Chattanooga Times Free Press

‘The Dutch House’ show at Chattanooga gallery draws on Ann Patchett novel

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by Ellen Gerst

Staff photo by Ellen Gerst / Pictured Friday is a painting by Becky Suss, part of her Chattanooga show, "The Dutch House." The painting depicts the observatory of the house described in Ann Patchett's 2019 novel.

A new exhibit that opened over the weekend at Chattanooga's Institute of Contemporary Art pairs a Philadelphia artist with work by Nashville author Ann Patchett.

Artist Becky Suss created 10 paintings for the exhibit, all inspired by interiors and objects described in Patchett's 2019 novel "The Dutch House."

The novel follows siblings who grew up in an ornate mansion once owned by a wealthy Dutch family in Elkins Park, a suburb north of Philadelphia.

Suss, who draws on literature in her work, grew up in Wyncote, which neighbors Elkins Park. Her pieces often examine domestic interiors and memory, both present in Patchett's book. Patchett bought one of the paintings herself, Suss said.

IF YOU GO

"The Dutch House" opened to the public Saturday at the Institute of Contemporary Art Chattanooga at 752 Vine St. on the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga campus. The gallery is free and open 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays and noon to 4 p.m. Saturdays.

When curator Rachel Waldrop, the institute director, asked Suss to do a show at the Chattanooga gallery and encouraged her to incorporate some aspect of Tennessee or the South, Suss said "The Dutch House" with its Tennessee-based author and vivid descriptions was a perfect fit.

"That's a big part of what I want to do at the ICA, to make sure it's grounded in some kind of Southern context," Waldrop said by phone, "whether we're working and presenting artists living and working in the South or we're thinking about conversations that are relevant to our place."

The Chattanooga Times Free Press talked with Suss about the exhibit and its relationship with Patchett's novel ahead of the opening.

The interview has been edited and condensed for clarity and brevity.

Q: What drew you to "The Dutch House" for this exhibit?

A: I sort of was thinking to myself, there are a lot of writers from the South, who's from Tennessee? As soon as I thought of Ann's name -- I read "The Dutch House" when it came out in 2019, and I thought, "Oh, this is such an amazing book because it describes this house in detail. It's set in an environment that I'm native to." It could be this sort of exchange, you know, Ann is from Tennessee and built this fictional house in the actual town where I grew up, and I can revisit it and fold all my own memories, experiences, research into making these paintings and then bring them all back down to Tennessee.

Ann, the way she describes in this book, is such a gift. It's such a rarity to have such a fully described interior when you're reading something.

Photo Gallery
'The Dutch House' show

Q: The Dutch house in the book isn't a real house, but is there a house that came to mind when reading the book?

A: Wyncote, where I grew up, is right next to Elkins Park, and you would drive this route to get over to where a lot of my friends lived, through this pocket of very fancy houses. One of them is actually, I think, the largest standing Gilded Age mansion in America that was designed by Horace Trumbauer. It's called Lynnewood Hall. It's so huge, you don't think it's a mansion, similar to the Dutch house -- you think it's this estate, a museum, like a government building. I've taken a mantelpiece from there, some of the architectural details, the molding, and I've incorporated that imagery into the paintings.

Also, my very best friend grew up at the top of the hill in a big, beautiful Tudor-style house. And so I've taken a lot from that, too. I took the wallpaper in

her childhood room, and I put that in a small painting in the show and some of the other details, a bed and some other things.

(READ MORE: Study: Tennessee had the third most inbound movers in 2023)

Q: How does this exhibit examine memory?

A: It has always been interesting to me, the freedom that it gives you to give your memory more credence than the idea that it's been altered. Then you get to see, what did you amplify and what did you edit out? And what does that say about your experience? In "The Dutch House," there is a conversation between Danny and his sister were he sort of says, "Do you think we can ever really remember stuff the right way? Like we're adults now, things change so much. We can't really remember the way it was." And I think that that's true for all of us. But I don't think that the departure is a negative. I think it's interesting, and that's sort of always been a foundation of my work.

Q: In the book, their memories change, but when they go back to the house, it's the one thing that hasn't changed.

A: Yeah, it's a really interesting character, and it also gets to be a witness to this whole family's story, which was always a really compelling part for me about making my paintings about domestic interiors. I love the idea that my paintings don't have people in them, but the people in the gallery get to be the people in the space. I like to imagine all the things the walls have witnessed over the decades or centuries.

Q: The book describes several paintings in the house. How did you incorporate those in your own paintings?

A: A lot of the time I will put paintings in my paintings. The description of the main hearth that has the Van Hoebeeks hanging over it was like, I know I need to make this painting. I'm not a portrait painter, but those portraits were such a center of the story. I ended up doing a bit of research and finding a couple that would have been an appropriate age and would have been very rich at the turn of the century. I ended up finding these great portraits of the Dukes, James B. Duke and his wife, as in Duke University, which was a little bit of a nod to the money of the house having come from this tobacco, Gilded Age. So I sort of co-opted them to be my Van Hoebeeks.

Ever since I started working with books, I really liked the idea that, like, we read these stories, we have descriptions described to us and we piece together what we imagine from our own experience. When I remember the stories that I've read throughout my life, and especially as a kid, those are part of my memories, too.

I do a bunch of research -- what would the kitchen have looked like in a house in the 1950s and '60s in Elkins Park? The house was probably built in the 1920s, so what furniture could have been there? What was made in Philadelphia at the time, or what would have been imported if they wanted, you know, French sconces on the wall? Then just editing myself and piecing them together.

Q: One of the characters in "The Dutch House" feels guilty, almost oppressed by the house's grandeur. Did you incorporate that feeling?

A: Certainly the guilt. A lot of the time when I make paintings about houses, I'll talk about how I'll take stuff for the

paintings that I could never afford. I'll take a screengrab of a $200,000 rug and put it in a painting because I know I can't have it in real life.

I want them to be accessible to people. Looking at a painting that may have some very ornate and intricate things in it, but also they're really relatable -- these are domestic spaces. Even if you've never read "The Dutch House," if you've never picked up a book, if you've never seen my work before, any person can go in and relate to that. In some ways, it's sort of the opposite of the mother hating and wanting to run away from the place. It's sort of channeling the other side, we all understand what these rooms look like and it provides an entrance for anybody to look at the paintings.

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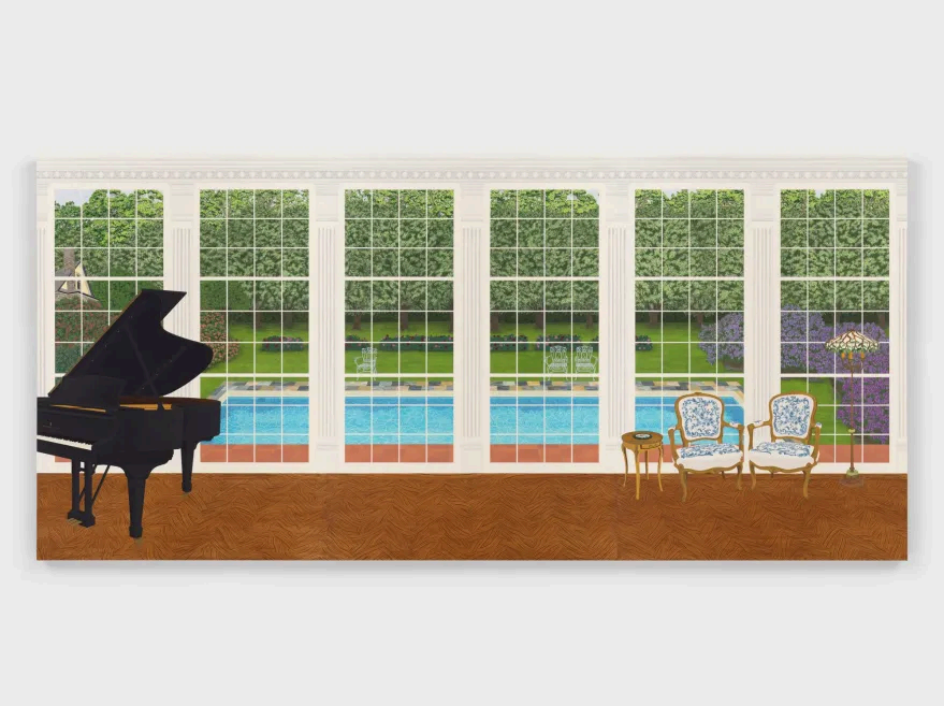
"The Dutch House" comes alive: UTC's ICA wrapping up inaugural art tour

January 22, 2025

Bethany Cothran



Becky Suss (American, b. 1980), The Dutch House (Observatory), 2023, oil on canvas, triptych: 84 x 60 inches (each panel), 84 x 180 inches (overall). © Becky Suss. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Housed in the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga Fine Arts Center, the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) prepares to close out its first art gallery tour.

Rachel Waldrop, the director and curator of the ICA, led the momentous endeavor of getting a collection of work from Philadelphia artist Becky Suss on the road to share her creative storytelling with others.

Suss's work illustrates "The Dutch House," a fictional story written by Nashville-based author Ann Patchett and told through the real Elkins Park of Philadelphia.

As someone who grew up in Elkins Park, Suss was excited to see her hometown neighborhood be the setting for a book she loved. After connecting with Patchett and working with the ICA, she brought the story to life through her paintings.

"Becky's paintings … bring memory and interior spaces to life. She's reading this book and imagining what 'The Dutch House' looked like," Waldrop said. "She both was pulling out details from the novel … but also pulling things from her own childhood and her own memories."

With “The Dutch House” being a Pulitzer Prize finalist and Suss’s paintings putting the story into perspective, Waldrop saw an opportunity for the ICA to expand its reach while supporting the careers of Patchett and Suss.

“I do what I do to support artists in their careers,” Waldrop said. “When I see a moment like this where it has some impact on an artist’s career, that means a lot to me.”

Waldrop’s love for “The Dutch House,” coupled with the support of Patchett and the UTC College of Arts and Sciences, made it possible for the collection to become the ICA’s first art show tour.

Beginning in January 2024, “The Dutch House” gallery was showcased at the ICA for two months before traveling to Naples, Florida, to be displayed in The Baker Museum.

This year, from Jan. 25 to March 16, the gallery will be exhibited at Cheekwood Estate and Gardens in Nashville–a fitting last stop for the show since “The Dutch House” originated there.

“I think (the show) has proven to be a really interesting possibility that we could do here,” Waldrop said. “We can take work in a small campus art gallery that is relevant enough to go to major museums around the country–and I think that’s a really great success story for UTC.”

Becky Suss (American, b. 1980), The Dutch House (Kitchen), 2023, oil on canvas, 84 x 60 x 1 1/2 inches. © Becky Suss. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Becky Suss (American, b. 1980), The Dutch House (Drawing Room), 2023, oil on canvas, 84 x 60 x 1 1/2 inches. © Becky Suss. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Memory Palaces
Michelle Millar Fisher

Grandparents, great uncles, and aunties chosen as family. Relatives, ancestors, and extended kin. When we recall them from the depths of our minds, at a geographic remove or once they have left this earth, they often appear silhouetted against related memories of the places in which we knew them to live. Ensconced in their favorite chair. Framed in a doorway, mid greeting. Close your eyes and their smells and sounds start to muster, too, alongside the feel, perhaps under a small fingertip, of their tchotchkes—glass paperweights, a well-worn dictionary, an ashtray, ceramic figurines—that occupied surfaces and windowsills in their homes. Sometimes these reliquaries are handed down and now reside wherever we live, while in other cases they only exist when our synapses summon their image. Either way, rarely are these everyday domestic landscapes lingered over or cherished beyond those who loved their occupants.

Becky Suss's paintings refuse such hierarchies of historical value. Instead, her work preserves and reimagines the sedimentary layers of material culture inside homes in which she has spent time and that might otherwise be overlooked in favor of grander historical arcs. Whether almost life-size sets into which we might step, or forensically focused on small, singular details, her paintings present interiors as both everyday and ennobled. In distinction to some of her earlier work, like *Upper Blue Lake I* (2011), where impasto paint is built up and then scraped down in order to conjure the roughness of geological rock formations, Suss's interiors are created with incredibly thin brushes that result in a hyper flat surface. In close relationship with the wall upon which they are eventually hung, this approach makes for "something that feels like you could fall right out of or into the painting."[1]

A foundational series, painted a decade ago, sifts through the belongings left after her grandfather's death in his home on Long Island. He and his wife, who predeceased him, lived there for almost sixty years from 1953. After his passing, their midcentury house was sold and, soon after, pulled down by new owners to make room for a McMansion. Through painting its insides from memory, surrounded by the things that once lived within its walls, his granddaughter reinscribed them in a history beyond the borders of family. In one view of her grandparents' home, titled after its pastoral address at 76 Meadow Woods Road, the midcentury architectural conceit of designing domestic spaces to "bring the outside in" crystallizes in a picture window. Closing her eyes and placing her younger self back in the space, the artist outlines a composition of ceramic figurines and vases that might once have populated its sill. They come into focus against a lush backdrop of suburban garden growth. The relationship of interior and exterior forms through the glass mirrors the ways which the artist's act of painting also punctures the divide between private and public space. These scenes are never entirely faithful reports. They are neither resurrections nor recuperations, because nothing can bring back the home or the humans once within their walls. Rather, they are a form of commemoration and a continuation of imperfect memory.

In her book recalling a childhood spent in a midcentury home built in rolling green hills an hour south of Edinburgh, Scottish author Shelley Klein reflects on its own "see through" quality. In this house, called High Sunderland, the picture window gives way to walls of glass. Klein's descriptions of the passages of light, thought, and recollection in and through this place resonate with Suss's own layering and movement between painted planes. A Jewish emigre from the European continent, Klein's father, the renowned textile designer Bernat Klein, built his home as an experiment in partnership with the young architect Peter Womersley. Beri, as he was affectionately known, kept photographs of the generations he left behind in Yugoslavia as a teenager during World War II. Leafing through these family archives after her father's death, his daughter alights upon pictures of long-gone relatives and traces the features of her forebears with her fingertip.

Her attention goes to the rooms in which they are posed, ones she never stepped into herself but that come alive through the attention to the objects within them: "a lace cloth … a small collection of glass and silver jars alongside an ornate, silver-backed hairbrush," tiled floors, "candelabras and gilt-framed paintings," furniture "upholstered in richly patterned chintzes and velvets," and "huge potted ferns with leaves coiled tight as clock springs."[2] Just as evocative as the paintings of Meadow Woods Road, Klein writes of the smells and sounds of her ancestors manifesting in her mind. It is, she says, the closest thing to discovering an attic within an otherwise flat-roofed, brightly-lit modernist home.

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Like the photographs of so many homes deemed of architectural note, Suss's paintings are not peopled. Unlike their celluloid cousins, however, it is plain to see that these spaces have been lived in. Indeed, they are portraits of those who have occupied them, those who have settled in easy chairs, balanced half-read books on side tables, and placed their coats on hooks and slippers by the door. The artist has chosen these vignettes deliberately because they are less *House Beautiful* and more "home, sweet home."[3] In *Hallway* (2017), three layers of space collide: stairs in the left foreground invite the viewer into an unseen upper realm, an open closet offers a peek into the sartorial lives of the home's occupants, and patterned wallpaper indicates a hallway beyond. Suss's work argues for the relevance of the humanity and mundanity of the home. Her attention lingers on the lived-in domestic landscapes created by ordinary people.

Her work is created in such conditions. Many of the recent paintings that I know of Suss's were made in a studio that accommodated a playpen where her young son, Sid, spent his first year or so of his life watching his mother work on canvases. There, Suss broke from the careful labor of painting to undertake another equally arduous and detailed task when he needed to be fed or tended to. While she painted, her own mom watched and fed and played with Sid tirelessly, a form of intimate, generational, and familial support without which none of Suss's work as an artist would have been realized. Different-but-related types of labor percolated side-by-side out of necessity and informed one another. Her studio was the site of a type of work that, over the last century in particular, has been associated with the household and has often been shunned in the places where fine art is made and displayed. Yet, in a pre-industrial world, as poet and writer Adrienne Rich reminds us, the home and the workplace were always intertwined. The home "was not a refuge, a place of leisure and retreat … it was a part of the world, a center of work, a subsistence unit."[4] These words come from Rich's chapter titled "The Sacred Calling", and in it she refuses the stereotypical and essentialized division of space into the domestic feminine and the public masculine. She reminds us that home is forged in the tensions between its wider cultural construction and what we ourselves determine it and need it to be. The latter requires our constant vigilance and effort to build in ways that offer creativity, freedom, and joy.

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The worldwide coronavirus pandemic, with its attendant lockdowns that kept many alternately within or estranged from the confines of domestic spaces, created a profound shift in many of our individual and collective relationships with physical and emotional notions of where we live. Years before, Suss had already presciently focused on an aspect that is only more recently being paid attention to: the matrilineal heartbeat of the home. As she put it when describing some of her earliest paintings of her grandparents' house,

I really started thinking about my legacy in terms of the women in my family. I always used to think, "Oh, my grandfather, he fought in the war and then he went back to school and became a stockbroker. And then my other grandfather was a doctor. A cardiologist. And my great great grandfather was an inventor. This was the narrative of my family, as opposed to the generation after generation after generation of women who kept these homes.[5]"

When she presented a suite of paintings of interiors at Jack Shainman Gallery in 2017, the artist titled the exhibition *Homemaker*. It was a noun that gave both her and her gallerist pause for the potential to pigeonhole her work but was ultimately chosen as a deliberate provocation. It's a term that is dismissed and derided, unloved and undervalued by social and cultural preference for systems of validation that are more firmly public. It's a word that invokes the drudgery of mundane maintenance and routines of care. It describes one of the only full-time jobs that is unpaid, receives no retirement savings, and is undertaken predominantly (though not exclusively) by women.

If I flip to the back of my well-worn copy of Rich's 1976 masterpiece, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience*, the index reveals that "home" is mentioned in four distinct strands: *history of*, 46–52; *as an institution*, 44; *loneliness and*, 53; *socialism and*, 54–55. As ever, Rich parses something complex and opaque into its constituent parts with ease. In her dexterous descriptions, the home is simultaneously a product of culture, a construction subject to interpretation and change, a place of emotion, and (always) a political project. But, as Rich says when she writes about motherhood and its environs, "the social institutions and prescriptions for behavior created by men have not necessarily accounted for the real lives of women …"[6]

As a student of architectural history, I dutifully studied the work of Great Men and their many model homes fed to me by most of my undergraduate instructors. I learned of Gaudí and Gropius and Le Corbusier and Mies. Such received wisdom tells us that homes are built by men and then tended to by women. But we know better. Women build worlds. They are the very foundation of the built environment. In the words of Ursula K. Le Guin, women form whole new geographies: "We are volcanoes. When we women offer our experiences as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change. There are new mountains."[7]

At Glasgow University, I found my refuge in a class titled Domestic Landscapes taught by (in my biased estimation) the most impactful design historian of her generation, Juliet Kinchin. It was in her tutorials that, as in Suss's paintings, material culture connected with real life, women's agency and ideas, and the politics of things. Like the artist, our professor focused our attention on the parts of architecture and design usually overlooked in the archives (if ever saved in the first place), unwritten about in survey texts, and deaccessioned from museum collections (if they had ever found their way in). Suss tends to these anecdotal histories, too—the ones that are passed down to us in the stories we are told and that we retell and re-shape for ourselves as we grapple with how and why we live like we do. As Suss notes, "With objects, it's the way we've chosen them and touch them and care for them and live with them over the years that's tender and secret."[8] Choosing to paint them is perhaps the tenderest act of all.

In Sarah Knott's reflections on maternity, *Mother Is a Verb*, which is as well-worn on my bookshelf as Adrienne Rich's texts, the scholar reminds us of the value of this type of anecdote to history. In her estimation, a focus on the minor detail of everyday life is a form of historical writing that emerged in the seventeenth century. It was a means of "exploring private lives and inner worlds … in contrast to conventional preoccupations of the doings of important men." Knott shares that these radical early modern historians were termed "anecdote-graphers." [9]

This odd, satisfying term is one way to describe what Suss does. The material culture that she paints with such painstaking care—the vessels and pieces of furniture and the textures and textiles and

wallpapers—are the connective tissue of our histories. Per Knott, far from being throwaway or inconsequential, focusing in this way is an act of "recasting such shards and nuggets of evidence, of turning absence into presence, what's mentioned *en passant* into the main drama."[10] Gather enough of this material and by a process that Knott describes variously as a slow accumulation and an accretion, quiet, persuasive stories emerge from the ether.

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Suss's most recent series of paintings began during the pandemic, when the artist returned to her childhood home in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, a half hour north of Philadelphia. Long leery of taking on a subject so literally close to home, she found herself mining different eras of rooms in which she had grown up and grown out of, including her own childhood bedroom. These places were palimpsests, spaces where furniture had gradually gathered, and which had been updated cosmetically over time. They were of the present and yet connected to everyone who had ever occupied them. Reflecting on their compacted, compounded nature, Suss relates it to the neurological theory of memory reconsolidation, in which the act of remembering causes a small shift in the memory, which then lands on top of and shifts the original.

She went to Wyncote so that her mother could provide childcare for Sid during the pandemic, and so these works materialized while his grandmother, once the artist's own carer, looked after a new generation. Similarly overlapping lifecycles are evoked in the wallpaper peeking out from the cupboard in *8 Greenwood Place (1988-93)* (2021) and busily populating the walls *8 Greenwood Place (my bedroom)* (2020). The pattern comes directly from one that the artist excavated from a remnant left hidden in a corner in the house during her stay there. Once uncovered, childhood associations flowed. Suss remembers begging as a birthday present for the pink carpet which shows up on these canvases. A dollhouse appears across works, replicating interiors described in some of the artist's favorite children's books in ways that are, in her words, "familiar but magical."[11]

Books appear continually across Suss's paintings. Some of my favorites include towering shelved stacks in her grandparents' home in *Reading Room* (2012), the richly-colored *Book (Chagall, All Saints Church)* (2016), as well as the ceramic book towers that were presented as part of the artist's exhibition at the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art in 2015. As she notes, she treats books as objects to paint because of the "weight that they carry … [there's] the content in between the pages, but there's also the idea of the book as a sentimental object … [and] what the book or knowledge can represent in society."[12]

From a 2018 suite of large- and small-scale works titled *Where They Are*, the painting *WT, TJ, and Blinky* (2020) foregrounds children's literature as a lens through which we learn to live. Inflected by the teaching philosophies of the renowned inquiry-led student-focused training center of Bank Street Education School in New York, the books in this series of paintings are both titles handed down from the artist's own family and new ones she has sought out to read to Sid. Her small book paintings are object portraits that zero in on detail so carefully that they allow us to imagine the object living inside of the depicted space in larger paintings. Their framing as *things* that are touched and used ushers them into the realm of craft.

Almost all of us can recall a book read to us as a child, or one of the first we read alone. Even as adults, we still have many of them on our bookshelves. I return to them in the moments where I want to remember not only the storyline but the voice of those who brought their pages alive for me, or the illustrations my smaller fingers traced as I listened along. Suss notes that while these texts are so foundational to our lives and the formation of our identities and cultures, they're also rarely heralded in the same way as works of fiction and nonfiction for adults. The works of *Where They Are*

ask us to consider children's rooms and literature, places that merge autobiography with fiction, as worthy of capturing and holding our attention, and reigniting our own imaginations.

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Philadelphia, Suss's home city, is a place that has a proud legacy of craft and a thriving contemporary maker community. Wharton Esherick is one of the city's best kept secrets. He is often dubbed "the father of the American studio craft movement," the bridge between nineteenth century Arts and Crafts traditions and the contemporary renaissance of craft amongst American artists living today. Yet, fewer than might be expected make the pilgrimage to his home and studio a short car ride away in Paoli, Pennsylvania. It's a magical haven of twisted and turned wood forms, carefully preserved interiors, and bucolic peony-laden landscapes. On a visit there a few years ago, Suss's imagination was sparked, resulting in what became an informal artist residency, the first of its kind in the museum's history.

The series of paintings she created in response to Esherick's home and studio were exhibited at Fleisher Ollman in 2018. The presentation firmly rebelled against the artificial distinction between art and craft. Pieces from Esherick's own home on loan for the occasion provided punctuation for the paintings on the walls, from handwrought wooden stools to a maquette of a library.[13] Visitors to Esherick's home and studio are encouraged to run their hands over the works, a tactile impulse that Suss notes is immediately lost when objects are transported from the everyday into a gallery context. By arranging her paintings in relationship with works that can be touched, she made painting accessible, especially to those who did not bring familiarity with art history to the encounter. Her juxtapositions led the paintings to behave like their three-dimensional counterparts.

It feels more germane to contextualize Suss within architecture, design, and craft histories rather than reaching first for precedent in people who have painted or collaged interiors. So many of the obvious compositional comparisons (Hockney, Matisse) or artists dealing in tactility and alterity (Louise Bourgeois) or the politics of the home (Martha Rosler) fall short of the *thingness* of Suss's work. But there is also a profoundly emotional and completely abstract element to this work, too.

