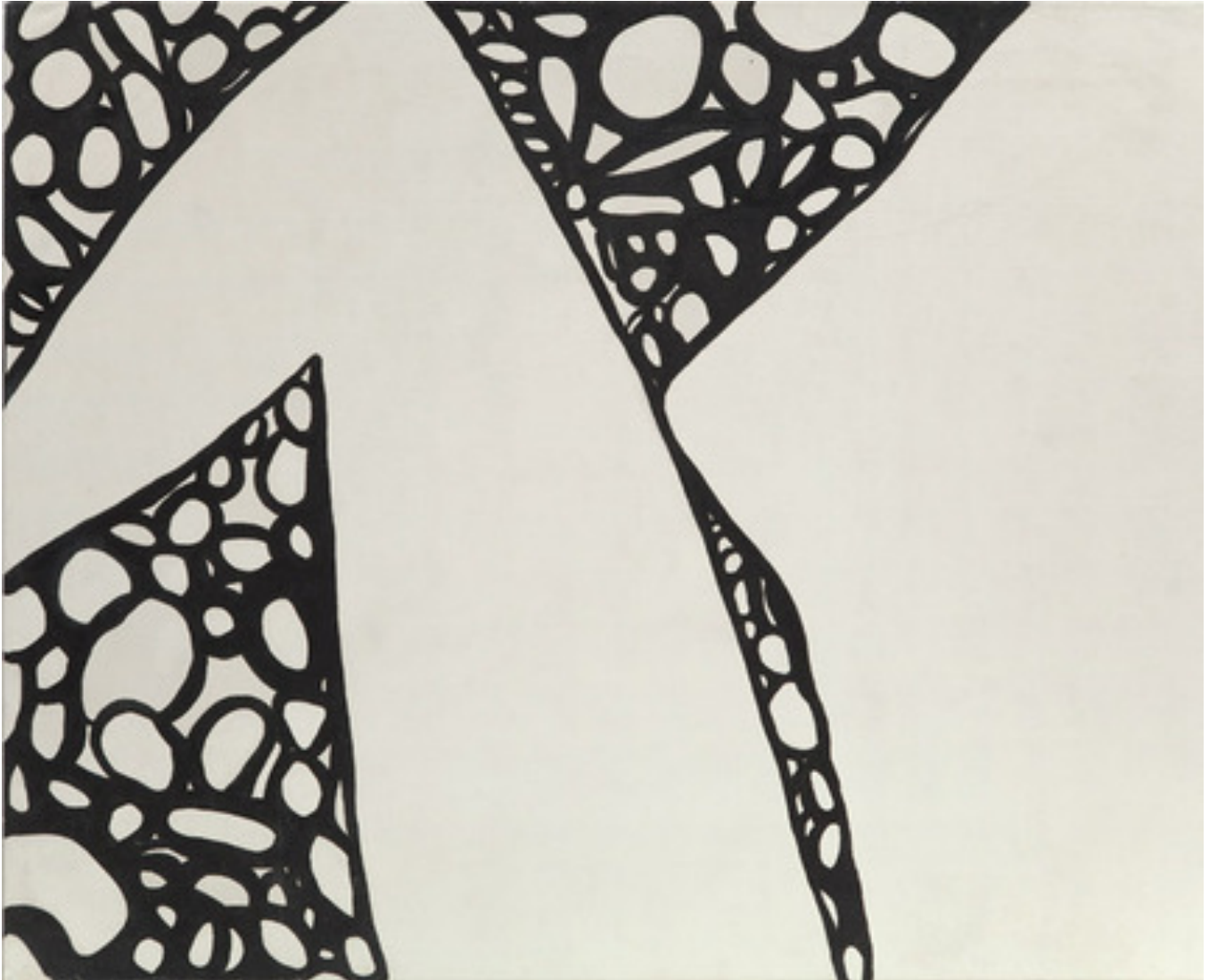


# Huguette Caland

Beirut Exhibition Center



**Huguette Caland, *Helen*, 1967**, oil on linen, 28 x 34".

The Lebanese-born, California-based artist Huguette Caland has burned through numerous styles, moods, and media in the five decades since she made her first painting, a monochrome titled *Red Sun*, to mark the death of her father in 1964. At the Beirut Exhibition Center, the work was placed just inside the entrance, where it marked the beginning and end points of Caland's first retrospective in Lebanon, which took a full-circle tour through the three major historical phases of her work. Produced as a

ruminative elegy to her father, Bechara El- Khoury—who was Lebanon’s first postindependence president and a nationalist hero—after she nursed him through a five-year struggle with cancer, the piece is also the defiant act of a thirty-three-year-old woman announcing the start of a new life. Faint gradations and delicate brushstrokes distinguish rings of concentric circles like ravenous cells giving way to a powerful bloodred sun. Within six years of producing it and a rush of other works, Caland announced, at one of her own dinner parties and to the astonishment of her guests, that she was leaving the country, her husband, and her children to pursue her art. The painting thus inaugurated a late-starting but lifelong career, which led Caland to Paris and then, following a pattern similar to that of her compatriot Etel Adnan, to California, where she still lives.

From the pride of place given to *Red Sun*, Caland’s retrospective picked up a chronological thread that ran counterclockwise around the open-plan, airplane-hangar-size Beirut Exhibition Center. Riotous, kaleidoscopic landscapes such as *Kaslik* and *Maameltein*, both 1970, captured Lebanon’s lesser-known harbors and seedy, unloved suburbs. The artist’s highly stylized, sometimes nearly abstract approach to self-portraits and nudes, exemplified in the pairing of knee and breast in *Helen*, 1967, gave the exhibition a fine sense of humor and mischief. Hundreds of Caland’s erotic drawings played across a floorto-ceiling screen in the center of the venue, where the video artist and filmmaker Nesrine Khodr had turned them into a lively animation sequence. On one wall, Caland’s lurid biomorphic abstractions appeared to shove enormous bodies into the shallowest of picture planes, emphasizing sexual organs and erogenous zones, as in two playful self-portraits from 1973—all flattened flesh and posterior curves—or the more compositionally complex *Elle et Lui* (Her and Him), 1978. On another were the intricately drawn, highly decorative, mural-size paintings for which Caland is best known—such as *La mer I* (The Sea I) and *La mer II* (The Sea II), both 2008; *Darius*, 2009; *Tarik al-Sham* (Road to Damascus), 2010; and the

Klimt-like full-figure portrait of a woman in a long skirt titled *Kantari, April 1952, 2010*—which emulate the look of finely detailed tapestries with twinned tendencies toward storytelling and mental mapping.

Curated by Nadine Begdache and Brigitte Caland, the artist's dealer and daughter, respectively, the exhibition divided some two hundred works into three sections based on time, place, and theme. The early works from Kaslik are, for the most part, loosely erotic. The middle works made in Paris involve a search for new forms and include collaborations with the sculptor Georges Apostu, for example, and the poets Andrée Chedid and Salah Stétié. The later works from California are suffused with nostalgia for a Lebanon that is long gone. Unless, of course, it lives on in Caland's art.

—[Kaelen Wilson-Goldie](#)