





THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE  
**Judith Schaechter, *Super/Natural*, 2023-2025. Stained-glass panels and wood frame. H 96, W 60, D 60 in.**

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND  
CLAIRE OLIVER GALLERY, NEW YORK,  
WITH SUPPORT FROM THE PENN  
CENTER FOR NEUROAESTHETICS  
PHOTO: CHRISTIAN GIANNELLI

# Inner Sanctum

Step inside **Judith Schaechter's** immersive stained-glass structure and enter an imaginary universe teeming with fantastical creatures that connect you not only to the natural world but, in their ornate optical intensity, to a vision of the divine.

BY ANDREW PAGE

**I may be sitting in a chair** in the living room of Judith Schaechter's Philadelphia townhouse, but I'm not fully there. Almost everywhere I look, I see a lush world inhabited by imaginary creatures that seem to have flown, slithered, or sprouted from the plates of a book of 19th-century hand-colored engraving, but every living thing has its own personality. Above me, the evening sky is all deep blue washes of various shades of indigo while bird-like creatures circle high overhead. Some fly so close, I can make out varieties with red feathers and intricate patterning, their beaks open and eyes tinged red, whether with anger or angst, it's hard to tell. The celestial scene is broken up both by the copper-foil lines of the stained glass and also the larger supporting structure of wooden beams arranged into a dome of hexagons, with stained-glass stars marking their points of intersection. And that's just what's above my head.

Around me, the walls erupt with plant and insect species I've never seen before, but are familiar for their heavy shading and languorous poses, weighed down by gravity or some type of exhaustion. There is so much atmosphere to this landscape: how a spider watches its prey dangling in its web, framed by the silhouetted tendrils of a vine, the quality of light achieved through the controlled mediation of colored glass ground away to create a portentous cast of luminescence. A lot is happening in this fertile mid layer; there is too much to take in at once, and so you surrender to the atmosphere of busy propagation, of cycles repeating; you can almost hear the din of the insects in the tropical night.

Meanwhile, the nearly opaque lower level is like a cross-section of the earth, the cutaway revealing layers of skulls, roots, and larvae incubating, just waiting to burst through the surface. It is an uneasy quiet compared to aboveground, but with no less potent a sense of intrigue, and a fragile balance between the quiescent and the unsettling. New life gestates, fertilized by what has come



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In this series of details we see the three levels, which the artist calls the "Cosmos" (opposite), the "Earthly Realm" (this page top and top right), teeming with foliage and winged creatures, and the "Underworld" (right), where the past and future mingle underneath.

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before, the decay of lived experience nourishing what comes next, for good or evil, for better or worse, the cycles of life itself.

I see all this because I am literally inhabiting *Super/Natural* (2025), an eight-foot-tall wood-and-stained-glass dome, staged temporarily in Schaechter's Center City home just before it is shipped off to the Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, where it will remain on view through September 14, just the first stop in a traveling schedule that includes the Museum of Craft and Design in San Francisco.

Having followed Schaechter's evolution closely for more than two decades, there is nothing surprising to me about her arrival to this place where you can literally go into her work, and the fact that I am no longer standing in a gallery or museum looking into the work, but literally inside of it, is both unusual and perfectly natural at the same time, especially given the intense discussions with her I've enjoyed over the years.

In my very first encounter with the artist some two decades ago, Schaechter extolled her experience of standing in the sunlight passing through a rose window at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. Her voice rose as she explained how it was not just a visual experience but one she felt viscerally, and how the transcendent experience of the window's beauty had committed her to stained glass as her medium. As her career flourished, and the scale of her work grew, I would always think about the ways her work sought to connect with its viewer, whether through the transmission of light projecting out of one of her wall-hung light-box works, or in the 2012 site-specific installation at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia (*The Battle of Carnival and Lent*), in which she set stained-glass panels into the apertures of the thick-walled former prison building so that they mediated the only available light in the former cells, which had been designed for contemplation and rehabilitation.





Schaechter's process uses cut and ground layers of glass in different colors, hand-painted enamels, and copper foil to build up intricate designs of visual intensity that offer endless detail, all of which creates an atmosphere of reflection and contemplation.