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I turned to Shelley Klein's history of High Sunderland not just because it is the same age as Suss's grandparents' house or, like the artist's own contingent relationship with the truth and fiction of a place, Klein oscillates between dredged remembrance and matter of fact. I turned to Klein because of her invocation of the Old Norse term "hefting," used by Scottish farmers to imply a deeply-rooted belonging to a landscape. Sheep that are hefted "carry within them an instinctive understanding of their surroundings … over the years the land becomes mapped in their blood and intuitively they recognize each stony pathway, each hillside and rocky decline." It is the knowledge that is passed on to their young each generation, an "ancient way of moving through the landscape."[14]

This word describes the genealogy of tangible and abstract things that Becky Suss's paintings are concerned with. Humans, too, are hefted, in so many ways, and so often to the places we call home. There, we know whose foot scuffed the hallway wall, or who chose the rugs and who spilled on and stained them, or in which crevice to find the cat in late afternoon. Sometimes it's a tie weighted by actual possessions, but more often it's a connection that moves across our kin through the memories of the places where they and we live.

"Doing history," Sarah Knott reminds us, is "like mothering, a form of embodied labor."[15] Suss's paintings are a physical manifestation of this claim, created while mining her own matrilineal

histories and nurturing her own family old and young, alive and passed on. They are *house beautiful*, deliberately lowercase encomiums to how we make homes, and a reminder for us to treasure the spaces and things of kith, kin, hearth, and heart, no matter how humble.

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[1] "Interview with Becky Suss," in *Contemporaries: Interviews with Seven Artists* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 2021), 29.
[2] Shelley Klein, *The See-Through House: My Father in Full Colour* (London: Penguin Random House, 2020), 11–12.
[3] *Home, Sweet Home* is a song from the opera *Clari, or the Maid of Milan*, which was first performed at Covent Garden, London in 1823. The lyrics were written by American actor and playwright John Howard Payne (1791–1852). Popularized during the late nineteenth century, it became an anthem for soldiers during the American Civil War: "Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam / Be it ever so humble there's no place like home! / A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there / Which, seek through the world, is ne'er met with elsewhere / Home! Home! Sweet, sweet home! / There's no place like home! / There's no place like home!"
[4] Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985), 47.
[5] *Contemporaries*, 29.
[6] Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 42.
[7] Originally from Le Guin's 1986 Bryn Mawr College commencement address, first published in a collection of her essays, *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 160.
[8] *Contemporaries*, 30.
[9] Sarah Knott, *Mother Is a Verb: An Unconventional History* (New York: Picador, 2019), 264.
[10] Knott, *Mother Is a Verb*, 264.
[11] Conversation between the author and the artist, September 28, 2021
[12] *Contemporaries*, 26.
[13] The same approach was taken in her 2015 exhibition at the ICA in Boston, curated by Kate Kraczon, this time with ceramic books and vases created by the artist and placed on the floor in between the paintings.
[14] Klein, *The See-Through House*, 13.
[15] Knott, *Mother Is a Verb*, 266.

LITERARY HUB

On Domesticity and Memory in James Baldwin and Becky Suss

Peter L'Official on Suss's "Brand of Children's Vision for Adults"

VIA SKIRA

By Peter L'Official

June 2, 2022

In 1976, James Baldwin published his first and only children's book, *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood*—a collaboration with French artist and illustrator Yoran Cazac. Described on its jacket cover as a "child's story for adults," the book drew on Baldwin's own difficult experiences growing up as a Black boy in Harlem, though it was written partly at the request of another young, Black, New York City "little man." Baldwin's nephew, Tejan, would often ask his famous uncle when he would ever write a book about him, to which Baldwin responded in the form of the story's four-year-old protagonist, TJ. The book, however, was not well-received upon publication.

The Black American scholar and children's book writer, Julius Lester, found its hybrid perspectiv "unclear," and deemed the book "slight" and "not especially exciting" in a review for *The New Yor Times*. Children's literature was a "genre unto itself" and required, in Lester's estimation, its own prescribed vision. Any Baldwin-esque "literary figures" moonlighting in adopted genres who wished to write a "story of childhood for adults" should do that, according to Lester, but rather in the form of an *adult* novel—something akin to Baldwin's own first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. [1]

Little Man, Little Man quickly fell out of favor, and out of print, until it was recently resurrected in 2018 by Baldwin's niece and nephew, Aisha Karefa-Smart, the aforementioned Tejan Karefa-Smart, and the scholars Nicholas Boggs and Jennifer Devere-Brody. [2] A tale featuring three Harlem children—TJ, WT, and Blinky—that is told both in a Black vernacular and a buoyant, searching child's voice that knows better than to subscribe to the fiction of American innocence, *Little Man*, *Little Man* is compelling because it condescends to no one—child or adult alike.

Baldwin had the audacity to invest his young, Black characters with a perception and perspective that had already internalized the vexed realities of poverty, police brutality, addiction, and racism which, in 1970s Harlem, one didn't have to look far or wide to see. In this way, Baldwin's singular children's book offers less in terms of a digestible, narrative-based lesson—as Lester might have preferred—to answer perhaps a higher calling. Instead, we might read *Little Man, Little Man* as a tool that can be used not merely to highlight narratives—and persons—that have been marginalized or ignored entirely, but also one that illustrates how we might reshape our own vision to see the world, both as a child and as an adult, through its complex, compound image. [3]

> As products of meticulous research, memory, editing, and imagination, they are as much poems as they are paintings.

It is this arresting synthesis of visions that I think of whenever I stand in front of the work of Becky Suss. Her work asks us to see differently, or rather, more accurately, if we admit to ourselves that our adult recollections of places, spaces, and objects are often just as subject to the distortions and exaggerations of memory in which our children often delight. Memories can be both vivid and furtive, lucid and surreal, distant and present.

Suss's work imagines space for such dualities to appear at once, perhaps each adjacent to or one overlaid by the next. Her exacting, acute manner of rendering interior spaces and objects beguiles because her paintings seem to offer the fantasy that our recall—of a book, a framed silk Mughal print, or a welcoming vestibule—could ever be so precise. Yet, their scale, perspective, and mode of composition—with certain accoutrements mined from various sources—complicate that

precision, and conjure within each painting curious, enchanting asymmetricalities. As products of meticulous research, memory, editing, and imagination, they are as much poems as they are paintings. If Baldwin's book crystallized the notion of a "child's story for adults," then we might think of Suss's work as a brand of children's vision for adults.

Becky Suss, "8 Greenwood Place" (1988-93), 2021 oil on canvas, 72 x 84 x 2 1/2 inches.

Becky Suss, "8 Greenwood Place (my bedroom)," 2020 oil on canvas, 84 x 60 x 2 1/2 inches (canvas).

It is no wonder, then, that Suss painted an illustrated excerpt from *Little Man, Little Man*. Her *WT, TJ and Blinky* (2020) depicts a single scene from Baldwin and Cazac's collaboration, where the three children process an injury to WT—a cut and bleeding foot, due to some recently shattered glass—before all retreat to their building's superintendent's basement apartment for

treatment. It is, in a book that has already considered what crime, surveillance, drug dependence, and other more subtle forms of violence might look like to children, the grisliest moment of Baldwin's narrative.

Cazac's illustration, with no accompanying text to distract from its frenetic, colorful depiction of shock and confusion at the bloody footprints on the sidewalk, is one of the few double-page spreads in the book. Suss displays it as such: the book is splayed open to that climactic page, and the jagged, intense energies of Cazac's watercolor images are juxtaposed against the softer, childlike renderings of flowers and plants that suggest a vintage tablecloth upon which the book sits, waiting for a reader. Yet the image, in Suss's hands, loses none of its power.

Be they child or adult, the artist has anticipated the viewer's encounter with the painting in the space of the gallery, and recreated for them the act of discovery that occurs upon turning the page of any illustrated text. Suss trusts her viewers, especially the youngest among them, with the maturity to process this moment. And for the depicted characters, WT, TJ, and Blinky, it is their outside brought inside—a moment of emotional and physical exposure given shelter, as happens soon after in the narrative. The painting illustrates at once the uncommon appeal of Baldwin's book, as well as the composite vision that Suss's work possesses, and seeks to invest in us.

Becky Suss. WT, TJ, and Blinky, 2020. Oil on canvas, 14 1/8 x 18 x 1 1/8 inches, Inventory #BS20.015

James Baldwin dedicated *Little Man, Little Man* to the queer Black painter Beauford Delaney, a mutual friend of Baldwin and Cazac, and an influential mentor to Baldwin in his youth. Of Delaney's essential importance to him, Baldwin wrote: "I learned about light from Beauford Delaney, the light contained in every thing, in every surface, in every face. Many years ago, in poverty and uncertainty, Beauford and I would walk together through the streets of New York City.

He was then, and is now, working all the time, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he is seeing all the time; and the reality of his seeing caused me to begin to see." [4] In an age of video meetings, remote learning, and endless streams of easily accessible images, our interior spaces—and ourselves—have never been on such constant display. But are we truly seeing amidst all this looking?

Suss, already prescient in her focus on domestic space and the objects within—which, of course, reflect our emotional interiors as well—dares to suggest that the finely-appointed households in her work do not require design training or an art historical background to appreciate. Young or

old, they are made ours to behold. The heightened qualities of sight that have produced Becky Suss's artwork aim to produce within us similar insurgencies of vision, as Delaney did for Baldwin—we can't, nor should we, want to see the same way again.

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[1] Julius Lester, "Little Man, Little Man," *The New York Times Book Review*, September 4, 1977: 22.
[2] James Baldwin, *Little Man, Little Man: A Story of Childhood* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).
[3] Nicholas Boggs, "Baldwin and Yoran Cazac's 'Child's Story for Adults,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to James Baldwin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 118–32.
[4] James Baldwin, "Introduction to Exhibition of Beauford Delaney Opening December 4, 1964 at the Gallery Lambert," in *Beauford Delaney: A Retrospective* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978), unnumbered page.

Excerpted from Becky Suss, *available via Skira. Top image credit: Becky Suss, 8 Greenwood Place (1997–99), 2022 oil on canvas, 72 x 84 x 1 1/2 inches.*

Suss' exhibition Greenwood Place *is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery through June 18.*

Peter L'Official

Peter L'Official is an Associate Professor of Literature and Director of the American and Indigenous Studies Program at Bard College. His first book, Urban Legends: the South Bronx in Representation and Ruin, was published by Harvard University Press, and his next project will explore the intersections of literature, architecture, and blackness in America.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Three exhibitions to see in New York this weekend

Becky Suss, *8 Greenwood Place (my bedroom)*, 2020
Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

THE ART NEWSPAPER

Becky Suss: Greenwood Place
Until June 18 at Jack Shainman Gallery, 524 West 24th Street, Manhattan

There is no place like home, they say, and no place more comfortable than your childhood bedroom. For most of us it is the place where we discovered who we wanted to be and started building the roadmap on how to get there. In Greenwood Place, the artist Becky Suss explores the memory of her childhood bedroom through different stages of her life. Through intricate details and a purposely two-dimensional perspective, Suss blends memory, fiction and history onto large canvases that, while personal to her own narrative, invite the viewer to explore memories of their earlier selves. Early during the global covid-19 pandemic, Suss moved her studio into her childhood home, in which her parents still live, so they could help her with childcare. Working in the space where she grew up gave Suss the chance to surround herself in memory and further build on the themes of domesticity and interiority so prevalent in her practice.

Sight Unseen

05.18.21

Q+A

In Her Paintings, Becky Suss Creates Real or Imagined Interiors From Memory

by Jill Singer

Because we don't cover art as our primary discipline here at Sight Unseen, we typically discover artists a bit more slowly than we do designers, and usually by way of gallery shows, art fairs, or Instagram wormholes. But I discovered Philadelphia-born painter Becky Suss in perhaps the most Sight Unseen — or at least the most me — way possible: Her 2016 painting, August (above), adorns the cover of LA harpist Mary Lattimore's Hundreds of Days, one of the many albums that helped

propel me through the emotional black hole that was 2020. When I did more research, I found that Suss' paintings have been featured on all of Lattimore's solo albums since 2014, but this one felt the most resonant, perhaps because it depicts a home. Not just any home, but a cozy, well-appointed home, with enough room for matching sofas, enough bold taste to include a bird-shaped lamp base, and enough curiosity and intellectualism to house shelves upon shelves of books. In other words, the kind of home many of us wish we could have quarantined in last year.

And that's perhaps the beauty of Suss' work: Most of her paintings are her own interpretations of real, fictional, or imagined interiors, and they often deal with ideas about memory and its ability to reinforce or betray our sense of place. Many of her subjects are personal — the now-demolished site of her grandparents' Long Island home, for example — but because their subject is interiors, with common or familiar elements, or perhaps decorative touches we recognize from our own lives, they feel at once aspirational and universal. We recognize a part of ourselves in her paintings even as we wish we could be the kind of people who inhabit them. "Devoid of figures, Suss' style uses flattened architecture, exaggerated proportions, and distorted perspective to amplify the tension between the factual and the fictitious, mirroring the plasticity of memory, continually reformed and revised. What resonates is how a dwelling, despite its rigid physical structure, can adapt, welcoming the day-to-day histories, eccentricities, and impressions of the people who move between its walls."

Her work is currently included in a group show at The School by Jack Shainman Gallery in upstate New York; curated by Helen Molesworth, the show is centered around the idea of feedback. "Some of the artists are interested in the twisted history of America. Others are interested in the persistence of quotidian pleasures as best exemplified by still life or contemporary tableaux of everyday life. Some artists have combined their sense of America's untold narratives with the gentle ebb and flow of daily life." Suss' work combines all of these themes, exploring everything from the racial history of America as referenced in children's literature to the ignored legacies of female homemakers to the daily pleasures of life and learning at home. We recently spoke to Suss via Zoom about all of these and more.

Bathroom (Ming Green), 2016

Let's start by talking a bit about your background. What inspired you to take up painting in the first place?

My mom taught art education — like, how to look at art for little kids, the basics of composition and color, all of those things — and she was always taking me to museums. My great uncle was a painter who lived here in Philadelphia — a WPA-era guy who made jewelry, had a little ad agency, made paintings and sculptures. We were really close. I would see him once or twice a week until he died at 100. He was a big influence.

There were always people in my life like that who valued art. And painting always made sense to me. It was intuitive, and I think that that's the way a lot of my career and work has gone. I've done things that made sense to me, without over thinking the *why* of that too much, and it's worked out.

How did you specifically get into painting interiors?

I worked in small-scale paintings and landscapes for a long time. Those paintings were small and impasto, and there was a lot of building up of the surface and scraping it down, thinking about the geology of the landscape and the geology of the painting. So, it was different from my current work in that respect, but there was always this underlying idea of thinking about remembered landscapes, a sense of place, and a sense of memory.

I grew up on the East Coast, but then I went to graduate school in Northern California. I wanted to go somewhere where the landscape was more interesting. While there, though, I got sort of homesick for the East Coast, and I started making bigger paintings with very specific remembered landscapes. For example, there's a place in Dorset, Vermont, where there's this beautiful quarry — one of the oldest white marble quarries in the country — and we would go swimming there when I

went to school in Northern Massachusetts. So, I made a painting of this quarry, and I did the same with a couple of other very specific places like that.

Then, I moved back to Philadelphia. I was like, what am I doing? I'm here in this place, and I'm making work about missing it? So, I spent a few years doing other things, but then in 2011, my grandfather died. He and my grandmother had this house in Great Neck, Long Island, which they had built in 1955. They lived there their entire life until they both died. We inherited all of the small stuff — the lamps, the mugs, the light switch plate covers — but also the big things, like the furniture and the house itself, which sold to somebody who demolished it and built a little McMansion on the footprint.

It was weird because though house had totally disappeared, I was surrounded by all of this familiar stuff. That's where the interior paintings first came from. I had these objects, and they weren't just in my house. They were in the studio. They were everywhere.

So, I was like, you know what? I want to make a painting about this stuff. I picked a very specific spot in my grandparents' house, where my grandfather would sit in his chair with all of his books around him, and I made this painting. It wasn't streamlined the way my paintings are now; I think I painted it over a landscape that was unsuccessful. But I made it and was like, "Oh, this makes so much sense." It combined a lot of the things I had thought about for a long time — a sense of home, a sense of memory. The interior provided so much specificity, but also so much relatability. It was universal and specific at the same time.

You mentioned that those paintings look different from your more recent works. How did you arrive at the distinctive, more representational style you have now?

When I was in California, I had this approach that was like, all right — you're just going to do an instinctive take on what it looks like to you. You're not going to try to

push it. You're not going to try to abstract it. You're not going to try to make it look more realistic. It was less about making decisions — I didn't deliberately say, "Okay, well, these are interiors, so I'm going to make these really clean, crisp edges." I sort of did it and *then* noticed I was doing it, and thought, "Okay, what has to happen here?" The painting has to be painted on a surface that's perfectly prepared, and the paint has to be much thinner, because you have this relationship between the depicted wall and the actual wall next to it when the painting's hanging in a gallery. When I was making paintings of landscapes, they were essentially windows. I didn't have to contend with those spatial relationships.

Growing up, learning to make paintings in the `90s and early 2000s, it was always like, "Don't look at a photograph. Don't use tape. Don't use a projection." Everything was supposed be this 20th-century Modernist, Abstract Expressionist idea about painting, and if you did anything else, it was bad. I basically had to throw out all of those lessons, because for me, it did make sense to use a laser level and tape for everything. It didn't make the painting worse. It was a different kind of painting, and it made it better.

Speaking of artists from the past, do you find yourself inspired by artists who may have also worked within the realm of domestic interiors?

Yes. I feel like I was very much raised in the 20th century, so my influences back then were, like, all men. David Hockney, and all of those artists at the Barnes, like Rousseau and Matisse. But if I try to contextualize myself with them it's like... I don't know if you know Nicki Maloof's paintings? Or Ann Toebbe, Aliza Nisenbaum — a lot of these women are my age, and I see myself much more in line with what they're doing than the painters I grew up being influenced by.

It's similar with literature. If I think about what I was thinking about when I first started making paintings, it was like Carver, Cheever, Updike. I mean, I still have a special place for those books in the way they describe America, but it's an America that is so male-centric. When you reread them, you're like, "Oh my God. John Updike, what an awful person." It's painful to read his female characters.

But I'm less and less interested in that; a lot of the reading that I do has been children's literature for the past few years, so I feel much more influenced by that than the literature I was reading a long time ago.

Drop Leaf Desk (Wharton Esherick), 2019

Tell me about that deep dive into children's literature. I know you had one series based on fictional chapter-book interiors, like the black marble bathroom in From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler. How have your subjects evolved?

So, those original paintings are of my grandparents' house, and that body of work was very true to the subject matter. I had tons of childhood photos and I had still-lifes, because I had the objects right in front of me. The next body of work was a little less specific. I would start with a couple of objects that were meaningful to me – like a lamp that belonged to my mother's mother — and I went on to imagine what the house she grew up in would have been like, based on the era of the house, my mom, and her taste. It was my invented version of it.

I moved more and more into being able to invent spaces that still resonated with things that I remembered, and the process of making them was still very similar. It was piecing together bits of things that I recalled, and then Googling things and being like, oh, I want to put that rug in. That's a $300,000 rug. I'll never have that rug, but I can take it off the Internet and put it in this painting.

When I was pregnant with my son, though, I was like, I can't make all this personal work. It's too draining. Around that time, I was visiting the Wharton Esherick Museum right outside of Philadelphia. Every time I go into a house, I'm always with my phone, like, "Oh, I want to steal that detail. I want to steal that." In Esherick's house, it was even more. I was thinking about this idea of domestic space within the space of the gallery, but also art objects in the space of the domestic, and I was like — this is all Esherick does. There's no distinction between the art space and the domestic space. I was like, I should just make a whole show about this, then I don't have to worry about each painting dredging up something autobiographical. Of course, in the end, it was just as hard, but it was great because I realized that the process was relevant, even if I wasn't doing directly autobiographical paintings.

So, after that — again, I have this little kid. I'm thinking about being a woman and making paintings in the wake of 2016. I had a show at Jack Shainman called

Homemaker, where I was thinking a lot about the legacy of homemaking. I used to say, "My grandfather fought in the war and my other grandfather was a medic, and then, you know, one came back and he was a cardiologist, and the other came back and he had a factory in Greenpoint." This was the family legacy. But the other family legacy that nobody ever talks about is that there were generations of women who organized and kept their homes, and everything was absolutely dependent upon them.

2016 certainly brought that into a sharp focus for a lot of us; the election laid bare the way that this country doesn't value women. I was thinking about being a mom, and being a working mom, and how children occupy the domestic space, as well. Without these children, we do not have a generation to take care of us when we get old. We don't have future scientists, or doctors, or nurses. People think women should work, but we don't want to give them a good option for high-quality daycare.

I was also just thinking about being at the studio a lot and I couldn't stop thinking about my kid. So, one of my solutions was to create this body of work about children's books. I was like, "I'm going to organize a library for my son, and it's going to manifest in these paintings."

I kept thinking about this book I read with my dad when I was 10 or 11. It was Salman Rushdie's first children's novel. He only wrote two, one for each of his sons, and this one was called Haroun and the Sea of Stories. It had this really great scene in a houseboat with two rooms next to each other. One side had a bed that was shaped like a turtle, and the other side had a bed that was shaped like a peacock. I kept thinking, "Man, that would make a great painting." I didn't know exactly how to frame it, but I was thinking about the way that my work focuses on memory. It was perfect, because with these chapter books, I have memories of what stuck with me when I read them when I was a kid — memories which may or may not be accurate. And then, as an adult, I can reread them and understand the historical context. And then the third layer is history, which is so rich because I can research it. What year was this book written? When was this supposed to have taken place? What did houseboats in Kashmir look like in the 1960s, 70s, or 80s?

To Be Titled, 2019

You've mentioned Google image searches a few times. Can you talk a little bit about

Yeah, I usually have my own personal photos and I'll have all of this stuff that I've looked up or read about. I made a painting that's at the show in Kinderhook from the book Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, set in 1930s Mississippi. To research it, I went to the Library of Congress, which has all of these archived photographed from that era. I spent hours going through and finding the relevant ones, and dragging them to my desktop. So, it's a combination of structuring the space and then adding these elements that I've researched and compiled, along with actual objects, too.

I want to talk about the show in Kinderhook but first let's talk about how your collaboration with the harpist Mary Lattimore came to be. That's actually how I found your work! I had posted an album cover that I love of hers on Instagram and someone wrote back saying, "That's Becky Suss, she's the coolest."

That's awesome. Mary's an old friend. She was probably one of my husband's first friends when he moved to Philadelphia. She played the harp at our wedding. Mary came to me, because she's always loved my paintings, and she was like, "Hey, would you think about making an album cover for me?" I'm not really good illustrating something, but I was like, "What if we pick a painting?" And she was like, "Oh, that's even better." And you know, there's an overlapping sentiment in our work. My paintings are very devoid of people; Mary doesn't have vocals in her music. Her albums are really atmospheric. They have a sense of place. And I don't know whether or not it's relevant, but Mary loves her stuff. She has all these nice beautiful little things around her house in LA.

August, 2016

Ok, so now tell me about the paintings you're showing for Feedback, the exhibition curated by Helen Molesworth at The School in Kinderhook.

So, at the show right now, there's actually that very first painting that I mentioned of the corner of my grandparents' house. It's the only big painting of mine that I held on to, and they borrowed it. The whole theme of the show has to do with feedback and education, and how we learn, what we learn, and what institutions we learn in.

Another painting in the show is Behind the A to Z, and that was in a previous show at Jack Shainman about children's books. It's from the book The Egypt Game by Zilpha Keatley Snyder, which is a book I read in fourth grade. The Egypt Game takes place in California, in a college town, and it's about these kids who play a game behind the A to Z, which is a junk shop run by a Middle Eastern man they call the professor. There's a little white girl whose mother abandoned her because she wants to be an actress in Southern California. And then there's this family with a little girl and a

little boy who are African-American, and their parents are in graduate school getting their PhDs. The story was written in the 1960s, so it's a racial picture that you didn't often see, I don't think, at that time. The kids are all friends and they play this game about Egypt together, but in reality, there are these crimes playing out around them, and they're being blamed on the Middle Eastern man who owns the A to Z. It's not a domestic space, but it is a space that these kids built. I felt like it was a really interesting departure.

The other painting in the show that's never been shown before is from Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, which I mentioned, which is about an African-American girl in southern Mississippi in the 1930s, and it paints a really complicated picture of what life was like there, especially for an African-American family. It delves into the history of Reconstruction and this family's legacy, where they own this land, but since post-reconstruction the white people in the community have been trying to take it back. The mother's a teacher and is teaching her Black students about Reconstruction and the schools are saying, "That's not part of the curriculum, you can't teach them that," and she gets fired.

You know, part of this is thinking what I want to memorialize for my son. Like I reread The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, and I was like, oh, no. No. No. No. That is not something we're going to elevate right now. Maybe when he's older and we can have a conversation about race and slavery, but that's not the sort of book I want to represent. I'm thinking about what it means to be a mom of this little white, blond-haired, blue-eyed kid, too.

Now that your son is a bit older, do you feel like you'll delve back into subjects that are a bit more personal again?

