

Exhibition 25 June, 2021 – 10 January, 2022

Parque del Retiro, Palacio de Velázquez

Vivian Suter



Vivian Suter's studio-house, Panajachel, Guatemala, 2019. Photo: Teresa Velázquez

‘I try to capture time in some way, a bit like holding your breath.’

Vivian Suter in conversation with
Javier Payeras, 2021

The Swiss-Argentine artist Vivian Suter (Buenos Aires, 1949) decided to leave Basel and go and live in the Guatemalan jungle after a solo trip through the Mesoamerican ruins in the early 1980s. She has now spent more than thirty years working out of a studio in a former coffee plantation on the banks of Lake Atitlán, in a town called Panajachel. From this personal Eden, dense in vegetation and with volcanoes on the horizon, she approaches abstract painting and artistic improvisation through the natural environment surroundings: her unframed canvases – or rather *mantas* – show painted forms that reference natural shapes, such as treetops, volcanic peaks or watery surfaces, alongside marks made by rainfall, soil erosion and animal tracks. The way Suter welcomes input from natural phenomena in her work not only upsets traditional notions of material hierarchy, but demonstrates a form of ecologically-aware existence.

Her work also offers a link between two cultures. Born in Argentina to European parents exiled by the Second World War, her connection to Latin America was shaped in childhood. Her canvases are the product of a fusion between the western world and the Guatemalan context: different techniques, visions and ways of thinking combine through paint, canvas and nature. Unlike the classic image of the foreign artist seduced by exoticism, Suter is the sort of outsider who creates new links between disparate worldviews.

Suter’s first works, produced in Switzerland in the late 1960s, were more structured. It was only when she moved to the

Guatemalan jungle that her artistic process and thoughts became more organic and free, especially in the aftermath of tropical storms Stan, in 2005, and Agatha, in 2010. These natural disasters left many of her canvases caked in mud, resulting in a series of paintings marked by the haphazard contribution of the climate. From then on, she treated nature as a sort of co-author, her canvases transitioning from the indoor introspection of the studio and out into the wiles of the wind and rain and mud, where tiny insects might even make their mark, mapping out and representing the singularity of vegetal life. These works also bear testimony to their own destruction, their own natural evolution and life cycle,



Vivian Suter's studio-house, Panajachel, Guatemala, 2019. Photo: Teresa Velázquez

for once they turn into museum pieces or items in an exhibition, they become static, as if frozen in time.

This stage of her artistic development coincided with her work being rediscovered in contemporary art circles. Suter's first solo exhibition was at the Stampa gallery in Basel in 1971, and shows in other cities of Switzerland and Italy soon followed. In 1981 she took part in the group show *6 Künstler aus Basel* [6 Artists from Basel], organised by the curator Jean-Christophe Ammann at the prestigious Kunsthalle Basel. However, feeling disenchanted with the art world and its social obligations, Suter then chose to depart the European scene and go travelling. Her wanderings eventually took her to Los Angeles, Mexico and, finally, Guatemala, then in the grip

of civil war. Although she continued to sporadically exhibit across the continent, she remained very much under the radar until 2011, when Adam Szymczyk, then the director of the Kunsthalle Basel, decided to recreate the 1981 exhibition. After tracking Suter down and admiring the way she worked, Szymczyk invited her to exhibit at Museo Tamayo in Mexico City (*Olinka*, 2012) and then, a few years later, in the Kassel and Athens editions of documenta 14 (2017). Other exhibitions followed, at The Power Plant in Toronto (2018), The Art Institute of Chicago (2019), The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (2019), Tate Liverpool (2019) and the Camden Art Centre in London (2020). In 2021 she was awarded the Prix Meret Oppenheim, a lifetime achievement award for artists whose work has played a key



Vivian Suter, Untitled, n. d. Courtesy of the artist and Karma International, Zurich. Photo: Flavio Karrer

role in stimulating cultural dialogue in Switzerland and beyond.

During her Buenos Aires childhood, Suter liked to play hide and seek among the fabrics at the Estampería Belgrano, the family printworks. For her Reina Sofía Museum exhibition, the Palacio de Velázquez becomes a similar playground with viewers invited to lose themselves amongst the pieces, colours and textures that hang within the building's glass and iron domes. Atmospheric immersion is a constant in Suter's work, as reflected in the documentary *Vivian's Garden*, directed by Rosalind Nashashibi in 2017, in which Suter is shown wandering through the dense vegetation of her Panajachel refuge,

losing herself amongst the green trees and tropical light, the suspension of time and the emotional landscape.

Related activity:

Event

Painting with nature

An evening with Vivian Suter and a screening of the film *Vivian's Garden* [2017]

Friday 25 June 2021 – 6:00 p.m.

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