

Vivian Suter's Paintings Breathe With Life

The fluidity of Suter's approach to painting and mark-making conveys an ecological sensitivity to the interconnections between people and place.



Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Disco* at MAAT, Lisbon (all photos Anna Souter/*Hyperallergic* unless otherwise noted)

LISBON — Vivian Suter is one of those rare artists who has been mythologized within her own lifetime. A sense of romance imbues her biography: As a young woman traveling solo to see the archaeological sites of Mesoamerica, she happened upon the small Guatemalan town of Panajachel on the shores of Lake Atitlan, and decided to stay. She left behind her life and the art world in Switzerland, where she was raised, and created a new home for herself on a former coffee plantation.

As the curatorial text accompanying Suter's solo show *Disco* at the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (MAAT) states, in Guatemala she pursued her "experimental, solitary, and obsessive practice" with a single-mindedness that disregarded the fluctuating trends of the art

market. In some ways, this is a conveniently appealing narrative that perhaps skates over her experiences of marriage and child-rearing and also her infrequent but consistent contact with Swiss art gallerists and fairs. Nevertheless, the key part of her story, which comes through powerfully in *Disco*, is her love for and immersion in her extraordinary environment.



Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Disco* at MAAT, Lisbon

Painting onto stretched canvases, Suter works outdoors in her garden studio, surrounded by lush vegetation and subject to the vagaries of weather and temperature. After a painting is complete, she removes the canvas from its stretcher, in some cases bringing it inside immediately, in others leaving it outside for days or weeks. During this time, the works pick up traces of their environment; the paint becomes embedded with dried leaves, flecks of earth, or the muddy footprints of her three dogs. These are collaborative artworks, produced in coalition with the ecologies of the place that Suter has chosen as her home.

This exhibition features more than 500 paintings produced over the last 10 years, presented in a way that evokes forest vegetation — almost entirely covering the walls as well as hanging from the ceiling and even carpeting the floor like fallen leaves. Suter is interested in undoing the hierarchies that have come to define painting as a medium. She hangs her paintings sideways, upside down, or back to front according to her instincts during installation; in several pieces, drip marks disconcertingly run upward. Many works are displayed on racks inspired by those she uses to store her works at home, hanging close together in parallel so that viewers must inspect them slantwise, creating visual obstructions every time a new sightline opens up.



Installation view of Vivian Suter: *Disco* at MAAT, Lisbon

Across her oeuvre, Suter employs an expressive visual language of abstraction, in which painterly gestures are rich with allusions and associations. She never signs, dates, or titles her works, which speaks to the power of conjecture; the shapes of vegetation, topographical markers, or the curves of a human body can coexist within the same canvas. For instance, one piece appears to evoke the outline of a baby, but it could also be read as a germinating seed. In another, gestural concentric circles suggest ripples in a lake or a setting sun, while the bottom half of the canvas is muddied and frayed, the result of a devastating storm that flooded her storeroom. The fluidity of her approach and mark-making conveys an ecological sensitivity to the interconnections between people and place, and an awareness of the inextricable links between human and nonhuman entities.

Both Suter and her paintings remain tantalizingly enigmatic, refusing to be explained away, shunning clear-cut analyses in favor of a practice that is both conceptually rigorous and generously open-ended. The exhibition's vast scale is countered by the humility of the title — *Disco* is her youngest dog. It's a testament to the generative potential of interspecies relationships.



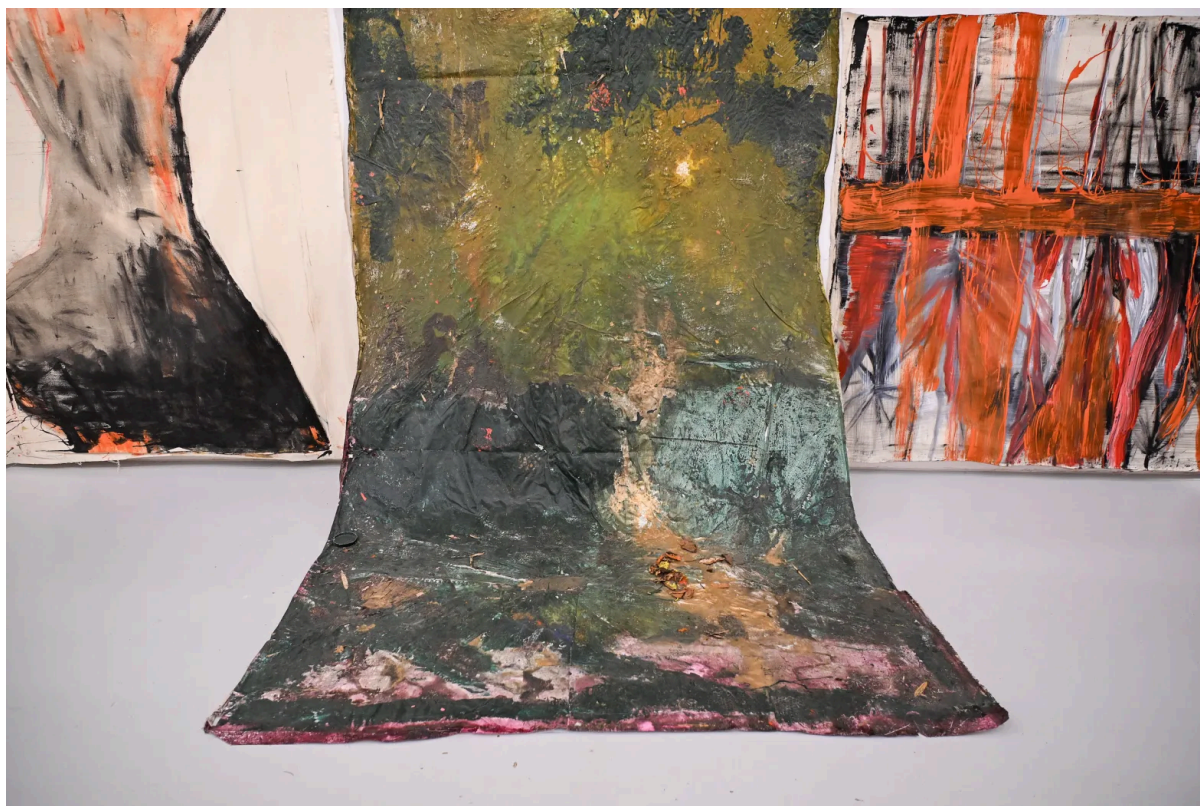
Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Disco* at MAAT, Lisbon



Detail of debris on a painting.



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Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Disco* at MAAT, Lisbon (photo Pedro Pina)



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Vivian Suter: Disco continues at the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology (Av. Brasília, 1300-598, Lisbon, Portugal) through March 17, 2025. The exhibition was curated by Sérgio Mah.

Editor's Note: Some travel for the author was paid for by MAAT.