



GALLERY
HOPPING
Cid Reyes

LIKE A conquering hero, she returns!

Fresh from her successful shows and art residency in Singapore and France, Pacita Abad brings to her country the laurels of her achievement and the plenitude of her art. With unbounded pride, the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) welcomes Abad's show entitled *Circles in My Mind*, a triumphant traveling show which opened at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) in 2003, and this year in the artist's own country. Abad will show more works at the Ateneo Gallery in January 2005 and the Jendela Gallery at The Esplanade in Singapore, where Abad has been residing for the past several years. As a gift to Singapore, she painted a bridge with her trademark scintillating colors. It should be called not the Bridge of Sighs, but the Bridge of Hights.

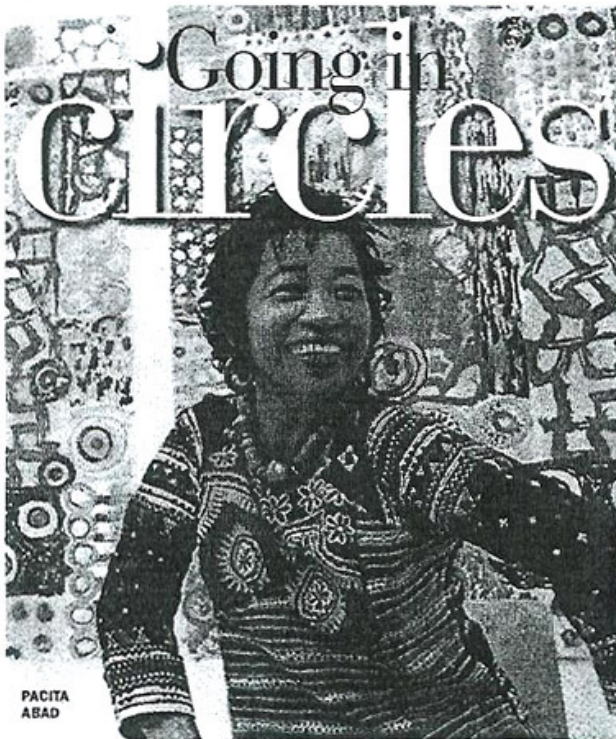
One might think of the schedule—not to mention the production—of Abad's shows as punishing and tortuous, but again most of us have not been blessed with the good fortune of being a talented artist possessed of incalculable energy, enthusiasm and zest for life. How fortunate are we as a people to have produced one such an artist, whose prodigiousness in work is equally matched by a global adventurousness refusing to be entrapped by a stifling insularity. Abad's current volume of work—and that is exactly the right phrase—which comprises *Circles in My Mind* attests to her self-assured identity as an artist for the world. And the Philippines is all the richer for it.

As the visual theme indicates, the circle reveals the power of the elemental shape, with its complex associations and boundless metaphors. The harvest of symbols is simply staggering.

In the text which this writer produced for the book that complements the show, we wrote: "In Abad's work, a whole range of images signals to the viewer as the eye organizes the circle into visual metaphors, from the sublime (sun, moon, planets, cycle of life, halo of light, royal crown, ring of Saturn) to the whimsical (Lifesavers, balloons, egg yolks, lollipops, earrings, carousels, beach balls), from rounded fruits (lemons, grapes, oranges, pomegranates, plums, peaches, cherries, melons, persimmons) to flowers (daisies and sunflowers)."

But from where did the brilliant idea of the circle come? In the history of modern art, the circle makes its earliest appearance in the abstract works of Wassily Kandinsky in the first decade of the last century. Kandinsky believed that the circle had infinite possibilities. "It could be assertive and filled with all possible tensions, both stable and flexible, concentric and eccentric." In the typical incantatory tone of the times, Kandinsky exclaimed: "The circle which I have been using to such a large extent in my recent work can often be described as a Romantic circle. And the coming Romanticism is a piece of ice in which a flame burns." Of such incendiary prose is the written work of the founder of Abstraction made.

And the origin of the circle in Abad's work? As the artist declares: "Circles have always been in my work and they are direct, simple, modern, universal, intimate, fascinating and playful. I love the shape of the circle!" Indeed, this statement transports us to Abad's early works which first made her reputation: the *trapunto* works. The word is derived from the Italian *trapungere*, meaning "to embroider." Thus did Abad embroider her padded and quilted canvases with a multitude of sequins and beads, buttons and mirrors, collected from the numerous coun-



PACITA
ABAD



CROSS Dressing

tries this peripatetic painter has visited. Asia, India, Africa, Europe and the Middle East saw the figure of this intrepid Filipino artist, relishing and imbibing the dynamic cultures and aesthetics of diverse peoples. Like a true ambassador of art, Abad has visited more than 60 countries. Each has left an indelible mark on Pacita Abad as a person and as an artist. Encircling the globe, the artist comes back with all the visual bounties of the world. Hers is an art of transfiguration: art transforming an artist's sense of humanity.

