

EMBRACING THE IMPERMANENCE OF BEAUTY

Michener Art Museum presents *Judith Schaechter: Super/Natural*

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There's something eerie about Judith Schaechter's people, currently on view in *Super/Natural*, an exhibition of the artist's stained-glass work, at Michener Art Museum in Doylestown.

They seem plucked from Medieval villages, but that's not it. It's that they're deeply distressed. Mouths are open in silent screams. Jaws are clenched in anger. Others just look despondent. The Philadelphia-based Schaechter says her people are in transition, experiencing the negative emotions that make joy, beauty, and happiness all the more pleasurable. She leaves those golden sentiments to our imagination.

The most agonized Schaechterians are *Axe-Wielding Maniacs* (2021), in which wild-eyed lumberjacks swing blades at stumps, logs, and one another. More a crisis than a transition, it's the artist's vivid commentary on environmental destruction and male rage.

Beautiful medium, ugly subjects

Disturbed villagers are only part of Schaechter's work and in fact, the piece that inspired the exhibition's title contains no people at all. Instead, [*Super/Natural*](#) (2023-2025) features tightly woven, exquisitely detailed plants, flowers, and

insects, bountiful tapestries that are Schaechter's signature. Super/Natural is also the only work viewers can step into (from 11am to 3pm during gallery hours).

Schaechter gravitated to the medium of glass early in her career, [writing](#) "unlike most raw materials, glass is extremely attractive before the artist ever touches it. I found I like to really manipulate it, stretch it, and transform and distort it in unnatural ways. I like to see what possibilities lie in mating difficult emotional ideas with sensuous but cruel materials I found the beauty of glass to be the perfect counterpoint to ugly and difficult subjects."

A gallery video shows Schaechter at work, a process she describes as being closer to carving than painting. She uses layers of "flash" glass, handmade glass with a veneer of intense color (blue, brown, pink, red, etc.), sandblasting and filing areas where she wants softer hues, then engraving details. Glass bits are then fired, assembled, and soldered together with copper foil. It's a Medieval process through which Schaechter explores contemporary ideas.

Glass half empty?

The exhibition explores the relationship of humanity to nature. In *Persephone* (2015), inspired by A.E. Stallings's poem, "Persephone Writes a Letter to Her Mother", Schaechter depicts the Greek goddess of agriculture underground, where Hades consigned her to spend half the year. Persephone asks her mother to send flowers to help her remember beauty and prove its existence to her companions in the nether world. But instead of a pen, she's gripping a flower's root with both fists, pulling with all her might, and ruining the above-ground blossom in the process. And naturally, on her back and six feet under, Persephone is distressed in the extreme. It's a dark presentation, but also darkly funny and completely recognizable: Who hasn't struggled toward a goal, only to achieve the exact opposite?

Regarding her glass-half-empty perspective, Schaechter has written, "People often tend to focus on the subject matter and many times I have been called to task for its 'negativity' ... Personally, I don't find my work negative or difficult at all." She maintains that life depends on death, that pleasure is enhanced by the knowledge that it's impermanent. Like the woman in *Human Nature* (2017), we cut blooms at their peak to capture their loveliness, knowing the bouquet will ultimately wither.

A shrine to human aesthetics

Schaechter intends viewers' experience to culminate in the show's centerpiece *Super/Natural*, which wraps them in light and color. The work grew from her time as resident artist at the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Neuroaesthetics, during which she sat in with scientists exploring the neural and biological components of aesthetic experiences. *Super/Natural*, a stained-glass capsule eight feet tall and five feet in diameter, immerses viewers in a cosmos of Schaechter's imagining.

One by one, visitors enter a space capped by a dome Schaechter designed with carpenter Patrick Murray, a glorious swirl of birds in an evening sky.

Super/Natural's middle tier enfolds them in a tapestry of ruffling, speckled petals, seashell-shaped stalks, insects fluttering delicately veined wings, string-of-pearl creepers, and seed pods like mitochondria, ready to regenerate.

The lowest tier represents the underworld. For it, Schaechter repurposed patterns from *Persephone* and *Over Our Dead Bodies* (2020), a pandemic-inspired work visualizing nature's ascendance over humanity. The result is a red-tinged, dirt-bound panorama of skeletons, roots, and things that crawl.

Everyday saints and martyrs

The artist says she isn't religious, but has long wanted to "make a 'personal shrine' for a single viewer." Though *Super/Natural*'s images aren't taken from scripture, unless you count the Garden of Eden, they convey a contemplative feeling similar to sacred spaces.

"A radiant, transparent, glowing figure is not the same as a picture of a figure (which reflects light)," Schaechter has written. "It's a blatant reference to holiness or some type of 'supernatural' state of being. In terms of my figures, although they are intended to be ordinary people doing ordinary things, I see them as having much in common with the old Medieval windows of saints and martyrs." Let's hope those ordinary martyrs find their bliss soon.

At top: Judith Schaechter, Super/Natural (2023-2025). Photo by Christian Giannelli, image courtesy of the artist and Claire Oliver Gallery, NYC, with support from the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics. Image provided by Michener Art Museum.