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A Philadelphia Glass Artist Has Made a Secular Sanctuary for the Ages

As the artist in residence at the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics, Judith Schaechter created a giant dome to spark joy. It's now on view outside Philadelphia.

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Reporting from Philadelphia

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This article is part of our Museums special section about how artists and institutions are adapting to changing times.

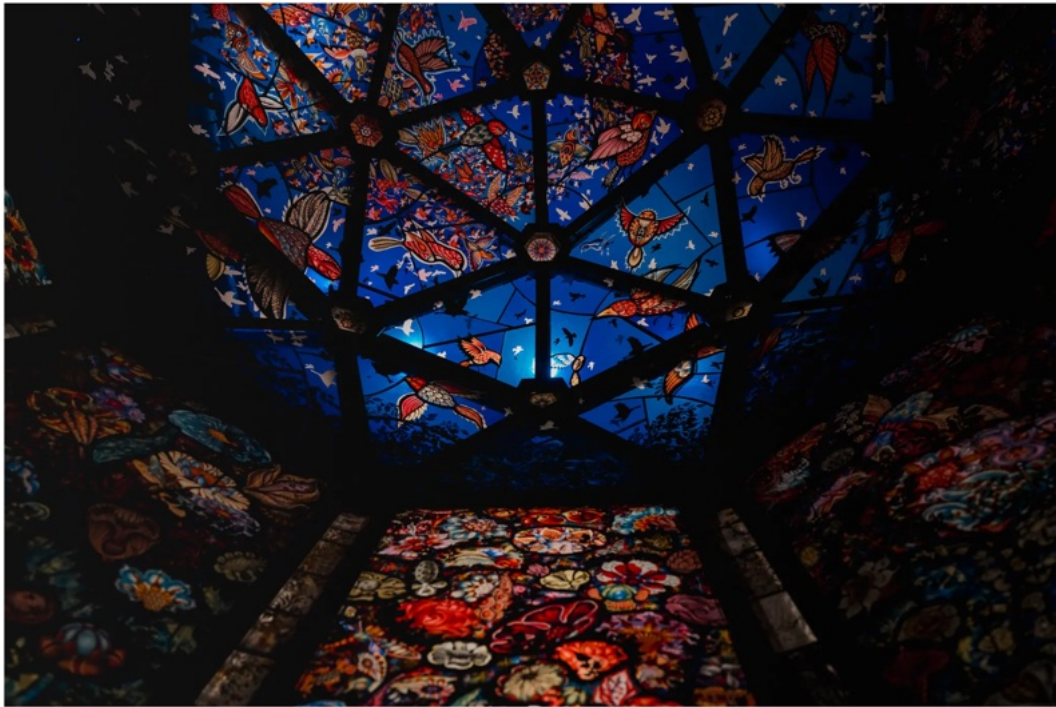
“Super/Natural” — an immersive, dome-shape work of art in stained glass by Judith Schaechter — is really best experienced from the inside.

Step through its small portal, and in the right light you will be surrounded by the polychromatic glow of birds, stars, insects and fantastical plants and roots. Earlier this year, I was able to experience it myself in Schaechter’s home studio and felt a curious combination of serenity and awe.

This is by design, it turns out: Radiance has a profound effect on human beings — something that medieval architects and glass artisans understood centuries ago.

“I am not a religious person, but it is hard not to feel overcome by a sense of awe and wonder when you enter the dome,” said Laura Turner Igoe, chief curator at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pa. The eight-foot-tall work, and nine glass panels and two related drawings exploring humanity’s relationship with the cosmos, are now on view there in “Judith Schaechter: Super/Natural,” which opened April 12 and runs through Sept. 14.

“You are surrounded by a riot of plants, insects, birds,” Igoe said, and even “skeletons and bones. It represents both the glorious abundance of life and its interconnectedness with death and decay. It’s beautiful, but it’s also a little scary.”



“Judith Schaechter: *Super/Natural*,” is showing at the James A. Michener Art Museum in Doylestown, Pa., through Sept. 14. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

Schaechter created the piece during her recently completed stint as an artist in residence at the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics in her home base of Philadelphia, some 40 miles from the Michener. The center was on her radar because she had read and enjoyed a 2013 book on the science of consciousness and beauty called “The Aesthetic Brain” by Dr. Anjan Chatterjee, the neurologist and professor who founded and directs the center.

