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Naomi Polonsky, "The Untamed Jungles of Vivian Suter's Abstract Paintings,"
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The Untamed Jungles of Vivian Suter's Abstract Paintings

While the ecological aspect of Suter's work is particularly timely, her obvious enjoyment of pure color and form makes her artworks all the more enduring.



Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Tintin's Sofa* at Camden Arts Centre, London, 2019 (all images courtesy of Camden Arts Centre, photos by Luke Walker)

LONDON — Wherever Vivian Suter goes, she takes the Guatemalan jungle with her. Last year, the 70-year-old artist filled New York's Gladstone Gallery and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, with her vibrant abstract canvases, suspended unframed from the walls and ceilings, strung from racks, and laid in

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piles on the floor. Now she has come to London's Camden Arts Centre, where 200 canvases fill two galleries and part of the garden, for the exhibition *Tintin's Sofa*, in the artist's trademark immersive *mise-en-scène*.

Though she was born in Argentina and raised in Switzerland, Suter has been living in Panajachel, Guatemala, next to the volcanic lake Atitlán, for almost 40 years. After some success in the European art world in the early 1980s, she went into self-imposed exile in Central America and quickly fell in love with the beauty of the Guatemalan landscape, and with an American academic living in Guatemala. When their marriage ended, she built herself a house and studio that she shared with her artist mother, Elisabeth Wild (who, sadly, recently passed away).



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Suter's house and studio are both at the mercy of the natural world: a strangler fig tree is currently threatening to uproot her bedroom floor, and a couple of tropical storms have flooded her studio. The first flood, in 2005, devastated Suter, who was convinced that the muddy rainwater had destroyed her paintings. But once the canvases dried out she realized that these encroachments from nature in fact enhanced the works. Though she had previously painted outside, she began to embrace an *al fresco* method more fully.

Suter's paintings bear many traces of the environment in which they were made. In addition to the water marks, they are embedded with leaves, sticks, mud, and paw prints. The exhibition's title — *Tintin's Sofa* — is a reference to her dog's penchant for sitting on top of the canvases. Another of her installations, currently on display at Tate Liverpool, is subtitled *Vivian's Bed*. This approach to art — acknowledging it as something in and of the world — is what makes her painterly vision so enchanting and, maybe paradoxically, so otherworldly.

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Suter's individual works, rendered in a bold and vivid palette, are idiosyncratic fits in the tradition of 20th- and 21st-century abstraction. In one there's a glimmer of Rothko or Clyfford Still, in another a splash of Oscar Murillo. Some of the canvases seem to hint at figuration — evoking a mountain or a cat, for instance — but it's rarely ever more than a suggestion.

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Suter doesn't seem to be particularly interested in the individuality of her works. None are titled, dated, or signed. Many are obscured by the way in which they're installed. Instead, they serve as parts of a whole that is greater, and more beautiful, than the sum of its parts — much like our ecosystem.



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There can be little doubt that Suter's sense of oneness with nature has contributed to the renewed attention to her work over the past few years, in which she has received major solo exhibitions around the world. Her respect for the environment and collaborative approach to the natural world is very much in tune with the contemporary zeitgeist. Yet while the ecological aspect of Suter's work is timely, her obvious enjoyment of pure color and form makes the artworks all the more enduring. I hope her sublime re-imaginings of Guatemalan landscapes continue to fill our galleries and public spaces for many years to come.