

# pacita after

By Doreen G. Yu

Nothing about Pacita Abad is ever ordinary or plain or tame. From her laughter to her wardrobe to her ideas to her artworks, Pacita is exuberant, startling, overwhelming.

Pacita is best known for her large trapunto paintings, three dozen of which are currently on exhibit (until the 31st of this month) at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila in a show aptly entitled "Thinking Big". Her works are shown alongside the equally massive works of Paz Abad Santos, resplendently composed with burlap, wood, twigs, metal and other unorthodox materials.

Because of the similarity of their names, the two artists have often been mistaken one for the other or taken as variations of one person. Some think they are mother and daughter or sisters—one married to Mr. Santos, the other not! Though they share the same expansive vision, the same artistic genius, the same bigness of heart, Paz (or Ching) and Pacita are also very different, as their artworks will show.



I had not seen Pacita in years, since she and husband Jack Garrity left Manila more than ten years ago and moved to Washington D.C., he to take up a position with the World Bank's International Finance Corporation.

Every so often I would hear about Pacita's exhibits: at the International Monetary Fund office in Washington, at the Barbican in London, at the Alternative Museum in New York, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts also in D.C. There were awards too: the Visual Artist's Fellowship of the



Pacita with the last work in the current Immigrant Experience exhibit: *Flor Contemplacion* (1995). Details of masks (this page and opposite) from *Medicine Man* (1985-87).

National Endowment for the Arts, artist-in-residency at the Rutgers Center in New Jersey, a fellowship at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. There were others, I'm sure, that I did not hear about, for the one thing that Pacita does not do is stop creating, and when she creates, people cannot help but take notice. This year, she is the recipient of the Excellence 2000 Award for the Arts, a highly prestigious award

honoring Asian Americans for their achievements and ongoing commitment to inspiring other Asians.

Her trapunto paintings sell for as much as US\$50,000 and her works are in many major private, corporate and museum collections worldwide. A new "fan" is architecture legend I.M. Pei, who recently visited her home-cum-studio in Jakarta for a closer look at her works.



I finally caught up with Pacita at the Met three days before the opening of her show. I found her in one corner of the museum's main gallery, down on her hands and knees fixing one of her trapunto works prior to hanging. Not one bit of the exuberance had been diminished, not one ounce of energy had been diluted, I was happy to discover: after all these years, she was still vintage Pacita.



On the ground floor of the museum are works from her *Oriental Abstraction* series. Here is *Sampaloc Wall*, based on graffiti seen on a wall in Sampaloc. There is the turbulent *House of Incest*, which practically scared one viewer away (but he loved *Medicine Man*). Right at the entrance is the 250-inch high *Medicine Man* replete with masks and snakes, with each mask representing an illness which the afflicted one must talk to to be healed. Back-to-back with this is *Night of the Shooting Stars* about an unlamented woman's penchant for drawing on cosmic forces.

On the upper level are 15 works from the *Immigrant Experience* series, which she started about five years ago. Perhaps because she has traveled so extensively—and also perhaps because it is her practice to immerse herself, literally "walking in the mocassins" of

# all these years

these immigrants (on a recent trip to Hong Kong, Pacita spent a full day with a DH she had befriended, eating, shopping, getting a manicure/pedicure and facial with her), Pacita is able to articulate the mixture of delight and fear, success and tragedy, assimilation and separateness, hope and dislocation that is in the heart of every immigrant.

There is *Sichan Between Two Worlds: From Angkor Wat to the White House*, the success story of the highest-ranking Cambodian-American in the Bush administration. There is the fulfillment of every immigrant's American dream of house, car and appliances in *If My Friends Could See Me Now*, complete with a mountain of gold. There are whimsical touches like "chicken wings and tings" and a man clad in a Chicago Bulls t-shirt over a sarong (in *You Have to Blend In Before You Stand Out*) and happy images of racial integration like *Mixed Marriage* ("improves the diet of your in-laws," Pacita guffaws. "My mother-in-law is now cooking adobo!").

But there are too the somber images: immigrants toiling in difficult work situations (*I Thought the Streets Were Paved With Gold*), dark colors (*Torment of the Filipino Overseas*) and the chilling noose on a tempestuous background of *Flor Contemplacion*.



Pacita's canvas spans the world and from the world too Pacita draws the stuff to populate her canvas. From the rugged terrain of Batanes where she was born to the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand where she worked to New York City's green grocers and Statue of Liberty to the *wayangs* of Indonesia where she now lives; it all fuels the intense energy that Pacita expends in her daily

Photo by WALTER BOLLOZOS/STAR



Pacita on one of her trapunto paintings: "My strength is that my work is very expressive because of the energy and colors and the combination of lots of different materials."

confrontation with the canvas.

Pacita invented trapunto to have a medium that could accommodate the deluge of emotions and images that she feels and sees. She started doing trapunto in 1985 because she found painting on canvas stretched on frames a nuisance. "I wanted my work to be more portable and free," she says. "I did not want to think about it in a frame."

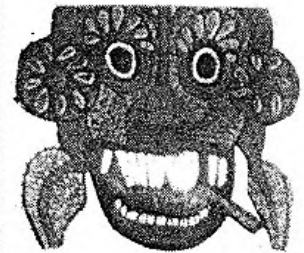
"Many people used to ask me what it was I was doing," she relates. "I thought I had to have a word to identify what I am doing, something unique that many other painters would like to use later on. I came up with trapunto (from the Italian word *trapungere*, to stitch and sew—Ed) but I didn't think that it was enough so I added painting and called my work trapunto painting."

Pacita uses oil or acrylic paint on unstretched canvas. Onto the painted canvas Pacita adds buttons ("Manila is the only place in the world where you can still buy buttons by the cupful"), shells, mirrors, sequins, rickrack and what-have-you. Each item is carefully and painstakingly sewn on by hand. I always suspected that Pacita had a hidden army of elves who came out at midnight to sew buttons for her, but a pair of reading glasses and an omnipresent thimble—both of which she is often frantically looking for—are evidence that "I am still crazy".

The canvas is then stitched, also by hand, and stuffed to make it three-dimensional.

The paintings are neither framed nor mounted; they are, as is, wall hangings. On one of the works at the Met I see a signature (always just "pacita") running vertically; is the painting hung wrong?

"My paintings are sometimes AC-DC," she whispers, then bursts out laughing.



I once sent Pacita a sack of leather scraps from my brother's leathers goods factory. One day some months later Pacita calls and with a pinch more than her usual exited energy says, "Doreen, you've got to come and see this!"

I hurried over to her house in Pasay City and followed her upstairs. On a wall in one of the rooms hung a larger-than-life trapunto painting of a naked man, seated and in deep thought. The leather scraps that had almost made the trash heap adorned the painting that Pacita had worked on—furiously as usual, I am sure—the night before: *I Am Thinking of Doreen*, it was called. ☉