Yes, I have a painting in a group show at the Philadelphia Art Museum right now, and it's a painting of the house I grew up in. I never did that before, because I felt like it was too close, but then because of COVID, we lost our childcare. My parents started watching my son, and we all quarantined at my parents' house in the suburbs. I just brought the painting there, and I made it in their living room. It was interesting to

Logan Family Home (1933), 2020

watch my son's life at 2 years old play out in front of the same backdrop that mine did, and I decided that now was the time to make a painting of that room.

So right now I'm working on a series of paintings for a show at Jack Shainman next year, and they're all going to be paintings of that same room. Different iterations of time, different stages. I'm interested in having clues that take you from one painting to another. Like in one painting, the whole wall is papered with the wallpaper that was original to the room when I was really young. The next painting has the wallpaper I remember from most of my childhood, but inside of the closet, behind the books, is that original wallpaper. So, there are things like that that can offer clues that this is the same space, moving through time.

Your work obviously deals so much with the past. How often do contemporary ideas or trends make it into your work?

The only sort of deliberate, specific thing that I do is that I have a subscription to The World of Interiors. They'll have an 18th century farmhouse that's never been renovated, and then they'll have these beautiful brand-new things. It's such a mix. But other than that, like I said before, if I'm at somebody's house or at a store, I'll take a picture of something and be like, "Oh yeah, that's a good one."

Besides your childhood home, is there an interior that you've always wanted to paint, but haven't been able to?

There's one painting that always comes back to me. I want to make a huge painting of the original Metropolitan Opera House. It isn't a domestic interior, but it was on my mind years ago, when I was working toward that show Homemaker, and I was thinking about the legacy of domesticity and homemaking. Most of these women, after the turn of the century, had aspirations and simply didn't get to achieve them. My grandmother, who I never met, studied opera and wanted to be an opera singer, but the war broke out. At that point, you had to study opera in Europe, and instead, she met my grandfather and married, and they had three kids, and she was the doctor's wife. I've been thinking about that alternative legacy. She went to the opera every week, and she died in the early '70s, probably right around when they built the new Metropolitan Opera. So, I was thinking it would be such a great monument and gesture to the possibility of a career that she could have had.

Installation view of "Feedback" at The School, courtesy of Jack Shainman.

ART

Helen Molesworth and Becky Suss Ask, What, Where, and How do We Learn?

By Katy Donoghue
July 9, 2021

"eedback" is currently on view at **Jack Shainman**'s **The School** in Kinderhook, NY, through October 30. The group exhibition is curated by **Helen Molesworth** and includes work by **Becky Suss**, **Sanford Biggers**, **Diedrick Brackens**, **Lauren Halsey**, **Hilary Pecis**, **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye**, and others. Taking its name from **Janet Cardiff** and **George Bures Miller**'s sound installation of the same name, it looks at the idea of feedback systems through the lens of education in the most fitting of settings—a former school.

In an essay for the show, Molesworth asks: how, where, and what do we learn? Answering this question in a biennial-like approach, she chose pieces by artists she's followed for some time, describing them as "a microcosm, a snapshot in time, of the feedback loop that is culture—people make things that help us learn things, that allow us to think things, that help us to ask questions, that propel us to make things."

Whitewall had the chance to speak with Molesworth and one of the artists whose work is on view, Suss, via Zoom earlier this spring. The curator and artist discussed art as a vehicle for learning, why artists are the best researchers, and rethinking our own experience of education within the context of America.

WHITEWALL: Helen, in your essay for the show you talk about a very visceral experience the first time you visited The School. How did that partly inspire what you wanted to do in "Feedback"?

HELEN MOLESWORTH: Jack reached out and said, "Would you like to do a show at The School?" I was really interested. I realized I had never done a biennial—that kind of show where you just want to think about things that have caught your eye, caught your imagination. I'd never had the freedom of the biennial. And I had the Janet Cardiff thing always like a pebble in my shoe but I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do with that work of art.

Then I saw The School, and it all fell into place. I did have what, for me, was an auditory hallucination. I walked in the building, and I felt like I could hear the kids running around. I also felt melancholy, that there was a school building that was decommissioned. Also, the weirdness of how art spaces take over defunct spaces—that kind of history is also beautiful.

WW: Becky you've shown there before. Is it similarly a special place for you? What's it like to show work there?

BECKY SUSS: The entire space has those moments that I'm always concerned with in my own work. You have these spaces where there are leftovers from people that live there, bits of wallpaper, pieces of molding that have existed through ten different families, or the objects that people bring to it. The School is great because it's just like that. You see these moments popping out, the way that the stairwell goes up, the rooms that have the old paint.

The rooms depicted in my work carry so much weight and I want them to allow the person who is viewing them to feel like they are occupying the depicted space. The School has these little tiny moments that collapse the space between the time of when it was a school and when we're in it now. You have a moment where it's both times at once.

Installation view of "Feedback" at The School, courtesy of Jack Shainman.

WW: Helen, when you decided to treat this like your biennial, how did you connect with Becky and start choosing other artists and their work?

HM: I had already seen Becky's work at Jack's and had gotten obsessed with it. One of the things I've been really interested in is, where do we learn and how do we learn? We think we go to school and learn, but of course we're always learning in domestic space. The role of parents and everything about your domestic space as a kid is inflecting who you're going to be, how you're going to be, what you're learning, how you organize information. The way I read Becky's paintings is that they're sort of like memory pictures—they're the way you remember a space rather than the way the space actually might be. And I liked that feeling in The School because I think we have memories of school that may or may not be what it actually was.

So, when I was thinking about what artists I wanted to include in the show, Becky's paintings met several of the criteria that I was working with: How do you learn? Where do you learn it? What role does memory play in how you get in the idea of who you are in the world?

Installation view of "Feedback" at The School, courtesy of Jack Shainman.

WW: I wonder how the fact that school was so disrupted over the past year due to the pandemic impacted your thoughts around the show?

BS: The domestic space has become the site of school. Everybody is learning from their home. That's personal for me. In terms of my work, I was thinking about, what does it mean? Do people care more about domestic space, now that they've had to spend 12 months valuing it in a different way? I don't know.

I remember at the beginning of the pandemic being like, "I can't wash another dish." And then I think of my mom 30 years ago and about how derided the idea of a housewife is. You come to discover how hard it is and how many people who never worked at home were like, "Being at home with all of these chores and kids all day is insane." Yeah, you think so?! I want that to stick but I don't know if it will.

HM: I really wonder about that, too. And it gets into so many things about privilege, who got to stay at home and who didn't get to stay at home, and the brain drain out of the work force of women. For me, I don't have a child, but I've long watched my friends who did have children and know that this fantasy about women having it all is just that. You don't get to have it all. People make choices and if you have kids, you give shit up. And if you don't have kids, you give shit up. That's real and we live in this world that acts like that's not real. It's totally real. Art and work and children, they don't necessarily fit together easily so there are going to be sacrifices there.

WW: So real!

Becky, you're showing a new piece in "Feedback," *Logan Family Home (1933)* (2020). Can you tell us about it?

BS: I'd moved into making paintings specifically about books and children's learning—I was thinking I'm going to make this collection of paintings which is also going to be a collection of books that I can then read to my son as he's ready.

The painting that is new in the show is from the book *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor, written in the '70s. It's about Cassie Logan and her family. She's a young African American girl in 1930s Mississippi. I read it when I was a kid and I remember it being pretty powerful. I was reading the book and going back not just through the literature itself but I looked at WPA era photographs in the Library of Congress, researching, putting it all together.

One of the things that stuck with me about this book when I reread it was how much of it was steeped in the initial success and ultimate failures of Reconstruction in the South. Because although it's not directly addressed, this family was African American and during Reconstruction had 300 acres of prime farming land. But Reconstruction fell apart so quickly, it had basically been a constant struggle to fight off white landowners that said the land actually belonged to them.

I learned about Reconstruction and its failures and implications in the future from reading this one novel. As a student I was taught more by fictional books than the conventional education. The way these books are framed in narratives are wonderful at teaching kids how the world works.

HM: The thing that Becky hit upon in that story that for me is the most important structurally, is that for many of us, we were taught an official history. We now know, and we've known in various iterations our whole lives, that the official history is an outright falsehood. And many of us come to these other histories through art, through culture, through music, through novels, through paintings. I've learned so much more about the history of African American life and what it means for American life through culture than I ever learned in any classroom.

That's one of the things that I'm so interested in: what happens if a school isn't filled with teachers and students but instead filled with art objects that are producing all kinds of knowledge and the audience, we're the learners and we have to figure out what our relationship is to learning from an art object?

WW: Objects and artists themselves! Every time I interview an artist, I walk away having not only learned something new, but inspired to research something new.

HM: I've always said artists are the best researchers. I think one of the essential criteria of being an artist is to be curious. And to be curious is also something that we praise in children and that we tend to want to phase out in adulthood. There's some weird moment in development of the child where we don't want curiosity, we want focus. Art is one of these places where curiosity is always rewarded.

Installation view of "Feedback" at The School, courtesy of Jack Shainman.

SURFACE

ARTIST STATEMENT

Becky Suss Recalls the Formative Interiors of Her Childhood

Part of a series that recalls the artist's childhood bedroom, a new painting on display at Art Basel Miami Beach illustrates the resounding power of how domestic interiors, memory, and fiction coalesce.

BY RYAN WADDOUPS

December 02, 2021

Here, we ask an artist to frame the essential details behind one of their latest works.

Bio: Becky Suss, 41, Philadelphia (@beckysuss)

Title of work: *8 Greenwood Place* (1985-88), 2021

Where to see it: Art Basel Miami Beach (Jack Shainman Gallery, Booth J3) until Dec. 4.

Three words to describe it: Childhood, palimpsest, '80s.

What was on your mind at the time: This painting is part of a series about my childhood bedroom through the years. They're the first works I've ever made about my childhood home, so of course I was thinking a lot about that place. I'm always thinking about how we conflate fact and fiction, and how that mix tells the most interesting story. Central to this painting is the importance of the kid's bedroom and children's literature, and I wanted to elevate those often-overlooked subjects that are actually foundational to how we all grow to understand the world.

An interesting feature that's not immediately noticeable: If you look through the windows of the dollhouse, the interiors are pulled from a few children's book illustrations: *The Berenstain Bears*, *Miss Rumphius*, and *Where the Wild Things Are*.

How it reflects your practice as a whole: Domestic interiors have long been at the center of my practice, spaces that have historically been understood as belonging to women and children, and have subsequently been undervalued and deemed unimportant. Equally relevant to my practice is the notion that there's no such thing as an inaccurate memory, only recollections that encompass a broader and more revealing story. My previous body of work focused on interiors as described in children's books; before that, most of my paintings were about remembered interiors. This new painting brings those two subjects together.

Becky Suss

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This conversation took place on Monday, June 1, 2020 over Zoom, with the artist Becky Suss at her home in Philadelphia in conversation with Liz Munsell, Lorraine and Alan Bressler Curator of Contemporary Art, at her home in Roxbury.

Liz Munsell

Hi everyone. It's so good to see familiar faces on my screen.

Last week we decided to postpone this event because we wanted to cede space to so much that's happening in the movement to protect Black lives and effect systemic change in our world. One of the things that Becky and I will be addressing this evening is how we can all be doing more to channel our efforts and energies, creative and otherwise, into carrying forward some of the change that's being made in really tangible ways right now.

If I am interrupted tonight, it's due to a Black Lives Matter rally that's happening directly outside of my window right now. I'm hearing some early firecrackers outside our apartment here in Nubian Square which has been an epicenter of a lot of the protests in Boston.

Last week, we announced that the MFA is acquiring twenty-four recent works by emerging and mid-career artists, over half of whom are artists of color. This was an initiative that took many months to pull together and was generated out of the contemporary department, although we worked collaboratively with others across the Museum. Within that larger group of twenty-four acquisitions is our guest this evening, artist Becky Suss.

Becky's work was most recently exhibited at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, her second solo exhibition there. It opened on February 21, right before the coronavirus pandemic hit, and I was very lucky to be able to see it there. I think it was some of the last art that I was able to see in person, and it has stuck with me throughout these past couple of months. So, welcome, Becky, we're so happy that you're here. I wanted to start by asking you from where you've been quarantining and social distancing over the last few weeks and how you've been spending your time ...

Becky Suss

Hi. Thank you so much for having me, everybody. I'm quarantining in my house in Philadelphia with my two-year-old son who might make an appearance at some point, and my husband, Micah, who's also an artist. We are really lucky because nearby, we have our studio. It's a small commercial garage that we bought maybe five or six years ago. My husband and I are taking turns watching our son, so I'm working a lot less, but it's also been a joy to be able to be around them.

I just want to echo what Liz said in the opening. The idea of canceling this program or waiting for "it" to blow over just didn't sit well with me at all, because "it"—the current moment of intense uprising—needs to be addressed and not blow over. We need to all work indefinitely in terms of fighting the norm of white supremacy and anti-Black violence and systemic racism, and especially white people, because this is a problem with white behavior and white supremacy.

LM Today marks exactly two weeks since George Floyd was killed in Minneapolis and the country has been swept by uprisings in all fifty States in favor of police accountability and community driven solutions to systemic racism. How have you been thinking and working and approaching this very charged time?

BS I've always been pretty politically engaged. I was born on election day in 1980. It was the only election my mother has ever missed in her life, and I turn 40 on November 3 this year—that's either going to suck or be great, I don't know. I'm a big believer in the combination of activism plus electoral engagement to make change. I really think that the combination of those two things can lead to change and I feel like it's my job—all our jobs—to keep pushing.

I think that one of the steps that's really critical is for us to recognize structural racism and its effects as a white problem. I think that even simple shifts in language are crucial in terms of how we think of this crisis as ongoing, and in terms of how we think of our roles in it. The way that I talk about this, and in front of my two year old son who is a blonde haired, blue eyed, white boy, is really going to be critical.

In terms of specific actions right now, I just donated a print edition for a really amazing fundraiser organized by Meg Onli, a curator at the ICA here in Philadelphia. They, independently of the ICA, organized a fundraiser for the Philadelphia Community Bail Fund. It raised over $40,000 in less than a day.

You're seeing the painting that inspired the smaller print I donated on your screen now. It is a large painting, seven by five feet, and it's based on the book *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor. My last show [at Jack Shainman] focused on art based on children's literature—chapter books and not illustrated books for the most part. The idea was to build a library for my son, but at the same time I was exploring the way I remembered some of those stories and how I experienced imagining them. All of the children's fiction that I was interested in was steeped in history that I could then go research, which is a really interesting and fun part of making a painting.

If you're familiar with this book by Mildred D. Taylor, it focuses on Cassie Logan, a nine-year-old black girl in depression era Mississippi. The storyline covers a lot of foundational issues that relate to race in America that underscore what we're experiencing right now. Her family lives in a community where many of the people are sharecroppers, but the Logans are not, in part, because several generations before, during Reconstruction, they had acquired 400 acres of ideal farming land. The book touches on how the family has had to fight to hold onto that land because of structural racism. The mother is a teacher who is fired for teaching Black students in the segregated South about slavery and Reconstruction, because they want her to teach from a white-centered curriculum. So, in some ways, my mind was already in this space.

A lot of the time when I make small paintings, they will be a book painting. I love books as objects to make paintings of because they have all of this weight that they carry. There's the content in between the pages, but there's also the idea of the book as a sentimental object to a person. There is also the idea of what the book or knowledge can represent in society.

LM One of the reasons we've been so excited to have you join us for this series of conversations is because your work deals so closely with the boundaries of domestic space and workspace. For those of us who are privileged to be working from home, those boundaries are now more collapsed than ever. Your work deals with domestic space and has a lot to tell about our notions of home—how we remember it and process it, how we inherit it from generation to generation, relationship to relationship, and how people, particularly women in your own family, have shaped it and made it their own. I was hoping you can address

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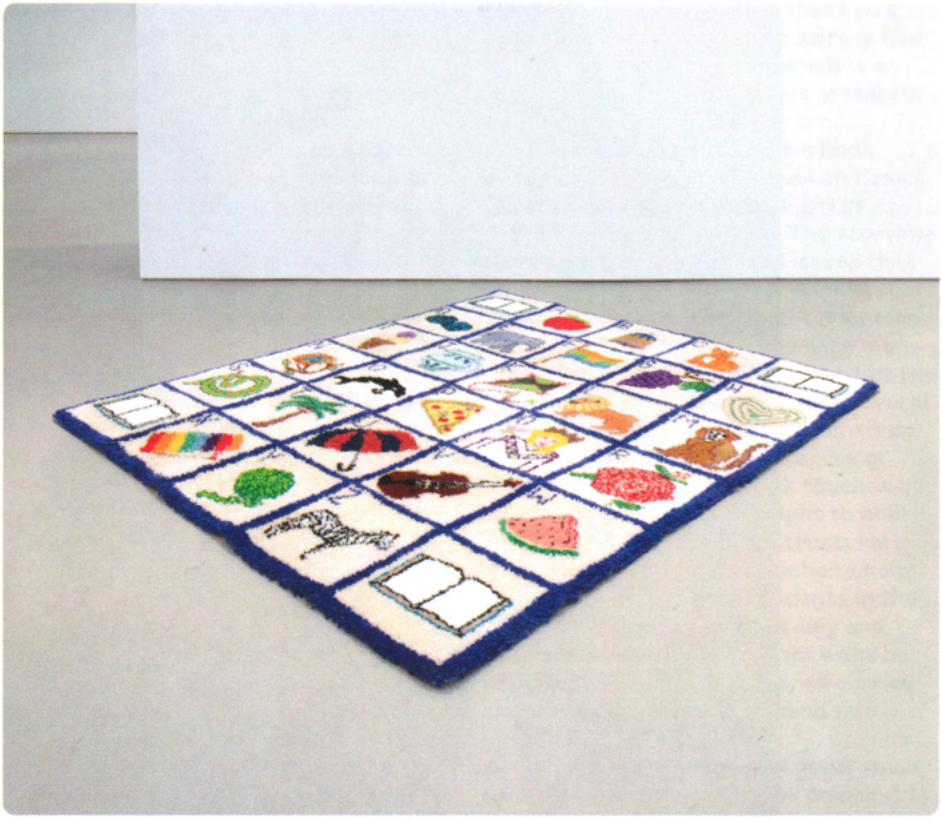

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how the space of the home made its way into your work.

BS I've always made work that was about place. I'll start with a body of work that was explicitly autobiographical that began around 2011. My grandfather died and he was the last of that generation and we had to settle his estate, centered on his house in Long Island. In the end, after it all shook out, I was surrounded by my grandparents' household objects in my studio, in my house. They were everywhere. Pillows and books and bowls and light switch plate covers and towels, just all the domestic items. They were everywhere, but at the same time the house was just gone. We had to sell it as part of the settling of everything and it was demolished immediately, so someone could build a little McMansion on this weird, tiny footprint of a midcentury house on Long Island.

I was thinking, "maybe I could recreate this place and the objects." At first I thought, "oh, this can be part set painting and part archive, and the scale would be large," and then the paintings will transform the gallery into a set. When I did it, I felt really at home, which is a funny pun.

And I really started thinking about my legacy in terms of the women in my family. I always used to think, "oh, my grandfather, he fought in the war and then he went back to school and became a stockbroker. And then my other grandfather was a doctor. A cardiologist. And my great great grandfather was an inventor. This was a narrative of my family, as opposed to the generation after generation after generation of women who kept these homes. It is such a wild thing that I never thought about having this legacy of homemaking, which a lot of us have in our families—I would say most of us probably. A legacy of women that goes assumed and taken for granted and unspoken. And that's what it evolved into—into something that I think about a lot more now in my own autobiography.

The name of that show was "Homemaker," and when I floated it to the gallery they winced. I said, "I know. I know it makes you feel that way, and it makes me feel that way too." But it's really messed up that it makes us feel that way. It's an invisible economy. I was talking to somebody about what has been said recently about coronavirus: "Oh, the economy has ground to the halt." And I'm like, "One economy has." But how much domestic work have we all been forced to do when we're in our homes all the time? It was something that I thought about before, and I certainly think about it in a renewed way now.

LM Shifting just a bit from work that is very personal and mined from a familial history, I wanted to ask you about a series of works you created while taking part in an informal residency at the Wharton Esherick Museum on the outskirts of Philadelphia which preserves the home and studio of the famed 20th century artist and craftsperson, Wharton Esherick. (The MFA has two works of furniture in its collections.) Can you tell us a little bit about the intersections of craft histories in your practice?

BS I came to this body of work because I was in the beginning of a pregnancy. I was at the Wharton Esherick Museum with my mother in law and my husband and I kept taking pictures of everything. And I thought, "Oh, I should make a show about this. Maybe it'll be easier while I'm pregnant." It wasn't easier, but it was a great experience. The people who run the museum are really invested in having relationships with working artists.

There's the craft-based aspect of Esherick's work. I think such distinctions can be silly, but one of the things that happens when "fine art" steals "craft," especially from a domestic setting, and puts it in a fine art museum or gallery, is that craft enters a world where you're not allowed to touch it. I don't really want people to touch my paintings, and I don't think that's the role of paintings, but I've always thought, what if you could do the reverse? I want my paintings to be transformative in the sense that they set a stage for people to play out a dialogue in front of this image of a room that then becomes a part of the room that the painting lives in. I've always wished that fine arts would borrow more from the way that craft thinks about itself in terms of the relationship to utility and touch.

Esherick didn't separate his life from his artwork, and when you're in the museum, it's one of the most appealing aspects of the experience. There's no division. I think a lot about the place of the domestic within the art world, and the role of artwork in domestic space, the way that art objects live in domestic spaces, the way that works about domesticity live in the art gallery. With Esherick, there's none of that. It's all one thing.

LM Were there any particular elements of this artist's life that you felt were too private to address, and how do you navigate that line in your own work and your own life when you mine the domestic spaces of your own family?

BS The Esherick docents were absolutely amazing. Some of the elder docents knew him, and they'd open up any drawer, show me anything, they're just this wealth of knowledge. His daughter and son-in-law had a big role in running the museum for a long time and so I felt like if his family set up those parameters [of openness], it was okay to explore whatever was there. There were some stories that I couldn't work in a reference to—for example, he was a nudist. It just didn't work out.

In my own work, I feel like I'm an open book. I mean, I don't include figures in my work ... when I have to reproduce a photo in my paintings, especially if there's a person in it, sometimes it will just feel like it's just so explicitly personal in a different way to have those bodies in there, as opposed to objects. With objects, it's the way that we've chosen them and touch them and care for them and live with them over the years that's tender and secret.

LM The most recent body of work that was on view in New York just as everything shut down [due to COVID-19] is a series of smaller scale book paintings and larger scale interiors that are drawn from the descriptions and fictional imagery inside of those books. The book paintings are about the size of the objects themselves, and to me, they felt really magical. Then the larger scale canvases, such as this one *Houseboat on Dull Lake in the Valley of K,* 2019, explode the books into an immersive, imaginative vista. Do you see this work as accessing some area of the brain that, I know for me as a new mother too, is exploding in its own ways—that of imagination that perhaps otherwise fades in adulthood?

BS I've always been really interested in memory—what we remember and what we forget. I think a lot about the neurological theory of memory re-consolidation, the idea that every time you recall something, the act of remembering changes the memory which then replaces the original. So, you can never mine some pristine memory. Instead, things change, and each of the inaccuracies that have been introduced through recalling a memory become a legitimate part of that remembered experience. Instead of an inaccuracy, it becomes a departure. I was always interested in how these distortions have the potential to reveal how we think and what we prioritize and what we forget. So, yeah, these paintings access that part of the brain. I think that in rereading these books, it certainly stirred up a lot of memories for me, and those memories got altered.

When I think about these paintings, I try to remember, how did I imagine these stories when I was a kid? Where did I pull the imagery from? How do I understand the story now, and how is that informed by being able to do a lot of research based around the context? Because while all of these works are fiction, they're all situated in terms of history.

LM One of the works in this series is a portrait of a James Baldwin book, *Little Man, Little Man*, from 1974, that is perhaps the most under-recognized volume of his career. It was billed as a children's book for adults, and its introduction says that it asks readers to "revalue and find beauty in what has been routinely cast aside as marginal, irrelevant, and even ugly by dominant culture—the lives and landscapes of urban Black children." How did you come across this book? (I have to say my partner is a professor of African American literature and he teaches Baldwin, and he did not know this book.) Why did you decide to paint it and add it to your son's library?

BS I was thinking about how formative children's literature is, but how it's also simultaneously treated as "less than." People, including myself, don't know the names of authors of so many children's books that are so deeply important.

I came across *The World is Round,* which is Gertrude Stein's children's

book she made at the invitation of the Bank Street School in New York [a well-respected teacher's college] in 1939. They were trying to publish a series with well-known authors who didn't normally write children's books and pair them up with illustrators. Clement Hurd, who often worked with Margaret Wise Brown (the author of *The Runaway Bunny* and *Goodnight Moon*) illustrated Stein's book. When I found that book, I thought, "Which other famous authors wrote children's books?"

I came across the Baldwin book and when it arrived I knew that I not only needed to include it, I needed to make a large painting from it.

