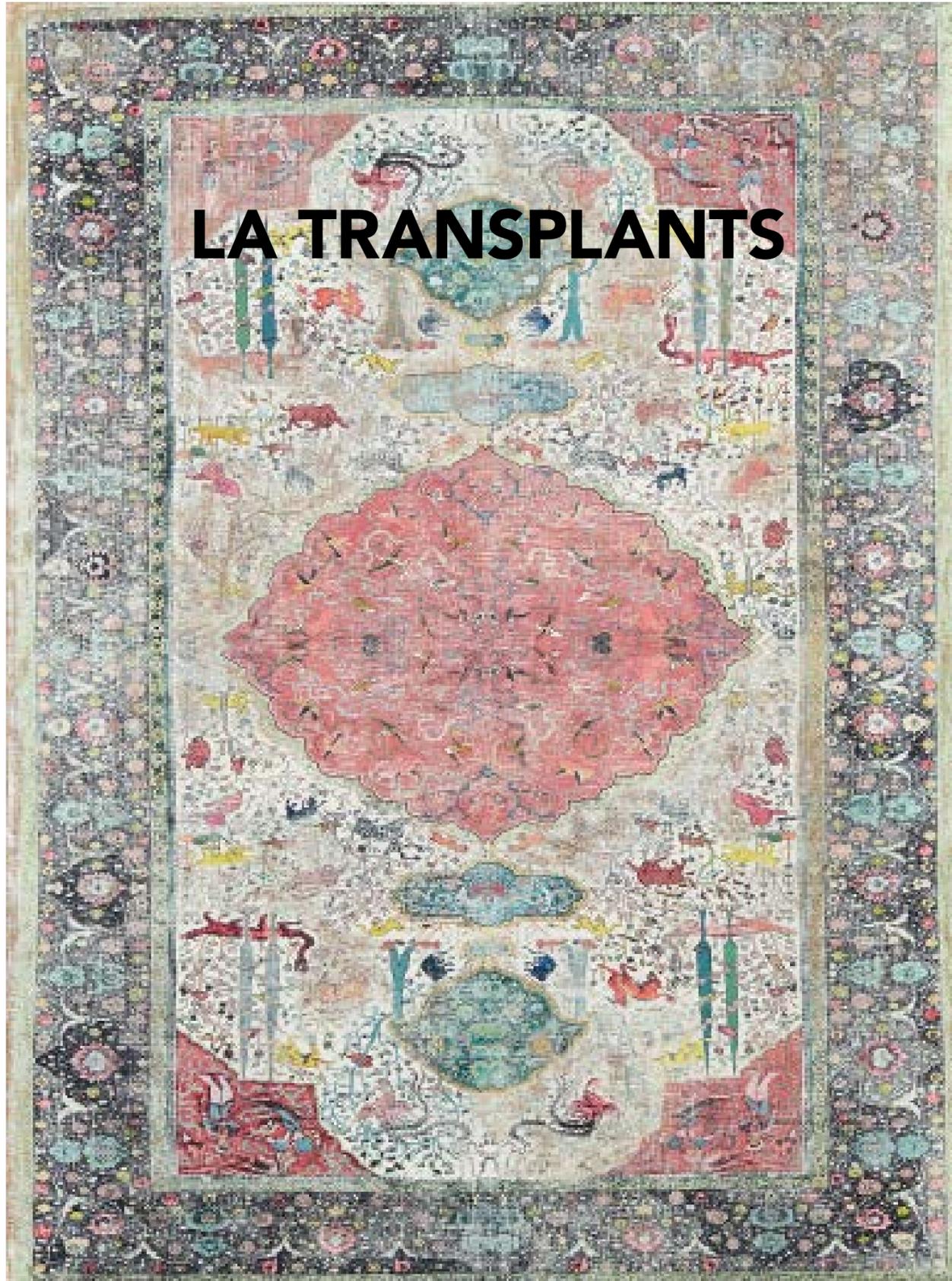


# LA TRANSPLANTS



All images courtesy of Kour Pour and S. Elle Quintana

Dragons and Genies, a carpet painting by Kour Pour

## From Huguette Caland's house to MOCA via Little Tokyo, academic, writer and current Los Angeles resident, Shiva Balaghi, explores the City of Angels' cultural scene alongside renowned Anglo-Iranian artist Kour Pour

"Los Angeles is a city of transplants," the artist Kour Pour tells me. "Everything here is from someplace else. Even the iconic LA palm trees were imported."

I am an East Coast transplant, settling into a new life in Los Angeles, drawn to the city by its reinvigorated art scene. The city is experiencing an economic boom that has stimulated a cultural regeneration. Last spring, the Broad Museum opened as an architectural counterpart to the Frank Gehry designed concert hall just across the street. The two buildings anchor downtown LA's art district – blocks of galleries and alternative art spaces, warehouses converted to artist lofts, urban walls covered with colourful murals. But LA's eclectic creative community is hardly contained in one district; it is dispersed across its sprawling cityscape.

