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Artist Vivian Suter: from remote Guatemala to Tate Liverpool

The painter on why she decided to live far from the world of art — until it came looking for her



Vivian Suter's new solo show 'Nisyros, (Vivian's Bed)' © Gladstone Gallery

I first saw Vivian Suter's vibrant, emotional work in Buenos Aires two years ago and, on the basis that artists' personalities are often reflected in their paintings, I expect her to wear her heart on her sleeve. But it's clear the Swiss-Argentine painter is far more restrained than her art. A slight, pretty, fair-skinned woman with auburn hair framing blue eyes and fine features, she is sweet-natured and

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softly spoken. We meet in Liverpool, where Suter is working with the curatorial team at Tate to install her new solo show *Nisyros, (Vivian's Bed)*.

As the title suggests, the show beckons us into Suter's intimate world. Over 50 of her signature raw canvases are hung on cords to create a jungle of gesture and colour that undulates around a small bed draped in a painted coverlet. Daubed with exultant painterly gestures that run a gamut from rainforest-green to sea-blue by way of sunset reds and dawn pinks, this radiant panorama reflects the inner landscape of a painter whose home and studio nestle on the forest-fringed shores of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala.

The Tate installation is just one of a shoal of new exhibitions that includes an important monograph at London's Camden Art Centre, a major new commission by Art on the Underground to grace Stratford station and retrospective at Reina Sofia, Madrid, in 2020. Like so many of her female peers, Suter spent decades in the shadows. But unlike her neglected sisters, Suter actually chose to retreat after a flurry of successes. "There was too much going on. Too many openings," she recalls of the moment when she decided to walk away from her burgeoning fame. "I wanted to find my own way, my own expression."

That was in the early 1980s and Suter was winning plaudits as a painter in Basel, Switzerland, where she grew up. After a solo display at Stampa gallery and participation in a collective show at the city's acclaimed Kunsthalle, she knew she was in danger of losing the inner stillness that allowed her to pursue her art.

A trip to the US with a friend ended with her travelling alone to Mexico. She takes a breath, remembering the moment her life changed direction. "I went from ruin to ruin and crossed the border to see Tikal, the biggest Mayan ruin. On the way, I had to stop because it was night. So I went down to the lake," She smiles at the

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memory of discovering the vast body of water which fills a volcanic crater. “And there I stayed.”



Suter working on a canvas

“You fell in love with the place?” I ask. “Not only with the place,” she laughs. Suter married her new amour — “an American professor of deviant behaviour” — and although they subsequently divorced, the couple had a son, Pancho. Obligated to leave their rented home, she decided to build her own house. “I found this beautiful piece of land on a hillside,” she says of the plot on a former coffee

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plantation, home to an “incredible strangler fig tree”. Construction, without an architect, took nine months. “I wanted to use materials from there and I just wanted [the building] to fit in [to the landscape].” She achieved her wish, as anyone will know who saw *Vivian’s Garden*. The 2017 film by artist Rosalind Nashashibi, which was nominated for the Turner Prize, captures Suter’s daily life that she shares with her 97-year-old mother, the artist Elizabeth Wild. In small, dim rooms all but swallowed by the exuberant vegetation, the women work, chat, play with their dogs. Living in such a potent environment is challenging. Suter sounds insouciant about the scorpions who regularly sting her at night. Right now, she’s a little less keen on the strangler fig because its roots are lifting her bedroom floor. She giggles: “I don’t know what to do about it.” Her serenity may be born out of knowing that she has already survived the worst of times. In 2005, a tropical storm wrought havoc on Panajachel. Suter’s studio was flooded and much of her work appeared beyond resurrection. “I thought: ‘I die’,” her voice drops to a whisper as she recalls the initial shock. “All my paintings were ruined. But slowly they dried off and then . . .” she hesitates, “I saw this beauty.” Already, Suter had the habit of painting outside. But having seen the transformation wrought by the storm, she decided to leave her canvases outside to absorb the wild gifts of the lake and forest. As a result, as well as their flowing, tropical rivers of colour, her canvases are frequently studded with twigs, leaves and pawprints left by her “three big dogs”. Those en plein air gifts complement a practice grounded in its world. When she arrived in Panajachel, Suter realised that the pigments and paper she worked with in Europe were not available. For a while she painted on raw canvas treated with fish glue. Now she paints with a mixture of fish glue, household paints “from the hardware store in very tiny tins” and professional artistic pigments “when she can get into the city”.

In 2011, the outside world came calling again in the form of Kunsthalle Basel curator Adam Szymczyk, who wanted to restage the 1981 exhibition where Suter

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Everyone asked: ‘What do you mean, you’re painting nature?’ It was very unfashionable. But now . . .

showed. Afterwards, he gave her a solo show there too and, after becoming artistic director of Documenta, included her in the 2017 edition. Since then, she has been back in the spotlight she worked so hard to

leave. How is she finding it this time around? “It makes me a little nervous,” she admits. “A little intimidated. I’m very shy.” I ask her how she feels, having spent years devoting herself to the natural world, to find such eco-friendly art is suddenly au courant. She laughs. “Before, everyone asked: ‘What are you doing out there? What do you mean, you’re painting nature?’ It was very unfashionable. But now . . .” Her voice trails off. I suspect she’s not bothered at such fickleness. This is a woman who has all she needs in her dangerous, seductive home. “I feel [the landscape] is like a human,” she explains. “The plants, the trees around, the volcanoes — they are all alive too. They have an incredible, magnetic presence,” she pauses again. “It’s difficult to get away.” In Camden, she will leave some of her canvases in the garden to pursue their own organic journey. Before I leave I peer again into Tate’s painterly jungle and realise Suter shouldn’t worry about homesickness. She’s brought her beloved world with her.