Baldwin paints a picture of a community in a way I thought is so deeply important. Baldwin's book has loving community members and family, and he presents a warm and vibrant space with dignified parents and neighbors, though he refuses to blot out other aspects of the community in the book. He depicts people on drugs and alcohol. A lot of them are Vietnam veterans. And a potentially violent and certainly threatening police presence is in the book. It's a picture of a Black community that is important to show [my son] Sid.

LM I highly recommend the book and thanks to you incorporated it into our library for our daughter, Viva, too.

And now, I would love to open up to questions from our audience. There's one that notes that Philadelphia is known for the Barnes Foundation and asks whether that collection influenced you at all?

BS You know, I don't think so. I went to the Barnes when I was a kid maybe once. Before the Barnes moved downtown, it was hard to visit, although I did go to see a lot of art and went to museums with my mom all the time. She taught art to kids, so I really was in that world. I saw a lot of Pennsylvania Dutch art and works by Rousseau and Pippin that are somewhere in between craft and fine art worlds. Seeing a lot of that growing up in Pennsylvania was probably more of an influence than Barnes.

LM We have a question asking if you could talk a little bit about the mechanics of your painting and the types of brushes you use?

BS The paintings take a really long time. I am very sparing with the paint. In part, that is to maintain the relationship between the depicted wall and the actual wall on which the work hangs. That relationship between the texture of wall-to-wall, I learned pretty quickly after I started making these paintings, was critical. When I was making landscapes, they were pretty impasto, thick paintings that would be built up and scraped down—their surface related a lot more to the way we understand the geology of land versus an inside of a room.

I use really tiny brushes, numbers zero or one brushes, they're smaller than my pinky finger. In terms of how I put together the composition, I use a ton of different sources. I'll use photographs, family photographs, found photographs, drawings, and I'll Google things until I find the perfect, weird perspective of a piece of furniture or the area of a room or a floor, or something like that. The compositions are really pieced together and, as I talked about a little bit earlier when I was thinking about the distortions of memory, this process really reflects that.

LM Davis, please go ahead with your question.

Davis [audience member] It's more of a compliment than a question. I was quite taken by the interiors [in your paintings] which are rather formal and structured, but the colors are pretty aggressive. It all hangs together. They're intimate, and they remind me of Pinewood art, a little bit, of Native Alaskan people's art.

BS That's interesting. Thanks. That's really nice. It's funny talking about the color—I have friends who are really finicky about the colors [in their paintings]. They're so specific. I don't dwell on

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getting the perfect color because they all work together. So, I put one down and then I can work off it. In my childhood home, my mother—long before it was popular to do so—had a bright green room and a bright red room and ours was the only house of any kid I knew that had all these bright colors. I wonder if that has had some effect on the decision making...

The other gallery that I work with is called Fleisher Ollman. They're in Philadelphia and they show a lot of self-taught artists. I'm absolutely not a self-taught artist, but I went to liberal arts school, and for grad school I went to a university that wasn't a particularly formal environment. I have always felt like that enabled me to have a little bit of a different approach to making art.

I got a really strong academic and intellectual education, my ideas were much more fully formed after school than my technical painting skill, and I sort of had to catch up with that on my own. Aesthetically there is some relationship, for sure, with self-taught art. Plus, I credit early influences like Horace Pippin whose amazing works in Philadelphia I saw when I was a kid.

LM That last question made me think—I'd love to hear you speak again about the consistent, straight-on perspective of your paintings. What precipitated that choice?

BS I've always had that instinct to make work from that perspective, to make something that feels like you could fall right out of or into the painting. Very direct and straight forward. I love when kids come into the gallery, or people who have no experience in looking at art, and they can recognize things very clearly, and have a very particular access to the work. That's been deeply important to my art making. There are certainly art historical references all over the place in the paintings, but you don't need to know that to get just as much out of it, and that's always been pretty critical to me.

LM I want to thank you, Becky, so much for joining us this evening, for being so willing to connect this digital space to our own homes and the events happening right now in the streets, too.

BS Thank you. I know that it's a weird time to sit in front of our computers and talk about art. Thanks so much for listening and supporting my work, to everyone at the MFA. ●

Becky Suss was born in Philadelphia where she currently lives and works. She holds a BA from Williams College and an MFA from the University of California, Berkeley. She is a former member of Vox Populi and Space 1026 in Philadelphia. Recent exhibition venues include the ICA Philadelphia, Fleisher/Ollman Gallery (Philadelphia, PA), Jack Shainman Gallery (New York), and The Berman Museum (Collegeville, PA).

(1) *Drop Leaf Desk (Wharton Esherick)*, 2018. Oil on canvas. 84" x 60".

(2) *Blue Apartment*, 2016. Oil on canvas. 84" x 60".

(3) *Alphabet Rug*, 2020. Wool. 1.75" x 74.5" x 61.5".

(4) *Wharton Esherick Bedroom*, 2018. Oil on canvas. 72" x 84".

THE NEW YORKER

March 3, 2020
By Sarah Blackwood

The Uncanny Domestic Spaces of Becky Suss

Becky Suss's small paintings prod reconsideration of art forms, such as children's literature, that are often considered secondary to the work of real aesthetic genius. Photograph Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery.

On a recent gray and cold Sunday evening, the painter Becky Suss welcomed me into her studio in Philadelphia's Fishtown neighborhood. I had stopped by to see the paintings she was finishing up for her show "Where They Are," which is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, in New York City, through March 28th. Suss and her husband, the photographer Micah Danges, work out of an old garage on an industrial block full of them. The two-story space is scuffed up and forbidding on the outside, but, inside, it's full of color and texture—bright paint drippings on the gray plywood floor, large and striking in-progress canvases on the wall, rolls of art works covering cluttered large work tables—and mammalian warmth. Their sweet old mutt, Baja, greeted me, wearing a lifting harness that helps her to get up and down the stairs. While I scratched her ears, I caught sight of a corner that Suss and Danges have blocked off for when their baby son joins them in the studio: a small love seat, a jumperoo, and a couple of kid-size book racks. "We weren't totally prepared when he started moving around and we realized how much he could get into here," Suss told me, with a laugh. She is thirty-nine, but has the fresh look of a teen-ager, and was dressed comfortably in a pullover gray hoodie and jeans, her long, wavy hair in a low braid.

Suss's best-known work—her flatly depicted, slightly uncanny domestic interiors—circle around the significance of homemaking and homemakers, which are terms that she uses with both affection and provocation. She is, as she told me, "fascinated by the complete dependence on and dismissal of domesticity," and, now that she is a mother herself, she is haunted by the generations of women in her family whose intellectual and artistic abilities were mostly channelled into homemaking. "There's this really rich inheritance of managing domestic space and life," she said of her family. "Even the shift for me in thinking of this as a 'heritage,' thinking of it as something generations of women have done—it was their livelihood—that little bit of shift in language has been very important to me."

In her new show, Suss turns her attention to children's literature, another undervalued cultural form, and how it encourages children and caretakers to imagine the domestic spaces that outline their worlds. The series of mostly large-scale canvases draws inspiration from an idiosyncratic selection of classic children's literature: E. L. Konigsburg's "From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler,," Salman Rushdie's "Haroun and the Sea of Stories," James Baldwin's "Little Man, Little Man." Some of these are

books that Suss read as a child, others she has been collecting and planning to read to her own child as he grows. The show nudges Suss's long-standing interest in the domestic both further inward, psychologically, and outward, socially and historically.

The title "Where They Are" refers to the educational philosophy of Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who founded the Bureau of Educational Experiments, which is now named Bank Street College of Education, in 1916. Mitchell championed a then-revolutionary child-centered educational philosophy that emphasized the "here and now": the everyday and familiar, the routine rather than the fantastical. One of the most famous students, Margaret Wise Brown, wrote the children's-book classic "Goodnight Moon," which was indelibly illustrated in simple shapes and bold, flat color by another Bank Street student, Clement Hurd.

Like Hurd's famous illustrations, Becky Suss's paintings can be deceptively simple. "I've always been a stacker and a flattener," she told me. She works large—most of her paintings are around seven feet tall, and some five feet or more wide—and she uses pattern and distorted perspective to explore how memory alters the shape of domestic spaces that one once knew, or imagined, intimately. Suss is an enthusiastic champion of representational painting, but she insists that her work is "not a window." Scale and distortion are two ways for her to kindle this realization in a viewer: to bring them back to the object in front of them. But they also, she offers, "validate the distortions of remembering. So instead of thinking of a distorted image in your mind as a lapse in memory or a misremembering—no, these distortions *are* the story."

Suss pursues this idea in "Houseboat on Dull Lake in the Valley of K," based on Rushdie's oddball children's novel from 1990, which her father read to her. The painting strikes a compromise between honoring the realistic details that are authentic to the world the book depicts (for example, a traditional Kashmiri khatamband ceiling) and exploring her memories of the world she imagined as a child, which were also influenced by stories her father told her about his own experiences travelling to Kashmir in the nineteen-sixties. Another painting, "Behind the A-Z," was drawn from Zilpha Keatley Snyder's Newbery-winning novel "The Egypt Game," which, as Suss remembers, inspired her and her friends' neighborhood play for months. "I realized I can't distinguish remembering the book from remembering trying to play the game from the book in the woods behind her cul-de-sac. It's just all in the soup."

"Houseboat on a Dull Lake in the Valley of K." Art work by Becky Suss / Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery.

Suss punctuates these large canvases with a series that includes small paintings *of* children's books, and explained to me that she thinks of them as anchoring "the viewer's physical relationship in front of a big painting." They help remind viewers that the dreamlike, philosophical worlds of the large paintings all stem from a somewhat lowly object we could easily hold in our hands. The small paintings feel comforting and familiar: Suss reproduces the penultimate page spread from "Goodnight Moon"—done in grayscale—which asks children and their caretakers to say goodnight to the stars and the air. She sets a scene from "Pat the Bunny" against a navy-blue floral background that recalls a calico print. She pays homage to Hurd in a striking pink-and-blue painting drawn from "The World Is Round," a 1939 collaboration between him and Gertrude Stein.

Evoking modesty in both technique and subject, the small paintings attend to the genealogy of caretaking and the everyday shapes that care takes: ordinary fabrics, simple language, routine. They prod reconsideration of art forms, like illustration or children's literature, that are often considered secondary to

the work of real aesthetic genius. Likewise, they prod whatever false distinctions have been erected between feminized domestic culture—with its floral prints, privacies, and mundanity—and Art with a capital "A."

These "everyday" spaces of feminized domestic culture are not simply sweet and comforting, however, and Suss's work addresses this head-on. In a painting inspired by Frank Gilbreth, Jr., and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey's "Cheaper by the Dozen," from 1948, Suss depicts a quandary related to heterosexual family life: What's the relationship between the lighthouse that stands on the family's vacation property (arguably a symbol for fatherhood: disciplinary, phallic, overpoweringly bright) and the mysteries of the slowly moving night sky (the feminized rounded space that surrounds)? In "Miss Beanpole's Apartment," an evocative painting drawn from Baldwin's "Little Man, Little Man," from 1976, a lovely interior calm takes shape (and changes shape) in tension with the state-sponsored violence of the world outside the character's Harlem apartment, signified by the locked front door.

L: *"Miss Beanpole's Apartment."* Art work by Becky Suss / Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery. R: *"Bathroom (Farmington, CT)."* Art work by Becky Suss / Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery.

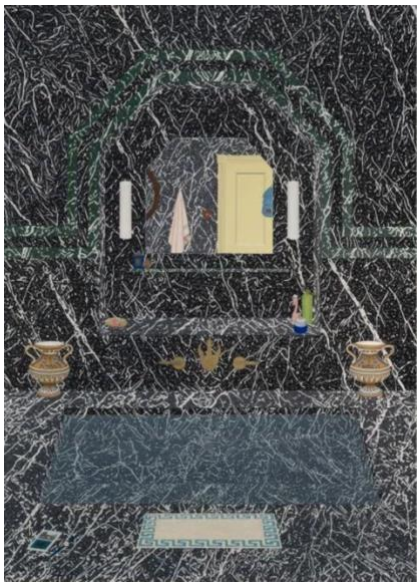
As our conversation was wrapping up, Suss pointed out that most of her large paintings are still made with the "teeny-tiniest brushes," which require and produce a kind of meditative patience to use at this scale. She hopes the viewer can feel "the way the labor has been applied to the canvas." This emphasis on patience, process, interiority, and domesticity is what the most spectacular of the show's paintings also explores. In "Bathroom (Farmington, CT)," Suss depicts one of the final scenes in "From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler," in which the young protagonist, Claudia, takes a bath in the titular character's remarkable bathroom, which has floor-to-ceiling black marble and mirrors and a sunken tub with gold fixtures. The canvas is almost entirely covered with a kinetic and stark black-and-white marble pattern. It's visually overwhelming and sets enough off-kilter that the scene—which many readers will know well—starts to open up in new ways.

The painting renders both the ongoing infinity-mirror feeling of developing selfhood and the strangely enfolded experience of caretaking and children's cultures. In "Bathroom (Farmington, CT)," viewers might meditate on the wonderful Claudia, who famously learns to keep secrets and take her time in that bathroom. But they also are encouraged to consider E. L. Konigsburg, a B.A. in chemistry turned suburban stay-at-home mom, writing a book about the complexities of art and attribution. Or the anonymous Italian High Renaissance craftspeople who produced the vases that Suss places at the scene. Or, of course, all the caretakers who have devoted time and energy to read and tell stories to children. Put another way, these images help us feel the labor that not only Suss but so many others, named and unnamed, have applied to their various canvases.

OBSERVER

February 20, 2020
By Karen Chernick

How a Museum Inspired a Book That In Turn Gave Birth to a Painting



Becky Suss, *To be Titled*, 2019, inspired by the book *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. Becky Suss.

Thousands of kids scale the grand 5th Avenue stairs leading to the Metropolitan Museum of Art expecting to see a fountain full of pennies, an ornate 16th century canopy bed, and a bronze sculpture of an ancient Egyptian cat. They're retracing the steps of Claudia and Jamie Kincaid—protagonists of beloved chapter book, *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler,* 1967, in which two runaways from Connecticut secretly live temporarily at the iconic New York museum, which celebrates its 150th anniversary this year.

Contemporary painter Becky Suss went to the Met a lot as a child. Her grandparents lived nearby, and it became a default destination during family visits from Philadelphia. "The idea of camping out or hiding out at a museum, when I was a kid, was a very resonant idea," Suss told Observer. "The book really stuck with me because it touched on this place that I was familiar with, but was still really exotic and of another world."

Suss recently created a life-sized painting based on a scene from the classic novel, as part of a series of large-scale interiors from children's books that she read as a kid. The series debuts on February 21 in a solo exhibition, "Where They Are," at New York's Jack Shainman Gallery and includes scenes from Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry, and *Little Man, Little Man* by James Baldwin, among others.

The interior she chose to paint for *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* is not from the museum, as one might expect, but of Mrs. Frankweiler's floor-to-ceiling black marble bathroom—a sumptuous space that Suss found hard to resist. (The most memorable Met scenes, which have captivated readers-turned-museumgoers for decades, may be best left to young imaginations, anyway.) The painter does wink at the museum, though, by accessorizing the rim of the sunken bathtub with two Renaissance Italian urns from the Met collection.

"Making the decision to make this painting about [Frankenweiler's] home and not the Met, I thought I really want to nod, I want to gesture towards that space, too," says Suss. "I liked the idea of having this little anchor that suggests a relationship to the museum, and a relationship to somebody who collects art from that time period and from the general location of Michelangelo." While squatting at the Met, Claudia and Jamie try to solve the art historical mystery of a sculpture that may or may not have been made by Michelangelo. The urns, from a scene at the end of the book, could help clue Claudia in to the answer.

Urns also feature in the book, when the brother-and-sister pair hide their belongings in a big one during the museum's opening hours. But most of the Met scenes that kids remember best no longer exist. The canopy bed where the kids slept is now in storage, and the Fountain of the Muses that once decorated the museum restaurant (and which Claudia and Jamie bathed in, using powdered soap from the restroom) now graces Brookgreen Gardens in South Carolina.

Some landmarks are still around, though. "The sarcophagus where Claudia hid her clothes is still there," Elaine Lobl Konigsburg, the book's Newbury Award-winning author, wrote later for a special publication produced by the Met. "And so is the urn where Jamie hid his trumpet."

Konigsburg knew the Met well. For a whole year, while she took Saturday art classes in the city, she dropped her kids off at the museum. She joined them afterwards, to stroll through the galleries together. Their visits eventually inspired the book, after Konigsburg spotted a single piece of popcorn on an antique chair behind a velvet rope—and let her thoughts run wild.

"How had that lonely piece of popcorn arrived on the seat of that blue silk chair? Had someone sneaked in one night—it could not have happened during the day—slipped behind the barrier, sat in that chair, and snacked on popcorn?" Konigsburg mused. "For a long time after leaving the Museum that day, I thought about that piece of popcorn on the blue silk chair and how it got there."

She used that kernel to craft a book that has made generations of curious youngsters hungry for visits to the Met—either real, or imagined.

From Konigsburg to Suss, and far beyond, the Met is an enduring source of inspiration. For kids lucky enough to climb the impressive granite stairs of the century-and-a-half-old institution, the museum has even, on occasion, offered tours and activities based on *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. It won't be lining its galleries with sleeping bags, though. "You can't, of course, camp out here," a special Mixed-Up Files issue of the Met's Museum Kids magazine warned readers. "But you can have an adventure each time you visit."

whitewall

Winter 2020

TO WATCH

Becky Suss, *Wharton Esherick Bedroom*, 2018, oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Becky Suss

Revisiting the magical interiors of the stories she grew up with.

By Katy Donoghue

Becky Suss remembers, as a child, looking forward to reading chapter books with her father in the evening. Whether it was *Cheaper by the Dozen* or *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, she would listen along, imagining images in her head—as we all do—of the scenes, spaces, and places described on the page.

When she had her own child, she started putting together a library for him, revisiting the books she so loved growing up. She wanted to find a way to marry her time as an artist and role as a mother, and decided to work on a series depicting the magical and memorable interior spaces from some of those stories.

Whitewall visited the Philadelphia-based artist, who was recently awarded a Pew Fellowship, to learn more about the new paintings that will be on view at Jack Shainman in Feburary 2020.

WHITEWALL: *What was the starting point for this new series?*

BECKY SUSS: Before I had a kid, I'd be working here 12 to 13 hours a day, seven days a week. All I did was work. My mind was in my workspace all the time. And I can't do that anymore.

Becky Suss, *Untitled (Portugal)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 84 x 60 x 1.5 inches, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

I was looking for content for new work and at the same time had the idea to build a library for my son—revisiting stories, chapter books, not illustrated picture books. This [*gestures to the painting on the wall of her studio*] is from a Salman Rushdie children's book, *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. My father and I read this together probably when it first came out in 1990. I loved reading chapter books with my parents, and with my dad, in particular. Whenever he was home, because he traveled a lot for work, we would go on to the next chapter. The biggest draw to doing this was just the magical imagery that I remember. This was a magical-feeling book that described beautiful faraway places. I got it on audiobook and listened to it. I remembered the spaces, and I was sure there would be some really wonderful domestic spaces that could be really wonderful paintings.

So this is a scene from when the father and son in the story stay in a houseboat on Dal Lake in the Valley of K. One of them stays in a bedroom with a wooden carved peacock for a bed, and the other in an adjacent room with a wooden carved turtle bed. There are all these descriptions of the houseboats and the room, and that resonated with me. I was like, "What a great weird painting that would be."

WW: *What are the other books you revisited?*

BS: I did *Cheaper by the Dozen*. The Gilbreths were real people—it's basically not a fictional story at all; it's a memoir by two of the kids. Frank Gilbreth pioneered the field of efficiency in motion studies. He was a pretty famous consultant, and my dad's a consultant, and so he really liked reading it to me and my sister.

I read that, and I got to the scene where they visit their beach house, a transformed lighthouse. Frank Gilbreth was always trying to get his children to learn constantly, like when they were in the bathroom they were told to put a record on the Victrola in Italian or French so that they would be learning subliminally all the time. But in the summer, he would say, "I promise, I'm not going to do that to you." But of course, he couldn't help himself, and he painted astronomical charts all over the walls of the inside of the lighthouse and hung photographs from the Harvard Observatory two feet off the floor, because his theory was that the kids should always be learning no matter how little they are.

WW: *This new work and your past series deal with the domestic space. What attracts you to that?*

Portrait courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

BS: One of the last shows that I had, I was really thinking about how domestic spaces are these conventionally female-oriented spaces. They are spaces that historically women have designed, that they've pieced together, that they composed, that they've cleaned and maintained. And they're completely relied upon by all of us. We spend the majority of our time at home in those environments. Our kids are raised in those environments. They teach us a lot about the world, but they're completely dismissed. How could something so foundational be so dismissed, right? And I thought, at the gallery, in this male-dominated space, I can elevate it and put it on the gallery wall. While this is certainly a departure from that, I feel like a lot of things regarding children are pretty similar. It is completely dismissed despite how foundational it is.

One of the things that I always love about making paintings that are of domestic environments is that they're very familiar—to kids and to people who don't always look at art. My other thought about this was that it'll be a magical thing for any kid to come and see these paintings. Imagine some kid gets dragged to the gallery with their parents and they've read this book. They see it and there are secrets embedded in the paintings for them. I always love when little kids will run up to a painting—it's amazing to see what they're drawn to.

One of the exciting things about visiting this sort of content to me is that when kids are little and they start to be told stories or read narratives, they don't have an image that's necessarily attached to it. As adults, we're pulling from what we've already seen. And kids get to completely imagine it for the first time.

Becky Suss, *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk by Mary E. Marcy (Wharton Esherick)*, 2018, oil on cavnas over panel, 14 x 11 inches, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

REVIEWS PHILADELPHIA

Becky Suss

Fleisher/Ollman Gallery

By Bea Huff Hunter MARCH 2019

Becky Suss, *Bedroom (Wharton Esherick)*, 2018, oil on canvas, 72 × 84".

In recent years, Becky Suss has painted the domestic spaces and personal effects of her late relatives from memory, guesswork, and fantasy, meditating on the mind's revisionist tendencies while crafting pictorial elegies to familial and cultural histories. For her new series of interiors and object studies, Suss turned her psychological gaze to the material legacy of the celebrated American modernist artist, architect, and designer Wharton Esherick (1887–1970).

During a residency at the Wharton Esherick Museum in Chester County, near Philadelphia, she rendered his historic home and studio from life and from photographic documentation. "Becky Suss/Wharton Esherick"—a collaboration between the artist and the museum—placed Suss's paintings in physical relation to items Suss selected, including furniture, maquettes, and drawings made by Esherick as well as his possessions, such as shirts and books.

Three large-scale oil-on-canvas paintings were the linchpins of the show, offering the viewer glimpses into some of Esherick's conserved rooms. These rooms were shown devoid of figures and in uncomfortably flattened or expanded spatial perspectives that work in uneasy tension with Suss's harmonious palette of soothing blues, rich browns, and slices of red and orange drawn from Esherick's artifacts. The floor and ceiling of *Dining Room (Wharton Esherick)* (all works cited, 2018) receded at impossibly steep angles. Squeezed almost entirely into the painting's center third were a slim wooden table and chairs, a delicate lamp, a blue-and-brown floor mat, and a window looking onto a copse. While the textures of the wood grain, woven fabric, and smooth ceramic plates were tantalizingly described with tiny, careful brushstrokes, the perspective in this period room refused the viewer's imagined entry —just as some of Esherick's furniture was protected by barriers and signs in the gallery. In *Drop Leaf Desk (Wharton Esherick)*, which depicts part of his studio, the massive, thickly engraved furniture loomed ominously, poised to topple over the receding red-stained floor at any moment.

Books were a motif in the show. In the larger paintings, such as *Bedroom (Wharton Esherick)*, they appeared without text on cover or spine, and thus were able to be read as mere design elements or as metonyms for the act of reading. Suss's smaller paintings presented more intimate views that invited close looking: *Rhymes of Early Jungle Folk by Mary E. Marcy (Wharton Esherick)* depicted in full the cover of a book that teaches children the theory of evolution through poems and Esherick's woodcut illustrations.

A curved, dark-wood couch with a deep-teal seat pad made by Esherick was installed in a rear corner of the gallery. Two of Suss's modestly sized, intricate paintings of textiles hung above it: *June Groff Pillow (Wharton Esherick)* showed a cushion whimsically decorated with olive-green trees and hedges, and *Letty Esherick Pillow (Wharton Esherick)* rendered another with a coarse black-and-white weave. These pillows, made by Esherick's friend and wife, respectively, were placed on a similar couch in the museum. Suss's decision to elevate them to the status of paintings was perhaps an attempt to collapse the gendered boundaries of what was considered craft in Esherick's time. Nearby, a small collection of his watercolors in a display case and four well-worn shirts in muted greens, blues, and browns, folded on a shelf, reminded us of the hand and body that once moved with and through the objects of Suss's gaze.

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

ec Suss Paints Wharton scheric s Dream i e ome and Studio

Suss's vibrant paintings celebrate the legacy of the painter, sculptor, and furniture maker known as the "Dean of American Craft."

