

Oliver Basciano, "Vivian Suter: Forces of Nature," *Art Review*, December 2019

ArtReview

Vivian Suter: Forces of Nature

Oliver Basciano visits the Guatemala-based Swiss painter to find out how she has learned to work with nature and cede control. Her solo show is on view at Tate Liverpool



When the storm came after lunch at Vivian Suter's home in Panajachel, I assumed that, though heavy, it was standard for the dog days of Guatemala's rainy season. Perhaps the deluge would stop in an hour: a short, sharp downpour, leaving the air refreshed. Later that night, as the rain continued and torrents streamed ankle-deep down the main street of the tiny town, the drains failing to contain them, it became clear that this was not normal.

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Arriving back at Suter's house from my hotel the next morning, she pointed to a large rock at the bottom of the steep path leading up to the hut and veranda where she paints. The boulder hadn't been there the day before; dislodged by the rain, it had evidently rolled down through the garden's tangled ferns, coffee plants and spineless yuccas, passing under the fig and mango trees, banana and fishtail palms to rest on a small patch of lawn by the back door. Suter looked concerned. It was, she said, a small but frightening reminder of the 2005 landslide that had devastated the building she stores her work in.

Over 1,500 people are thought to have died in Guatemala alone when Hurricane Stan hit Central America 14 years ago. While thankful that she and her family were safe – Suter then shared her home with her son, who now lives across the lake, and her mother, Elizabeth Wild, also an artist – seeing her studio destroyed was a personal tragedy. She had been working here for 20 years, having decamped from Switzerland, where her career had started, and with barely a market, so that piles upon piles of canvases were swamped in mud and rubble. Suter had told me this story the day before, the rain yet to come, while sitting in the sun by her favourite tree outside a house crowded with antiques, paintings, photos and books. She's shy, quietly spoken and pauses at this point in the narrative: the memories are obviously still raw. The event led to a crisis, she says, a questioning of her work; the life choices she had made, even. Why, lacking an audience, had she come here to make art?

Her work from before the hurricane occasionally contained geometric patterns reminiscent of the Mayan textiles still frequently seen worn on the

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streets in town, but she says the influence was never intended. For the most part they were highly wrought abstractions, made with roughly handled, heavily laden brushstrokes. Occasionally the use of green makes the connection to the surroundings of their production explicit, but in truth all the works, in their tangled, dense composition, depict – if anything – the former coffee plantation that constitutes Suter's garden. In 2005, as she desperately tried to clean the muck from her canvases, Suter began to realise that fighting nature was futile. Not only must she accept it as a pervasive part of life in rural Guatemala, however harsh, she further imagined that these lush surroundings could actually become an active agent in her artmaking. From that point on, rather than trying vainly to protect her paintings from the elements, she'd leave them in the garden to gather detritus across their surfaces: an invitation to the rain, falling leaves and fauna to do their worst upon the canvases (even, in one case, a possum peeing on a painting). It was a resolution that would, in time, bring recognition from museums and galleries internationally and, if it hasn't brought the artist in from the cold, has certainly tempered her reclusion in the Guatemalan heat. Suter, born in Buenos Aires but raised in Basel from the age of twelve, crossed into Guatemala from Mexico aged thirty-three in December 1982. The Mexicans she had met along the way had warned her obliquely that Guatemala was no place for a Swiss backpacker, however adventurous. The civil war between the US-installed military dictatorship and leftist-Mayan rebels had reached its gruesome pinnacle, with state-sponsored disappearances reaching the scale of genocide. Yet the Mexicans were vague, Suter ill-informed, and she took the bus south. She never planned to come to Panajachel either: she had arrived on the western shore of Lake Atitlan intending to travel onwards,

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but it was getting dark and she was told that taking a bus at night was dangerous. She jumped off here, 115km by road from Guatemala City. The town was slowly becoming a stop on the hippie trail south from the US and is today speckled with tourist shops and hostels – Juan, the photographer accompanying me on this trip, tells me that this is where he and his friends used to come to party as errant teenagers – but back then it remained barely developed. In Suter's telling of the story it was not the two ramshackle streets that make up the bulk of this place that enchanted her, nor the lake or the three volcanoes that tower over its shoreline, but a particular tree, a *matapalo*, the strangler fig. (It's the one I sat under to interview her: the fruit provides food for the bats that come out after dark.) She stayed first at a local hotel, and then bought the former coffee plantation. (It still provides a modest harvest; in Suter's kitchen are two big sacks of beans.)

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She knows every inch of the garden that surrounds her house and her mother's home next door (they have separate entrances from the same barely tarmacked side street, but a narrow path through the undergrowth links the two). Suter produces her paintings on the veranda of the small hut that, before the trees grew too tall, offered a view of the volcanoes. She first prepares the canvases, stapling them

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Vivian Suter, Nisyros, 2017 (installation view, Filopappou Hill, Pikionis Paths and Pavilion, Athens). Photo: Stathis Mamalakis. Courtesy Documenta 14, Athens

roughly to a wood frame, then applying a coat of paint. She might leave these out overnight before picking up her brush. On my first visit, one blank canvas, resting against the side of the building on the earth, had a faint splatter of mud along the bottom. Returning the next day, after the rain, the dirt had sprayed higher and a small snail was trailing across the cream surface. Suter paints until late at night, employing a battery-operated light if necessary, using tins of household paint she buys from a DIY shop in town. These she mixes with glue and, occasionally, powder paint from Guatemala City. The canvases are then carried down the hill, brushing past the undergrowth as they go, and left out faceup for a few nights under the forest canopy.

