

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Stefan Benchoam, "Time Exists Differently Here: Vivian Suter and Elisabeth Wild,"
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Time Exists Differently Here: Vivian Suter and Elisabeth Wild

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by Stefan Benchoam



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Rosalind Nashashibi, *Vivian's Garden* (still), 2017
Courtesy: the artist

The alarm goes off. It's Saturday, and the day is overcast. Turn on the kettle. News. Facebook. Instagram. Brew a morning cup of coffee to start the day. Answer a few emails. Shower. Grab some magazines. Out the door.

8:32 A.M.

Start the car, start the drive. Immediately I'm hit with heavy traffic. People honking their horns and utter chaos. The mood in Guatemala City is very heavy. Only a few days ago, a(nother) national tragedy occurred due to governmental negligence: this time, thirty-eight teenage girls tragically died due to a fire that consumed them in a government shelter for youth ironically called Hogar Seguro (Safe House). They were locked inside as fire ripped through. The directors of the shelter knew about it and did nothing, the directors of the country's welfare program knew about it and did nothing, and as it turns out, the president knew

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about it and did nothing—nothing at all. We are all struggling to get back on our feet.

8:53 A.M.

I reach the Pan-American Highway, a truly ambitious undertaking: a road that would stretch throughout all of the Americas, from Alaska in the north to Ushuaia, Argentina, in the south. Thirty thousand kilometers of uninterrupted highway... except of course for the Darién Gap, a 160 kilometers stretch of rainforest between Panamá and Colombia, creating a forced rupture between Central and South America.

9:01 A.M.

On the Pan-American Highway, heading north. Officially outside of Guatemala City.

9:35 A.M.

Chimaltenango: the city with the highest HIV and STI rates in Guatemala. Brothels, fried chicken stands, and car-parts shops align the highway: a type of black hole where traffic abounds. Bumper to bumper, at 5 km per hour. I roll down the window and hear, from the radio system of a car that is also stuck in traffic but slowly headed the opposite way, that the number has risen to thirty-nine. Thirty-nine young girls burned alive due to governmental negligence. An absolute tragedy!

10:20 A.M.

An obligatory stop at Cabaña Don Robert, a wooden cabin in the highlands, for fresh mango juice and a jar of their homemade orange jam—Elisabeth's favorite. Seventeen minutes later, I am back on the road again.

11:03 A.M.

There's a makeshift flower stand at the side of the road. All freshly cut. "How much for a handful of the yellow ones?" I ask as I point out to the ones I like. "Fifteen quetzales" she responds. "And the white ones next to those?" "Same price for you," she responds in her broken Spanish. I take one of each.

11:17 A.M.

I reach Sololá. It's market day. Beautiful textiles everywhere. Traffic is slow.

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From a distance comes a banged-up silver pickup truck with a loudspeaker connected to its roof. Inside a woman calls for people to show their indignation and to join her, and others, at the town's central square to protest. "Guatemala llora sangre" (Guatemala weeps blood), she says.

11:35 A.M.

As I drive down the winding road to Panajachel, tucked in between Volcán Atitlán, Volcán San Pedro, and Volcán Tolimán, I catch my first glimpse of Lake Atitlán. The sun is out, and the view never ceases to amaze. In his 1934 travel book *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, Aldous Huxley writes: "Lake Como, it seems to me, touches on the limit of permissibly picturesque, but Atitlán is Como with additional embellishments of several immense volcanoes. It really is too much of a good thing." Alexander von Humboldt famously described it as "the most beautiful lake in the world."

11:57 A.M.

I slowly drive over to the empty lot just a few houses away from Vivian and Elisabeth's. I greet the lady sitting next door. I explain that I am coming to visit them, and ask if I can park there. "A friend of Vivian's is a friend of mine. Park wherever you like," she yells back. I get out of the car. I get the magazines, the jam, and the flowers. I lock the car and start walking down the path to their homes and reach the hand-painted wooden "Finquita Panchito" sign that's been carefully placed above the gray stone wall and green wooden door. It's 12:02 PM when I ring the bell.

I hear a storm of dogs running over to greet me. Soon enough, the door opens into a majestic garden and Vivian greets me with her usual warmth. TinTin, Bonzo, Flor, and Sofi jump and roll about in excitement.

Time exists differently here.

We walk down the dirt path. There's all sorts of greenery around us. Pure exuberance. Areca palms. Royal palms. Banana palms. Fishtail palms. Bougainvillea in a variety of colors. Pine trees. Ficus. Eucalyptus. Grevilleas. *Monstera deliciosa*. Spineless yuccas. Bamboo. Birds of paradise. Ceiba trees. *Justicia brandegeana*. Macadamias. Lemon trees. Lime trees. Tangerine trees. Papaya trees. Mango trees. Avocado trees. Maidenhair ferns. Boston ferns. Bird's-nest ferns. Cinnamon ferns. Australian tree ferns. Ostrich ferns. *Adiantum* ferns. And coffee plants. Lots of coffee plants everywhere, as this was a coffee farm before they arrived.