Samantha Mitchell December 18, 2018

Becky Suss, "Bedroom (Wharton Esherick)" (2018), oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches (image courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia, photo by Claire Iltis)

PHILADELPHIA — Wharton Esherick was a painter, sculptor, printmaker, designer, poet, and furniture-maker who developed a unique style that came to define the American Studio Furniture Movement of the 1960s, notable for its contemporary reinterpretation of traditional materials and methods. While Esherick, who died in 1970, was classically trained in painting, his self-taught practice of woodworking, which he insisted was a fine art rather than a craft, defines his legacy.

In a contemporary moment in which artist and collector alike champion self-taught and folk artists, Esherick's idiosyncratic style finds renewed relevance in the paintings of Philadelphia-based artist Becky Suss, who similarly champions the importance of craft. In 2018, during a residency at the Wharton Esherick Museum — formerly Esherick's home and studio in Chester County, Pennsylvania — Suss created a series of vibrant paintings based on the house-museum's interiors. These works are now on view in *Becky Suss/Wharton Esherick,* at Philadelphia's Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, alongside a selection of Esherick's art and personal items.

In its acute celebration of the hand-hewn, the exhibition offers an opportunity to meditate on perception and perspective, to observe private moments of discovery within the work of both artists, and to experience the relationship between functionality and artistry.

Known for her meticulous, obsessive rendering of interiors, Suss's style references American vernacular art, with its focus on patterned detail. In the past, she has explored elements of her own history, recreating interior spaces from memory. Her compositions exude a dream-like, wistful sensibility while creating visually challenging relationships between texture, color, and scale: the paintings are of recollections rather than spaces themselves.

Becky Suss, “Drop Leaf Desk (Wharton Esherick)” (2018), oil on canvas, 72 x 84 inches (image courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia, photo by Claire Iltis)

Becky Suss, “Dining Room (Wharton Esherick)” (2018) Oil on canvas, (72 x 84 inches) (Image courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia; Photo: Claire Iltis)

That dream-like quality also emanates from Esherick’s aesthetic: wiggly, Deco-inspired curves and angles give his furniture a playful creativity that riffs off of austere Shaker frameworks, all faithfully rendered in Suss’s paintings. Originally from Philadelphia, Esherick received formal training in painting from the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art (now University of the Arts) and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts before moving with his wife to more rural environs in Chester County, where he began exploring wood as a central medium. From woodcut prints to wooden staircases, Esherick’s works developed in line with craft traditions, incorporating elements of Pennsylvania Dutch design into his German Expressionist-influenced style.

The perspective in Suss’s paintings is often from a slightly lowered eye level, like that of a child, giving her interior spaces an uncanny, dollhouse-like sensibility. Three large paintings present interiors at a near-lifesize scale; they operate as portals into the Wharton Esherick House, providing a real sense of its complexity: challenging acute angles in the architecture, dense natural textures of rock and wood, braided and woven textiles. Suss’s obsessive rendering maintains intense focus on every detail of Esherick’s carefully constructed interiors, from the upholstery to the floorboards to the stacks of notebooks and papers on his desk.

Surreal on another scale are small paintings of Esherick’s maquettes — miniature preliminary models for furniture — nonchalantly sitting on shelves between art and design books. These paintings are small windows to a secret world, depicting tiny shelving systems. The actual maquettes are displayed elsewhere in the gallery, as are various playfully designed stools and chairs that appear in Suss’s paintings. These sculptural elements enhance a feeling of familiarity and unreality in her interior paintings, like a vision made manifest. It blurs the timeline between these two makers: perhaps the objects were sculpted from the paintings.

Becky Suss /Wharton Esherick at Fleisher/Ollman Gallery. (Installation view) (Photo: Claire Iltis)

Becky Suss, “Maquette #2 (Wharton Esherick)” (2018) Oil on canvas, (72 x 84 inches) (Image courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia; Photo: Claire Iltis)

Becky Suss, “Theodore Dreiser, Of a Great City (Wharton Esherick)” (2018) Oil on canvas, (72 x 84 inches) (Image courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia; Photo: Claire Iltis)

A shared appreciation for the dynamic qualities of wood grain flows seamlessly from 2D painting to 3D sculpture. Esherick’s wooden objects are carved with a sensitivity to the grain’s undulations, and Suss revels in its patterning where it appears in Esherick’s home: bookcases, floors, walls, chairs, and ceilings vibrate with vivid veins of warm browns and yellows. A series of small paintings depict four woodcut prints by Esherick, hung in hand-carved wooden frames on an unpainted wooden wall. Rendered through Suss’s flattened perspective, these surreal, *trompe l’œil* investigations of Esherick’s influences — the Expressionist woodcuts, the Deco frames — demonstrate a deep collaboration between the artists.

Both artists present elements of the everyday as worthy of awe. This echoes the practice of American Shakers, who considered every act a small devotion to God, an opportunity to honor their own faith. In tackling Esherick’s legacy, Suss continues to present the interior, domestic realm as an object of fascination. This parallels Esherick’s career-long elevation of craft, which brought elements of traditional American design into conversation with German Expressionism. In creating his home and studio as a work of art in itself, Esherick celebrated a limitless creativity that blurred the line between function and form.

Becky Suss/Wharton Esherick *continues at Fleisher/Ollman (1216 Arch Street, 5A Phila., PA 19107) through January 26, 2019.*

pulse

'In My Room' at the Fralin lures art viewers into the great indoors

BY JANE DUNLAP SATHE 20 hrs ago (0) 2 min to read

"Living Room," a 2015 oil on canvas by Becky Suss, can be seen in "In My Room: Artists Paint the Interior 1950-Now" at the Fralin.

Becky Suss

If you'd like to bring more art into your life but you've always felt intimidated by gallery settings, it's time to head for the great indoors.

Through Sept. 30, the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia is presenting "In My Room: Artists Paint the Interior 1950-Now." The new exhibition is taking the concept of the landscape and switching the perspective around. This time, the focus is on rooms and other indoor spaces that can offer multiple ways to engage and layers of insights to consider. And the interior you end up exploring may be uniquely your own.

"We bring our own biographies, our own experiences, to the art," said Matthew McLendon, the Fralin's director and chief curator.

If You Go

"In My Room: Artists Paint the Interior 1950-Now"

Through Sept. 30

The Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia

uvafralinartmuseum.virginia.edu

(434) 924-3592

The exhibit, co-curated by Rebecca Schoenthal and visual artist and former art critic Ryan Steadman, includes works by Andrew Wyeth, Alex Katz, Richard Diebenkorn and Becky Suss, to name a few. The scenes depict everything from sitting rooms to stadiums. And as you move from painting to painting, pay attention to any details or aspects that stir your curiosity. Do you find yourself wondering where that hallway leads, or whether someone's shuffling back to rest on that rumpled pillow?

"There are so many layers — layers we can investigate," McLendon said. "You can investigate it from a design standpoint and how much design changes over time.

"You're looking at unpeopled interiors. What happened in that room? What's going to happen in that room? You've made a connection."

And if you're still looking for that elusive toehold in the art world, you've got this. There's nothing in this exhibition that you're supposed to "get" or react to in a certain way. Your engagement with the works is completely your own.

McLendon said he hopes "In My Room" can strip away the intimidation factor that keeps some people out of galleries. Art belongs to you as much as to anyone, and McLendon said this exhibition is accessible because "there's already a comfort level."

"I think people are often intimidated by art," he said. "But we know what a room is. I'm hoping people who think they don't understand art, or it's not for them, hopefully they'll take that feeling of comfort and say that art is for them."

Attend with a friend or two, and you can share ideas about the works. That's part of why Charlottesville's First Fridays phenomenon is so popular; it offers a stimulating opportunity to reflect on and converse about something outside your hectic daily routine.

"Art can be a solitary moment just between you and the object, but it can be a social moment as well," McLendon said.

And if you've always assumed galleries are stuffy places, take heart; you won't be asked to buy something or move along. You're expected, and encouraged, to take whatever time you feel is right to linger and look.

You've got the luxury of time to look at the works individually, to step back and observe them in context with each other, to see how the light strikes them and make your own connections.

"These experiences can help take you out of the stresses of everyday life. It can give you license to slow down," McLendon said.

"You are invited to come in the museum and sit down for a long time. We just get to step out of our own frenetic lives and have a different experience with time and duration."

And, sometimes, we just need a quick reboot in the presence of something that's simply beautiful.

The works in this show "are aesthetically pleasing," McLendon said. "We're not necessarily surrounded by beauty these days. I think we need that.

"We're giving people license, giving people permission, in a place where they know they're welcome."

Beauty can smooth down the rough edges of a stressed-out soul. But that's not to say the Fralin backs away from tough topics. Visual art's focus on perception has a way of bringing both the head and the heart into play. Because art offers a safe environment for discovering viewpoints and validating individual experiences and reactions, it's a comfortable place to talk about things that make us uncomfortable. Challenging exhibits that bite into politics, death, injustice, pain and other controversial subjects we'd rather avoid.

"We're one of those places you can have a difficult conversation in safety and comfort," McLendon said.

Jane Dunlap Sathe is the features editor for The Daily Progress. Contact her at (434) 978-7249 or jsathe@dailyprogress.com

Smith, Roberta. "What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week: Becky Suss." *The New York Times.* 18 May 2017. Online.

The New York Times

ART & DESIGN

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

MAY 18, 2017

Becky Suss's "Blue Apartment" (2016), at Jack Shainman Gallery. Credit Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

BECKY SUSS

Thro h J e 3. J ck Sh i G ery, 13 West 20th Street, M h tt 212 1701, jackshainman.com.

What's in a home? At the very least, a portrait of its occupants, and a fertile memory bank — of rooms, light, objects and relationships — for frequent visitors. This much is demonstrated by the captivating, often large paintings in "Homemaker," Becky Suss's excellent Manhattan debut at the Jack Shainman Gallery.

These views of comfortable middle-class interiors — most of them from her grandparents' now-demolished Long Island home — are eerily still and shelter-magazine neat. The furniture, rugs, books, art and artifacts are placed just so, yet they set a lot in play. Representing a range of world cultures, they appear to be tokens from the travels of well-educated people: They conjure a complex mix of delight, taste, openness and an admiring, seemingly benign colonialism.

Stylistically, these scenes are superhybrids. They have the detail and sweetness of folk paintings; a scale that's sometimes Abstract Expressionist; the sharp-focus of photography and the geometry and spatial tricks of hard-edge abstraction.

In "August," with its facing armchairs and end tables beneath a framed rubbing from Angkor Wat, the vividly grained parquet floor recedes at one angle through a door and at another through a broad archway. In "Blue Apartment," a nearly flat blue-patterned rectangle sort of resolves itself into a covered bed. These rooms and their contents must have helped Ms. Suss become an artist. We sense their hold on her and are alerted anew to the ones that haunt us.

- ROBERTA SMITH

Voon, Claire. "Paintings that Revel in the Wonder of Our Domestic Spaces." *Hyperallergic*. 18 May 2017. Online.

HYPERALLERGIC

GALLERIES

Paintings that Revel in the Wonder of Our Domestic Spaces

Becky Suss's paintings at Jack Shainman Gallery boldly usher the quiet comforts of home into the white-walled space.

Claire Voon | May 18, 2017

Becky Suss, "August" (2016) (all images ©Becky Suss, courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York unless otherwise noted)

Pristinely kept and replete with beautiful objects, the domestic spaces that Becky Suss paints are like photographs in interior design magazines that leave you coveting the lifestyles of strangers. But unlike those glossy spreads, the Philadelphia-based artist's oil paintings feel familiar, even though you've never stepped inside these particular bedrooms, libraries, and hallways before.

Seven of these large-scale works are currently on view at Jack Shainman gallery for Suss's solo show, *Homemaker*, where they boldly usher the quiet comforts of home into the sterile, white-walled space. Books, seashells, and other evocative trinkets such as a saxophone mouthpiece line shelves; a sliced grapefruit nestles in a bowl like a ritual breakfast for one; a closet door stands ajar to reveal soft flannel shirts and an unmarked box of potential secrets.

Becky Suss, "Red Apartment" (2016)

Suss began painting her detailed rooms after her grandparents' passings, memorializing the rooms of their house in vivid oils as a way to process her sudden inheritance of their countless belongings. For *Homemaker*, her new paintings are less faithful to reality: the rooms blend actual, lived spaces with Suss's imagined visions as well as details she looked up online.

In the expansive "August" (2016), for instance, a small library on the left emerges from memories of her therapist's office, while the marble mantlepiece in the central living room is a copy of one in her current house. The view out the window of apartment buildings is a replica of that in David Hockney's "Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy," minus the British painter's wispy foliage. For "Blue Apartment" (2016), Suss drew upon the architecture of an Upper East Side apartment belonging to her parent's friends, and filled the cozy bedroom with a number of her personal possessions.

These diverse sources aren't made explicit, but Suss's paintings immediately feel unreal because of their flatness, broad perspectives, and use of three-fourths scale — which makes these rooms seem enterable from afar, but up close, are clearly diminutive, and even dollhouse-like because of Suss's playful colors. But her careful and deliberate construction of them also lends them their sincerity and heartfelt associations of a relatable home. Her paintings celebrate the everyday environments that we may take for granted, and urge us to behold the wonder in our domestic spaces, which are stages for us to air our identity without bars. Our gaze is kept moving by the many curious objects and busy patterns, which encourage a meandering of another kind — to mine our own memories for places that hold meaning. Further inducing this psychological wandering are Suss's many connective furnishings, like doors, archways, mirrors, and windows that create continuous realms, like abstract, labyrinthine spaces of the mind.

Becky Suss, "Hallway" (2017)

The show also features about a dozen small-scale paintings of book covers and decorative objects, such as vases and wall art, that appear in her larger paintings. These extend the fictional architectural spaces into the gallery so it, too, becomes her own constructed, personal space — one that we can actually walk around in — with these particular, chosen articles speaking to her own associations of home.

Two paintings of embroidery are especially personal: the original needlepoint of an American flag by her great-grandmother who was a suffragette; and one of the Irish phrase of allegiance, "Erin Go Bragh," that hung in her grandmother's house. Suss painted them partly because she wanted to honor her own family of women homemakers — a word, she told me, for which she has a slight disdain because of its traditionally gendered meaning. With *Homemaker*, she reclaims the term, devoting herself to the domestic space, but to domains that are utterly of her own and that are fully under her control. The title is also a proud assertion of her sustained labor and successful career as a working female artist. More broadly, it is a testament to her power and presence today in a system that has always catered more to men.

Becky Suss, "Bathroom (Ming Green)" (2016)

Becky Suss, “Bedroom with Peacock Feathers” (2017)

Becky Suss, “Home Office” (2016)

Becky Suss, “Blue Apartment” (2016)

Becky Suss, “Still Life” (2017)

Becky Suss, “Stars and Stripes For-Ever” (2016)

Becky Suss, detail of “August” (2016) (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Weiss, Haley. “At Home With Becky Suss.” *Interview Magazine.* 09 May 2017. Online.

Interview

ART

AT HOME WITH BECKY SUSS

By HALEY WEISS
hoto r hy JACQUELINE HARRIET

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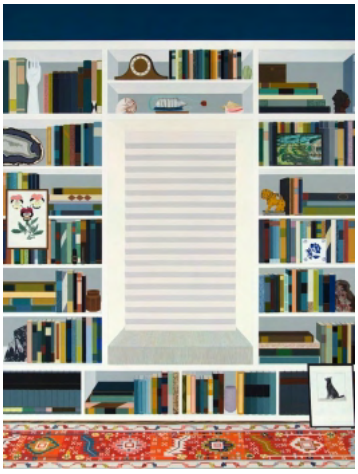


BECKY SUSS IN NEW YORK, APRIL 2017. PORTRAIT: JACQUELINE HARRIET.

"I know that that word elicits a sort of cringe from a lot of people," says Becky Suss of "Homemaker," the title of her current exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. Suss admits that even she, at first, was resistant to using the term—one that's often used to diminish women—to describe her new body of work. But that very "recoiling" is what convinced her she had to, and is part of what spurred her to paint large-scale domestic interiors, void of people but replete with objects. In doing so, she elevates the domestic sphere, honoring its importance and acknowledging its invisibility in daily life. "If I have any goal for having that title

be a success," says Suss, "it would be that people can leave the show with a little more respect for that word than they did when they walked into it."

Suss, who primarily painted landscapes before focusing on interiors and items related to her own family history, describes creating this body of work as "running on instincts." After undergoing a multi-year period of psychoanalysis and the trauma of the 2016 election, Suss found a new compassion for her mother's choice to leave school and build a home, and a new respect for the women who shape lives through the spaces they furnish. She painted hyper-detailed works "that in some ways are the stages for everyday life, the backdrop to what we do every day, of our own stories," and small-scale "satellite" paintings that point toward specific objects within the larger canvases. From the pile of a rug and the squares of a quilt hung on a wall, to a Hamsa hung above a bed or a ship in a bottle placed on a bookshelf, one cannot escape the feeling that every thing has been meticulously placed. You can imagine who lives in these rooms, while recalling the halls and items that construct your own experience.

Each choice Suss makes is a meeting of the aesthetic and storytelling. An apt example is *Mary* (2016), a satellite painting which depicts a book by Sholem Asch that sat in Suss's great aunt and uncle's house, which she frequently visited while growing up. The simple question of "what is that?" unfurled histories both personal and broad. Asch, a famed Yiddish writer, was related to Suss's great aunt, and his son, Moses Asch, was the founder of Folkways Records (now Smithsonian Folkways Records), which released hits by Woodie Guthrie and Lead Belly, and happened to be the soundtrack of Suss's childhood. ("I thought every kid listened to that until I was 25 and was like, 'Oh, you didn't have those children's records?'") This experience of Suss's is one that many face, blindly: homes and their objects hold histories, if one only asks. As Suss puts it, that book was "the key to a story that was in plain sight for my whole life."

Interview recently spoke to the 36-year-old artist on the occasion of her show's opening, a few weeks after visiting her studio in Philadelphia.

HALEY WEISS: How do you feel about domesticity now?

BECKY SUSS: There's a way to look at it that has to do with how I think about the domestic within the context of the gallery. I can talk about that in a sort of art speak way, and I do have feelings about that and how it gets to be this thing that is simultaneously completely undervalued and absolutely relied upon. I was talking about it with my mother last night; it's this perfect example of how women don't get to win either way, it's a lose-lose situation: they're absolutely, completely depended on, and yet dismissed at the same time.

When it comes to my personal understanding, I wish I could live two parallel lives. I wish that I could live in that domestic space. I grew up in the '80s and '90s with the feeling that, "I'm supposed to be a professional," and that there's something wrong with being a woman who makes the decision to be a homemaker—not because my parents deliberately did it to me, they just wanted me to have every option, but I think I internalized, "I have to be a success." What that means is that I have to be a professional. Looking at it now, I can absolutely understand my mom. She was in graduate school for religion and the big shot professor in the department basically groped her. She felt like, "Here are my two options: I can leave or I can put up with this." There wasn't a third option; you couldn't get him fired, you couldn't get him spoken to by the administration. It was 1969 or 1970—it wasn't not going to happen. That being said, my mom was really happy with the decision that she made to stay home with us, and that was something that up until very recently had been really hard for me to understand. So when I think about the context of my own life, I wish that I could have these two parallel lives sometimes, because I really would love to spend the time managing my own domestic space, whereas in reality I spend 12 hours a day painting. But, to be able to paint these domestic interiors in some way scratches an itch. There are parts of making these paintings that are really greedy for me. I find a 100,000-dollar rug online that I will never have and would never buy, and I can just put it in the painting and I get to look at it. The owning it isn't a big deal. I kind of feel that way about the domesticity, too: I get to spend 12 hours working through, organizing these spaces. They're in a much more pristine, controlled context, because my actual home, in a week it's covered in dog hair and dust and the cat's scratching at the wooden shelf—it's totally different.

In terms of the painting world, I do feel like sometimes there's a dismissal of subject matter: "What is it? It's *just* a room. It's *just* a domestic interior. What does it mean?" There's this idea that somehow it's not terribly meaningful. But so much of our time is spent in these domestic spaces; they are where the scenes of our lives play out. Again, it's something that's undervalued. It's taken for granted in some ways, like it's an undeserving thing for a big painting to be made about.

WEISS: That's why I found it refreshing when you said, in your studio and now again, that if you like something online, you can just add it your painting. There's no shame in that. Things can be beautiful and you can want to see them, and I think that ties into the building of a domestic space. There's value in the aesthetic; we build these places for our comfort, to reference our history. You have a lot of cultural icons in these paintings too. It's about how people display their past and live comfortably in the present.

SUSS: Yes, and though some of the objects are chosen because I like them, a lot of them reveal a story, even to me. I will pick something because aesthetically, it's what the painting needs and I like it, and then I'll research it—whether it's an object, a houseware, a lamp or a pitcher, or something like that—I'll find out who designed it, and it'll be such an interesting story.

WEISS: Like the wallpaper.

SUSS: Like the William Morris wallpaper [in *Hallway*, 2017]. To look into William Morris a little bit more, when this is something that is sort of ubiquitous—certain neighborhoods in Philadelphia have a lot of foyers that have William Morris wallpaper—and find out that he was a socialist, he had this background as an activist, but then, when he really made it and he had a factory, he was conflicted. He wasn't the greatest guy. He had better standards for his workers than a lot of factories, but he didn't go all in with the ideals that he talked about. It's amazing when I pick something for an aesthetic reason or a sentimental reason—I don't shy away from the use of that word because I like it, I think it's very useful and it's meaningful—but then I'll research it and realize, "Oh my god, there's this whole other rich story to it." That helps me to build on my understanding of what it means, what stories objects can reveal.

WEISS: You also have this painting of a cookbook [*The New Moosewood Cookbook*, 2017], and you have another one in the back room [*Victory Cookbook,* 2017]. I don't remember seeing those before, so how did they become a part of the series?

SUSS: They are new. I like to have these satellite paintings, which are the small paintings that relate the larger paintings. I think that they anchor your position in the space of the gallery and expand the space depicted in the painting into the gallery a bit, because it stretches it out, and you can understand a kitchen [near] a cookbook. The other reason is, when I was talking to you before about the embroidery and thinking about this space of domesticity—these women's spaces being taken for granted, and then also completely dismissed—I feel like cookbooks are a wonderful example of that. *The Moosewood Cookbook* is a book that a lot of people relate to and a lot of people have, so people have their own specific associations to it. The other thing is, as much as somebody will use a cookbook, they're not valued in the same way that novels are. They're treated in a completely different way. I have a Fannie Farmer cookbook that was my mom's that I think was her mom's, and I will love that and always have that, [but] it's not valued in the same way.

WEISS: You've used the metaphor of keeping the window open in these paintings, which you do for the time period by not including super contemporary objects, but also the unknown light source. I always just assumed the people were out of the house at the time, and it's waiting for them to enter, but what if they don't return? There's a creepy, haunting aspect.

SUSS: Absolutely. All of those things I think about a lot. It's also just an intuition. When I think about these paintings, and that neutral light source and the empty house, I didn't start doing it consciously, but I go back and I think about the way that my house felt in the middle of the day when I came home from school and nobody was there. There was something very specific to that sort of emptiness, and I think about that a lot with these paintings. I don't think I did that deliberately, but it reminds me of it, and I always felt like that time of day was always really weird.

WEISS: I think of coming home sick from school in the middle of the day—

SUSS: Oh, yes, being home from school sick, for sure—that's very much the way that this [looks].

WEISS: You're confronted with, "This person, who I love and see when I'm home at night and in the morning, they're here for a lot of the day. What are they doing?"

SUSS: And thinking, in some ways, "It'll be so fun if I stay home from school"—not fun, but I never liked school. Even though I did pretty well, I was always was trying to not go to school. When I would stay home, I remember there was always a little bit of a disappointment, like, "This is all it is?" I've never talked about this before, but it's really accurate.

WEISS: It goes back to the whole appreciation of the domestic space, that this life is largely invisible to you. And even when it's made visible, it's this weird, uncanny thing.

SUSS: And it's completely common at the same time, which, I hope, is one of the things that comes across in the paintings.

WEISS: I think it opens up some empathy, too. It makes me think of my mom, at home, when I was off at school. You've said that the characters absent from these paintings are still you, your family, and family friends, and you've talked about maybe doing something more fictional in the future. One place I see that is in the worn chair in *Hallway*, because you think, "Who sits there on the phone?" Are you thinking about those things? Is that something you're interested in yet?

SUSS: I really work on a continuum and I'm not deliberately thinking, "Okay, this is over and the next thing starts." It's very hard for me to do things that deliberately at least immediately. Usually I'll recognize that I'm doing it, and once I recognize that I'm already doing it, then I can push it a little bit more. It'll surface when I start imagining characters that can offer up different things. My family has a lot of shit and so do my parents, so who knows if I'll ever run out of those things, but I feel like it will give me so much more ability to tell stories, build compositions, and build exciting spaces in the paintings. It is very hard for me to do something without objects that I care about, but maybe caring about them turns into something different that has to do more with building these characters in my mind that don't ever actually manifest in the painting, but their decision-making and their objects do. Even though I never really followed up on it in any professional or adult capacity, short stories have been really important to me, and I read them a lot. I took this one workshop in undergrad and I still think about all of the things that we did in that class. The idea of narrative building, even if it's only for me to have and eventually use, is not something that's outside of what I think about.