To get a sense of the cultural map of Los Angeles, I ask Pour to show me a slice of his city. He grew up in Exeter, a small town in England, to an immigrant Iranian father and a British mother. The family moved to Los Angeles when he was a teenager. This sense of being a part of various cultures frames Kour's art. In this respect, Pour is very much a measure of a younger generation of LA artists.

"I think of LA as a collection of small little worlds that come together," he says.

Pour is best known for his intricately detailed carpet paintings. He draws on the composition of traditional Persian carpets, but fills the canvas with his own

cosmopolitan iconography. There are traces of Persian miniatures, references to Picasso's odalisques and influences of Japonisme.

The very first carpet painting Pour made was based on a rug that he grew up with as a child at home; in England his father used to run a carpet shop. He's also spent time at the Los Angeles County Museum (LACMA),

Kour Pour in his LA studio



*"I THINK OF LA AS A COLLECTION OF SMALL LITTLE WORLDS THAT COME TOGETHER"*

## “[CALAND] USED TO TELL ME I LOOK LIKE A PERSIAN MINIATURE”

admiring the historic Ardabil Carpet that dates from the 16th century. But Pour also credits the influence of the Lebanese artist Huguette Caland with stimulating his interest in rugs and textiles. Pour met Caland when he was fresh out of art school. The two developed a close creative relationship – she mentored Pour, and he helped her with some of her paintings. “We had this connection,” Pour recalls. “We were both artists in LA with this Middle Eastern background. She used to tell me I looked like a Persian miniature.”

So Pour decided to begin our tour of Los Angeles at Caland’s home. “I was born Lebanese. I became French by marriage and American by choice,” Caland is known to have said. The daughter of Lebanon’s first president, Caland moved to Los Angeles in the early 1980s to create a space in which she could come into her own, as an artist. She has lived and worked here for three decades and her symbiotic artistic relationship with Los Angeles is only just being properly recognised. The city coloured her art, and she influenced its cultural landscape. This past spring, the Hammer Museum’s exhibition, *Made in LA* – something akin to the city’s own biennale – devoted an entire gallery to Caland’s artwork. “Through lines apparent in Huguette Caland’s work,” the curators wrote, “the female body, eroticism, her own preoccupations with desire, to

name a few – represent, in many respects, the joyously defiant output of an artist whose tendency was to be provocative through beauty and an engagement with taboo themes.”

In Venice, an area of the city popular with artists, Caland built what an LA Times critic called “the quintessential artist’s house.” When we arrived, Pour led me past imposing concrete walls that surround the house and along a stone pathway leading to a large, aged, wooden Moorish door painted a bright green. We walked into an airy space filled with light. Large windows open the living space onto a garden filled with blooming plants and sculptures centred around a long lap pool. Caland, Pour tells me, keeps the water ice cold and goes swimming every afternoon to get energized for more work in her studio.

In Caland’s studio, two assistants were busy organising, preserving, and cataloguing her art – painted portraits, erotic drawings, and softly coloured abstract paintings. Some of the signature caftans Caland designed for Pierre Cardin in the 1970s were hanging in garment bags. Opening a drawer, we carefully looked at some of the artist’s textile works. Against a backdrop of deeply hued fabric, she’s drawn intensely layered linear designs. “Our house

in Lebanon,” Caland once said, “was full of rugs. My mother and my father loved rugs. I never thought of that association, but I see it in my work. It’s all about rugs and fabric and tapestry and old things.”

Caland’s house is itself a work of art. She has painted a mural on the kitchen wall – a colourful patchwork of whimsical portraits against intricately graphic patterns. Along a central staircase, Caland hung hundreds of artworks made by her friends. It’s an intimate, personal gallery, but also a reflection of the artistic life of Los Angeles in recent decades. Years ago, Caland acquired some works by Pour, among the first paintings he ever sold. She hung them in that staircase alongside artworks by her friends Ed Moses, Larry Bell, and Kenny Price. Caland had an influence on Pour which I’m still trying to flesh out – in her incorporation of rugs and textiles into painting, the way she organised her studio, her way of living as an artist.

As we leave Venice, Pour steers his car along the freeway towards downtown. “We’re heading to MOCA now,” he tells me. But rather than visiting the