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Over the years, Schaechter also came to embrace the power of decorative patterning, which we know from religious art, can be used to manifest the divine without depicting a God-like figure, as in many Hindu, Islamic, or Jewish sacred spaces. Religious imagery and architecture that does not directly refer to a worshipped figure is called "aniconic," and one of the defining features is that the intricacy and the precision of the patterning itself can stimulate a meditative response in a viewer, inspiring the contemplation of something that approaches perfection, and so intricate it is impossible to take in at once, much less fully comprehend, and thus inspires awe at something far larger than oneself.

Though she is not religious, Schaechter acknowledges there are religious aspects to this work, which she developed through a residency at an academic center at the University of Pennsylvania set up to study the interaction of "the built environment and wellness." An encounter with a book by the director of the center, Dr. Anjan Chatterjee, *The Aesthetic Brain: How We Evolved to Desire Beauty and Enjoy Art*, led Schaechter to the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics, and when she learned it had an artist residency program, she was thrilled, applying immediately. She saw the opportunity as a means to explore the exquisite intersections of art, environment, and the boundless universe within her own imagination.

"I was so psyched," she says. "I will tell you before it was a go, my thought was it was the only thing on my bucket list. I wanted to do this so badly!"

One of the reasons for Schaechter's enthusiasm was a comment she heard frequently from other stained-glass artists, who contrasted her light-box works with their own windows that may have been permanently installed in churches, synagogues, and hospitals. Though probably not intended, she heard these comments as judgmental, in a way, and it sparked in her a desire to create an architectural work that could enshrine her stained-glass

artworks. The idea of inhabiting a stained-glass work hearkened back to her childhood visits to the Mapparium, a three-story stained-glass globe located in Boston's Mary Baker Eddy Library, where you could actually walk inside a three-dimensional spherical glass map of the world.

Asked whether the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics was a part of the medical program or more of a scientific center, she explained that it focused on cognitive neuroscience, making it closer to psychology than something like brain surgery. "One of the things they study is people's response to art, the effect of architecture on cognition, and beauty and morality," she explained.

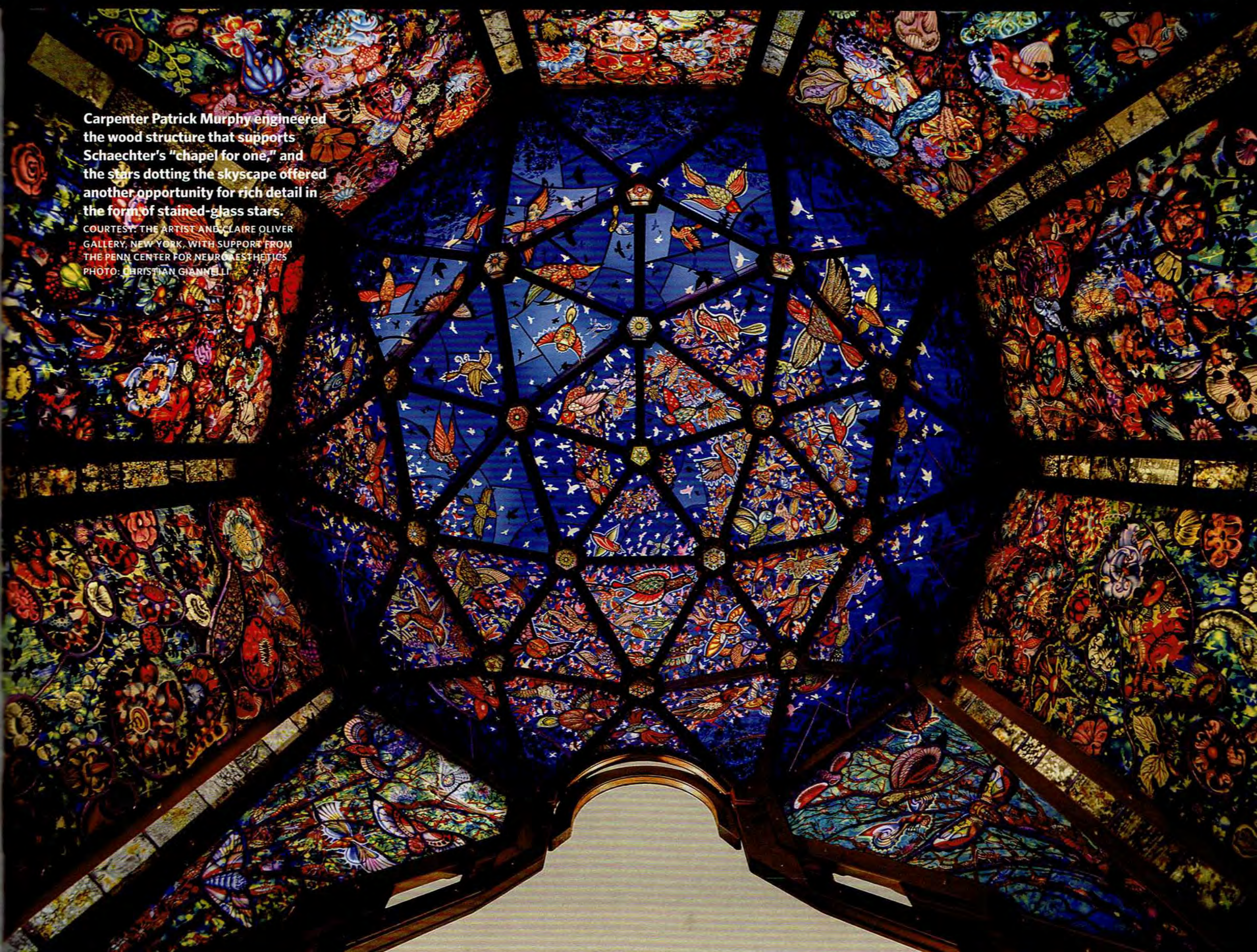
If *Super/Natural* is Schaechter's personal "Mapparium," it is made up of not one but three distinct worlds arranged in tiers. She calls the upper level "Cosmos," the middle "Earthly Realm," and the lower "Underworld."

