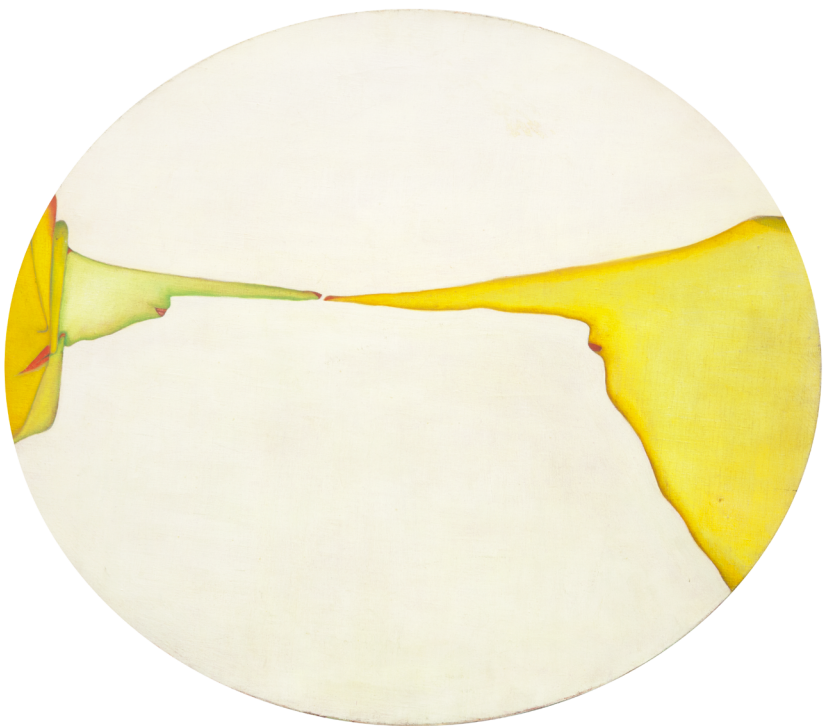


Huguette Caland

EN

Tête-à-Tête

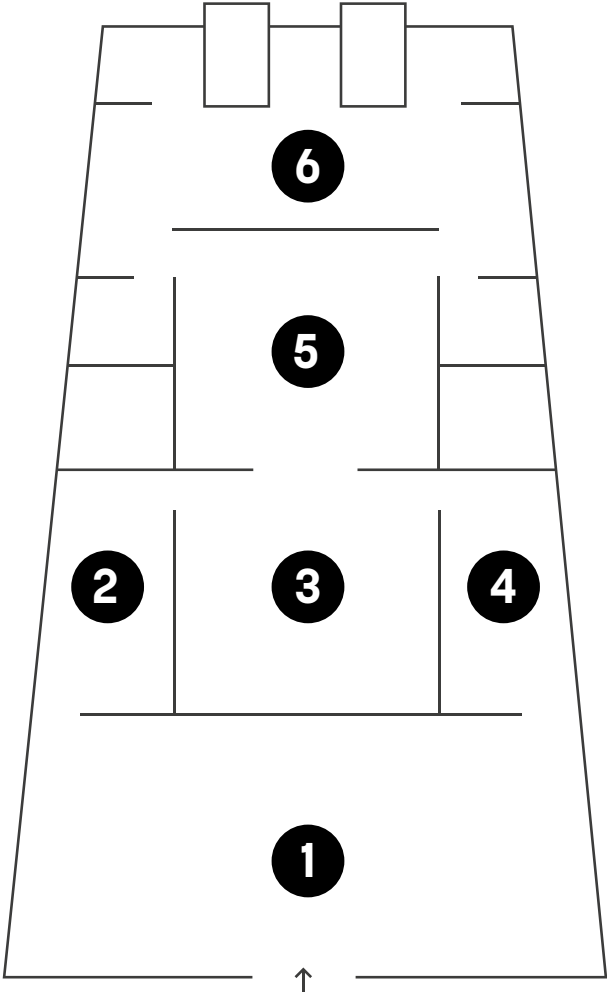
25 – 02 ————— 12 – 06 – 2022



Huguette Caland, *Nous deux*, 1972, Oil on canvas, 69.9 x 77.5 cm. Private Collection.

