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Huguette Caland

"Art is not a part of my life; it is my whole life. I've never analyzed my creative intention. I know only that I want to determine a point of emotion in the painting or drawing, and that I am absorbed by an exploration of the sensual possibilities of the human body. My body feels these possibilities more in painting than in drawing, perhaps because the material itself is so much more sensual; two felt and painted forms touching evoke the touching of human bodies."

Although she always knew that one day she would become an artist, Hugette Caland did not begin until she was 33 years old. As she says, "There were too many other events in my life, too many other commitments to finish with before I could turn to art. I had to go through being a daughter, a woman, a wife, a mother; I had to taste and digest all that living before I could begin with the artist in me... And I don't like doing things in half measure."

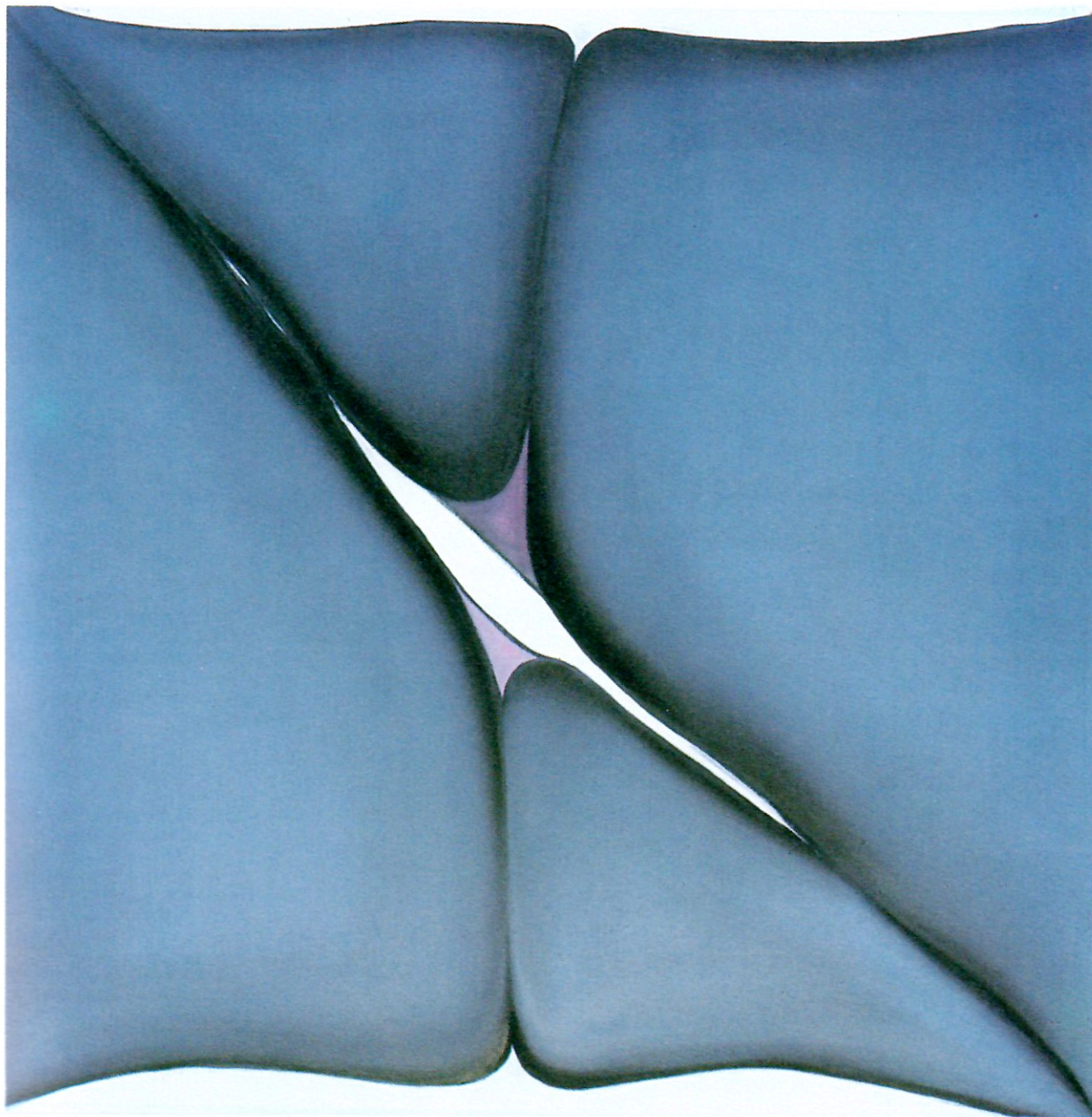
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First things first is axiomatic to the character of Huguette. Decisions are made, each in its proper time, and always with total dedication. Of strong and willful personality, with a spirit of calculated risk which is the mark of a born gambler, she rarely acts purely on impulse. Each move is carefully considered and the stakes decided upon; then will, perseverance, and patience become the substance of her method.