"Stained glass has an incredible long history of being installed in churches, and I really wanted to make a little tiny chapel, for one person at a time, so you could be in the center of the universe," she explains.

Once Schaechter landed the residency, she set out to realize her most ambitious project, with the only restriction that she not do a literal map of the brain, which she found humorous because to her, her imagery is really a map of the human brain, or perhaps more specifically, how it can make sense of and understand worlds.

As a child, Judith Schaechter's microbiologist father collected antique books of drawings of mushrooms, which featured





Carpenter Patrick Murphy engineered the wood structure that supports Schaechter's "chapel for one," and the stars dotting the skyscape offered another opportunity for rich detail in the form of stained-glass stars.

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hand-tinted prints and sparked a lifelong interest in natural history. In addition to their aesthetic qualities, she appreciates that they were usually drawn by women, who in that era, "weren't allowed to do anything else," she says, appreciating that it provided a rare opportunity for expression in another era.

While Schaechter has honed her ability to grind flash glass to reveal shades of color, to cut shapes, to paint with enamels, she does not have much experience in building three-dimensional structures. And so she turned to her highly skilled and versatile carpenter, Patrick Murray, who helps to maintain her century-old home. She gave him a sketch and let him develop the engineering to allow the stained glass to be fully incorporated, and he set about working out the engineering and then constructing the actual structure, for which she gives him full credit.

"The first thing Pat said to me is that we're going to have to learn how to build a geodesic dome," Schaechter recounts. "I said, 'No, you are.'"

Happy to let Patrick take on the woodworking and structural engineering, Schaechter threw herself into the time-consuming and painstaking process of realizing her vision in hundreds of individual panels, many with two layers of glass modulating light based on the amount of grinding away of the flash glass. Other

elements are applied enamels and copper foil lines, similar to lead lines in liturgical stained glass but more suitable for the intricacies of Schaechter's highly detailed patterning.

I ask Schaechter about her vision of nature, with an uneasy relationship to the flora and fauna evident in the nature of her lines, of the way light is depicted in a harsh cast at times, and how overall there is something unsettled about the depiction of nature. She acknowledges that she is not looking to turn nature into something prettified, something idealized and easy to dominate. In addition, she is also drawn to depict things that are complex, and sometimes unnerving.

"I'm weird, I like things that make me uneasy," she says. Sometimes her inspiration is as simple as needing additional elements to break up an open space in a work, which she says offhandedly. But the truth is, whatever she makes is imbued with a psychological complexity, revealing a more complicated picture, always avoiding the easy answer.

"To me, an insect is like a life-form that we are eternally at battle with," she says. "And they're winning, as well!" ■

ANDREW PAGE is the editor of GLASS.