

pacita abad

unfurled

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Pacita Abad: Unfurled

by Cid Reyes

Certainly not the first Filipino expatriate artist but, no doubt, a proponent for global travel outside the cosmopolitan cities of New York, London or Paris—is one artist born, prophetically it seems, behind a post office in Batanes, in the northern islands of the country. She is Pacita Abad—certified high-mileage traveler, who has visited an incredible number of countries all over the Asian, African and Latin American continents.

The impact of these countries reverberates in Abad's series of works. The 'Portraits of Cambodia' series started in the eighties depicted the refugee camps of the war-torn country. Another thematic body of work she created was the 'Immigration' series, which dealt with the complex emotional and psychic trauma of Asian, African and Latin American immigration in America. Inevitably, her sympathetic relationship with Third World countries yielded another visual stimulus. The various masks of these countries—with their marvelous resonances of ritual and celebration—have become her most visually charged works. As a long-time resident in Jakarta, Indonesia, the Ramayana puppets, used in the shadow play, have become emblems of Abad's multiculturalist view of the world. And yet all these works can only be described as fiercely Filipino, an amalgam of the world's richly variegated cultures.

Undoubtedly the hallmark of Abad's art is her self-created art medium she has called trapunto. Derived from the Italian word *trapungere*, meaning to sew, the process of doing the trapunto paintings is described by the artist thus: "I paint using either oil or acrylic on canvas, then stitch and collage it with a variety of materials. I follow by making two layers of canvas and fill cotton in-between before joining the pieces with running stitches." But the more exciting stimulation of the pictorial surface happens with the encrustation of assorted objects, such as plastic buttons, beads, broken mirrors, sequins, cowrie shells, feathers and tattered bits of embroidery. Again these objects are relics of objects drawn from the artist's travels.

In 1994, Abad exhibited a thematic show under the collective title, 'Assaulting The Deep Sea'. It was held at the Art Museum of Western Virginia, and the theme intriguingly enough, was the underwater world. Not a seascape of crashing waves against craggy boulders but, rather, the mysterious depths of the seas—a vision better known to deep sea divers and more adventurous aquanauts.

The show consisted of eight large-scale trapunto paintings, some extending lengthwise up to twelve feet. The intent in each work's massiveness being to evoke, not just hint at, the expansive space of this watery universe. Size as spectacle, size as physical manifestation of the sublime, and size as expression of the ineffable. The artist was aware of the consolidating impact to engulf the viewer.



But before any of this aquatic grandeur could be known to the artist, Abad had to overcome some very real fear. A childhood incident where she nearly drowned was a trauma that kept the artist away from any body of water. What erased her fear of water was a simple, practical solution: she took swimming lessons at the YMCA and, in her own words "after thousands of laps," she was brave enough to explore the water, in particular, the Bangkok seas. Indeed, the artist—now an enthusiastic scuba diver has discovered the incredible beauties of the deep, and coming up for air, brought with her

a poetic vision and sensation. All the underwater-themed paintings—save one—are dream-states of aquatic life. In high-keyed vibrant colors, the artist delineated schools of tropical fish activating the space, surrounded by corals and groves of underwater plants and flora, their branches waving and oscillating with the underwater current. The artist's appetite for ornamental activity is in full but controlled force. This is marine life teeming, not with activity, but with the efflorescence of undisturbed nature. Already the titles of the works bestow a sense of pelagia geographic: 'Dumaguete's Underwater', 'Ligpo Island', 'Sepoc Wall', 'Hundred Islands,' 'The Far Side of Apo Reef'. What pervades the works is a lucidity of sunlight, a light that invigorates even the shadowed recesses of a hidden world.

The lone painting that digressed from this sunny disposition is the earliest work, painted in 1985. Entitled 'My Fear of Night Diving', it is a terrific nightmare dredged from the murky oceanic depths.

The work is startling for its nightmare imagery: a seemingly colossal battle between a razor-toothed shark and a wildly thrashing octopus, elephantine in its maniacal struggle. The ambitiousness of the work derives not only from the scale and motif, but in the perceived exorcism of the artist's deep-seated fear of water. The vile, atmospheric darkness is appropriate to the density of imagery, buttressed by a swarm of highly stylized, evocatively sinister viperfish, stonefish and moray eels. It is an upsetting image, no doubt, but if the viewer were in a Spielbergian mood, the work guarantees a scream or two.

"I am a sunshine person from the tropics and I am naturally drawn to warm and bright colors, although I have gradually grown to appreciate more subdued colors," once declared the artist, whose entire approach to life has been dominated by a passionate relationship with color.

But at the opposite extreme of emotions lie the dark, haunting feelings of mortality and loss, betrayal and disenchantment. The impact of her mother's death was a critical turning point that jarred the smooth trajectory of her life and art.

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The exhibition is open to the public from Monday to Saturday
Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm
Saturday, 8am to 4pm
Closed Sundays

Admissions: P70
Student concessions (with id cards)
P50, gradeschool/P60, high school and university



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As excruciating is the memory of death by one's hands, when life has been snatched away by a decisive will. Such a death—the suicide of a dear friend—haunted Abad, whose response to her grief was the creation of the work entitled 'Recluse'. More than just a lamentation for the dead uttered in a wordless cry, 'Recluse' is rather like a visual—long, stretching canvas, running over 10 feet. As trapunto work, it has a faded, grizzled quality, as if life had been drained away from its colors. Its calculated languor is in marked contrast to most other works of Abad. One notes the absence of black, of any virulent sign of fatality, instead, there is a washed-out lambency, an exhaustion of the spirit. Even if the spectator were not privy to this personal information, he would still sense a discomfiting silence. Here is an instance of art as allegory, where the genuine source of emotion resides in the controlling visual intelligence of the artist.

The work is constructed along invisible grids, with patches of stitched canvas—collages, mostly in squares and rectangles. No ingratiating qualities—by way of bristling brushwork, ornamental patterns or exuberant colors—mars this quietly sensuous work.

The two trapunto works, 'Recluse' and 'My Fear of Night Diving', are facets of the shifting moods of the artist. While both works are deeply contrasting examples compared to her more familiarly exuberant colors and motifs, they are consistent with Abad's astute control over her image and material. Moreover, the works are a manifestation of the artist's restlessly roving imagination. Indeed, as her spirit impels her to rove all over the world, Pacita Abad continues to yield visual treasures from the depths of her imaginings.

Short Biography

Pacita Abad was born in 1946 in Batanes, an island located at the northern tip of the Philippines. In 1970 she moved to the United States to study immigration law, but contact with artists convinced her that she really wanted to do art. She later went to study at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington and the Art Students League in New York. Pacita Abad is an extensive traveller, and from her travels procures insights and materials for her work. Currently based in Singapore, Pacita continues to have exhibitions in galleries the world over.

My Fear of Night Diving and *Recluse* are part of the Lopez Memorial Museum Collection, Manila, Philippines