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PLAN & ROOMS



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INTRODUCTION

Huguette Caland's life and work have often been described as unconventional. Born in 1931 in Beirut, she was the only daughter of the first president of the Republic of Lebanon, Bechara El-Khoury. Shortly after her father's death in 1964, she enrolled in the Fine Arts programme at the American University of Beirut where she studied painting and drawing. In 1970, she abruptly left her family in Beirut and moved to Paris, where she, tired of being the daughter of, the wife of, the mother of, built her own identity and began exploring themes of sexuality and desire in her work. In 1987, Caland relocated to Venice, California, USA, where she built a home and her studio. The artist lived alternately between there and Beirut until her recent death at the age of 88 in 2019.

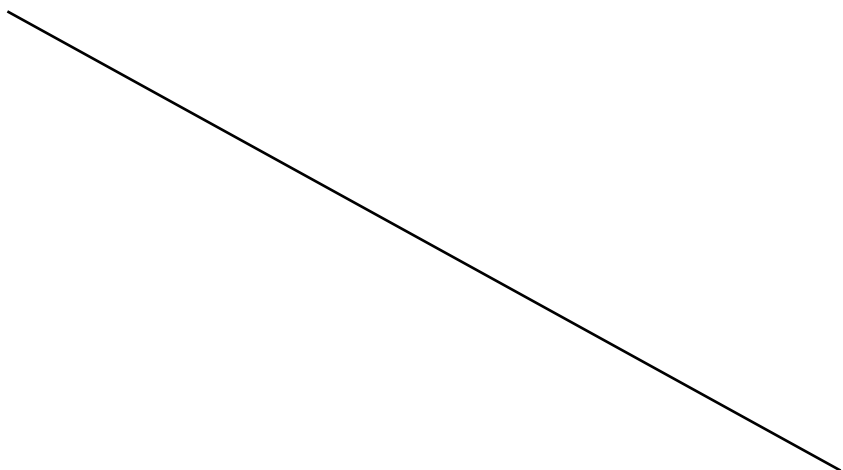
Tête-à-Tête presents how Caland challenged traditional representations of sexuality, the body and desire, transgressing inhibitions and conventions, drawing ideas from (and talking back to) Surrealist body scapes (body as a landscape and vice versa), Pop libidinal icons as well as orientalist sensuality or abstract patterns drawn from traditional weaving. Across diverse work groups, it is through the sensuous line that one observes the themes of mutability, sensuality, and the basic human desire for intimate connection that motivated Caland in her work and life. Participating in the vein of 60s liberation and disinhibition, Caland developed a mesmerising and highly singular aesthetic language, confirming her work as a keystone of middle-eastern modernism.

Curated by Claire Gilman, Chief Curator, with Isabella Kapur, Curatorial Associate, The Drawing Center, NYC. Coordination at WIELS by Devrim Bayar, curator

Caland moved to Paris in 1970, leaving her life in Beirut behind and delving in earnest into the eroticism that would become integral to her work in the 1970s and '80s. During the period between 1970 and 1979, Caland used increasingly delicate linear gestures to render bodies pressed against one another, faces piled into view, and fluid maps of nude figures in black ink across white paper. Even as Caland found new ways to join and abstract figures in her drawings, she translated these compositions back onto the body, embellishing the caftans that she wore in defiance of current trends, with the same continuous lines. These caftans, decorated with embracing arms and X-ray-like renderings of nude bodies, caught the attention of French fashion designer Pierre Cardin, who collaborated with Caland in

1978–79 on a line of caftans inspired by the artist's provocative personal style.