She began decisions at an early age, and it didn't make any difference that she was the daughter of Lebanon's president, Bechara El Khoury; it simply made things more difficult, more challenging (and Hugette loves challenge). While her father strived for the independence of his country, she was concentrating on achieving her own independence. Her life was filled with many incidents and experiences uncommon in the lives of most children. Constantly faced with pressures to conform to the dictates of her status and role, she resisted; many stories are related of her youthful escapades, of a conduct unbecoming the daughter of a president.

Few young girls, for instance, fall in love at the age of 12 to the serious point of choosing a husband. Huguette did - - with 17-year-old Paul Caland who, to make matters worse, came from a family that was actively engaged in political battle with her father. "From the moment I saw him, I decided he was the man I would marry," recalls Huguette. "He didn't know it, my parents didn't know it, but I had made up my mind. It wasn't easy, and it took eight years of effort on my part. George Naccache, Paul's uncle, owned the leading opposition newspaper, and was regularly lashing out at my father's regime. It was a Montague-Capulet affair... and I had my Romeo to convince besides, because at first he didn't pay much attention to this 12-year-old Juliet! There were secret meetings (and plots to evade the security guards assigned

83 STEEL BLUE
1973, oil on canvas,
120 × 120 cm.
Sculptural modelling develops the volume in this painting and gives the shapes the burnished quality of metal. They press heavily against each other, and are relieved only by the two horizontal white areas. The diagonal white, however, instead of easing the tension, increases the sense of pressure and anxiety expressed. The forms are large and heavy, but their edges are treated with sensitive sensuality.



to me); there were constant battles at home, tears and angry words; but I stubbornly persisted, my parents finally capitulated, and when I was 20 Paul and I were married."

130 Behind such qualities of reasoned planning and determination, however, lies another stratum in the temperament of Huguette Caland. There is another side, which lends reverberant counterpoint to her life and provides the tension and energy, the storehouse of fantasy and imagery, out of which her art is born. When Huguette speaks about her childhood, she reveals early manifestations of unbridled imagination and curiosity, of impulsive emotions often shot with intangible currents of uncertainty and fear. She remembers the child's world of demons and angels she found in the changing night shadows on her bedroom walls, frighteningly alive and real. She remembers the night when illusion and reality became one, when French soldiers in search of her father suddenly burst into the room and with bayonets slashed through the mosquito netting above her head. She remembers also at times experiencing levitation and insists that she was able at will to elevate her body.

About body, Huguette speaks with complete candor: "You know, as a young girl, I weighed 112 kilograms. I was grotesquely huge... and that was another kind of battle I had to contend with. Why did I persist in stealing sweets when I was supposed to be dieting; why did I let myself grow so fat that it became finally not only aesthetically unacceptable but also physically painful? I don't know... To hurt myself? To hurt my parents? To defy the world and insist that it accept me as I was, all 112 kilos of me? I accumulated and kept that weight, it seems, with the same determination and thoroughness with which I decided to and managed to marry the man I wanted."

A simple psychological label for this abuse of the body would be "frustrated desire." And to a certain extent, despite surface indications to the contrary, this may be true - - because when finally Huguette began to paint, she also at the same time began to pay attention to the state of her body, and proceeded with methodical determination to lose 30 kilos in one year.