"HOMEMAKER" IS ON VIEW AT JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY'S 20TH STREET LOCATION IN NEW YORK THROUGH JUNE 3, 2017. FOR MORE ON BECKY SUSS, VISIT HER WEBSITE.

Pogrebin, Robin. "Becky Suss's Painted Memories Have a Solo Show in Chelsea." *The New York Times.* 27 April 2017. Online.

The New York Times

Becky Suss's Painted Memories Have a Solo Show in Chelsea

By Robin Pogrebin - April 27, 2017

Becky Suss with her dog, Baja, in her Philadelphia studio. Her first solo exhibition opened in Chelsea on Thursday. Credit Agaton Strom for The New York Times

When her grandparents' Long Island home was sold and demolished, the artist Becky Suss ended up with much of its contents in her Philadelphia studio: sculptures, paintings, pillows, vases. So she started painting rooms filled with them.

The resulting body of work — large-scale flattened images of domestic interiors — was exhibited at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 2015 and featured at the Independent Art Fair in New York last year.

The Manhattan dealer Jack Shainman is now giving Ms. Suss her own show at his West 20th Street gallery. “They’re just exquisite works — the compositions, the colors, the light,” he said.

Though the paintings’ lack of perspective create a childlike charm, Mr. Shainman described them as “very sophisticated.”

“The grid within the grid within the grid,” he said. “The whole painting is a play on formalism.”

The show, “Homemaker,” features new paintings that grew more out of the artist’s imagination than her personal experience. “I had been thinking about bringing the home into the gallery and having the art in the home and the home in the art,” Ms. Suss, 36, said in a telephone interview.

“It’s a step away from the autobiography of the previous work,” Ms. Suss said. “Thinking about how paintings can become this place where distortions that happen in remembering things become legitimized, flattened into a new object.”

Having grown up just outside Philadelphia, Ms. Suss returned after graduating from Williams College, joining an artist collective. She worked in her studio by day and as a bartender at night before earning her M.F.A. from the University of California, Berkeley.

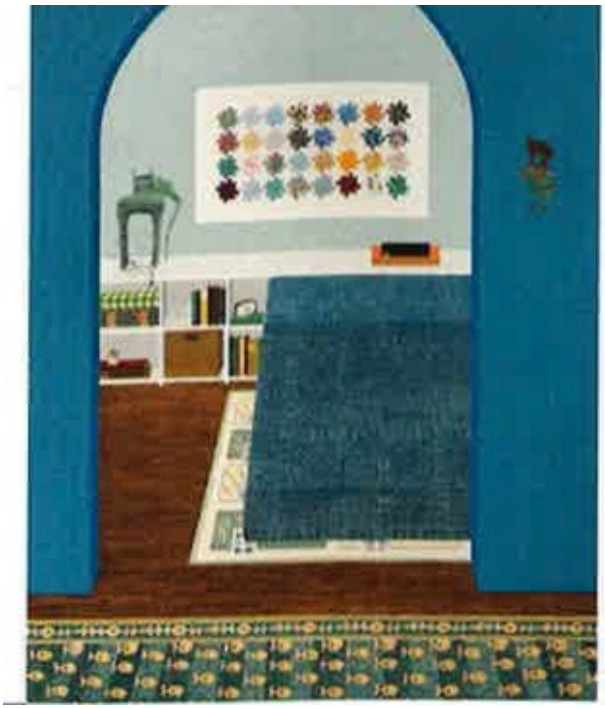
She doesn’t have to tend bar anymore. “I get to just be an artist,” Ms. Suss said, “and that just feels totally unreal.”

The Shainman show is a major step forward; it features several large paintings as well as about a dozen smaller works. “It’s definitely a whole other level of exposure,” Ms. Suss said.

Although the body of work is new, Ms. Suss said it still feels connected to her original series, which captured pieces of her past. “Whether it’s a place that I remember or a place that I’ve imagined,” she said, “the physical act of having gone through making it releases it from being precious — something I have to hold on to.”

INTERIOR DESIGN

Spring 2017



the psychology of space...

Witness her meditative, detailed domestic tableaus, and you could conclude that **Becky Suss** is an architect. But she's a celebrated painter having her first solo show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, April 27 to June 3, the oil on canvas *Blue Apartment* among the large-scale works.

INTERVIEW

Kate Kraczon and Becky Suss

Becky Suss's meditative, large-scale paintings—augmented by smaller studies in oil and ceramic—reimagine the domestic spaces of her relatives with a focus on her late grandparents' midcentury suburban home. With their flattened architecture and exaggerated perspective, Suss's canvases memorialize their collected art and objects through an intimate, archaeological process that opens familial narratives to class, politics, and religion.

KATE KRACZON : Let's begin with the two earliest canvases in the exhibition, *Kensington, Summer* [2010–11] and *Kensington, Winter* [2010], which I initially saw in your 2011 Space 1026 show after you returned to Philadelphia from graduate school: Can you talk about the transition from the more expansive landscapes you were doing at the time to these smaller canvases with their tighter sense of space and perspective?[1] And your subsequent shift from the smaller canvases to the seven-by-ten-foot *76 Meadow Woods Road* from 2012?

BECKY SUSS : *Kensington, Summer* and *Kensington, Winter* were part of a series of paintings where, for the first time, I was approaching specific content in a really direct way that had a lot to do with depiction. I made *Kensington, Winter* first and it grew out of a real desire to make a painting of a place that I missed, in part as a way to miss it less and feel closer to it. I was living in Berkeley and I was homesick for Philadelphia and my backyard—and the snow and winter. And I didn't overthink it, I didn't make any deliberate conceptual

1 Space 1026 is an artist collective in Philadelphia that was founded in 1997. Suss was a member in 2003–2007.

decisions about the flatness or perspective. I just went into it thinking, "I'm gonna make this very direct and simple painting of my backyard."

KATE : And did you paint it in the backyard, in Kensington?

BECKY : I painted *Winter* in California and *Summer* back in Philadelphia.

KATE : Did you work from a photo?

BECKY : I must have—it's always how I work. I always have something like four pretty bad photos and a sketch or two that I did from life, and I'll search Google images for a fence or a certain kind of tree or something that I need to add. I had photos from other seasons too, not just winter. I remember there was so much snow that winter when I was in California, and I was so jealous and I missed it so much.

KATE : I was about to ask about the snow (LAUGHS).

BECKY : Yeah (LAUGHS). And Micah [Micah Danges, Suss' husband] would send these pictures to me of the backyard where the dog is up to her armpits in the snow, and the old dead vines on the fence are just piled with snow, like a foot high. It was something that I missed so much. And there was that great feeling of all of that snow blanketing everything, transforming it into another sort of little imaginary world, or something like that. And I've always understood snow as this totally transformational element that automatically makes even the most familiar place magical and surreal, which makes snowy landscapes wonderful subjects for paintings. Before I made that painting, I made another snow painting that I gave to my friend Brody Reiman and another that a collector in San Francisco bought. The collector had lived in San Francisco for years and years, but had spent considerable time on the East Coast earlier in her life, and she saw the painting at my MFA show at the Berkeley Art Museum and bought it because the long shadows of trees on snow reminded her so much of those winters from long ago.

KATE : Were those landscapes imagined or were you working from images?

BECKY : It was a combination. Actually that one that the collector bought, *1974, 1984*, had to do with the Werner Herzog short film, *The Great Ecstasy of the Woodcarver Steiner*, about the famous ski jumper Walter Steiner. There are these amazing shots in that film that are almost aerial views of the hillside, looking down at the forest in the snow. It's this beautiful pattern of evergreen trees covered in snow against the white backdrop of the ground. And along with the score—who wrote that score again?

KATE : Was it Popol Vuh?

BECKY : I think it was. With the music, it is so otherworldly and those moments transcend any narrative in the film, but the film is still very much a documentary pursuit. So the specific content—the trees in the snow—was relevant to what I had been working on anyway, but just as important to me at the time was this notion of something existing simultaneously as documentary and as something that feels like art or poetry or something else.

That painting of the snow came from watching that film a lot, and showing it to my students at Berkeley—as a way of saying, "Look at how art can be both an incredibly direct documentary film and at the same exact time it can be this

whole other thing!" So the painting was a combination of that film, the landscape of my childhood neighborhood, and the way that when everything is covered in snow I have, and always have had, a totally different perspective of a very familiar place. I think a lot of people do. It just shifts slightly, but I understand the longitude and latitude of the space in a different way—north will feel a little bit more to the east or west.

KATE : You introduce the frame of a fence in *Kensington, Summer* and *Kensington, Winter*, and then the next major canvas is *76 Meadow Woods Road*, which is the frame of a large picture window. You've said before that you like the idea that your canvases become a part of the gallery architecture in some way, that the wall becomes an extension of the canvas.

BECKY : Yes, absolutely. Those elements are critical to how the painting itself is able to relate to the room that it hangs in. In *76 Meadow Woods Road*, the relationship between the frame of the window and the edge of the painting itself allows the painting to then have a very specific and deliberate relationship with the wall of the gallery, which ultimately determines the way that the viewer relates to the depicted space.

KATE : Particularly when *76 Meadow Woods Road* was installed at Vox Populi Gallery in 2012. It really dominated the space because of the small size of their individual galleries. But there was also a push beyond the edge of the canvas.

BECKY : Yeah (LAUGHS). I just did this little interview and they asked about my "process," and it made me think about the very first impulse I have with each work, where a notion or idea will strike me that will become the foundation of the painting. With *76 Meadow Woods Road*, I thought, "I want to make a painting of this window (from my grandparents' home), and two elements are going to be critical; it has to be very big—life size or larger—and the wall of the painting beyond the window frame has to feel like a continuous plane with the wall of gallery." It is the only one of these paintings that I made larger than life size, and I think it was in part to ensure that there would be that push beyond the edge of the canvas, and also because in all of the other paintings of interiors there is some floor and ceiling depicted, so you understand that the space is receding no matter how close you stand to the painting. That wasn't true with *76 Meadow Woods Road*, because it was just a huge window.

KATE : The painting is based on your grandparents' home and the objects in that house, but were you thinking about the introduction of the large picture window into American suburban architecture in the 1950s, and the inside-outside, exteriority-interiority relationship this produced in terms of private and public space?

BECKY : Yeah, I mean I was thinking generally about the trend in mid-century architecture to bring the outside in, and in some ways that made it very easy to transition from years of landscape painting to making these interiors, because I got to include so much landscape so naturally, especially in *76 Meadow Woods Road*. I don't know that I was thinking about the picture window consciously, but looking back I can understand more clearly how much all of the objects in these paintings are stand-ins for a value structure, and to place those objects in a large picture window certainly has a lot to do with displaying and communicating that value system to everyone who walks by.

My grandparents bought that house in 1953, the year it was built, and then lived in it until they both died—he died after her in 2011—and the house was demolished the following year. So I have photographs of the entire life of the house itself, and one of the things that changed at some point was that they had a picture window on the front of the house, too—the painting depicts the back of the house—but at some point they remodeled and blocked it out, maybe when they expanded the kitchen.

KATE : That is also something that's transitioned in suburban architecture because of privacy concerns.

BECKY : Yeah, that could have been part of it—it's great though because even now I think, "Oh, I don't know, I'm gonna go back and dig through these photos and look, and I can figure out when and how exactly it changed." That's part of why their home is such a treasure in a way that my parents' house won't ever be. My own familiarity with the house I grew up in doesn't demand the same sort of research—there's something very compelling to me about this place that I was very—but not completely—familiar with. And then having all of these photos and documents allows me to discover more about it years after its demolition and my grandparents' deaths.

KATE : And we've talked about "archaeol ogy" as a way of approaching their objects, mapping how they were placed to determine their use.

BECKY : Yes.

KATE : Right, and that's something that I realized gradually as I engaged with your work over these last three years. I initially assumed you pulled objects out of their collection and were fetishizing these objects individually, but you're interested in the use-value, or aesthetic and decorative values, and how they reveal matters of taste, class, and education, and in the way your grandparents arranged them: the curation of the house.

BECKY : Yes, and they have layers of meaning: there is my own nostalgic meaning, the objective meaning of the item itself, and the anthropological meaning or the way the object functioned in the culture at the time—and now maybe as well. The books are an interesting example of this. There is the difference between the way we can understand an individual book and its contents versus a wall of books or the book as a symbol, which gets at the idea that books in general are valuable because they represent learning and being informed citizens regardless of title and content.

KATE : What is the scale of *76 Meadow Woods Road*?

BECKY : It might be one to one. It's so hard to say, because the house doesn't exist anymore. It was a very big window. And it spanned a nook that is depicted in *Reading Room*, which was the one older painting in this series that didn't make it into the show. It was the first painting in the series and it includes a portion of that window next to a huge bookshelf, a chair, and a little reading table. In *76 Meadow Woods Road* some of the sculptures in the painting are definitely bigger than the real sculptures because the painting demanded them to be larger.

KATE : And the larger canvases in the exhibition are three-quarters size, while the smaller canvases are one to one?

BECKY : Pretty close to three quarters, yes.

KATE : What made you decide on that scale?

BECKY : It's important to me to that the paintings are close enough to life-scale to allow the viewer to feel that the gallery is an extension of the space within the painting. But it is also important to me that there is an element of the paintings that has something to do with play/imagination/memory, and I think that the slightly smaller than life scale does that.

KATE : A slightly uncanny shift… .

BECKY : Yes.

KATE : You've mentioned before that as the viewer approaches these canvases they seem one to one in scale, but the three-quarters scale is ultimately revealed once you are standing in front of the painting.

BECKY : Yes. It allows you to be in the gallery itself and in the world of the painting at the same time. It also keeps the painting situated in the world of painting. Their flatness and perspective do, too; they tell you that these are not just reproductions from a photograph. When I was an undergraduate in the late 1990s and early 2000s there was still that question, especially about representational painting: "why painting when we have photography?" I don't think painters today get asked that over and over again the way that we did then, maybe it was because that time was sort of the dawn of digital photography for everyone, but it always felt like you had to defend why you were choosing to paint.

KATE : The mood is back to painting now—

BECKY : Yes! The mood is back to painting! That *almost* life-size scale relates to how the paintings are *almost* normal depictions, but they aren't at all. That tension between clear representation and the slightly abnormal scale/perspective/light is why the paintings work—they are almost something, almost normal maybe.

KATE : It doesn't allow your eye, your gaze, to get lazy. Something's off.

BECKY : (LAUGHS.) You can't get lazy, you can't make the shortcuts we make in the real world because the logic of the paintings don't work that way—the floor is tipped up and the reflection is wrong, for example. And there aren't a ton of places to rest in the compositions even though the paintings as a whole are pretty restful and still.

KATE : There are moments where you've incorporated grids and busy pattern, but also large of blocks of color—moments of rest.

BECKY : Yes, and when the pattern or grid covers enough area you can rest there as well.

KATE : Which I love because of ICA's important history with Agnes Martin.[2]

BECKY : Yes, actually I just recently visited her room at Dia Beacon, and there were some pre-grid paintings that are basically landscapes—horizon with a sun form—and I was thinking about her transition away from the biomorphic works and sort of landscape pieces to the grid.

For me, after years of landscape painting, where you can put a horizon into a composition and automatically have this magnet for the eye to rest on, the pace of the interiors feels so different. You can certainly enter into them and look at the paintings within the painting and the patterns, but each one has a wall that blocks you or an upturned floor that pushes you back pretty quickly. Even *Kensington, Winter* and *Kensington, Summer*—the only landscapes—they are totally fenced in except for that tiny bit of sky.

2 Agnes Martin's 1973 solo exhibition at ICA was the first retrospective exhibition of her work. At the artist's request, sales from her 1975 Pace Gallery exhibition formed an endowment for ICA.

KATE : Your approach to backyard foliage is very similar to the patterning of the Martinique wallpaper in *Bedroom 2* or the bedspread in *Bedroom*, a flattened use of space even when depicting deep, plant-based imagery.

BECKY : Yeah, the patterned wallpaper and bedspreads were a really natural transition from the landscape/foliage paintings.

KATE : Or perhaps you treat all your vegetation in decorative terms, like wallpaper? Charles Burchfield is an artist I recognized in your work immediately.

BECKY : I love Burchfield, and in his wallpapers the patterned planes are a different kind of window—it doesn't have to do with depth in the same way, but it does have to do with entering into some other imaginary world. When I was a kid I remember being so intrigued by floral wallpaper or a toile de Jouy pattern, they were a whole other imaginary world. I feel that way about Burchfield's wallpaper and paintings. Little details and pattern are magical and have the ability to transport.

KATE : You've increasingly flattened space over the years.

BECKY : I think again it's another way to make it clear that I am very deliberately building a painting, that it is not illusionistic space. The painting is certainly representational, but the flatness and skewed perspective remind the viewer that before this is a living room or bedroom, it is a painting. It's also always been my style naturally to flatten and stack thing. This is present in even my earliest—and most embarrassing—work.

KATE : And your use of oil is flattened as well, though you achieve this incredible variety of simulated textures on your canvases.

BECKY : Yes, that was a huge change. You can see in *Kensington, Summer* and *Kensington, Winter*, those are pretty impasto paintings. I made landscape paintings for ten years and so much of that was about the process of painting as it related to the process of remembering and the geological processes of changing land. I would scrape and rebuild and find the painting as I worked. So when I started doing the interiors and I made that first painting (*Reading Room*) that I didn't want to put in this show, I still hadn't figured out how different the paint application had to be for these paintings. The surface of that painting is all over the place and just not right—the interiors demand a different approach. Now the re-painting process has turned into a drawing process. I'll make preliminary drawings, one after another, until I figure it out. Sometimes I even make a full-scale, full-color sketch. Then, when I start the actual painting the paint can remain thin and flat, but the composition has been labored so it doesn't feel unresolved. I just get to that point in a different way. A big part of why the paint has to stay thin/flat is so that that painting-to-gallery-wall relationship can work. It would make it about something very different if they were made with more paint, maybe it would be too much about surface. The thin paint allows for illusionistic space even in a very large painting, which is important.

KATE : Your spaces contain glass, but it's completely invisible. You're not painting light reflections or anything to indicate that there are windows; we know because of the frame.

BECKY : Yes, it's true. I know that the window glass is not even close to it, but because of how representational the paintings are I think that negating the glass is another reminder that these paintings are not attempting to be photorealistic in anyway. The render-

ing of glass in a painting reminds me so much of trump l'oeil and photorealism; I think that is part of the decision to steer clear of it. I have painted glass, in a small painting called *Cookie Jar* [2012], where an old cookie jar sits on a glass shelf, but the glass is really an object, its substantial and the edge is dark teal and at least a half-inch thick—so maybe I either negate it or completely make it into a hefty object.

KATE : You're referencing the way your grandparents lived in a 1955 suburban modernist house, but there are no televisions in your paintings. And many other artists—Dan Graham, for instance—have dealt with the inside-outside, the transparency, the large glass windows in these homes, but also television as a portal between private and public.

BECKY : The absence of the television is as much a declaration of values in these paintings as is the presence of books. I think that they had a television in the bedroom, and maybe a little one that they never used in the kitchen, so they weren't totally extreme, but they were pretty anti-TV. At the end of my grandmother's life all she did was watch episodes of *M*A*S*H* with closed captions (she was deaf), which always seemed odd because my grandfather had fought in World War II—and the Korean War wasn't really the war that they were involved in—but there was the whole underlying left leaning, anti-war agenda that definitely appealed to her, so I guess that was why she liked it so much. Anyway, television was always something pretty bad in our family. My father won't watch TV, and he hasn't watched it like a normal person for the last fifteen years. Books were seen as nourishment and TV was junk food.

KATE : Doesn't he know we're in the "renaissance" of television right now?

BECKY : I know! I always tell him, and he says, "I'm gonna wait until I'm too fucked up to do anything else and then I'm gonna watch everything." Maybe that was my grandmothers reasoning as well. Maybe one day I'll make a painting that has *M*A*S*H* on the screen with closed captions.

KATE : The television will enter your room.

BECKY : Yeah, but in its own very particular way. That television would have never lived in those spaces. The television lived in its own world, it was tucked away.

KATE : This is a good entry point into class. I'm first-generation upper-middle class and refuse to allow a television in the "public" space of my home.

BECKY : (LAUGHS.) Yeah, that's so funny, it's such a perfect recognizable example of a totally different slice of American culture. We had a TV in the "TV room" growing up and that was it, no TV in the bedroom or kitchen ever—that would never have been OK—and I still don't have one in those rooms, but I do have a huge TV in the living room and I love it. I think there are so many people who live with three TVs running at all times. The emphasis on books instead is such a Jewish thing to me. There is this emphasis on the pursuit of knowledge and questioning—even in conservative and Orthodox Judaism, there is a real emphasis on asking questions. And, although the expression "people of the book" when applied to Jews has to do with the *Torah*, I've always understood it as a much broader description. And although my family was not particularly religious, like the vast majority of secular Jews in America and across the world, that focus on learning was something that stayed with them.

KATE : What's the timeline for your grandparents' lives, exactly?

BECKY : So my grandfather's brothers were born in Russia.

KATE : What part of Russia? Russia, or one of the satellite states? My grandmother came from Ukraine.

BECKY : All of the papers say Russia, but over the years I had heard Lithuania as well. Wolf Susselman, my great-grandfather, was born in Pinsk which is now in Belarus. They were mostly part of that grand immigration from Russia and Eastern Europe around the turn of the century: Wolf first arrived in 1904.

KATE : That's around the time my grandfather came over.

BECKY : Yes, I think that was the major wave. So Wolf came, and his wife Rebecca, my namesake, came with him, then she went back to her family in Pinsk with their first son Jack because they had no money, then when Wolf finally got a job as a court translator she moved back and had my grandfather in 1920. We have some amazing crib sheets that belonged to Wolf. He has the words for all sorts of crimes, because he needed to know them as a translator during trials, so—murder, rape, sodomy, adultery, etc.—in five different languages. On my grandmother's side it was a similar timeline and story, maybe they came a little earlier—Louie was the other great-grandfather, and he was in the rag trade.

KATE : Can you tell me about the way you use books in these canvases as indicators of cultural and familial history? Some people are very open about what they actually read on their bookshelves, some people don't have bookshelves, some people have a "curated" sense of what they're going allow on their bookshelves. I certainly have books on my shelves that I bought and have never read, though I intended to. We keep them on the shelves and they tell a story that maybe isn't accurate about what our reading interests are, but our aspirational reading lists. Books are almost like characters in your paintings because there are no human bodies except for re-creations of photographs or paintings within the domestic space of the canvas. And the books migrate; they appear in several different canvases, or as ceramic objects.

BECKY : They are definitely characters. They are also a constant reminder of the fact that the people who inhabit the spaces have a certain set of values. They are also clues or tools that a viewer can use to construct a story. When they are identifiable books—the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and *Salvation*—they are evidence or stand-ins for a specific story, and not just the story that is between the book's cover. The *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* was a book that I never even cracked until, I don't know, my grandparents died, at least—maybe even after that, maybe even after having the book in my own house. But the spine of the book was always important to me. There were these big built-in bookshelves all over their house, and a lot of the books were old, leather-bound books, not terribly exciting to a kid. But this one had an amazing cover with red flowers and gold embossing. It was always so alluring but I knew that it was a book for grown-ups—that if I took it down to read it, it wouldn't make any sense to me. But eventually, when I began to understand the content and the really complicated history of the book, it became even more appealing. Throughout the twentieth century it became really popular in Europe and the United States, so many people read and memorized the poems and recited them, and the book was a real piece of popular

culture. For a Persian text from the tenth century the poems seem really modern. And then the translation itself is a huge part of the book's history. Before Edward FitzGerald translated it, it really wasn't a notable piece of writing within Persian culture or history—in fact, Omar Khayyám was much better known as a mathematician and astronomer.

KATE : Of course, there's the romanticization of Middle Eastern culture at that time.

BECKY : The translation is generally understood as nearly a collaborative between FitzGerald and Khayyám, and FitzGerald —a renowned writer in his own right— is understood as a huge contributor to not just the popularity but also to the quality of the text. This dynamic brings up issues of colonialism and the exoticism of the East, which are then complicated by the fact that FitzGerald's relationship to the work wasn't strictly exploitation at all, there was a lot of value in his translation. It's such an interesting complicated history, and then to think about all of this in the context of what Iran is today. I couldn't have hoped for this beautiful little book to offer up more of a perfect reason to make a painting of it. The Edmund Dulac illustrations in that volume of the book are *so* romanticized. And that's everywhere in modernism, and it was all over my grandparents' house. Where that book was exotic and romantic, the other book, *Salvation*, tells a story almost at the other end of the spectrum. Instead, it reminds me of Jewish immigrants coming to the new world and the struggle and almost hiding or leaving their history back in the old country. It was a Jewish book by a Jewish writer that is a tribute of sorts to a lost religious world; it highlights the tension between piety and goodness, and a fading Hasidic life in the face of a new more modern world. I have a much more personal relationship to that book as well; in the painting *1919 Chestnut St (Three Cities, The Mother, Kiddush Hashem, Salvation, The Apostle, Mary, Nazarene)* [2015] you can see the seven books in the center of the painting. These were books that lived on a shelf separate from other books at my great aunt and uncle's Philadelphia apartment. Until my great aunt was in her nineties we didn't know or ask what they were—eventually we discovered that she had a different mother from my grandmother, a never before disclosed family secret, and that her biological uncle was a famous Yiddish writer named Sholem Asch. He stayed in touch with her and sent her every book he wrote as it was published; they have loving inscriptions to her on the inside covers. These books were windows into another world of Jewish communities as the old country started to modernize, but also, as objects in my great aunt's home, they were clues into this whole other part of her life and my own family history.

