

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Tess Thackara, "A Painter Who Left the Art World in Order to Actually Make Art,"
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A Painter Who Left the Art World in Order to Actually Make Art

For the past 30 years, Vivian Suter has been quietly working in her home on Lake Atitlán, Guatemala. Now, she's found international recognition.



Vivian Suter in her second studio, where she stores her paintings. Tony Floyd

WHEN VIVIAN SUTER arrived at the lake in the early 1980s, it took her three days to summon the courage to look at it. At the time, the Swiss-Argentine artist was in her early 30s and recently divorced. She had spent the previous few months driving through Central America on a solitary tour of Mesoamerican ruins. In Guatemala, where she'd come to see the Mayan Tikal architectural site, she arrived one night in a town on the outskirts of Lake Atitlán, which fills the crater of a volcano. Though she couldn't see the lake, the thought of it unsettled her. "I was very emotional about the lake, and I didn't dare to go and look at it," she remembers, sitting in her garden on the northeastern side of Lake Atitlán, across from an imposing *matapalo*, or strangler fig. "I felt it would have an incredible attraction. I felt it would be powerful."

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That early premonition held true. Suter, now 69, has ostensibly never left. For 33 years, she has found sanctuary in a two-bedroom adobe house that she built on a wild, overgrown property at the foot of a mountain facing the lake and the dormant volcanoes beyond. Her house and gardens are haphazardly functional, and at times a little menacing. (Scorpions sometimes sting her in her bed at night.) The house is built on the site of a former coffee plantation, and the evidence of its previous life can be seen in the modest coffee harvest that her garden produces; when I visit, deep red beans are drying out in the sun. In the living room, skylights are covered with bamboo shades. Thick patterned carpets made by the country's Momosteco weavers cover the doorways as curtains, and the walls are hung with Suter's own work and that of her mother, Elisabeth Wild, and her son from her second marriage, Pancho.

Suter is small and slight, with feathery red hair and low-slung eyebrows that give an inquisitive air to her warm and gentle demeanor. Walking the rambling grounds and trampled pathways — she shares the house with her mother and three spirited dogs — she points out plants as if they are old friends. We stop to admire the way another matapalo has wound its muscular roots around a great clod of earth, binding it together and giving it a makeshift pedestal from which to surge up into the sky.



Suter's living room is decorated with Guatemalan textiles and a chandelier by her mother, the artist Elisabeth Wild. Tony Floyd

Up a steep, verdant incline and through a fragile, low wooden gate is Suter's working studio — a light-filled space with screen doors that open onto a deck overlooking the thicket of plants that now obscures her view of the lake. It's here — outside, and usually in the morning, or after dark, by lamplight — that Suter makes her raw, vivid paintings, which are filled with fiery lashings or translucent washes of paint, meditative columns of circles and dense greens, browns and reds, like chromatic distillations of the tropical environment. She works quickly and attentively, surrounded by a mess of paint pots and a chorus of bird song, church bells, the occasional belligerent rumble of a passing tuk tuk and the gentle knocking of wind-rustled bamboo.

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A painting can sometimes take her just 20 minutes, “but it needs a whole lifetime,” she says. It has taken Suter about that long to find her way back to the international art world. She is in the midst of a run of exhibitions that have come her way over the past few years, including recent presentations at Art Basel Cities in Buenos Aires and the Power Plant in Toronto. Earlier this month, 20 of her paintings were installed [on the High Line](#) in New York, where they’ll hang for almost a year like a canopy, raw and unstretched, as she likes them, over the staircase that leads down to Gansevoort Street, near the entrance of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her [first solo gallery show](#) in the city is currently up at Gladstone Gallery and closes in June.

Suter might have achieved this level of success decades ago if she had wanted it, but art, not the art world, was her calling. She was given her first solo show at Stampa gallery in Basel, Switzerland, in the '70s, and in 1981, the curator Jean-Christophe Ammann placed Suter in a group exhibition at the prestigious Kunsthalle Basel. It was then that she made the decision to walk away. The art world’s endless social obligations depressed her. “I thought, ‘All of this I don’t want,’” she recalls. “I want to get to the center, to the bottom of it.” So after the show came down, she headed west, beginning in Los Angeles and working her way down through Mexico and civil-war-era Guatemala until she found her way to the lake.



One of Suter's paintings drying in her studio. Tony Floyd



The garden, once the site of a coffee plantation, is filled with mango, avocado and lemon trees, bougainvillea, towering strangler figs, coffee plants and bamboo. Tony Floyd

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SUTER WAS BORN in 1949 on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, but after Juan Perón and his Justicialista party rose to power in the 1940s and began to nationalize the country's industries, her father sold his printing factory and the family moved to Basel. It was a difficult transition for the young Vivian Wild, but she entered art school at 17 and was married at 19 to Martin Suter, a writer. (They divorced a few years later but remain friends, and her ex-husband also has a house on Lake Atitlán.)

The paintings Suter made in her 20s were tighter and more structured; she layered paint and paper to form crowded compositions that curved and buckled into strange shapes. Her art has adapted partly out of necessity; she discovered that not only was it difficult to ship work that was thick with pigment but she had fewer materials at her disposal. Her strokes became looser, the paint thinner, her process freer. As an alternative to layering paint, she began to layer the *manta*, or cotton, that she now paints on, hanging compositions in airy, overlapping arrangements. "I didn't want to make a concept ahead of my paintings," as she often used to do, she says. "I wanted the painting to show me, not to force myself the other way. I wanted to be surprised by what I did."

For years, she worked largely under the radar, showing the occasional work here or there. But it was in Basel, again, that another opportunity emerged. In 2011, Adam Szymczyk, then the director of Kunsthalle Basel, recreated the 1981 group show that Suter had appeared in; he soon gave her a solo show at the institution, placed her in an exhibition at the Museo Tamayo in Mexico and, most crucially, showed her work in both the Athens and Kassel editions of [Documenta 14](#) in 2017. This time, she was ready for the exposure.



Suter's studio faces the peaks of two volcanoes, Toliman and Atitlán, on the southern side of Lake Atitlán. Tony Floyd

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IF SUTER'S EARLY paintings expressed a more labored effort to find her voice through natural forms, the environment now seems to speak through her in bursts and sighs — and Suter welcomes the elements into her work. When Guatemala was struck by two hurricanes, Stan and Agatha, in 2005 and 2010, respectively, her house was flooded and much of her work drenched in water and mud. But the catastrophes also brought restorative discoveries. When she opened up an unpainted, waterlogged manta, she found the earthy residue had expressed itself in a series of delicate Rorschach-like forms that resembled X-rays of plants or exotic insects. “It was like a miracle, you know, just beautiful,” she says. “This was very special, like a gift.” She calls the painting the Virgin Rorschach.

Echoes of that form now appear in several other recent works, one of which hangs over her bed. Its loose, orange-red circles and swoops are bifurcated by a wobbly white line running down its axis. “Like a spinal column,” she says. There are other occasional allusions to animal or human life in her work, as in a painting that is currently leaning against the wall of her studio. It shows the sketchy form of a figure in profile that emerges from a big glop of white paint. There are also paintings of dogs. In one, their faces form a near all-over pattern, their disembodied heads floating in the pictorial space. There is very little separation between mammal and plant life, between Suter and the sapote palms and the monarch butterflies in her garden. Being in nature, moving, making the art she wants — “This,” she says, “is the freedom I give myself.”