84 RED, WHITE, AND BLUE
1970, oil on canvas,
75 × 75 cm.

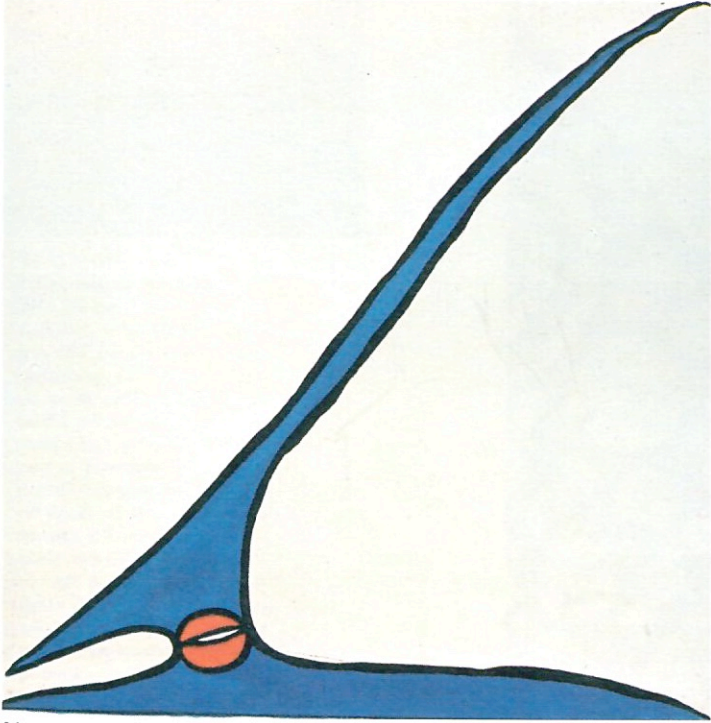
Very often Caland's message is expressed only through the negative shapes she unwittingly creates. The hard, thrusting blue line, deliberately put down, asserts a presence which at first glance inactivates the visual impact of the negative white canvas areas. But with an easy shift of the eye, the white shapes immediately assume importance and reveal their erotic interest in the red focal point.

85 TV CITY
1968, oil on canvas,
100 × 80 cm.

Making bolder use of the canvas white, Caland's unpainted areas are transformed into negative spaces of significant visual weight. The compositional massing of the city into two separate parts that push towards each other foreshadow the form tension that will mark the artist's subsequent work.

86 COLORED FORMS
1969, oil on canvas,
100 × 120 cm.

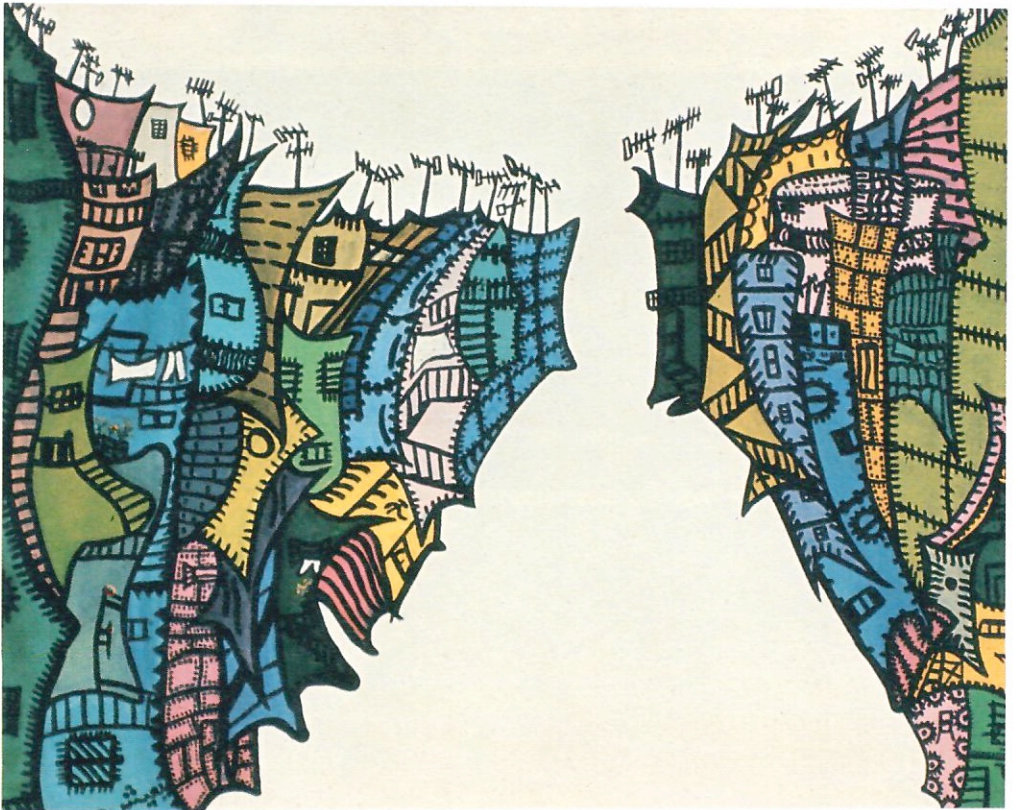
The compositional concept of two major forms, one pushing against the other, now takes on more personal intention. Decorative design continues, but a suggestion of erotic activity is introduced. Colored with irony and a teasing aggressivity, the form on the right strains to touch the smiling, imperturbable presence on the left.