After learning about the Sholem Asch connection I was reading a biography about Woody Guthrie and I stumbled onto a sentence that said that Moses Asch, who started Folkways Smithsonian Records, was the son of the Yiddish writer Sholem Asch, and I thought, "Oh my God! That was my great-aunt's cousin!" And then I asked her and she was like, "Oh yeah, I knew Moses, yeah that was my cousin… ." These books were evidence that was hiding in plain sight. I think of so many of the items in the paintings as the same thing: they all hold their own story as an object, and then a whole different story as a piece of my family history.

KATE : Can you tell me more about your work in ceramics? You've included a number of ceramic objects in the ICA exhibition, including several stacks of books.

BECKY : I took a class at the Clay Studio, which is a great resource here in Philadelphia. The class was a Christmas gift from my mother and I started taking the class for fun, and then realized that the ceramics were a really great way to highlight the relationship between the space depicted in large paintings and the space of the gallery itself—to sort of confuse the space just a bit: the space that the viewer physically stands in and the space that they look into. There was also something compelling about making a three-dimensional object that was "flatter" in a way then the two-dimensional version of the same object.

KATE : Did graduate school in San Francisco influence your interest in ceramics?

BECKY : You know I didn't do any ceramics when I was there, but it was a hotbed for innovative ceramics, especially during the Funk movement. There were so many exciting ceramics going on out there with Richard Shaw, Ron Nagle, and Robert Arneson. And I did work with Richard Shaw at Berkeley—he continues to be such a huge figure in the ceramic world and he is just an amazing person and mind. I worked with him but not in ceramics, and I wish that I had done it then. I thought, "Oh, I should take a class with Richard—I should work with Richard." and I didn't. He was an advisor and came to my studio and sat in on all of my reviews, and I wonder if I became interested in working with clay in part because of my work with Richard. Ron Nagle taught at Mills, and I almost went there in part because I wanted to work with him, so ceramics were definitely on my mind even if I didn't make any while I was in graduate school.

KATE : It's like the Imagists in Chicago. If you go to school there, or work there in the arts, the presence is unavoidable.

BECKY : Yeah, it's there.

BECKY : And then I worked with Squeak Carnwath, who's a painter but was trained as a ceramicist. She is the most pro-painting painter that you'll ever meet—she says painting is the queen of the arts or the god of the arts or something. But she started as a ceramicist and I could always see in her work how oil paint and clay have a specific relationship as mediums. And the ceramic books are great for me because I can be a little bit more of a novice with the sculptures. I don't have full control. I don't know what I'm doing. I've been painting for a long time, and I have a very different disciplined practice, so I think it's hard for me to do that with paint. And the paintings don't demand that I do that, the paintings need to be the way that they are. But it's nice to have a space to work outside painting that allows more freedom and play, to loosen up a bit.

KATE : And the vases?

BECKY : The vases do the same thing. I think that they were lucky in the sense that I knew I wanted to do the books, and then I wanted to remake the bust sculpture from an ugly old sculpture that my great Uncle Sid made, and I wanted one more ceramic item to punctuate the space. I had made this sort of three-tiered, mid-century flower vase in *Dining Room (Verve magazine, vol. 1, nos. 1 and 2)* [2015], and even though the painting is very flat like all the rest of the canvases, that form was fairly volumetric. This vase was such a perfect way to push the two-dimensional/three-dimensional relationships—the sculpture of the vase is a flattened version of the painted vase. Initially I thought of making the vase identical to the painting, with the rounded forms, but I was messing around and built a flattened vase and decided, "Oh no, that's the right thing to do." It was just so simple and it worked.

KATE : That echoes the shapes of the trees… .

BECKY : And the topiaries, yeah… .

KATE : …through the window…topiary! I like that word, I'll use that.

BECKY : (LAUGHS) Topiary, yeah! Of course I'm always looking at David Hockney paintings, and there are a couple of amazing paintings from the 1960s that have shaped hedges—*Hotel L'Arbois* [1968], *A Neat Lawn* [1967], and even *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* [1970–1971], beyond the French doors. And then the huge weird hedges in his more recent plein air paintings.

KATE : I assumed Hockney.

BECKY : I have spent many years looking at Hockney, obviously (LAUGHS), since the landscape paintings. *Mr. and Mrs. Clark and Percy* is a huge inspiration behind *Living Room (Yogi 2)*, both in the rug and putting the dog into the painting. He's one of those artists, I see his paintings and I'm like I'll never be that good… . I mean they're different for sure, his paintings have so much to do with shadow and light in a different kind of space and with California and England, and an actual moment in a very specific time, and the people in that moment. There is an absence of people in my paintings, and, in part, it's to ensure that the paintings can feel like an ongoing moment in time, not a frozen moment. There's nothing to tell you whether the span of time in a painting is ten seconds or hours.

KATE : The ICA installation is like a dream space; one of those dreams where you're in a home and you're going through different rooms… .

BECKY : Yes, definitely. A dream space or a remembered space.

KATE : Some of the canvases are imagined spaces, and some are almost exact, or—to the best of your ability—exact reproductions, correct?

BECKY : Yes, about half of the large paintings were very true to actual spaces that existed. The others I definitely allowed myself to be more imaginative and take a lot of liberties. The original *Bedroom* [2013] is a fairly straightforward representation of my grandparent's bedroom. The framed box of medals that hangs over the bed was an object that migrated around the house, along with a portrait of my grandfather in his uniform that I reproduced for a previous show at Vox.

KATE : And this was from WWII?

BECKY : It was WWII, my grandfather was a navigator in the Eighth Army Airforce and he was based in Seething, England, from December 1943 to May or June of 1944, on the eastern coast of Great Britain. The RAF airbase still exists. There is this dinky little museum dedicated to the 448th Bomb Group I'd like to visit one day. He flew his missions and made it home, and although it wasn't the very worst part of the war in regards to survival rates, it was pretty grim. I found this V Mail letter that he sent my grandmother after he flew his final mission but was still in England, and he is so happy that he survived and kind of breaks down the percentage chance that he should have made it; it was pretty low. And, of course, he never talked about the war the way that that generation never did, which again, is another example of how these objects are clues. That framed box of medals is such a rich box of clues, and when he was alive it was much easier to ask him to explain what the oak leaf clusters represented than to just say "tell me about the war." It was so traumatic for them, and then to be a Jew, it was another level. It was very rare to get a story out of him.

KATE : My grandfather never talked about his experience in the war.

BECKY : That box of medals was always something that travelled around the house. I don't know if it actually hung in the bedroom. But to me, I liked that box which was a key—it looks like the legend to a map. And it was a key, for me, to figure out some of the stories that were rarely told. And then next to it there's the bedspread, which is kind of this tame and designed version of a wild jungle. I liked those two different really organized little keys to very large and wild subjects, both within this domestic setting. I feel like so many of the objects in domestic settings tend to end up serving that purpose. But on the other hand it was also just this very straightforward painting, and this was a bedspread that was always on their bed—again, the bed where the TV would be on with *M*A*S*H* on it.

KATE : I was about to ask if that was the TV room.

BECKY : Yeah! That was the TV room, and the kids were allowed, all of the five cousins, sitting on the bed watching TV. And it was interesting, too, growing up in my parents' house where we weren't allowed in their bedroom almost ever, so the openness of my grandparents bedroom was great to me. But it still held these secrets, the war secrets, and beyond that, the bedroom is a very personal space. So anyway, the painting was very accurate in terms of the lamps, bedside tables, bedspread, etc., and that drive to preserve that memory was certainly important, but I also knew right away that I wanted to make this painting where the bed is fully patterned, takes up most of the entire painting, and that the size of the canvas itself was pretty close to the size of a bed. And that's always how it works, the content will be important to me, but there will be this other fundamental drive that really just has to do with making a good painting regardless of accuracy.

Living Room (Yogi 2) [2013] is pretty straight forward, too. It represents the actual room and objects for the most part. I stole that pueblo pot from the Barnes Museum (LAUGHS). They didn't have that. But they had the other things—the trigger mugs. A review of the show mentioned the David Gil trigger mugs, and I went to the Vermont studio center, maybe seven years ago or six years ago. Micah and I went together, and we met this totally eccentric playwright who turned out to be David Gil's son. He was really far out and amazing and wrote plays but would design elaborate tiny stages for the plays. Somehow it came out that David Gil was his father and that he was around when my dad worked at the restaurant that was attached to Bennington Pottery, and my dad kind of remembered him. These kinds of stories are really important to me, too, and how these objects can forge weird connections and unearth old stories.

My grandparents always had West Highland terriers and they all had the same name: they were all Yogi. So if I'm looking through old pictures, and I come across one of the dogs, I think, "Oh, was that Yogi 1 or was that Yogi 2?" Yogi 2 was around in the 1970s. The dogs looked exactly the same but you could identify them by the decor of the time. The dogs are great because they're somewhere between being an inanimate object that is owned, that says something about status, class, values, or whatever. But then it's also a dog and elicits all of the feelings that a dog can make us feel. And aesthetically, I really wanted to put the white dog on the white rug, but it felt like a huge risk because there are no other living things in the paintings.

KATE : Do you think your grandparents had white dogs because they had a white rug?

BECKY : Probably, my grandmother was a pretty neat and tidy person. So that painting is a pretty straightforward interpretation. Some of the newest paintings start to become more and more fictionalized. *Living Room (six paintings, four plates)* [2015] is pretty historically accurate as well. The couch is a little bit different. It was a white couch initially.

KATE : (LAUGHS.) More white!

BECKY : More white, yes! It was a white couch. It was a long couch with this wall of paintings behind it. The lamp was a James Mont lamp. It's funny: Mont was a mid-century designer but his work was so ornate, and he was well known for doing business with high-profile mobsters. It's very odd that they had two pieces of James Mont furniture—the lamp and this huge, ornate breakfront, which was so unlike them.

KATE : Yes, that piece of furniture is so strange in that house.

BECKY : It's very strange. The glass paperweight on the lower shelf of the side table—I don't know if it was by anyone in particular. But my great aunt and uncle always had glass paperweights around, too. I think that's another sort of grandparent kind of thing—the paperweight—and, of course, they were from a time before computers, when everything was on paper. I have another one in my studio that's really great. But the image in the painting—that wall, they had that wall arranged like that for a long time, photos from the 1970s show the same configuration I'd always known. Almost all of the paintings on the wall were, in their minds, I think, reflections of their leftist values—the factory-town-looking painting and the old man were by a Vermont painter named Stanley Marc Wright—they liked the work because it represented the working man, especially the scene of the New England factory town on the far left. They always collected Native American art, both because they liked to purchase things on their vacations and they would sometimes travel to the southwest, but even more because I think that they felt a kinship with a culture that they saw as pretty screwed over by capitalism, and somehow once they became wealthy it was a worthy place to spend that money—maybe that's just my interpretation of it.

The most notable artist whose work is on that wall is Jack Levine, and it's also the work that is most relevant to their specific roots as progressive activists. Levine, like my grandparents, was the child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants—they were the same age and were invested in similar causes. Levine was a suspected Communist, although I'm not sure if he was ever called before the House Un-American Activities Committee or blacklisted. But my grandparents were activists at Brooklyn College in the late 1930s and early 1940s; my grandmother was even called to testify before the Rapp-Coudert Committee, a committee that investigated Communist influences within New York's public schools. So even when they eventually became wealthy, and really appreciated the safety that wealth gave them, they remained really left leaning, gave to leftist causes, and bought paintings by artists like Levine and William Gropper—another radical artist who eventually became a friend of theirs. But they left their Communist texts in the basement of their home in Queens, where they lived after leaving Brooklyn, before they finally moved to Long Island. They also changed their name from Susselman to Suss, and the story behind that was always that it had to

do with their Communist ties and left-leaning politics. A lot of their friends were suspected Communists. They were really close with the Wershbas for their entire life—Joe Wershba worked with Edward R. Morrow at CBS to expose McCarthy. So it was a huge part of their life. For me, this upper-class suburban wall of paintings with left-leaning themed paintings really gets at the conflict that they always felt.

I think that the Jack Levine painting was the most extravagant art purchase. The William Groppers were pretty big purchases too—there aren't any of his in these paintings of mine but I've included them in others. They were similar to earlier Levine paintings, done in a social realist style, grotesque depictions of politicians and businessmen. Ultimately, buying the art was a great solution for them; they thought, "We have this money but we're very cautious and conflicted about spending it, and if we do, it's going to show something we find valuable."

KATE : I think there's a term I read once, but I've never read it again—"drawing room pinks"? "Champagne socialists" is the term in England… .

BECKY : Oh yeah! Yes, that's absolutely accurate.

KATE : After the war, left-leaning artists and intellectuals shifted away from Communism, questioning how to align one's politics on the left without aligning with the Soviet Union and what was happening under Stalin. Your grandparents moved to a Long Island community that was at that point a Jewish community?

BECKY : Great Neck was as Jewish as it gets, yes—my father grew up there and just assumed all of the "good guys" were Jewish, because everyone he knew was Jewish. He thought FDR and Lincoln were Jewish when he was a kid. That's how insulated it was. But they always lived in Jewish communities. Their entire trajectory is this very specific Jewish American story that a lot of people have. They were children of Russian immigrants born into a working-class family in Brooklyn, then the kids are encouraged to study hard and focus on school, then they go to Brooklyn College, then the men go to fight in the war, come back, move to Queens—first Kew Gardens, then Fresh Meadows, then eventually to Long Island with the help of the GI Bill. And Great Neck was definitely a nice town when they moved there, but it eventually became very wealthy. But you could find so many people who ended up there with the exact same trajectory and the exact same conflict over wealth and their leftist roots. By the time I would go visit it was mostly this really rich area with lots of flashy fancy cars and new houses, really flagrant showy stuff, and my grandparents hated that. I knew what conspicuous consumption meant when I was very, very young, and it was a very bad thing. You did not want to spend money just to show that you had money. And it's a very particular… it's a particular slice of Jewish culture, the very intellectual non-conspicuous type, then within the same community—in Great Neck there were equally wealthy Jews that had very opulent and showy taste.

KATE : And that influenced your decision to use gold, copper, silver, and aluminum leaf in the *Verve* paintings?

BECKY : Maybe a little bit of that, a combination of it. There is what I think of as the Jewish Rococo style in the 1960s that was sometimes a flagrant display of wealth, but then it was also from the aesthetic sense that my great aunt and uncle had, but they

weren't even rich. He was an artist and she was a teacher in Philadelphia. They had gold wallpaper in the bathroom and a brocade sofa, lots of gilded picture frames—not exactly the pared-down elegant functional design sense that my grandparents had. Actually, much more the James Mont aesthetic. Maybe because my great aunt and uncle were not rich they felt more comfortable with that aesthetic, because it wasn't really displaying any wealth because they weren't rich: he was an artist I think that he just liked it. They also did not have the same history with activism, although their politics certainly always leaned that way. So, yes, that was more of the jumping-off point for those paintings from *Verve* magazine.

KATE : Can you expand on your inclusion of *Verve* magazine images in these works?

BECKY : From my Great-Uncle Sid, I inherited all of his art materials and a lot of his art—portfolios and portfolios of old work and paper, and I have had all of his stuff for at least eight years, but there is so much that I'm still always coming across new things. Last year I was leafing through something, maybe in my parents' basement or in my studio, and I found these two issues of this magazine that I had never heard of called *Verve* magazine. And they're these absolutely beautiful, beautiful productions. The first issue came out in 1937. Matisse did the cover design, and it was this really avant-garde art magazine. It wasn't just art. It was art and literature, sort of everything that was happening within that world, in the creative world in Paris in the late 1930s. It is this beautiful large-format magazine, and the printing would range from lithographs to photogravure and daguerreotypes. The prints depicted in the paintings come from the lithographic editions in the first two issues; Kandinsky, Matisse, Leger, and Masson. They are amazing and beautiful prints, but clearly these magazines are so much more than a collection of reproductions. They are amazing art objects in and of themselves. And it's a beautiful magazine but maybe even more interesting to me is how the reproduction becomes its own unique art object. They are just so exciting. There are articles written by Hemingway and Joyce, photos by Brassaï, writing by Matisse with little line drawings next to it! My Great-Uncle Sid died at 100 in 2007, and he had saved these from 1937–38. Some of the editions had been pulled and framed in their apartment but I never knew where they were from until I found the magazines.

These two paintings are from souvenir photographs of my grandparents in Santorini in 1975. I think of these small paintings as portraits of objects, so whether it's a book or it's very obvious like a pot or a still life, or if it's a photograph or drawing, all of them to me are portraits of objects. As objects these souvenir photographs are really amazing things that I found at the bottom of a box after my grandparents died. For so many years at the end of their lives they were unhappy and sick—she had Alzheimer's. It was lovely to find these photos of them, happy and healthy.

KATE : What size are they? Did you blow them up for the canvas?

BECKY : These are pretty true to life.

KATE : Really? I didn't realize they were that big.

BECKY : Yeah, they're about that big, they're about eight by ten inches. The size is also what makes them amazing objects—you can see where they changed 1974 to 1975,

where they cut out the negative. And you can see all of the detail in each of the tiny images that border the main photo. They are pretty big darkroom prints that my grandparents waited for, then picked up and brought back to the states, probably on a cruise. I never heard too much about their travels. Even now I only know of their travels by what they brought back. They never told us about them. Initially I thought, "What a great object!" You know, it says 1975, but everything about it says 1975—the process used to make the print, the clothes that they are wearing, even the fact that there was a Greek revival thing going on in fashion and design in the 1960s and 1970s. And maybe because of the economic crisis in Greece, while I was making the paintings this summer, there was also a part of me thinking about the transformation of a country like Greece, once the technological and cultural center of the world, and now a tiny nation in complete economic ruin—that successful tourists from the United States, today's global power, can go ride a donkey and get their picture taken. That was probably more of an aside, but another example of the interesting issues that these objects can bring up.

I wanted to end the show with a nod to their love for each other, which was definitely an enormous theme in their life. And so much of the time they worried and worked hard and felt conflicted about their life and wealth and children, but in this picture they were uncharacteristically happy and carefree on vacation—and even though they are two separate pictures, he is carrying her purse on the donkey and following behind her—you can see him behind her in the image of her. He really loved her so much and spent his entire life with her carrying her purse for her in one way or the other; I don't even know how he lived without her for five years after she died. I think that their deep love for each other was probably the dominant event of their lives. So I thought it was a nice nod to that love story. To have Jim's [Shepard] story in the catalogue, "Cretan Love Song"—the imagery of Santorini was perfect. That story… it made so much sense because, like almost all of Jim's fiction, it is based on researching the hell out of the facts, then putting together a fictional story with that knowledge that can get at a greater truth than a purely historical account—in this case of the eruption of Santorini in 1600 B.C. and the subsequent tsunami that destroyed much of the Minoan Civilization. And I think in many ways I'm trying to do the same thing.

The New York Times

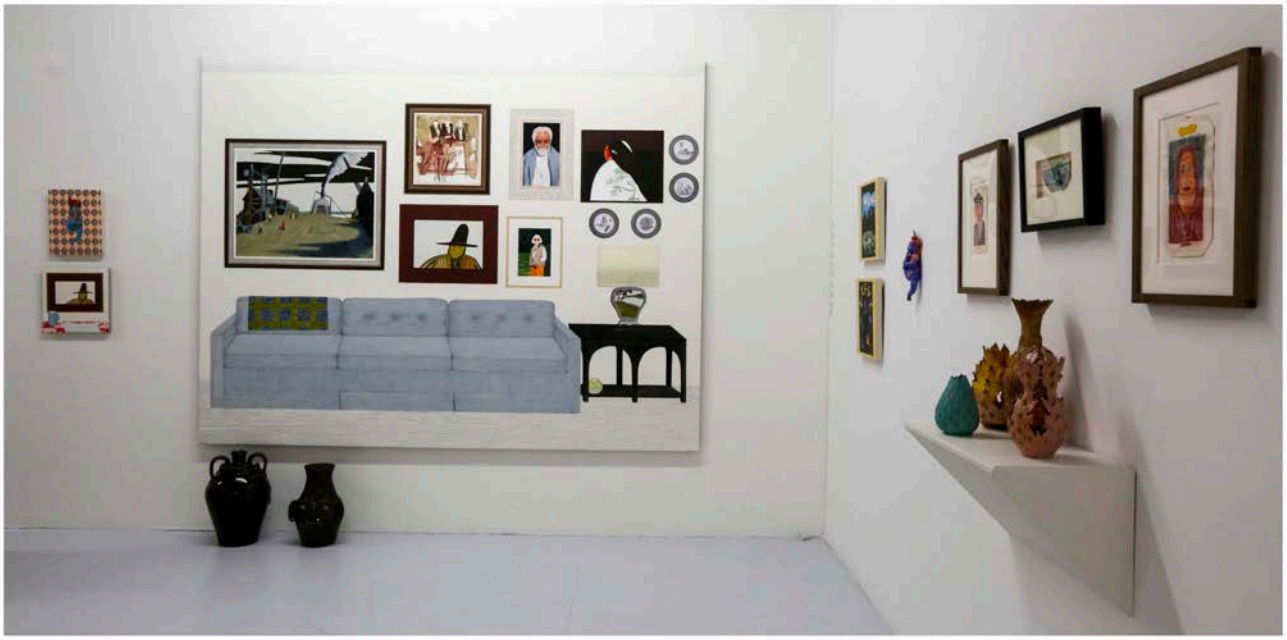
ART & DESIGN

Review: Independent Fair Is More Conventional, but Still Eye-Catching

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER MARCH 4, 2016

The Independent art fair, which runs through Sunday, began as a more provocative alternative to the bigger art fairs. Now in its seventh year, it isn't quite so independent anymore. There are two iterations in New York — one in November and the one now in TriBeCa — as well as one in Brussels, which opens next month.

There are overlaps between 45 galleries exhibiting here and the other, larger fairs; there are also a number of fairs considerably more indie in scope and ambition, including Spring/Break, at Skylight at Moynihan Station. But the Independent has moved from Chelsea to downtown; the light pouring through the windows and open plan of the fair, along with work ranging from the self-taught to the ephemeral, make the fair a welcome respite from the windowless casino-warren in other exhibition spaces.



The exhibition space for the Fleisher/Ollman gallery of Philadelphia, a first-time exhibitor at the Independent art fair. Nicole Craine for The New York Times

Fleisher/Ollman

Fleisher/Ollman is on the ground floor in Independent Firsts, along with a handful of other first-time exhibitors at the fair. Founded in the '50s to showcase self-taught artists, this Philadelphia gallery is showing the wonderfully composed paintings of Becky Suss, who had an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia last year. Ms. Suss's paintings, which often depict the inside of her grandparents' home, play well against the self-taught artists also in the booth, like James Castle, and illustrate the blurring in contemporary art between outsider artists and everyone else.

MUSEUMS / PHILADELPHIA / REVIEWS

Becky Suss: The Impression Remains

Posted on September 14, 2016 by LIZ AYERLE

About this time last year Becky Suss's (http://www.beckysuss.net/) first solo show was set to open at the ICA in Philadelphia (http://icaphila.org/exhibitions/7466/becky-suss). Upon entering the room, one felt a curious sense of abandonment; this is because there are no figures in the all too human spaces Suss gives us. The expansive bare walls of the Eleanor Biddle Lloyd Gallery were the perfect setting for her large scale work. Some paintings are as big as seven by nine feet installed alongside smaller still lives consisting of ceramic vases and stacked books placed neatly on the floor. The show has long since closed but the impression it left with me remains.

This was my first visit to the ICA but as it turns out the timing was fortunate. While I was getting to know Philadelphia's art institutions better I was also thinking a lot about the role of memory and trace in my own work. Suss paints flat surfaces using vibrantly colored patterns to inject an element of play between interior and exterior spaces (http://www.fleisher-ollmangallery.com/artists.php?id=49&page=1&img=2). The palm print bedspread (http://www.beckysuss.net/portfolio/paintings/2015-ica-philadelphia/) and fern like wallpaper are treated in much the same way as a garden view. The mid-

century modern rooms feel familiar. They are both generic and specific enough to give the viewer that haunting sense of déjà vu. Like the eerily deserted airport terminals of the Langoliers, Suss's rooms seem frozen in time. Later that day I left the ICA, went home and began to write a blog entry (a blog entry that I never completed).

Left Reading Room, 2012 from the artists website, Right: image from the slide presentation (Just prior to beginning works for the ICA)

Finally summer at PAFA rolled around and in yet another spot of good luck Becky Suss turned out to be a visiting artist. During her talk she opened up about the process she uses to build an image placing the work in an even richer context. As she puts it, "I always flatten, I always pattern, I always stack." One of the reasons her paintings feel both personal and generically "of a moment" is because she uses family keepsakes in combination with research documents to build an image.

