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A collection of caftans by Huguette Caland. Charles Benton, via Institute of Arab and Islamic Art

Huguette Caland

Through March 18. Institute of Arab & Islamic Art, 3 Howard Street, Manhattan; 917-609-7804, instituteaia.org.

It's easy to get caught up in the story of [Huguette Caland](#). The daughter of the first president of independent Lebanon, she married the son of one of her father's political enemies and then had an open affair and three children before becoming an artist in her 30s. In the 1960s Ms. Caland worked in an art studio near the sea in a suburb of Beirut, at the same time as the artists Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal shared a studio in that city, making paintings that hovered on the edges of abstraction, minimalism and erotica. Ms. Caland later moved to Paris, then to Los Angeles.

In a recent book, "Huguette Caland: Everything Takes the Shape of a Person, 1970-78" (2017), one of Ms. Caland's friends describes her physical appearance in the '60s: "Twiggy was the woman to be — all legs, a flat chest, and half-closed eyes." Ms. Caland, by comparison, was "massive, laughing, gregarious, eyes wide open, the complete antithesis of Twiggy." That warmth and great bodily presence are tangible in this terrific, small show featuring four decades of the artist's paintings, drawings and garments at the new Institute of Arab and Islamic Art. (Ms. Caland's work was also included in the 2017 edition of the Venice Biennale.)

Two minimal, flesh-toned paintings from the mid-1970s have sinuous lines and treat the body like a landscape marked by dunes or deserts or craggy outcroppings. Ink-on-paper drawings use grids and doodling lines to create patterns that suggest veils, masks or other objects. One of the best parts of the show, however, is the two rows of Ms. Caland's own caftans, hanging on plastic wires suspended from the ceiling, on opposite sides of the gallery. Roomy and richly colored, embroidered or scrawled upon with ink, they give a wonderful, physical sense of the artist's presence, but also her laughing, gregarious spirit and curious vision as an artist.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER