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Claire Armitstead, "Vivian Suter: the rainforest-dwelling artist who paints with fish glue, dogs and mud," *The Guardian*, January 07, 2020

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Vivian Suter: the rainforest-dwelling artist who paints with fish glue, dogs and mud

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She was ignored for decades, but now Suter has been rediscovered as a pioneering eco-artist. We meet her, and her 97-year-old collagist mum, in the wilds of Guatemala



Free ... one of Vivian Suter's canvases hung outside the Guatemala home she shares with mother Elisabeth Wild. Photograph: Vivian Suter. Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

A large dog romps across a blue and white canvas, leaving a trail of brown paw prints. "Oh well," shrugs Vivian Suter. "They're part of the work now. I don't

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think anyone will mind.” I realise Bonzo – one of three Alsatian crossbreeds that shadow the artist wherever she goes in her Guatemalan home – has just put the finishing touches to an artwork that will shortly be on public display thousands of miles away.

The painting lies on the floor of her “laager” – a storage barn open to the elements, apart from a metre-high stone wall, which you have to clamber over with the help of a rickety chair. The wall is to guard against mudslides, she explains, gesturing at a ghostly tideline that rings the interior. Most of her works hang from a rack; the piles on the floor are for three upcoming exhibitions in Berlin, London and Madrid. Having just opened a 53-piece installation at Tate Liverpool, Suter is halfway through choosing the 200 works that will feature in her Camden Arts Centre exhibition, which opens next week.



Wilderness ... Vivian Suter works at her lakeside studio in Guatemala.

It is the latest stage in an extraordinary renaissance for a 70-year-old Swiss-Argentinian artist who all but disappeared in her 30s. Suter was close to having to sell off part of her home when a curator tracked her down for an update of a group show in which she had featured in 1981. What he found was an artist perfectly attuned to an era of looming ecological crisis, with three decades of work in her backyard. Strapped for cash and far from specialist suppliers,

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she had learned to work with house paint and fish glue on cheap local fabric, which she would then leave outside for the weather to finish off. She stoops to stir a twig that has fallen into a tin brimming with scummy green water and says: “This is a good colour. I’ll definitely find a use for it.”

The title of her Camden show, *Tintin’s Sofa*, pays tribute to another of the dogs with which she and her 97-year-old artist mother *Elisabeth Wild* share their hideaway on the slopes of a volcano, a bone-rattling three-hour drive from Guatemala City. Though Suter seldom ventures out, leaving shopping to her two assistants, she is well-known in the small lakeside town of Panajachel. “Just get a tuk-tuk and ask for the black door,” I am told.

Walking through that black door, set into a high wall on the town’s outskirts, is like stepping through CS Lewis’s wardrobe into a timeless world that is both beautiful and menacing. Her hideaway, covering several acres of an old coffee plantation, is a tumble of rock and vegetation. Close to the small bungalow in which Suter has lived for more than three decades, lies a boulder that was washed down the mountain in the last rainstorm, and has yet to be colonised by the strangler figs whose roots lattice the ground.

“ Suter was entranced by Lake Atitlán's fierce beauty and remoteness. 'Nobody told me there was a war going on' ”

It was one such tree that drew her to this site back in the early 1980s when – recovering from a divorce and wearied by life in her home city of Basel – she took a road trip across Central America. On reaching Lake Atitlán

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in Guatemala, she decided to stay, entranced by its fierce beauty and remoteness. “Nobody told me there was a war going on,” she says.

She fell in love, remarried (again briefly) and gave birth to a son, Pancho, now 34, who lives on the other side of the lake but has recently turned one of the sheds on the slopes of his mother’s garden into a recording studio. Suter is not sure if he will join us for lunch because a Nicaraguan rapper is about to turn up. Pancho has adopted his grandmother’s surname, and she in turn snaps up his cast-off clothes, greeting us for lunch in a badass graffiti T-shirt.



Renaissance ... Elisabeth Wild, 97, works on a collage.
Photograph: Claire Armitstead

Wild, too, has been enjoying a renaissance. A solo show in Dubai in 2019 will next year be followed by a retrospective at Vienna’s Museum of Modern Art. The reason for coming all this way to meet them is that, while Wild is confined to a wheelchair and no longer well enough to travel, the life and work of the two artists is so intertwined it would be hard to understand one without the other. It’s a pilgrimage that has already been made by the artist Rosalind Nashashibi,

whose film *Vivian’s Garden* was part of her shortlisted 2017 Turner prize entry.

