

Speak, Memory: Becky Suss's Painterly Anthropology



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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 Iglar) (click to enlarge)

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.



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 Iglar) (click to enlarge)

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 statuery 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) through December 27.*