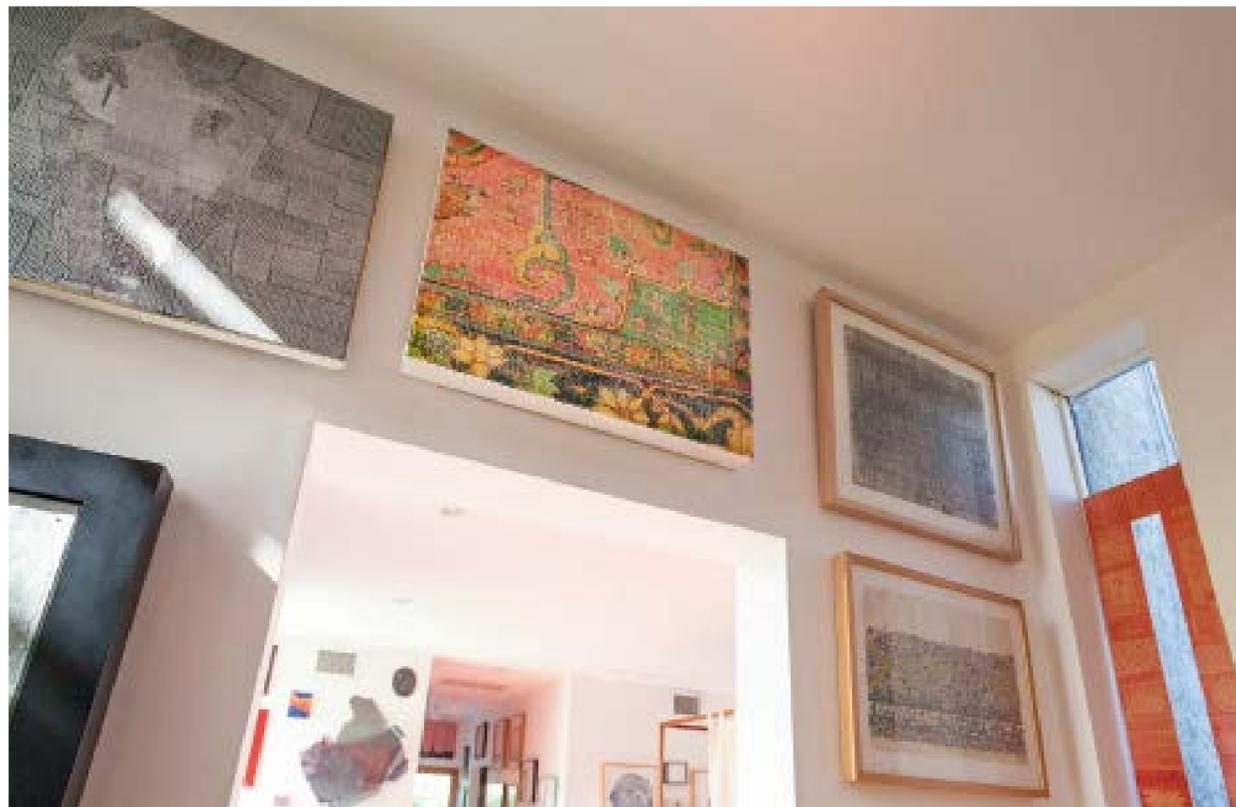
museum, Pour takes me to nearby Little Tokyo, the centre of the largest Japanese community in North America. Bright red lanterns are strung from buildings that echo the architecture of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines. After lunch in a small sushi restaurant, Pour and I walk through the neighbourhood peering into shop windows. He pulls me into a favourite store to pick through Japanese knick-knacks – Hello Kitty stickers, stuffed animals, cosmetics and snacks. We stop in front of a shelf full of small cat figurines. Some are made of gold coloured plastic, others of white ceramic. A few are battery-powered, with the cats’ paws slowly moving up and down. “Is this where you bought the little toy you keep in your studio?” I ask Pour, who nods smilingly. The maneki-neko is a talisman, believed to bring good luck.

“It’s past two,” Pour says. “We better head out.” It’s a bit of an obsession in LA, trying to predict traffic flows across the city. We drive north along the Pacific Coast Highway towards the Getty Villa, perched on a cliff overlooking the sea in Malibu. Pour and I stop for a moment to look down the wooded mountains framing a view of the sea. Like Beirut, Los Angeles is nestled between the mountains and the sea. A natural tranquility flows through its urban grit. We walk through the villa’s gardens filled with fragrant thyme, pomegranate trees and bubbling fountains.

Inside, we find a room filled with ancient Egyptian artefacts. We pause to look at a case filled with Fayum portraits. They are reminders of how art endures, how history lives on, and how humanity itself is a beautiful patchwork. Pour leads a path past an array of Greek and Roman antiquities to show me his favourite piece in the museum. We come upon *Kouros*, a tall marble sculpture of a naked young man, standing on an oval plinth in the middle of a dimly lit gallery. Curly hair frames its face and falls into long braids down its back, its nose chipped.

“*Kouros*, Kour,” I say smiling in recognition. As Pour tells me the story of the sculpture, he mimics its posture, with his hands at his sides and one foot stepping forward. Kouros represented the physical ideal of the ancient Greeks. But there have been questions about the authenticity of the Getty *Kouros*. Its museum label reads, “Greek, about 530 B.C., or modern forgery.” Like much of what we see in LA, the statue may or may not be real, but it has acquired its own legend. Though scientists and art historians still debate its origins, one thing we know for certain is that *Kouros* is a transplant. As famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright once said, “Tip the world over on its side and everything loose will land in Los Angeles.”

A Kour Pour painting hanging in the staircase of Huguette Caland’s home in LA



Labyrinth, a carpet painting by Kour Pour