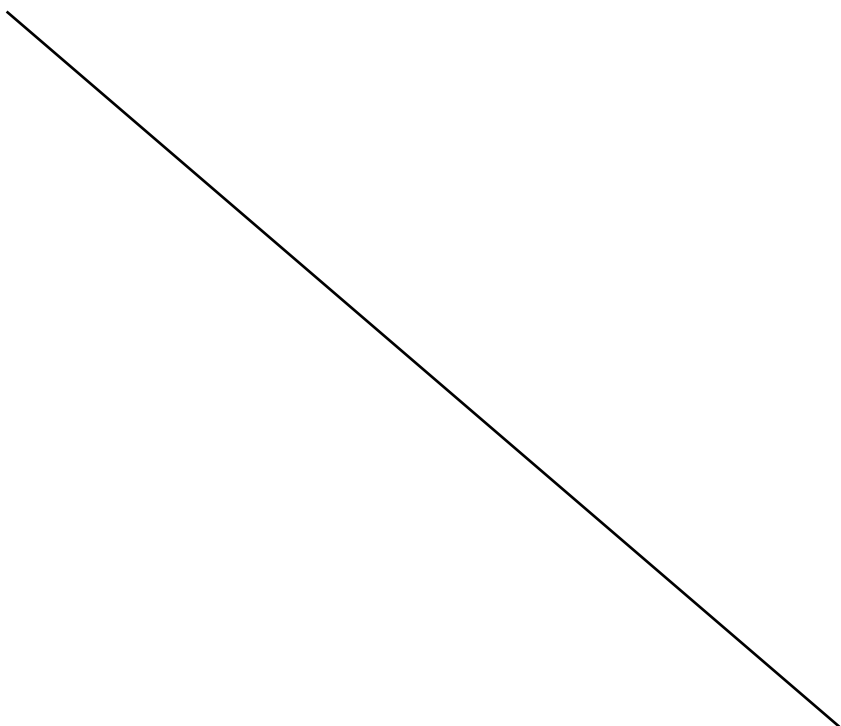
Caland developed her best known body of work, *Bribes de corps* (Body Bits), simultaneously with the more delicate pen drawings exhibited in the same room. Continuing the exploration of body and abstraction in her monochromatic drawings, Caland painted weighty fields of color cleaved by wavering lines—vibrant close-ups of flesh on flesh. Color and shading evoke breasts, lips, and legs that swell and dip like valleys, hills, and winding rivers. Many of these forms recall the weight of the artist's own body, or the body parts of friends and lovers.



In 1983, while in Paris, Caland met her soon-to-be lover George Apostu. Developing a relationship with the Romanian sculptor—who was himself known for abstract investigations of the human form in wood and stone—she started to explore sculpture. On the surface of the semi-human terracotta forms she created in the early 1980s, Caland painted and incised confident lines, reveling in the tension between tangible form and representational gesture. As she does in her drawings and caftans, she playfully offsets bodily heft by using two dimensional marks and patterns.

A complement to the *Bribes de corps*, Caland embarked on delicate color pencil drawings in the 1970s and '80s. These borrow from the same muted palette as

many of the artist's paintings from the time, taking advantage of the soft color pencil medium to explore the contours of fleshy, organic shapes. Among these is the 1983 *Tête-à-Tête*, which lends this exhibition its title, in which two visages hover in the upper left corner of the page, face to face, in a world of their own. This face-to-face motif recurs throughout Caland's work, as figures negotiate relationships between the self and other people, minds, and bodies.

