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Murray Whyte, "An emerging art star in her late 60s, Vivian Suter brings bright, blissful works to the ICA," *The Boston Globe*, August 29, 2019

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ART REVIEW

An emerging art star in her late 60s, Vivian Suter brings bright, blissful works to the ICA



A view of some of the paintings by Vivian Suter on display at the Institute of Contemporary Art. MEL TAING PHOTOGRAPHY

It's hard to know when Vivian Suter ends and when she begins. Her paintings at the Institute of Contemporary Art are unpreciously draped like drying laundry on an outsize rack, or they're tacked in layers on the wall. They have no dates, no titles. There are dozens, in every possible shade. They were all made some time in the last few years. That's really all there is to know. Those craving tight annotations describing the arc of the artist's career will leave disappointed. The rest of us will be blissfully enamored of the loose,

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unfussy display. It feels less like a museum exhibition than a self-directed wander through the artist's own mind. Curator Ruth Erickson suggested the installation was designed to evoke Suter's studio at the site of a rustic and sprawling former coffee farm in the Guatemalan jungle. For most artists I've known, the studio is a real-world extrusion of the one inside his or her skull. I don't think Suter's any exception. And what a gloriously peaceful, enveloping world it is.

Suter's a painter — though, like her exhibition, that's a word best loosely applied. Working in humidity you could almost grab by the handful, Suter, 69, would be an uptight art conservator's worst nightmare. She paints the shadows of palm trees on a canvas splayed on her dusty floor; when branches or leaves or dust blow or tumble onto her still-wet surfaces, she leaves them to become part of the work. She's also a museum budget director's dream come true. No complex crating or freight arrangements here: When it's time to send them to the various exhibitions that demand them, she rolls them up — many are painted on slight cotton manta cloth, a local clothing staple especially popular with indigenous groups — and ships them off.

Suter, who is Swiss Argentinian, makes the work, but her environment is the collaborator, occasionally uninvited. One piece at the ICA dangles from the rack, its lower quarter an earthy taupe beneath a crisp horizontal. You might think Suter was dabbling with colorfield abstraction, a pursuit defined by proportion and color alone. But by now we know better. Her studio flooded, and the height of the color was the height to which the water rose.

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Vivian Suter FLAVIO KARRER/GLADSTONE
GALLERY, NEW YORK AND BRUSSELS

That's the thing about Suter. You'll look around the space and your mind hops unprompted to the litany of art-historical name checks: Here, the soft figuration and extravagant hues of Henri Matisse, there the jagged collisions of color of Clyfford Still. That muddled patch of manta cloth, the product of sudden flooding, might put you in the mind of the hazy color blocks of Mark Rothko.

But Rothko never made a painting — that I know of, at least — quite like this. Suter spent the past 30 years in her muggy jungle retreat, working without thought or care for the strictures of an art world hierarchy built brick-by-brick on circular references, present to past. Her paintings are softly exuberant, bursting with joyful serenity; big thick swipes of color suggest blissful fugues.

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Suter's dog pops up as frequently, as do views into the jungle through her capacious windows (one, swabbed in what looks like quick, bold strokes, looks almost like a Franz Kline in deep royal blue). However abstract they appear, Suter is always seeing something. The leap of faith she quietly requests — to abandon expectation and programming, and let your eye be free — provides the show with the tension it needs. This is painting not about painting, but about her world within eyeshot.



Installation view of Suter's work at the ICA.MEL TAING PHOTOGRAPHY

Suter had a brush with fame before she hit 30 — a Basel dealer gave her a show, which eventually led to group show in the city's top museum, the Kunsthalle Basel. Right around then, Suter said no — no to exhibitions, no to dealers, no to buyers, no to painting on demand to feed a fickle market warming to her as its newest flavor of the month. Instead, she lit out for Los Angeles and worked her way south: through Mexico and Central America, navigating Guatemala in the 1980s at the height of its indigenous-ravaging

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civil war, to eventually land at her tumbledown coffee-farm refuge in the jungle, and a space to be free.

Suter deigned to re-enter the public eye more fully in 2017, when [documenta 14](#), the once-in-five-years contemporary art extravaganza in Kassel, Germany, deemed to be the world's most significant, came knocking. To her own surprise, it seems, she was ready. And so, in her late 60s, Vivian Suter became an emerging art star.

How much has it changed things? Well, more of us know her name (her paintings have been draped above New York's Highline near the Whitney Museum since April, flapping in the breeze like tribal regalia). But the show, like all of her works, is untitled — no snappy catch phrase, no leading statement. Just “Vivian Suter.” The artist doesn't want to say too much, or anything at all. She just wants to paint.



A detail of one of Suter's paintings at the ICA.
MEL TAING PHOTOGRAPHY

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That's not to say she's turned her back on you. The opposite, really. A show more homey and inviting, brimming with a gentle kind of life you'll never find. Remember Suter being a conservator's nightmare? Well, they're likely hers, too. That array of paintings hung neatly in a row begs to be parted with your hands; it wants you to come inside. Alas, regular museum rules — no touching — apply, leaving us short of the full Suter studio experience. (She gets her revenge in the museum's glassed-in promenade, where a dozen or more works dangle in full sunlight, taking in all the harmful UV they can handle while making a show for the harbor below.)

You get the idea. In Suter's world, a work is never really done, even if she is. Given her way, the world will pick up where she ends off and leave its own mark. Even hands off, the show, with its cozy intimacy, will get under your skin, and in the most gratifying of ways. It's a place to be with art, but it's also a place to just be.