Suss speaking at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Summer 16'

The body of work she presented at the ICA began with the death of her grandfather, who she described as, "the last of a generation." Surrounded by his books she saw his possessions as artifacts, only, some of them were missing. As Suss moved through the presentation and the slides progressed you could see her work shift away from strict adherence to reality. Embracing

elements of the imagination she began to construct spaces that "felt" true, inserting objects her grandparents "might" have owned. She finished the talk with two paintings completed after the conclusion of her show at the ICA. These included a fictional bathroom with teal color tiles and an apartment reminiscent of one remembered from childhood.

Suss's works are unabashedly nostalgic. She is mining her own family history and combining it with plausible elements of fiction in order to reveal things concealed by time. What can we learn from the intersection between memory and imagination? The more we understand about the way humans form memories, the more we understand their changeable nature.

By Liz Ayerle

Suss will be speaking again at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts this coming December. Click here for more details. (https://www.pafa.org/VAP)

Click here to listen to a radio lab (http://www.radiolab.org/story/91569-memory-and-forgetting/) on memory loved by both Becky Suss and post author Liz Ayerle

Tags: Becky Suss, Elizabeth Ayerle, fleisher ollman, ICA Philadelphia, Memory, Philadelphia Artists, Philadlphi, Vox Populi. Bookmark the permalink.

Becky Suss (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania)

Becky Suss, Living Room (six paintings, four plates), 2015, oil on canvas, 84 x 108 inches. Courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia.

What: Becky Suss
Where: The Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
When: Sept. 16, 2015 to Dec. 27, 2015
Why: Philly-born and Philly-raised, Suss reimagines the domestic spaces of her relatives, flattening the physical spaces of her memories and filling them up with skewed perspectives and historic kitsch.
Also on view: Josephine Pryde and Christopher Knowles

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

28 Art Shows You Need To See This Fall

From Boston to San Francisco and everything in between -- here are the art exhibitions you'll be talking about this fall.

09/01/2015 10:38 am ET | **Updated** Sep 28, 2015

Priscilla Frank
Arts Writer, The Huffington Post

Katherine Brooks
Senior Arts & Culture Editor, The Huffington Post.

As we approach Labor Day and the unofficial end to summer, the only thing motivating us to open our laptops and begin another day anew is the thought of a new season of art exhibitions. Well, maybe that and the promise of cooler temperatures. But the slate of fall art shows is considerably high on our list of autumnal things to look forward to.

In anticipation of fall, we scoured the calendars -- one editor on the East coast, one writer on the West -- and came up with 20 exhibitions (and eight honorable mentions) we're excited to ogle over the next few months. Whether you're in New York or Los Angeles, New Orleans or Detroit, St. Louis or Fort Worth, here's your guide to getting down with art in September and beyond.

ARTFORUM

ec S

ST T TE O O TE PO T, P DE P
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Se ember 16, 2015 December 2 , 2015

In her 2011 memoir, *e a en o an e ormal* , eanette Winterson observed of the genre "Part fact part fiction is what life is. And it is always a cover story." The act of covering, then, in Winterson's book and in Becky Suss's first solo museum exhibition, refers not only to concealment but also to adaptation. In a body of recent paintings and ceramics mostly prompted by the demolition of her deceased grandparents' home on ong Island, Suss integrates the material facts, fictions, and revisions that constitute her memories of the domestic spaces of her childhood. Seven large canvases depict individual rooms at three- uarter scale—a dining room, living room, bedroom—complete with re collections of art, literature, and furniture. Each presents a closely cropped tableau with flattened perspectives reinforced by a focus on patterns that confirms the scenes' static midcentury period. *edroom R i t o Omar a m* , 201 , for example, depicts 1 0s-era palm-leaf wallpaper, bright wood grain, and a concentric-semicircled bedspread. The ob ects featured appear desirably without wear, and the books' spines are blank, withholding information. This is reiterated by the glazed ceramics displayed on the floor—including *ntitled stac o oo s* , 201 — the invitingly glossy surfaces of which deflect attention from the fact that they are stripped of identifying information, bringing these period rooms out into the visitors' personal space.

ec S , *Bedroom (Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám)*, 2015, oil on canvas, x 60 .

Two small, s uare paintings of the artist's garden in Philadelphia, *ensin ton inter*, 2010, and *ensin ton S mmer*, 2010 11, together interrupt the show's hypnotic sense of frozen time. The skeletons of trees in snow followed by bursts of wiry green have greater perspectival depth and an emotional immediacy absent from the domestic canvases. Their concise portrayal of the vitality of change contrasts with the exhibition's overwhelming melancholia.

ec nter

HYPERALLERGIC
Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Speak, Memory: Becky Suss's Painterly Anthropology

by **Louis Bury** on December 19, 2015

Becky Suss, "76 Meadow Woods Road" (2012), oil on linen, 72 x 120 inches (courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, Philadelphia) (click to enlarge)

In his 1973 essay "Approaches to What?," an underground classic of documentary aesthetics, French writer Georges Perec opposes the drive to find meaning primarily in "the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines."

Beyond the "daily newspapers" that "talk of everything except the daily," Perec wonders, "How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual?"

Perec's lament may feel quaint in an age where traditional newspaper journalism is on the decline and social media makes it easier than ever to glimpse the minutiae of others' lives. But **Becky Suss**, in her first museum solo show, at the **Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia**, manages to use the analogue medium of painting to conduct a breathtakingly fresh Perecian investigation into her relatives' forgotten suburban houses. With a stylized anthropological eye, Suss reimagines and anatomizes a set of familiar rooms from her upbringing, especially those of her late grandparents' Long Island home, in a way that brilliantly demonstrates how painting can help us better see those

parts of the world that have been hiding in plain sight.

Becky Suss, “The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám” (2015), oil on canvas, 14 x 11 inches (courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia. Photo by Aaron Igler)

Across the show’s seven large paintings, each of which depicts a household room, Suss achieves differentiation within the canvases through her beguiling use of pattern and texture. With brocades, plaids and foulards, with repeating seashells, fronds and florals, with intricately textured carpets and shrubbery, Suss’s patterned décor, somewhat in the manner of Matisse, introduces bounded vectors of visual energy into otherwise restrained and ordered domestic interiors. At its most extensive, such as in “Bedroom (Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám)” (2015), the use of pattern and texture encompass nearly the entire surface of the painting, dividing the canvas into contiguous and overlapping rectangles of loud, heterogeneous design. The décor stands out as distinctive, but not always in the flattering way its inhabitants might have hoped.

While the depicted décor sometimes verges on questionable taste, Suss’s paintings never do. “Bedroom” (2013), for example, centers on a massive green-and-white leaf-patterned bedspread that occupies a full two-thirds of the canvas. If the bedspread were its own artwork, it would be of a piece with the Pattern and Decoration movement, whose work came to be maligned as over-embroidered during the post-Minimalist ‘80s. But the painting as a whole, with its quiet internal symmetries and deadpan humor, views the ornate bedspread from just enough of a critical remove to endow the work with a visual and intellectual moderation that Pattern and Decoration-influenced works often lack. That critical distance, slight but unmistakable, allows Suss to view the familiar as exotic, rendering her relatives’ rooms beautifully strange.


U.S.

Becky Suss, “Bedroom” (2013), oil on canvas 84 x 60 inches (Private Collection, New York)

The paintings’ flattened architecture, evocative of early Modernist experiments in non-traditional perspective and of David Hockney’s California pool paintings, contribute to that sense of estrangement. The sense of depth, especially — the rigidly simplified, sometimes gawky furniture; the faintly inaccurate room proportions — is always subtly amiss. This gentle perspectival eccentricity becomes most pronounced in “76 Meadow Woods Road” (2012), wherein numerous interior windowsill decorations sit directly in front of voluminous exterior bushes and trees, with only a minimum of visual depth separating them. Figure and ground collapse, press up against the flattened picture plane in a thicket of greens, browns and grays that contains only nooks and crannies of negative space.

This dense jumble of interior and exterior objects constitutes a canvas-wide window view that doesn’t feel much like a view at all. Jungle-like, the statuary and the trees clog up all available lines of sight. A similar sense of visual plenitude, with minimal unoccupied space, pervades both “Bedroom” and “Bedroom (Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám),” as well as the smaller “Kensington, Summer” (2010-11), which depicts a backyard garden with a meticulously rendered palimpsest of overgrown greenery. But even in the more aerated canvases, the paintings’ many patterns, textures, and leafy sections still give the sense that something is being camouflaged, hidden, not shown. For example, the background wall in “Living Room (Yogi 2)” (2013), a mostly-white and therefore innocent-seeming room, stops just short of the canvas’ left edge to reveal a peek of the non-white space beyond; like an ever so slightly drawn curtain, it teases with the prospect that as-yet undisclosed secrets might lay behind it.

Becky Suss, “The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám” (2015), oil on canvas, 14 x 11 inches (courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia. Photo by Aaron Igler)

What, exactly, do these alluring painted rooms hide? The people who once inhabited them, for one thing. Though the paintings depict artworks of human bodies (sculptures, paintings and photographs), they do not depict any actual human bodies using the living spaces. Similar to families who keep a room of furniture so nice that they never allow their children to use it, Suss's reconstructed rooms don't feel like *living* spaces. It is as though she took Fairfield Porter's wistful domestic interiors, hardened the lines and colors, and erased the people: scrubbed of nostalgia, we see their contents with unnerving clarity.

In particular, Suss's unpeopled domestic views sharpen the focus on the sundry knickknacks, tchotchkes and artworks that populate them. Not only do the exhibition's large paintings contain a mishmash of objects diverse in visual aesthetic and cultural provenance, exemplified by the windowsill statuary in "76 Meadow Woods Road," but many of the show's small paintings are still lifes of a lone decorative object depicted in a large painting, as if the smaller works were detail views rather than stand-alone canvases. What's more, Suss's little clay sculptures, arranged at intervals along the museum walls, which also depict objects from the large paintings, serve, in a fitting curatorial touch, to brighten the spotlight on the curious decorations.

A partial list of those decorations: an ersatz ancient Greek vase; Pueblo pottery; kitschy lamps; reproductions of prototypical Modernist paintings; a bust of an Easter Island head; family travel photographs; decorative gray-and-white plates; a fantastical portrait of a green-faced man in a sombrero and a poncho; a cartoonish portrait of a penguin in profile; a realistic portrait of an elderly woman out on a hike; books in both spine- and frontal-view; framed and hung military regalia. The list, far from exhaustive, represents the quizzical souvenir traces of a generation's worth of family living. The specific cultural provenance of each item on the list matters less than the aggregated sense of mismatched variety.

In her dispassionate treatment of these decorative objects, Suss is at her most pointedly anthropological. Perec contrasted the exotic with what he termed the "endotic," that which is internal and native to a place, but Suss again and again zooms in on the exoticism, the utter foreignness, of that which we take for granted as native, normal, ours. In this light, even something like pattern, so common in household décor, becomes a form of visual exoticism, an attempt to avoid the appearance of quotidian monotony. But it is Suss's eye-catching souvenirs, products of tourism, that are especially notable for the way they appropriate and pre-digest the exotic aspects of other cultures.

Becky Suss, “Living Room (six paintings, four plates)” (2015), oil on canvas, 84 x 108 inches (courtesy the artist and Fleisher/Ollman, Philadelphia)

Suss’s imaginative reconstructions, X-rays onto exoticism in its many domestic guises, ultimately suggest that her family’s mid- to late-20th-century suburban milieu lacked an indigenous visual culture. Or, more precise, it possessed one — aspirational and sentimental bric-a-brac — but it was founded upon cultural appropriation and a class-based fear of bad taste.

Nowhere are those motivations more apparent than in Suss’s series of five 14 x 14-inch copies of Modernist paintings, one of which, André Masson’s “The Sun” (1938), is also depicted hanging in her relatives’ hallway in “1919 Chestnut (Three Cities, The Mother, Kiddush Hashem, Salvation, The Apostle, Mary, Nazarene)” (2015). Suss’ reproduction of a reproduction differentiates itself, however, by virtue of a painted silver border not present in her relatives’ wall hanging, a kind of quotation mark that signals knowingness with respect to the line separating good taste from bad. Indeed, in the context of the show, it is striking that all five of the Modernist reproductions, untamed swirls of color and shape, eschew pattern, as if pattern carried with it the taint of decoration, inadmissible in serious art.

Anxiety about the intersection of aesthetics, taste, and class is as old as art itself, but Suss’s exquisite family archaeology gives such concerns a unique, self-directed emphasis. How best, the paintings ask, to express love for someone or something that is imperfect, flawed, maybe even a bit problematic? Because Suss positions herself at a slight, but not severe, critical remove from her relatives’ rooms and their contents, it can be difficult to discern exactly how much affection her

harsher judgments contain. More than a little, you get the sense. But that affection is hidden, reserved, composed, in such subtle details as the painstaking care of her brushstrokes. For Suss — as for Perec, an expert in tender detachment — to anatomize is a way to express regard. To paint so magnificently well is an act of scrutiny that is also an act of love.

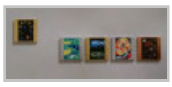
Becky Suss *continues at the Institute of Contemporary Art (University of Pennsylvania, 118 S. 36th Street, Philadelphia)Â through Â December 27.*

TITLE MAGAZINE

Becky Suss
at the Institute of Contemporary Art
through December 27th
by Samantha Mitchell








Posted: October 18th, 2015ÀÀFiled under: ReviewsÀ

Writing on *The Fulbright Triptych* (1974), Simon Dinnerstein's epic autobiographical realist painting, Jonathan Lethem articulates its ability to condense and expand a single moment: "It functions as a time capsule and a mirror for its viewers' souls, and so, despite personal and historical referential elements, has become permanently contemporary and universal." The painting is an ambitious interior, depicting the artist and his family surrounded by the objects that composed his life in the studio at the time: artwork, tools, photographs, postcards, plants, and a view flattened by the frame of a window. There is something unique about the intimacy created by paintings of interior spaces, where personal objects, however impersonal to us, create a common thread from artist to viewer, subsequently activating our own landscape of memory.

A similar kind of suspension of personal space and time carries through Becky Suss' paintings. While her interiors are absent of living presences (save one dog), they communicate in the language of timeless objects, hyper-real textures, and the geometry of interior design, simultaneously flattening and expanding the spaces she depicts. In her current exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Suss focuses almost exclusively on the austere, mid-century modern interior of her grandparents' home. Through seven large-scale canvases, nine smaller studies, and an assortment of ceramic pieces, Suss creates multiple portals into these spaces, largely culled and interpreted from her own memories. With a focus on individual objects found in these spaces – wiggly vases, hypnotically patterned textiles, various sculptures of the human form – these shapes appear in both paintings and sculpture. Among the painstakingly detailed and dimensionally flat canvases, these objects seem to form a constellation of meaning between the 3D and 2D work throughout the exhibition.

What makes Suss' objects so engaging is that while they are highly rendered and often recognizable as discrete things, they are often ambiguous and impersonal, at least to the viewer. Her approach keeps its distance, while the canvases are large enough to physically enter the spaces. Absent are indications that these spaces are timeworn or lived-in, gestures of nostalgia one might expect from representations of the home of beloved grandparents. This is partially due to their particularly modern design aesthetic – I imagine it would be difficult to represent these kinds of *objets d'arte* as well-loved and handled – but also comes from the artists' distinctive approach to pattern, perspective, and space. In *Bedroom*, the entire space of the painting is consumed by a bedspread, printed with a hypnotic, Matisse-like green and white pattern, which extends directly into the sides of the canvas in an awkward, arresting way. It puts the viewer in an impossible, almost aerial position, considering the bed from above, lost in its jungle of a bedspread, which is – save one small fold at the end – completely formless. Despite their lack of specificity, there is an intimacy created by the strange, dreamlike perspective that defines these spaces, allowing them to become more personally resonant with the viewer.

Another element that articulates a narrative thread is Suss' recreations of other works of art. On one wall, she displays five meticulously recreated post-impressionist lithographs (a few of which appear in other paintings as well) deviating from their originals through slight distortions of line and the addition of

metallic borders. This odd detour into quasi-plagiarism illuminates an element Suss plays with throughout: the muddiness of reinterpretation via the imperfect vehicle of memory. These prints clearly resonated with the artist within the walls of the spaces she depicts and are appropriated in the same way as other elements, despite their identity as discrete, famous artworks.

When depicted in Suss' cool style, these domestic scenes shed emotional attachment or the kind of imperfections and idiosyncrasies that make things specific and personal. At the same time, the visual relationships and tensions that the things in the paintings maintain belie a different kind of attachment. Particularly effective is *Bedroom (Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám)*, where a layered dimensionally patterned blanket butts up against the sculptural banana-leaf wallpaper print and the marbled wood grain of the floorboards. The patterns jockey for space, the only reprieve found through the spatially confusing reflection in a mirror, where an open door offers an out. The hypnotic claustrophobia becomes almost narrative.

Suss shares a vocabulary of small interior objects with a number of contemporary artists, including Paul Wackers, using these forms to be both topically engaging and aesthetically complex. They can operate as commercially recognizable references to affluent, artistically minded homes. Suss seems to seek the deconstruction of modernist aesthetic while simultaneously relying on it, emerging from an intense attraction to its simplicity of form while using it to articulate an interest in subtle kinds of chaos. While Wackers uses this domestic vocabulary to allude to something extraterrestrial or psychically challenging, Suss taps into the subtle deviations of dense pattern to create a kind of hyper-reality. The objects remain true to their basic nature, but the obsessive detail lavished upon them flattens their form and sharpens their boundaries. In *76 Meadow Woods Road*, a series of figurative sculptures are arranged on a windowsill, facing the viewer before a landscape of trees and shrubs vibrant with stippled marks. Before this chaos, the figures appear pensive and alive, their monochrome bodies absorbing the information behind them. An effect of the dizzying array of pattern and texture throughout Suss' work is that everything seems to pulse slightly, each shape humming or buzzing in place as we scan the vast surface of the paintings. This ruffles the distanced approach to the scenes that Suss creates, introducing a sense of instability and unease in these highly composed and serenely static interiors.

Suss mentions a recent fascination with memory reconsolidation in an interview with ICA, articulating how memories are essentially altered with each recollection, as they are created through new neural pathways each time we call them to mind. "I find this mechanism similar to the process of painting itself," says Suss. "If I think of the distortions and inaccuracies of both my memories and the paintings themselves through the lens of this theory, I can understand the final product as its own legitimate and accurate depiction of itself, not a skewed or distorted version of something else." In this way, the paintings too become unstable, a process of remembering for the viewer as well. We too can access these rooms, wander around in a stranger's house, and create our own relationships in the context of individualized interior landscapes.

Samantha Dylan MitchellÀs an artist, writer, and teacher living in Philadelphia.

philly.com

Galleries: Becky Suss' art dreams mid-century dreams

E e , r T e rer

POSTED: December 06, 2015

At a time when exhibition titles tend to stretch into lines of prose, the decision to call Becky Suss first solo museum show simply "Becky Suss seems not only a good omen, but a perfect introduction to paintings that make ust as strong an impression on their own - I had previously seen them in group shows in and around Philadelphia in recent years - as they now do together on the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Art. As organized by associate curator ate raczon, Suss crisp paintings also echo the architecture of the Eleanor Biddle loyd Gallery on the ICA s second floor. It s an enclosed, meditative space that complements the orderly calm of Suss images.

Though small, the earliest paintings in the exhibition, both from 2010, portray the same view of a rectangular backyard in ensington, one lushly green in summer and the other brittle and snow-covered in winter. They hint at the large, spartan paintings to come three years later, a body of work inspired by Suss recollections of her grandparents mid-century house on ong Island, but filled with liberal spoonfuls of poetic license.

In one such painting, *ivin Room o i* , Suss offers an ostensibly straight-on view of her grandparents living room, with its minimalist fireplace of white bricklike tiles alongside which collected ob ects have been artfully positioned - the head from a Mexican sculpture, a fragment of white coral, a Native American vase incorporating white patterns. The room s whiteness is further emphasized by a West Highland White terrier stretched out on the white carpet, with a sliver of a window in the background revealing a white birch tree on an emerald lawn.

Interestingly, though the rooms Suss paints are spacious, she typically makes much of one large element in a scene, and that element is often composed of a pattern, such as the aforementioned brick pattern of the fireplace. She likes to bring the outdoors indoors through the use of windows and mirrors.

Those two tendencies come together particularly dramatically in her 201 painting *edroom R i t o Omar a m* . The banana-palm-leaf-patterned wallpaper on a back wall, which Suss based on the Beverly Hills Hotel s iconic decoration, dwarfs the room s other, more modest appurtenances, among them a twin bed and a bedside table with a lamp and books. A full-length mirror offers a reflection of an interior entranceway framed by an outdoor railing.

ne senses this room is the artist s inventory of her past, and curator raczon more or less confirms this in her essay for the exhibition, revealing that the lamp was Suss mother s girlhood lamp and that one of the books is a volume of poetry the artist admired as a child.

Suss brushed up her skills as a ceramicist in preparation for her show,
and her glazed low-fire ceramic vases and stacks of lifesize ceramic books and glazed stoneware iterations of pre-Columbian Mexican and Maori heads, all placed on the floor at strategic intervals, have the clever effect of making Suss paintings look like windows into other rooms.

Which, come to think of it, they are.

Institute of Contemporary Art, 11 S. 6th St., 11 a.m. to p.m. Wednesdays 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays 11 a.m. to p.m. Saturdays and Sundays. 21 - -710 or www.icaphila.org. Free. Through Dec. 27.

Arboreal musings

If you have yet to familiarize yourself with the work of Ellen Harvey, a British-born Brooklyn artist, there s no time like the present.

Harvey is perhaps best known for her haunting monochromatic installations in which architecture and landscapes, especially ruins, are reimagined through the use of hand-engraved mirrors and lighting and that is the half of it - she also counts painting among her many media .

Besides her installation Metal Painting, at the Barnes Foundation, which runs through an. , Harvey is having her fourth solo show at the ocks Gallery.

The Museum of rnamental eaves comprises new works such as *e orest o O solete Ornaments*, pairing sculptural casts of the leaf molds used for ornamental architecture detailing with her own two-dimensional images of trees, as well as earlier works that are featured in her recently published, 02-page monograph, *e se m o ail re*.

ne of those works is a life-size version of a souvenir stand, *lien So venir Stand* 201 , which was part of her exhibition The Alien s Guide to the Ruins of Washington, D.C., at that city s now-closed Corcoran Gallery of Art. Her interpretation of what an entrepreneurial alien would sell to tourists visiting the ruins of contemporary Washington seems corny and obvious when separated from its original context. n the other hand, her painting *e orest e nternal Reven e Service Re orested*, in which she imagines the abandonment of the Andover, Mass., IRS complex, and its subse uent swallowing by nature, is an eerie, unforgettable image.

ocks Gallery, 600 Washington S uare, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. 21 -62 -1000 or www.locksgallery.org. Through Saturday.

Becky Suss's Cold, Cold Ground at Space 1026

By guest writer *a* *11*

By Diana Jih

Becky Suss embraces remembrance and her *artistic* seasonal affective disorder through a series of multi-textured oil landscapes at her first solo exhibition in Philadelphia, *Cold old Gro nd*, on display at Space 1026. Her wintry mix of iced-over hidden streams and snowed-in backyard gardens calls to mind the past season and the missing places of spring. Those places exist once again in these recreated memories. During her First Friday opening, "Green River" and "wish you were here" twinged my nostalgia for pockets of rural New England I've happened upon in previous years.

"Green River" - Oil on canvas - 16" x 16"

Suss trespasses on my emotions and lays claim to these scenes through the richness of her palette, accuracy of overlapping natural textures, and submission to the sentiments these landscapes stir in us all. The steel-cold, grey shadows covering the softness of the snow mimic the bite of frost on your lips and the chill of winter in your bones. The chipped ice popping through Suss's blue-black "Green River" captures the idea of the river's memory melting away with time.

photo of them or simply recalling the image in the mind. The viewer's emotional response to the landscapes attests to the honesty of its memory activation, which for the modern viewer relies not only on personal and collective narratives but also competing images—historical, photographic, remembered, and imagined.

"Emerald Street" - Oil on canvas - 16" x 16"

While literal tufts of early spring grass gouge through the purity of the white painted blanket of snow in "wish you were here," literal branches and sticks stab through the layers of paint to great effect in "Emerald Street."

The beast of a beaver's den in the foreground of this piece emerges life-like yet impossible from the winding composition of celestial waterfalls. A few of Suss's most spirited previous pieces, like "Snake Hill," often feature twiggy and rocky mammoths whose texture, scale, and perspective disorient and challenge the viewer. Suss references Cezanne's initial ventures into Modernism's multiple perspective still-lifes, as she admits to taking on a "snow perspective," with the first snowfall of the season transforming her perspective on landscape. Having worked on her MFA in Berkeley, CA, she confessed to withdrawals from seasonal landscapes and an inability to escape being seasonally affected. With "Emerald Street," she admits to "predictably wanting spring" and transitioning from winter to spring as the snow thawed in her mind and on her canvas. A visit to 1026 before the show closes on May 27 allows you to revisit experiences of winter richly symptomatic of Suss's seasonality and modern explorations of memory.