

Ray Mark Rinaldi, "In the Guatemalan jungle, Vivian Suter paints the beauty that surrounds her,"
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In the Guatemalan jungle, Vivian Suter paints the beauty that surrounds her

Ahead of a major solo show at Palais de Tokyo in Paris, the artist welcomes Art Basel to her unusual studio on the shores of Lake Atitlán

by Ray Mark Rinaldi
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Vivian Suter paints in the dark, and only outdoors. Nearly every day, she exits her home on a lush parcel of land in Panajachel, Guatemala, in the late afternoon. She locks the doors, collects a walking stick cut from the local brush, traverses the mango and coffee trees in her garden and ascends 120 steep, stone steps to the front porch of the one-room studio she has carved into the crest of a hill.

She arranges her pigments and gets to work, brushing generous amounts of color onto canvas in sweeping, gestural strokes until after the sun goes down. There is no electricity, no lamp. Much of the time, she cannot make out what she has created.



Vivian Suter's studio in Panajachel, Guatemala. Photo: © Flavio Karrer.

‘In the mornings I go and see the paintings,’ Suter told Art Basel. She works on two or three canvases at a time, switching back and forth to allow one layer of paint to dry before adding another. ‘I do not really know how they will look until I see them in the light.’

By then, the works have taken on a life of their own. Suter always mixes fish glue into her paints and the canvases, still sticky and left outside, often collect the dirt, debris, or even the insects passing by overnight.

This is what she has done for four decades now, with little variation, though at 75, she does make some modifications. She might have her assistants place the stretched, white canvases in a flat part of her yard, not too far from the towering fig tree that inspired her to purchase the property in 1983. There, the artist works directly on the ground, in a field of fallen leaves and twigs and dozens of empty, scattered paint buckets she has hollowed with abandon but keeps around for inspiration.



Vivian Suter in her studio in Panajachel, Guatemala. Photo: © Flavio Karrer.



Suter rarely takes a day off and can amass hundreds of paintings in a single year, all untitled and undated. That, in part, explains how she can present a solo exhibition – as she will starting June 12 at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris – with a considerable 500 paintings on the checklist.

The exhibition, curated by François Piron and organized in collaboration with MAAT in Lisbon, is titled 'Disco,' which also happens to be the name of one of the dogs who run freely around her yard (and sometimes over her wet paintings, leaving paw prints). The works will be displayed unframed and in various configurations: layered salon-style on the walls, hung from wires so they move in the wind, piled into stacks on the floor where only the top painting may be fully visible to viewers.

Suter leaves it up to curators to decide how her works will be presented in a show, though this free-wheeling style Piron has chosen seems just right. It is, in a sense, without rules, as her own life has been.



Suter was born to Swiss parents in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where her father owned a printing business. Her mother was the late collage artist Elisabeth Wild (coincidentally co-represented by her Swiss gallery, **Karma International**). The family moved to Switzerland when Vivian was 12, and at 19, she married Martin Suter – long before the author started writing the novels that would make him famous (‘He wanted to write then’ Vivian said. ‘But he always said he did not have enough experiences.’). The couple divorced a few years later though they remain close friends, so much so that Martin owns a property next door to Vivian in Panajachel, and lives there part of the year.

Vivian Suter first went to Guatemala as a tourist searching across the hemisphere for ruins, she said. But it all stopped in Panajachel. She had been looking to get away from busier worlds, ‘for freedom,’ as she put it, and found it in this settlement on the edge of Lake Atitlán, a volcanic crater, spread over 130 square kilometers and full of fishing boats and water taxis ferrying passengers to various towns along its shores.



‘I was never very social,’ she said. ‘I came here because I wanted to avoid all that.’

Panajachel was more like a village when she arrived, she said, but it has grown into a noisy and bustling, low-rise city with too much traffic for its narrow stone streets. Fleets of three-wheeled tuk tuks buzz in all directions, serving both locals and the legions of backpacking visitors that now pass through.

The artist came across a former coffee plantation for sale and was mesmerized by that fig tree. She purchased it, built a modest, one-story house, went through another marriage, raised a son, and later built a second house for her mother who spent her last years there before she died in 2010 at the age of 98.

Suter holds multiple citizenships and speaks several languages, but she said, her global upbringing always made her feel like a foreigner, an outsider, no matter where she has lived. It makes sense, in that way, that she feels at home in nature, and that is the thing that drives her art. Her abstract paintings, with their loose but determined lines – sometimes formed into right-angled blocks of color, other times shaped into circles, and nearly always colliding into each other – are landscapes.



She paints trees and bushes around her, their outlines and shadows, but also something closer to their essence, or perhaps their personalities, as they reveal themselves to her in the moment. 'I am capturing the light, the sounds, the atmosphere,' she said.

She works in constant motion, or 'in action' as she describes her nightly ritual, 'And then I suddenly stop,' she said. By then, the sun is gone.

Vivian Suter picks up her walking stick, makes her way down 120 steep steps, and returns to her home. In a few hours, the artist will know exactly what she has created.