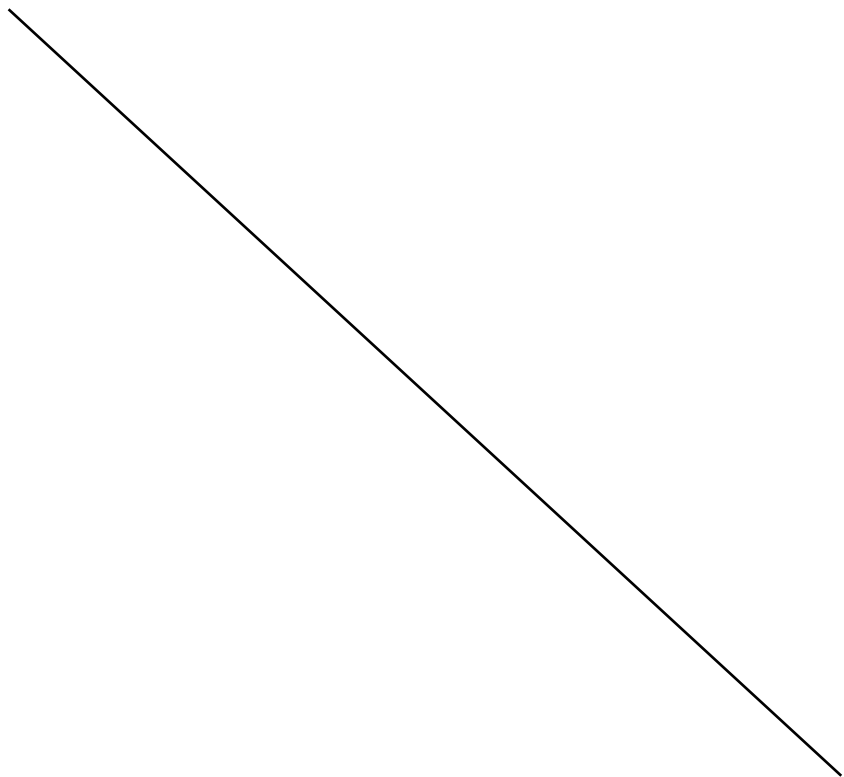


In the *Rossinante* series, named for Don Quixote's horse, large disembodied lips and eyes punctuate chains of minuscule dots and X's. This series began when Caland injured her knee, necessitating the use of a cane. Referencing the old horse, Caland alludes to her own experience of ageing. Meanwhile, the dashes and X's reference cross-stitch, as well as the weave of the many rugs in the artist's childhood home. Despite invoking frailty, these tapestries also foreground the joy and satisfaction of repetitive work—as in embroidery, weaving, or depicting the same shape over and over again.

The 1992 series *Homage to Pubic Hair*, executed after Caland moved to Venice, California, USA, is a multicolored exploration of the pubis. In these works, Caland uses her signature linework to detail gently curling loops and triangles of hair sprouting from fleshy patchwork figures. The washes of bleeding color and wavering figural geometry reveal a direct link between her 1970s pen drawings and her quilt-like mixed media compositions of the 2010s.

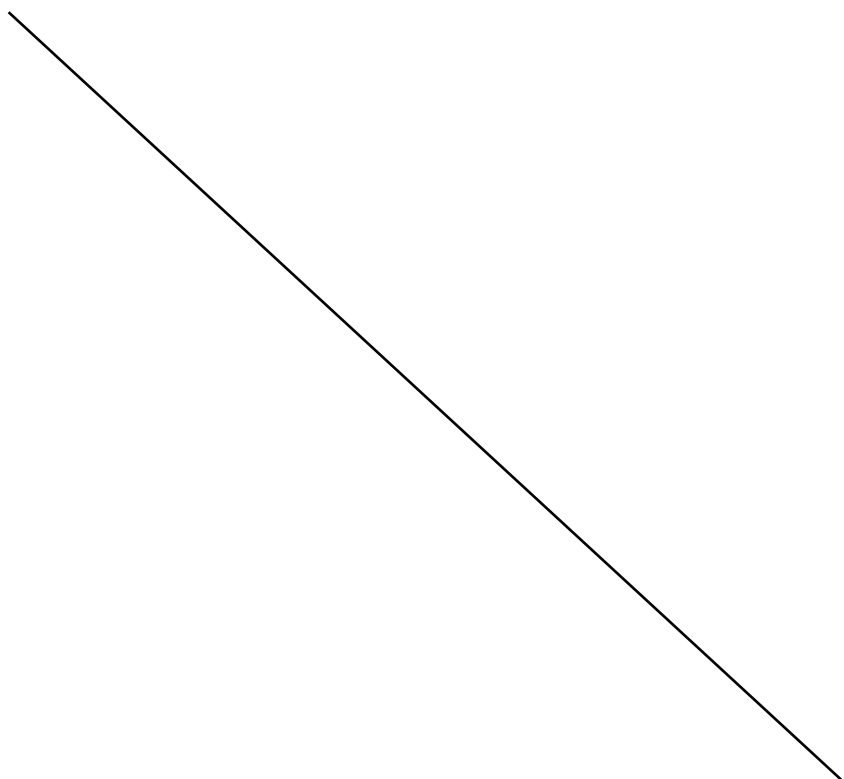
Despite her interest in anonymous figures and partial views, Caland did occasionally use real people as models. Christine was a model from LA with whom the artist began working in the early 1990s, in tandem with the *Homage to Pubic Hair* series. Both small and large-scale

ink drawings of Christine emphasize the model's mass of curls. The artist captures only what she needs to, trusting viewers to follow the masterful logic of her lines. Hair falls around empty faces which are given articulation by the surrounding curls or just enough shadow is granted to communicate an elbow resting on a knee. The remainder of the leg and arm phase into negative space, yet the placement of the limbs is clear.