When Schaechter wrote to him several years ago, her timing was fortuitous: She learned that the center regularly has an artist in residence, and that its current resident was nearing the end of his time there. She eagerly volunteered to go next.

Once there, she wanted to create an immersive work that placed a human being at the center of a “three-tiered cosmos,” she said in a video interview. The resulting luminous structure is a kind of quiet, wondrous sanctuary space.

Dr. Chatterjee said he was not surprised that Schaechter’s work evoked this kind of reaction. “Awe typically occurs in the presence of vastness, where a person feels small and yet connected to something larger,” he said in an email interview. “Brain networks that induce contemplation and implement rewards are presumably activated. Endogenous endorphins can be released with the pleasurable feelings of transcendence and oxytocin with the feelings of connectedness. Looking upward helps induce this feeling.”

Schaechter sits atop the art world glass firmament in the United States, beginning her career with a B.F.A. in glass from Rhode Island School of Design in 1983, and recently receiving the 2024 Smithsonian Visionary Award. She is represented by Claire Oliver Gallery, and her work can be found in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, among others.

“No one works in glass the way Judith does,” Igoe said. She recalled a recent visit to the Met and seeing a three-part stained glass window, “Garden Landscape,” designed by Agnes Northrop in the studios of Louis

Comfort Tiffany. “I think a work like that is perhaps comparable to ‘Super/Natural’ in its virtuosity of technique and immersive qualities,” she wrote, also citing “The Dream Garden” by Maxfield Parrish.

“But of course, the Northrop piece was created by a large studio; Judith made all the glass in ‘Super/Natural’ herself,” she added.



Schaechter outside her dome at the Michener. The show also includes nine glass panels and two drawings created by the artist. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

Last month, Schaechter spoke about the work in a video interview from her beautifully restored 19th-century rowhouse in Philadelphia. The conversation has been edited and condensed.

What was your artistic ambition during your residency at the Penn Center for Neuroaesthetics?

They study three things: beauty and morality; the built environment and wellness; and engagement with art.

I wanted to do a project that wrestled with the question of beauty and morality, but it didn't inspire me artistically. Around the time that my residency began, I was also doing a lot of research into natural history prints, especially by women, because apparently, in the 17th and 18th centuries, this was one thing women were allowed to do in the realm of art. I was really inspired by the work of, for example, Maria Sibylla Merian. These were allegedly people attempting to make objective images of nature. But they really didn't look very objective to me — they looked like art prevailed over science. So I wanted to do something with that kind of imagery.

What is it like to spend time at the center?

It's an interesting vibe. I mean, there are maybe about 15 people at any given time, there are undergraduates, and the undergraduates often have a dual major with something artistic, like architecture or fine arts. There's a [medical student studying] plastic surgery, and he's very interested in aesthetics for obvious reasons. And so every week at the lab meeting, everyone talks about their projects and where they are, and gives an update, including Dr. Chatterjee and me.



The dome features a swirl of birds, stars, insects and fantastical plants. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

I've been thinking about this since I had the chance to step inside "Super / Natural": Why do you think that glass, particularly the experience of seeing light come through glass, inspires awe?

I think it's very biological. I think we have a physical response to radiant light, and we get kind of used to seeing clear light. Colored light is more magical because it doesn't read as nothingness. Most art is produced to be seen in a reflected light situation, and you are not designed as a human being to stare into the sun. So what I think a good [stained glass](#) artist does is modulate that light to make it visible.

It's almost as though it makes light palpable. Glass enables you to catch something ephemeral.

Yes, people love radiant light. You know, people put their vodka bottles in their kitchen windows when they're empty. It doesn't have to be something exalted and fancy; people just really respond to it. It has this incredible power.



Inside the 8-foot dome, a look to its top reveals colorful birds flying overhead. Hannah Yoon for The New York Times

What do you hope people will experience when they encounter it?

I hope to inspire people the way I am inspired. Every single thing in the dome is from my imagination.

I really appreciate all technology, so when I say that I wanted to do something for the field of craft with the dome, it's not at the expense of, say, A.I., necessarily. But I do think that people fall in love with these technologies and devalue others. Never forget that we invented A.I., never forget what we can do with our hands and our own brains. That's why I didn't use a lot of reference material for the dome. I mean, I'm 64, and all my references are in my head now.

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