

Huguette Caland

Lombard Fried, New York, USA



Huguette Caland, *Untitled*, 1985, coloured pencil on paper, 51 × 70 cm

This exhibition of early work by the 83-year-old, Lebanese-born artist Huguette Caland was a welcome revelation, inspiring the re-examination of a canon by bringing a less familiar voice to light. Caland, who studied art at the American University in Beirut before relocating to Paris and, ultimately, to California, has nurtured a remarkably flexible practice over the years. Underneath a penchant for expressive colour and warm touch, the early abstract works on view here seemed to respond structurally to certain strains of ‘minimal’ painting (in the term’s broader, lower-case sense) from the 1950s and ‘60s. Rather than emulating, however, Caland consistently inverts, substituting tight, shallow spaces for expansive ones and favouring a sensuous, tactile sensibility over optical asceticism.

For example, Barnett Newman may haunt ‘Bribes de Corps’, a series of six paintings and one drawing from 1973, in which most of the pictures are divided down the middle by a linear element. Sometimes it’s the result of

an absence, like a narrow gap between two forms; other times it's closer to a crease (are those buttocks?); and at other times still it's truly a stripe or another kind of positive form. Perhaps especially in the context of a Manhattan gallery, it's hard to think about the insistence upon this specific compositional strategy without also considering Newman, whose characteristic vertical 'zip' is usually regarded as a breakthrough in the history of abstraction. But Caland's project, which leans ever so gently away from abstraction into figuration, with every shape doubling as flesh, appealing as much to a sense of touch as vision, could hardly be more at odds with the sublime opticality Newman's paintings strive for. Similarly, a warm, pink form that stretches edge-to-edge of a square canvas from the same series, slightly pinched in at the middle of all four sides, might bring to mind Ellsworth Kelly or even some of Frank Stella's shaped canvases. But, in Caland's painting, the structure emerges from within an illusionistic, pictorial field, on its way to becoming a pudgy, four-petal flower. Whether or not the references are intended, there's a definite cheekiness to the gesture of twisting structures coded as 'deductive' or 'Minimal' into something halfway between a body and a flower.

Of course, if that's where the paintings get some of their critical traction, it should also be said that they are much more than re-workings of pre-existing genres. Cumulatively, they open up onto their own, idiosyncratic world. Despite the abstract content, the pictures often feel cropped or zoomed in. The colours alternate between high saturation and a powdery paleness, with little in between. Throughout, bodies merge and separate, or push against and seem to feel each other. There are later paintings and drawings, from the mid-1970s on, which withdraw from abstraction altogether, so that sometimes what was uncannily suggestive in an earlier picture becomes explicit in a later one: instead of biomorphic forms, there are eyes, lips, breasts, bellies and faces in profile, conjured in oil or coloured pencil with a delicate, preening touch. In *Exit* (1970), something of an outlier for its graphic approach, excerpted portions of many different bodies and faces are joined together in a kind of patchwork, or

like a multi-cellular organism wobbling in the frame. It makes sense that Caland was also producing drawings on kaftans at the same time. These pieces, ten of which were included in the show, bring the kinds of relationships between forms established in the paintings into contact with real flesh (or, actually, as they were presented here, the artificial flesh of female mannequins, which Caland also designed). The tone is serious, but also playful – frankly, it feels good to stand in the room with Caland’s works. Their unmistakable ambition is matched by their warmth.