This major exhibition of Abad's works is heralded not with one but two glossy coffee-table books: the book *Circles in My Mind*, which complemented the Singapore Tyler Print Institute show; and the more recently published *Obsession*, which celebrates the new works done after her stint at the STPI.



TURNING Japanese

One is made dizzy not only by the magnitude of the works but by the dazzling quality that informs the vision of the artist.

In the message from Nestor O. Jardin, CCP president, and Fernando C. Jose, CCP artistic director, we learn that Abad held her first exhibition at the CCP, entitled *Scenes from Batanes*, in 1985. The year before, Abad was recognized as one of the Ten Outstanding Young Men, awarded by the Philippine Jaycees and the Gerardo Roxas Memorial Foundation. She was the first woman recipient of the prestigious award, for being the most outstanding artist in the Philippines. "She then moved on from strength to strength, impressing audiences here and abroad with her vivid colors, and garnering accolades for her *trapunto* paintings, affirming her stature as a world-class Filipino artist."

The *Obsession* book is written by Ian Findlay-Brown, editor-publisher of *Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News*, and Ruben Defeo, professor of art history, theory and criticism at the College of Fine Arts, University of the Philippines. One could rightfully consider Findlay-Brown as an expert on the

art of Pacita Abad, having written several books on the artist, such as *Exploring the Spirit and Endless Blues*. On the other hand, Defeo has been a long-time personal friend who now serves as exhibition curator for *Circles of the Mind*. The two critics wrote on different aspects of the person and the works.

In "Poetry of the Moment," Findlay-Brown writes with passion commensurate to the excellence of the art:

"Intensity of color, emotion, line and patterning strike the eye and the imagination powerfully at the same time in almost all of Abad's works. The combination of color, emotion, line and patterning seems to flood haphazardly from an artist so brimful of ideas and energy that there would appear scarcely enough time to get everything down on canvas or paper, or to bring order to the turbulent emotions simmering within the artist."

Swept by ardent scholarship, Defeo enlarges and deepens the rich symbolism of the shape, referencing the circle to a blazing prism: "From the ritual rings and bracelets that adorned pagan forerunners to the prayer beads that balm today's believers, from the glass marbles and paper balls of early childhood games to the gilded CD and digital video disc of high-technology leisure." Like the artist, the critic circumnavigates the world conjuring the circle: "From the igloo of Alaska to the colosso of Roma, from the mandala of India to the cupola of Italia." Spinning wheels of the imagination, Abad leads the viewer through a maze of time, place and emotion.

But for all the rich symbolism of the circle, the viewer is undeniably buoyed by Abad's mesmerizing use of colors, which grab the viewer surely by the eyeballs. In sizzling and dazzling combinations of hues and shades, in pigments as though mixed by some ancient alchemist, Abad stuns the retina with a force that is at once playful and majestic, bold and attacks without hesitation, but leaves the viewer with a sheer sense of exhilaration, and finally leaves one with an addictive taste for life, with all its joys and sorrows. Surreal is the feeling the artist envelops her audience, an equivalence of a thrilling shock that is, without exaggeration, a near delirious experience. How one can return to the solemn, abysmal grays beloved of contemporary minimalist interior decorators is a mystery devoutly to be ignored.

Does Abad's genius for colors correspond to some deeply innate need to celebrate the wonders of life? Perhaps. What we do know is that a correspondence exists between the emotions of the artist who wields these colors and the response of the colors themselves to the artist. After all, these same pots of colors remain available to other artists. We are left with no doubt that a similar emotional relationship exists between the musician and his instrument. The same piano or violin will yield a different sonorosity, depending on who is caressing the ivory keys or strings.

A word should be put in edgewise on the use of a material not usually associated with the artist, which is paper. Abad met this challenge with, no pun intended, flying colors. With the help of the technical experts at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, the artist produced works that are a hybrid of painting, printing and sculpture. Rising to the challenge posed by Abad's creative imagination, the print experts responded with equal innovativeness. The results are astonishingly seen in the "sculptured" paper works, which descend against the wall like torn tapestry. At once weighty and light to the eye, these "wall-hanging" prints strike the viewer as spectacular curtains, glittering with sequins and beads, buttons and fabric swatches, in sibilant colors that make one feel exultant.

If you have to see only one show a year, this is the "must-see" for you. *Circles in My Mind* is jointly organized by the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Galleria Duemila and ArtPost Asia Pte Ltd. The CCP Main Gallery is on the third level of the CCP Main Building, Roxas Boulevard, Pasay City. Admission is free.