She admits that she has, on occasion, forgotten a work, only to discover it weeks later, rotting away. In the last stage of the artworks'

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journey, they're carried to the lower studio, a whitewashed barn with corrugated transparent plastic skylights, in which they are stored. It was this building that was almost swallowed by the hurricane-induced landslide 14 years ago.

Suter is prolific in her production, and although she now shows and sells with increasingly regularity, there are still hundreds of canvases in this second building, all removed from their frames as she now prefers to exhibit them. Some are hung, pegged in parallel, a space-saving device she's since employed frequently as a mode of installation: first at the joint show she and her mother had at Kunsthalle Basel in 2014, and at the São Paulo Biennale the same year, and most recently in this past summer's exhibition at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art. Others are simply heaped on the floor. Her compositions are much lighter now, swirling brushstrokes often with a paler palette.

Occasionally there is the hint of figuration. Suter points to one work that, in thick red and blue strokes against an unpainted background, depicts one of the three dogs that accompany her at every step of the painting process, and whose wayward pawprints sometimes traverse a painting. The amount of detritus stuck to their surface varies wildly: one work, hung up, has barely a mark across its wash of pastel green. Another, among the piles of canvases, is laden with leaves, twigs and dirt, stuck rock-hard to the water-stained blue and brown painted material.

Suter is currently preparing for an incursion into London: an exhibition at Camden Arts Centre, and a commission from the city's Art on the Underground programme. The latter is a more complex operation,

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working with larger-sized canvases that will hang from the ceiling of Stratford tube station. For the institutional show, however, the curators were given free rein to choose the paintings, all part of the artist's desire to relinquish as much control over her artmaking as possible: after all, she says, it's only chance that brought her here, and made this work possible, in the first place. Not only can she not predict what exactly will happen to the paintings when left overnight – I ask her if she can now anticipate what will happen if she places a canvas in a particular spot; she says she avoids thinking like that – but when painting, she will also occasionally move the stretcher into a narrow outside space between the studio wall and some thick undergrowth to purposely restrict her own room to manoeuvre her brush.



Vivian Suter, 2019 (installation view). Photo: David Regen. Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York & Brussels

It might seem, reading the artist's CV and the recent rash of high-profile exhibitions after years in which she barely exhibited at all, that her career

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has trodden the same weary line of so many female artists, overlooked until later in life. But this isn't exactly how the story goes. In her twenties, Suter enjoyed precocious success. She was given her first show at the age of twenty-two at Basel's Stampa gallery, having several exhibitions there and at the Kunstsammlung Thun and Istituto Svizzero in Rome. In 1978 she was included in the exhibition *6 Artists from Basel* at the city's Kunsthalle, and it was the exhibition pamphlet for this that curator Adam Szymczyk came across while going through the museum's archives upon becoming its director in 2004. Szymczyk recognised five of the names, but Suter was a mystery. Discovering her whereabouts, he asked her, in 2011, to take part in a restaging of the show (with the addition of six current younger artists from the Swiss city). Under his patronage, Suter and her mother went on to have the two-person show at the institution and to participate in Szymczyk's Documenta 14 in 2017. It's the type of attention that drove Suter to leave Switzerland in the first place. She tells me that she enjoyed making the work, but back then she couldn't stand the necessary socialising needed to build a career. She had sold well, however, and her family had money from her father's success in the textile industry in Argentina (he offloaded the business in 1962), so she could afford, at least initially, to duck out of the European artworld. Yet Suter tells me that, as the years and decades passed, she became frustrated about the lack of attention.

The contested relationship between humanity and the rest of nature is as old as Eden, but the increased recent interest in Suter's work has run parallel to discussions around the so-called Anthropocene. Suter exhibited at this year's Taipei Biennial, which curators Mali Wu and Francesco Manacorda titled *Post- Nature*, showing her installation *Lala*

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Mountain (2019; oil, acrylic, pigments, fish glue, earth, botanical matter and microorganisms on canvas) alongside contributions from environmental groups, activists,

scientists and designers, as well as artists. While conversant in art history and theory – books on art, antiques and crafts pile up across an array of surfaces in her house – Suter is not one for academic references. Instead she has the same laissez-faire attitude to how her work is interpreted – and how

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Wu, Manacorda, Szymczyk and others have used it to weave particular curatorial narratives – that has guided her work since the hurricane, happy for the paintings to be contextualised as others see fit. Indeed, she often changes the subject when I push to talk about the work conceptually, turning the conversation instead towards its production or how a certain development relates to her own biography. This way of thinking about her own art recalls Robert Smithson's introduction to the Land works he dubbed 'abstract geology'. In his essay 'A Sedimentation of the Mind' (1968), Smithson poetically noted that 'the earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other... One's mind and the earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing.'

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It is perhaps pertinent for us to think of Suter's work as a kind of psychic embrace between nature and artist, in which both operate as coauthors of the paintings (as is the case in Smithson's iconic Land works, not least the constant evolution of *Spiral Jetty*, 1970). In his 1968 text Smithson notes how all art materials are a part of nature, the raw materials merely refined through industry. In Suter's work the only thing separating the paint from the DIY shop and the detritus from the garden work is a certain level of human interaction in the former's manufacture. In their intermingling on the surface of her canvases, the paintings point to the precarity of human dominion over nature, offering Suter's give-and-take relationship with her garden as a blueprint for how we might live with the planet.

Work by Vivian Suter can be seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, through 29 March; at Tate Liverpool, 13 December – 3 May, and at Camden Arts Centre, London, 16 January – 5 April. A yearlong commission from Art on the Underground for Stratford station, London, opens 18 June

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