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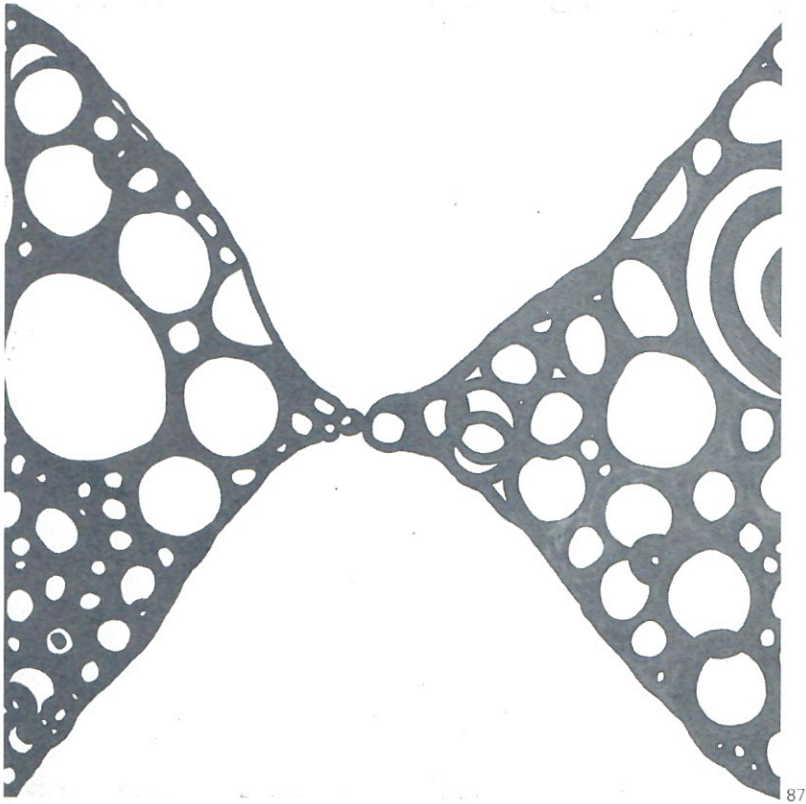


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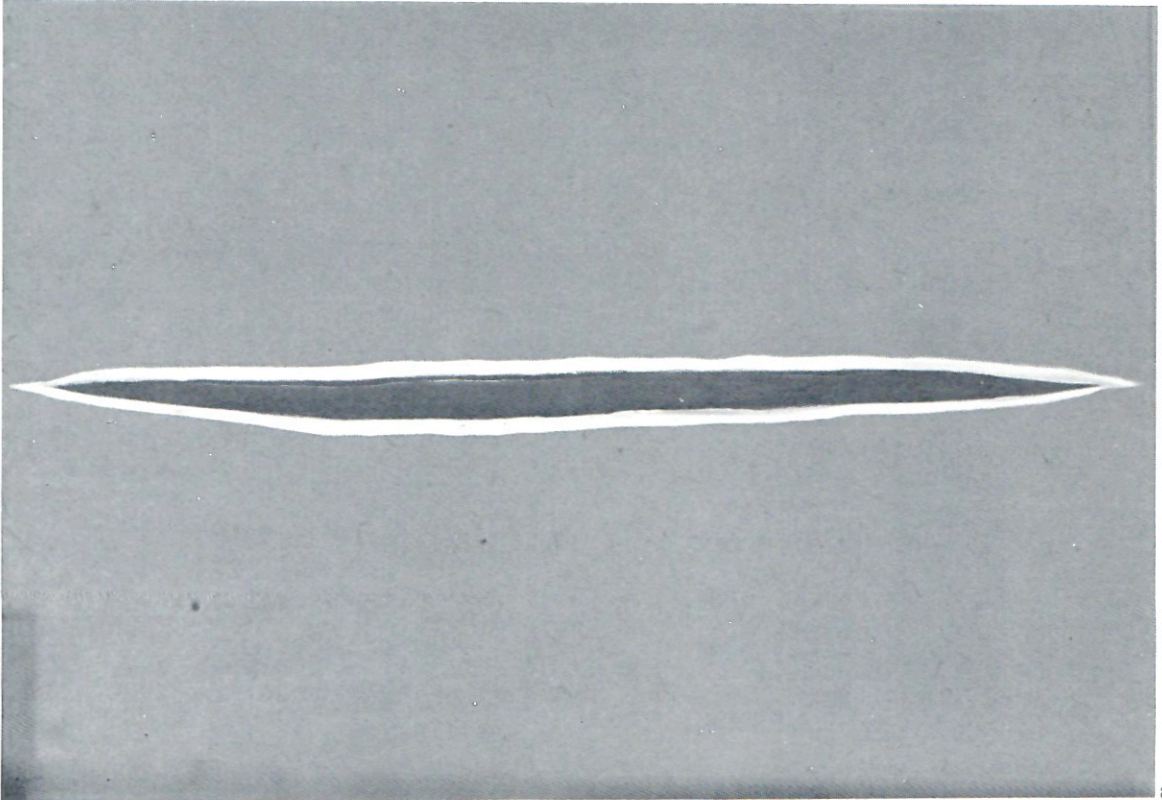