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Wild was born in Vienna in 1922 to a Jewish father and a Catholic mother, who fled Nazism, ending up in Argentina. While working there as textile designer, she met and married Suter's factory owner father, before fleeing back to Europe to escape the dictatorship of Juan Perón. Settling in Basel with their 12-year-old daughter, they set up a furniture shop where Wild turned her skills to cabinet painting. "I would go to flea markets and find old furniture and restore it," she says, leafing through an album of exquisitely painted work.

Suter recovered from all this uprooting to secure a place at art school in Basel at just 17. Within three years, she had landed her first group show. She made her solo debut a year later. When did Wild first know her daughter was an artist? "Always," she says. The closeness between the two women is evident as they chat, gently challenging each other's versions of history in a mixture of German, English and Spanish. They live yards apart in separate bungalows, with their shared artistic heritage covering the walls of both, from a couple of intricate botanical watercolours by Wild's grandmother to a scattering of large abstracts painted by Pancho as a child.

“I look at my mother's collages and sometimes, when she's not there, I quickly move something. But she always notices

Mother and daughter have exhibited several times together, most recently in Los Angeles, where a critic's remark that their work was "compositionally diametric yet chromatically in sync" captured the creative tension between them. While Suter works in a bold freestyle, often very quickly, in collaboration with whatever the weather throws at her, Wild sits at a desk

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snipping and glueing, composing a small geometric collage every day from architecture and lifestyle magazines. While Suter leaves all her work undated and unsigned, Wild painstakingly signs and logs every piece for storage in a painted chest which is the only piece of her furniture that made the journey to Guatemala.



A joint exhibition of Suter and Wild's work in 2018 at Toronto's Power Plant gallery.

When I ask Wild how she would describe her daughter's work, there is a long silence. "Sometimes," cuts in Suter, "I showed my mother my things and I couldn't stand her comments so I stopped showing her." She admits that she too can be judgmental: "I look at my mother's collages and sometimes, when she's not there, I quickly move something. But she always notices. We have a relationship, and sometimes individually, without speaking about it, we make similar things. The spirit is the same."

Suter's response to a question about the impact of her mother's criticism is to lead me up a perilous flight of stone steps laid into the hillside to a studio that is

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most definitely not wheelchair-friendly. She does most of her work outside it, squeezed into a narrow gap between its side wall and the encroaching forest, “because I really like painting while squished”. Bare white canvases lean against the bright red wall waiting for her to start work on her next big project, a commission from *Art on the Underground* for London’s Stratford station. For such big works this seems less than ideal, and the peril of her perch is greatly increased by the mess of old paint cans that litter the ground.

For all the nimbleness with which she flits around – a slight, otherworldly figure with a drift of auburn hair – there is an anxiety in her relationship with her surroundings. She has fortified her garden with towering spears of bamboo. One wall of her studio has a built-in cupboard, the door of which stands ajar. “There’s probably some good paint in there but I haven’t looked for years.” Why? “Because it’s probably got scary things in it.” Like what? “Like snakes maybe.”

“A mudslide covered everything she had created. As they started drying, the colours began to come out. I realised I had to start working with nature and not against it

She knows from bitter experience how dangerous this environment can be, and her respect for it has become the keystone of her work. In 2005, a hurricane sent a mudslide hurtling over everything she had created. “At the time I saw it as just a catastrophe,” she says, “but as they started drying, the colours began to come out, and I realised that I had to start working with nature and not against it.

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A large canvas dries in the 'laager'. Photograph: David Regen/Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

“Then I started leaving them outside in the rain so that they could get splashed. It was a turning-point which transformed everything. It made all I do into one work – and that’s how I see it now, not as single pieces but as a whole.” One of the ruined paintings hangs above her bed. It’s a rich burgundy that looks simultaneously cosy and sacramental. In a gesture, perhaps, to her truce with nature, she has hung it upside down so that its top 18 inches, rather than its bottom, is caked with mud.

Does she ever tire of the isolation? “Why would I?” she says. “My best friend is here. The question is what will happen when she goes.” Towards the end of lunch, when Suter is out of earshot, I ask Wild again what she makes of her daughter’s work. This time there’s no hesitation. She leans back in her chair with a smile and says: “It’s free – in a good way.”

Vivian Suter’s *Nisyros* (Vivian’s Bed) is at Tate Liverpool until 15 March; *Tintin’s Sofa* is Camden Arts Centre, London, 16 January-5 April. She is part of *En Plein Air* at the High Line, New York, until March.