



Title

Vivian Suter and the white cube

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Cover image:

Vivian Suter and the white cube

by Kirsty White • 22.04.2020

If you compared a photograph of an exhibition from the 1950s with one from 2020, they would probably look fairly similar: white walls, works of art spaced widely apart upon them, with no visual distractions and empty of people. The white cube aesthetic is now so ubiquitous now that we barely register it. In his well-known series of essays *Inside the White Cube* (1986), Brian O'Doherty writes that it is this 'white, ideal space [. . .] more than any single picture [that is] the archetypal image of twentieth-century art'.¹ While this mode of presentation suited certain painting styles at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, how often do we consider if it is the most relevant means of display now?

It is refreshing, therefore, to see an exhibition that strays from convention, and finds its own way of inhabiting the gallery. *Vivian Suter: Tintin's Sofa* at Camden Arts Centre, London (closed 5th April 2020), was conceived as a single installation and blankets the gallery's main exhibition spaces in colourful canvases. They hang from the walls, the ceiling, one even tremors under the air vent. A pile on the floor, stacked like pages from a book, is especially enticing **FIG.1**. The paintings depict in thick brushstrokes graphic patterns, shimmering fields of colours and forms derived from the natural world **FIG.2**: a dog with pricked ears and black nose; a river of brown bordered by banks of turgid green. Suspended as they are, some are visible from both the front and back, the translucency of the canvas allowing the paint to shine in muted tones through to the other side **FIG.3**.



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Tintin's Sofa*, at Camden Arts Centre, London, 2020. (Photograph Luke Walker).

While not a recreation as such, *Tintin's Sofa* recalls Suter's home and studio in Panajachel, Guatemala. Born in Buenos Aires, Suter spent her formative years in Switzerland before moving to her current, idyllic, location by the volcanic Lake Atitlán. Photographs show large canvases hanging from racks outside, stretched over the forest floor or propped in front of lush vegetation **FIG. 4**. Since a storm flooded her studio in 2005, caking her paintings in mud, Suter has made nature her collaborator. Her unprimed canvases are left outdoors to 'weather', 'absorbing traces of falling leaves, rain water, dirt, passing animals and the marks of her dogs, Bonzo, Nina and Tintin'.² Her paints too, are partly organic, composed of a combination of fish glue, DIY pigments, oil and acrylic.

Accordingly, the paintings are mostly talked about in terms of their relationship to the natural environment. Suter's coexistence with nature is interpreted in the wall text as a wider ecological concern. But her own explanation is more personal: 'the idea of it is that I don't miss out [. . .] Painting, that is my favourite thing to do, and being outside as well. So this brings it all together'. In the gallery, the canvases have been cleaned of any jungle debris, and their loose brushstrokes make it hard to determine what is an accidental or deliberate mark, a wash of paint or a trickle of rainwater. Perhaps this is the point: where does Suter's work end and the rainforests begin?



Fig. 2 *Untitled*, by Vivian Suter. Mixed media on canvas. (Copyright Vivian Suter; courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; Photograph David Regen).

The most striking aspect of this exhibition – more so than any environmental message – is how different the installation is from that of the conventional painting exhibition **Fig. 5**. By opting to hang on almost every available surface, and most of the space in-between, Suter brings a warmth to the gallery that is usually lacking. Gone are the chilly white walls and polished floorboards. The white cube is draped, furnished, clothed. Even the acoustic has changed – footsteps muffled, and chatter softened. Wandering through its pathways of unprimed canvases, with their fraying, unfinished edges, one recalls piles of fabric for sale in markets or

washing hanging on the line. There is a domesticity to its aesthetic, as well as its concept – it is named after one of Suter's dogs who sat on a painting and made it his 'sofa' – that brings an informality and intimacy to the gallery space. Art, for Suter, is something that is lived and lived alongside, not something you handle with white gloves on.

Considering the elitist connotations of the white cube, it is surprising how few exhibitions experiment with how they hang or display art. Perhaps it is easier for Suter, as the artist, to take such liberties with the work than it would be for a curator or designer. She discusses the installation as 'a document' of her life, making it apt that it mimics her home and studio environment. Her exhibition is a triumph, showing how art can be something other than an autonomous object in a white box. It can be lived and lived with, if we are willing to forgo the formula.



Fig. 3 Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Tintin's Sofa*, at Camden Arts Centre, London, 2020. (Photograph Luke Walker).

Due to the continuing spread of the coronavirus in the UK, Camden Arts Centre is currently closed. It can be viewed through the below virtual tour:



Fig. 4 A painting in Vivian Suter's studio garden. (Copyright Vivian Suter; courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; Photograph David Regen).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Vivian Suter: Tintin's Sofa*, at Camden Arts Centre, London, 2020. (Photograph Luke Walker).

Exhibition details Vivian Suter: Tintin's Sofa
Camden Arts Centre, London
17th January–5th April 2020

Footnotes

- 1** B. O'Doherty: *Inside the White Cube*, London 1986, p.14.
- 2** Wall text in *Vivian Suter: Tintin's Sofa* at Camden Arts Centre, London, 2020.

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