleasure in her life—as evidenced in her rich body of early erotic work. “She saw life through her body, and through the way others perceived her body,” Brigitte explained. “She always said that she didn’t like her body but her body served her well—what else can you ask from a body? I think she probably meant that it never stopped her from doing anything that she wanted.” Brigitte added that a lot of her mother’s art is inspired

by bodies—the roundness of the body and the feminine side of the body. “It’s very sensuous, and very experimental.”

Caland began making erotic and body-inspired images in the 1960s, not long after entering the American University of Beirut to study art. (Around the same time, she began wearing long, loose kaftans for greater comfort, ease, and mobility; later, she would design and make them herself, decorating them with embroidered biomorphs or kissing lips.) But it was after 1970, when she left her husband and three children in Lebanon and moved to Paris in pursuit of artistic freedom, that she developed her “Bribes de corps (Body Parts)” works—abstracted, surrealistic drawings and paintings of bodies up close that in some cases seem to swallow the canvas whole.

Two paintings from 1973, titled *Self-Portrait (Bribes de corps) (Body Parts)*, show pink and orange flesh engulfing the picture plane, save for small cleavages at the perimeter of the paintings that suggest lips, labia, or ample buttocks. Some of them are still more abstract: A different painting from the same year zeros in on yellow masses separated only by a sinuous vein; another shows mountainous pink forms intersecting, with a fine slither of light visible in a break between them. The 1976 work *Bribes de corps (Body Parts)* is a white plane interrupted only by pink and yellow shapes that emerge from two corners of the canvas, evoking male and female genitalia. (The perky head of a phallus? Breasts? Testicles?) They are connected by a faint line. Cleavaged and conjoined parts are abundant across the series, as are bodies that are full, generous, and free.

In Paris, Caland found liberty and pleasure, but not necessarily artistic acceptance. Her erotic work was “very controversial, in an unpleasant way,” said Brigitte. “It was dismissively received—like she didn’t know how to do anything else.” The cultural establishment felt that “she wasn’t an artist or painter because all she did was erotic work—which wasn’t

true, but this was the perception." While the avant-garde bohemia of Paris maybe wasn't "as critical, not as judgemental," as the cultural milieu of Beirut, she said, it was not positive. Her exhibition history is thin, even in Paris, up until the 1990s, when her work began to draw recognition in the Middle East. By then, she had settled in California, and her work had evolved to quite different subject matter—cityscapes and textile-like fields of abstract pattern.