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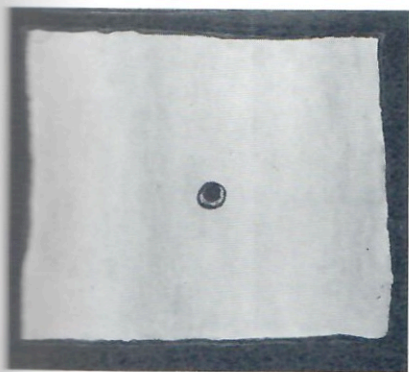
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87 BLACK AND WHITE
1970, oil on canvas,
75 × 75 cm.

Caland, who draws constantly when she is not painting, will from time to time, utilize black paint on white canvas to make her graphic statement. Symmetry gives equal expressive weight to each of the four segments of the composition. The whites touch, as do the graphically designed forms, with discreet sensuality and with equal existential power.

88 RED AND GREEN
1967, oil on canvas,
100 × 70 cm.

Caland begins to leave selected and defined areas of the canvas unpainted. In this composition, the canvas white becomes an outlining shape that isolates the green, and also gives it an important volume in relation to the red background. This type of compositional division of the picture into minimal forms is further developed in later paintings.

89 PINK AND GREEN
1966, oil on canvas,
70 × 60 cm.

Caland explores many different approaches during her first years of painting. From the beginning, she concentrates more on the emotive power of pure line, form, and color in abstract design. Here, the relationship of color proportion is studied. In the area it occupies, the pink field dominates; but the green and red, in their stronger color intensity, assume greater weight and visually impose their presence.

There exists, however, another kind of concern with the human body which is neither frustration nor a matter of kilos, but rather one of admitted and avid curiosity in its sensual and erotic possibilities. In her work today, Huguette makes an inquiry into this realm, exploring all the qualities of line, texture, angle and juncture of limb, torso, and appendage with the absorbed and innocent eye of a child examining a new toy. Although the erotica is often explicit, the eye is first provoked by a highly inventive handling of compositional space, and follows with aesthetic appreciation Huguette's seductive, abstract play line, color, and form. It is only upon closer, more literal observation that one arrives at the erotic content - - but not before being wooed by the tender humor and wit of a surreal imagination that insists on the pleasures of sensual discovery and denies any taboo.

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Huguette began to paint, finally and precisely, in January, 1964, immediately after her father's death. He had been ill for three years, and through those years she had remained at his bedside, the devoted daughter. Now that obligation of filial love was ended, and less than a week later she announced her decision. Her husband, long ago recognizing the unusual qualities of the woman he had married, brought her the paints, brushes, canvas, and later built her a studio. She had never been the conventional wife and mother and she never would be, he knew. He also knew that this decision would become a permanent and total commitment, that it would take priority above all else in Huguette's life, and that it would be left to him to guide their three young children into adulthood. He eased her path then, and still does.

She began, completely alone and without guidance, yet in those first months produced works of startling accomplishment, both in size and quality of expression - - one of her first canvasses was a large, red abstract two and a half meters long. Aware, however, that she needed some formal training, she enrolled a year later in art classes at AUB. There, for four years she moved through the entire gamut of plastic expression, from drawing to painting, from figurative to abstract, absorbing all techniques, all materials, with remarkable appetite and energy.

In 1970, after her first exhibition in Lebanon, she left both country and family to live and work in Paris. When questioned about this move, Huguette says: "I felt too confined in Lebanon. Maybe it was the fact that the public viewed me still as a president's daughter and not as an artist... maybe it was the ambiguity of my role at home - - being a wife and a mother, and still not actually being one... or maybe I wanted that larger challenge of the world, and not just Lebanon. I suppose it's a combination of all."

Each summer, however, she returns. Physically separated from her husband and children and following no conventional patterns of family functioning, she declares that the emotional bonds are still deep and strong. "We are a family of individuals," Huguette says. "Each must be permitted to chase after his own star, and to each, no matter what that star and to what corner of the world it may lead, the rest of us give all support."