

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Louis Block, "Vivian Suter," *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2019



**ArtSeen**

## Vivian Suter



Installation view, *Vivian Suter*, at Gladstone Gallery, New York, 2019. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo: David Regen.

Snails, Francis Ponge writes, “secrete form.” In their humble lives, they “stick so well to nature, savoring it perfectly from up close,” leaving only spiraled monuments when they are gone. What fascinates Ponge about snails is their absolute devotion to digesting one element: earth. “It travels through them. They travel through it.” In their silver trails, Ponge reads the mark of life transmuted into a work of art.

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Staring up at the whorl of orange and blue that opens Vivian Suter's show at Gladstone, I saw the lump of a snail's shell being carried, two protruding eyes glancing skyward. The work is smudged and airy, born from loam and wind.

Suter has worked for over 30 years in her home on Lake Atitlán, in Guatemala, which she shares with her mother, the artist Elisabeth Wild. Their story of displacement and migration winds from Vienna to Buenos Aires to Basel, then back to South America. Suter's work feels both settled in place and open to the possibility of change. Painted both indoors and outdoors, her canvases are subject to the unstoppable forces of nature—hurricanes, flooding, critters—but do not resist their effects.

Suter's paintings fill every nook of the gallery: walls, corners, floor, even the ceiling. Many hang from the rafters, wavering with the slight shift of air currents when the gallery door is opened. In both their imagery and their forms, the paintings evoke a landscape with beaded scorpion tails wagging in the wind, pink rows of cabbage or rivulets of wet clay, the flattened blue horizon of a hazy lake.

Employing a range of techniques and media, Suter seems to encounter imagery through material exploration. A carmine canvas, completely overloaded with pigment, curls into an irregular trapezoid. Without line or modeling, it is as viscerally provocative as Soutine's carcasses of beef. In a corner, an abstracted angel cuts into an orange background, equal parts Christmas cookie and Romanesque carving softened by centuries of rain. Flecks of dried leaves are caught in the brushstrokes of a green composition.

Especially impressive here is how Suter draws attention to painting's labor without sacrificing any of the work's formal integrity. The paintings reveal

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their constituent parts but never dissolve. Standing among them, I am aware that cotton and flax are cultivated, processed, and woven, that pigment is sifted earth. These thin films of color require vast plots of land, mines, factories, and animals for their glue. In this embrace of congruent entropies, the canvases become less screens on which to project, but skins with which to live. They are carpets, nationless flags, and clothing to be formed.



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On the subject of canvas, Vilém Flusser writes, “It is a textile that is open to experience (open to the wind and spirit) and then stores these experiences.” To Flusser, the billowing of a tent is akin to a transferring of experience. He notes that the German word for canvas, *Leinwand*, contains “wall” within it. In French, *toile* is used both for canvas and web—that which collects. If a canvas is a membrane, then its minuscule pores are dictated by warp and weft, its substance balanced on the precarious taming

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of natural fibers into a perpendicular logic. Filled, these pores are units in an illusion, grain in the picture space.

It is not that Suter undoes this logic, but that she works outside of it. There is nothing radical about freeing canvas from its support, but these paintings need not claim freedom from their supports; they are self-sustaining. I crane my neck toward their stains and wrinkles, I want to rifle through them like a wardrobe.

I think again of the snail—the artful consumer—and the burden and freedom of carrying your house with you, the beauty of being so porous, so flexible.