

# HYPERALLERGIC

## Becky Suss Paints Wharton Esherick's Dream-Like Home 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**

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.

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



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 Ittis)

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.

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.

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