In the mid-2000s, Caland began to look backwards, embarking on a body of work inspired by Palestinian embroidery and the Byzantine aesthetic of her Middle-Eastern ancestry. In these compositions painted on linen, the curved lines of her drawings and paintings— as well as an earlier focus on legible figures—give way to straighter, grid-like markings and patterns, suggestive of urban topographies interspersed with curvilinear details invoking fields of flowers and other vegetation. This work is presaged by the environment Caland created in her Venice, California, home, which, in keeping with her sustained interest in bringing art into life, she decorated with similar mosaic-like patterns. To make these large-scale works, Caland folded and unfolded sections of unstretched canvas, working

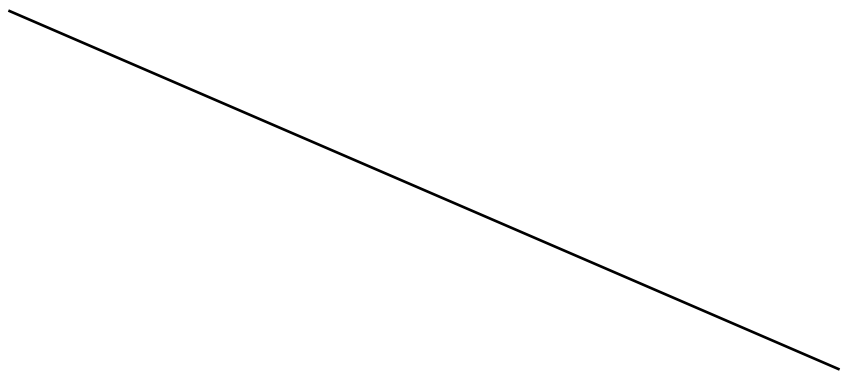
on one section at a time so that she was unaware of the visual whole. The resulting compositions are rarely continuous or fused, and instead resemble patchwork quilts or bird's-eye views of composite terrains. In the canvases, we see Caland taking stock of her life: "Appleton" was the site of her dream home in Venice, California, and "Bodrum," the name of a boat owned by her brother in Turkey on which she spent months at a time.



In parallel to the sketchbooks presented in this room, *The Silent Letters*, executed in the late 1990s and early 2000s, represents a shift away from the figuration that characterize the earlier work. Each drawing is composed of stacked stripes that mimic lines of text and also, devoid of words, suggest a communication withheld. The lines, which begin clearly defined, continue until they fade to almost nothing, a gradient that results from the progressively drier brush being dragged along the paper or canvas. Despite a drastic shift in approach, the intimacy that characterizes Caland's aesthetic remains. According to Caland's daughter Brigitte, this group contains sentiments that Caland wanted to express from her personal letters to friends and lovers, but also to keep close. Where the works

cleave along lines of negative space, much like the swelling shapes in the *Bribes de corps* series, we are reminded of bodies drawn close together. Still, the letters do not quite touch—an incomplete communication and connection.

Whenever she would travel, Caland carried with her small pads of paper and pens, which she used to create abstractions wherever she found herself. Executed on planes, trains, boats, and anywhere else, some of these small drawings are as small as playing cards. The tight grids and dots recall the weave of the gauzy fabrics and tapestries on which Caland increasingly came to work in the 2000s and 2010s, which are in turn reminiscent of her early embellished caftans.



THANKS FOR YOUR VISIT!

With the support of: Peter and Nathalie Hrechdakian-Oghlian
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Laura Hoptman, Claire Gilman, Isabella Kapur, Omar Kholeif,
Jean Edouard van Praet, Sophie Fitze.

COMPLEMENTARY PROGRAMME

The exhibition is accompanied by a programme of activities, including guided tours with Brigitte Caland (25_02) and Samah Hijawi (16_03), lectures ('Kunst of pornografie' by Petra Van Brabandt and Hans Maes on 20.03), workshops and more. More information at **WIELS.ORG**

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