Further down, on a brick path that connects her house and her studio to Vivian's house, is Elisabeth. She recently turned ninety-five, and is as radiant as ever. Vivian hands her the flowers and gets behind her mother's chair, pushing her

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down the ramp to her home, where the smell of a freshly cooked meal awaits. I follow behind them.

We go in through the kitchen, where various warm pans sit on the stove, and into Vivian's living room. From the roof hangs a mirrored disco ball and a chandelier that Elisabeth made in the 1970s using bits and pieces from old chandeliers; she had her own antique shop in Basel. On the walls there are artworks by Vivian, Elisabeth, and Panchito (Vivian's son), most of which he created when he was very young. There are also works by some of their artist friends, and also a couple of antique paintings that have been with them since Basel. In the center of the living room is a chimney, and in front of it two couches covered with local hand-woven textiles. And there are more plants—four potted palms that have found their way into the interior of the house.

I help Elisabeth out to the patio and we sit underneath the canopy of a huge matapalo, next to the way that leads up the mountain to one of Vivian's studios. There is a swing hanging from the tree. Vivian runs to the kitchen, and Elisabeth explains that this tree was ultimately what convinced them to buy this property in the 1980s. Vivian comes back from the kitchen with a bottle of red, a bottle of white, and three empty glasses. We pour wine into our glasses, raise them, and cheer.

As we serve a second glass, Elisabeth reminds us it's time for lunch. We go back into Vivian's living room and out to the terrace that offers another stunning view of their tropical garden. Elisabeth and I take our places and Vivian makes several trips to the kitchen, returning with a variety of dishes: tomato and red radish salad, diced carrot, rice, meat, and onion stuffed zucchini, guacamole, broccoli, meatballs, and Vivian's freshly made *chiltepechilito*. Conversation and more wine accompany our meal, and after seconds, it's time for coffee and dessert: vanilla ice cream with homemade strawberry sauce.

Soon after our meal is over, Vivian leads Elisabeth back to her studio, and invites me to go up to her studio to see her most recent paintings. A good thirty meters up, perched on the side of the mountain, is a single-room wooden cabin with an expansive balcony hovering above the tree canopy. A few meters before reaching the studio, we stumble across a number of paint buckets, jars, and brushes on the floor. Leaning on one of the exterior walls of her studio I see a large stretched abstract canvas with bright green, blue, and red color fields, and splatters of mud and leaves that have fallen on it as she has been working on it. We walk through dozens, if not hundreds, of paint jars and buckets scattered across the balcony floor and into the studio itself, where more containers lie everywhere and four paintings greet us with their bright colors and organic forms.

This is a place of work. A place of mediation where Vivian has been dancing with nature and with her emotions, on a daily basis, for more than thirty years, and translating that experience into her large-scale works. She has done this by

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disconnecting from the world around her and connecting with the world within her, pushing her painting practice forward physically, mentally, and spiritually. She always works in the present, with little regard for the future, committed to her process, to change, to chance, and even open to misfortune in the form of natural disasters. After hurricanes Stan (2005) and Agatha (2010) flooded the lake and her second studio (at lake level), soiling most of her unstretched paintings of the last decades, she embraced nature further, even collaborating with it.

The sun starts to set and rainclouds loom on the horizon. We descend the mountain and head to Elisabeth's studio. On the way, underneath a mango tree, is a large half-painted canvas that has been placed flat on the ground, face up. A few mangos have fallen on it. We reach Elisabeth's and find her, scissors in hand, working at her desk. Excitedly she asks Vivian to reach for a folder with about ninety collages made of magazine cutouts, all from this year.

She pulls them out and we start laying them on her dinner table. They are all small, colorful, and very carefully constructed. Yet what's most striking is the variety among them, and her bold sense of composition. Some are surreal and very loose, others more structured and architectural. They are small gems, all of them. Paintings in their own right. "These are stunning," I tell her, as Vivian nods her head in agreement. "They are just collages," Elisabeth quickly answers back with a smile.

Outside, it's already dark. The wind brushes through the trees above, and the stars come out by the dozens. Bonzo howls at the moon and slowly, drop by drop, the plants, the trees, and everything that surrounds us disappears into the rain.

Stefan Benchoam (Guatemala, 1983) is an artist and exhibition maker with a strong interest in collaboration. He has had solo-shows in La Casa Encendida (Madrid, 2013), The White Cubicle Toilet Gallery (London, 2011) and La Loseta (San Juan, 2011), and many group shows. He is co-founder of Buró de Intervenciones Públicas, that develops projects in public spaces worldwide. He co-founded and directs Proyectos Ultravioleta, a multivalent artistic and curatorial platform for contemporary art, is co-founder / co-director of NuMu – Guatemala's only contemporary art museum, and co-founder of the Joaquín Orellana Legacy Project.

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