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Pacita Abad



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Poetry Of The Moment

The work of Pacita Abad represents much of the dynamism of life in which struggle and joy, pleasure and pain go hand in hand. At the very core of her art is the intense vital poetry of a spirit that seeks to put a smile on the world's face.

By Ian Findlay

From Pacita Abad's earliest sketches and oils to her most recent collage and works on paper there has always been a compelling energy, one that speaks of an uninhibited zest for life and an appetite for experimentation. The boldly colored and often multidimensional structure of Abad's works have also served to confirm her as an artist for whom a universal vision is central to her being. This is clear in the figurative and abstract works that have made up the dynamic visual narrative of her art of the past three decades. There have been intensely felt and moving statements on refugees and immigrants, as well as interpretations of numerous folk cultures and dramatic colorful abstractions of her personal thoughts. The collection of works that make up *Obsession* confirms that her voyage into self-discovery and experiment are as intense as ever.

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 of the past two decades. The combination of color, emotion, line, and patterning seems to flood haphazardly from an artist so

brim full 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. The sheer vibrancy of the images sometimes overwhelms the eye for, at first glance, many

of her works seem to be fortuitous collections of circles, triangles, squares, heavy lines, and confident color patterns. This is entirely deceptive, however, since Abad—though frequently spontaneous in the execution of an idea—is always fully in control of the outcome. The rhythmic and cir-

cular *Pink Sherbet* (2003), the spiraling drama of *Say, om* (2003), lightness and suggested delicacy of *Red Lilies* (2004), and the spare *Spring in Tokyo* (2004) attest to Abad's control. In *Pink Sherbet*, for example, the power of the work does not lie solely in Abad's ability to harness numerous circles into a cohesive whole in celebration of the cosmic world, but to suggest that within each circle lies an entirely singular world that is divorced from the rest of the picture's structure. This is something which Abad has achieved again and again in works dominated by her iconographic circles. She also achieves this with her squares and triangles. These four works also show us Abad's ability to make complex emotional statements clearly so that the viewer is drawn into each work with ease.

While one might be confident in accepting the boldness of Abad's vision of the



Pacita Abad, *Pink Sherbet*, 2003, oil, acrylic, painted canvas collaged on handmade paper, 57 x 77 cm. All photograph: Courtesy of the Artist.



Pacita Abad, **Spring in Tokyo**, 2004, oil pastel, silk collaged on handmade paper, 135 x 70 cm.

world, her abstract work is rarely readily accessible emotionally and intellectually. The meanings of many of her pieces are frequently couched in deeply personal terms which inhibit interpretation. And while Abad may be intent in bringing a sense of joy to the world, on smiling on the world even in turbulent and painful times, our comprehension of this is to be embraced through her visually challenging art. This is Abad's way for she is letting us know that what one sees on the canvas or the paper or in the collage is an experience of the world not easily come by and not readily surrendered. It is only right that she should make our eyes and mind tussle with that which she has seen and felt, and still sees and feels. Her intuition is not ours, of course, neither are her feelings and insights, but through observ-

ing her process we will surely be embraced by them, warmed by them, and matured by them. What Abad has seen and felt and suggests in such collage works as *Turning Japanese*, *Techno-color Dreams*, *Take Me To The Water*, and *You're a Fast Car Racer* (all 2004) seems to the eye an effortless interpretation of her world, yet the mind, the imagination, tells us that it is not so since the subtlety of collage, the layering and juxtaposition of different materials requires a unique sense of time and space, of emotion and the understanding of it in making visual choices.

A recent turning point for Abad was the challenge of working on paper once again as an artist-in-residence for three months at the Singapore Tyler



Pacita Abad, **Red Lilies**, 2004, oil pastel, oil, acrylic, collage on fabric, 135 x 70 cm.

Print Institute in 2003. It was a challenge that Abad relished from the outset, not only because she would be working with a highly experienced team of printmakers, but also because it presented her with the opportunity to work with a different medium and to develop her aesthetic at a different level. "I had not worked on paper for the past ten years. The change in medium from canvas to hand-made paper was the biggest challenge for me," she said in a recent interview. "On top of that, the detailed process of printmaking with a team of people was a different experience from working alone in my studio. My work has always been colorful, textured and multidimensional, whether it was abstract or narrative. Trying to maintain this approach led me to develop both abstract and finally sculptural works on

paper. I like working on paper because it is more spontaneous and allows me to be freer. There is no chance to go back. But to me the main drawback of working on paper is the size limitation."

The result of her intensive period at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute was a dramatic collection of prints, paper pulp works, and paper assemblages under the title *Circles In My Mind*. There are many similarities between Abad's works on canvas and those on paper that are striking to the eye. There was her trade-mark boldness of colors and a similar emotional and visual dynamic, for example, that reminds one of the best of her art. But there is also a different sense of lightness, a fresh sense of humor, and a softer edge to her line that are striking. This is particularly true in her abstract figurative assemblages which struck a resonance with much earlier work, referencing as they do some of her most important journeys of discovery into other cultures and her desire to make strong sculptural objects with paper that would be different from any three-dimensional explorations that had gone before. These figures are strong individual aesthetic statements, tinged with a more objective emotional view of the world.

A great deal of what Abad experienced and learned during her residency was carried over into much of her work of 2004. Where her trapunto work, dense with many materials and ideas, had a weighty three-dimensional quality, here her new pieces, with their base on hand-made paper, have a sense of lightness about them and a very different lyrical quality: *Paper Roses* (2004) is one of finest of Abad's more lyrical pieces. Oil pastel, acrylics, painted and printed paper are the materials at the center of much of recent work. But Abad has not discarded such things as silk, batik, glitter, sequins, mylar glass, buttons and fabric en-



Pacita Abad, *Paper Roses*, 2004, acrylic, oil pastel, gold and silver paper collage on handmade paper, 135 x 70 cm.

tirely. They are here but the difference is that these materials are used more sparingly. With her more careful use of many standard materials of recent years Abad has been able to make a very different impact on the imagination with a more subtle range of images. *A Memory From Your Lonesome Past*, *Morning Rising*, and *Prized Possession* (all 2004) are excellent examples of this fresh approach. Here there is a sense that the earlier anxious tension of some her trapunto works has been replaced by a gentler, more relaxed view of the world, but still an incisive one. Other examples of Abad's new visual dynamic are *Is Spring Far Behind?*, *Take Me To The Water*, and *You've got Me Running* (all 2004).

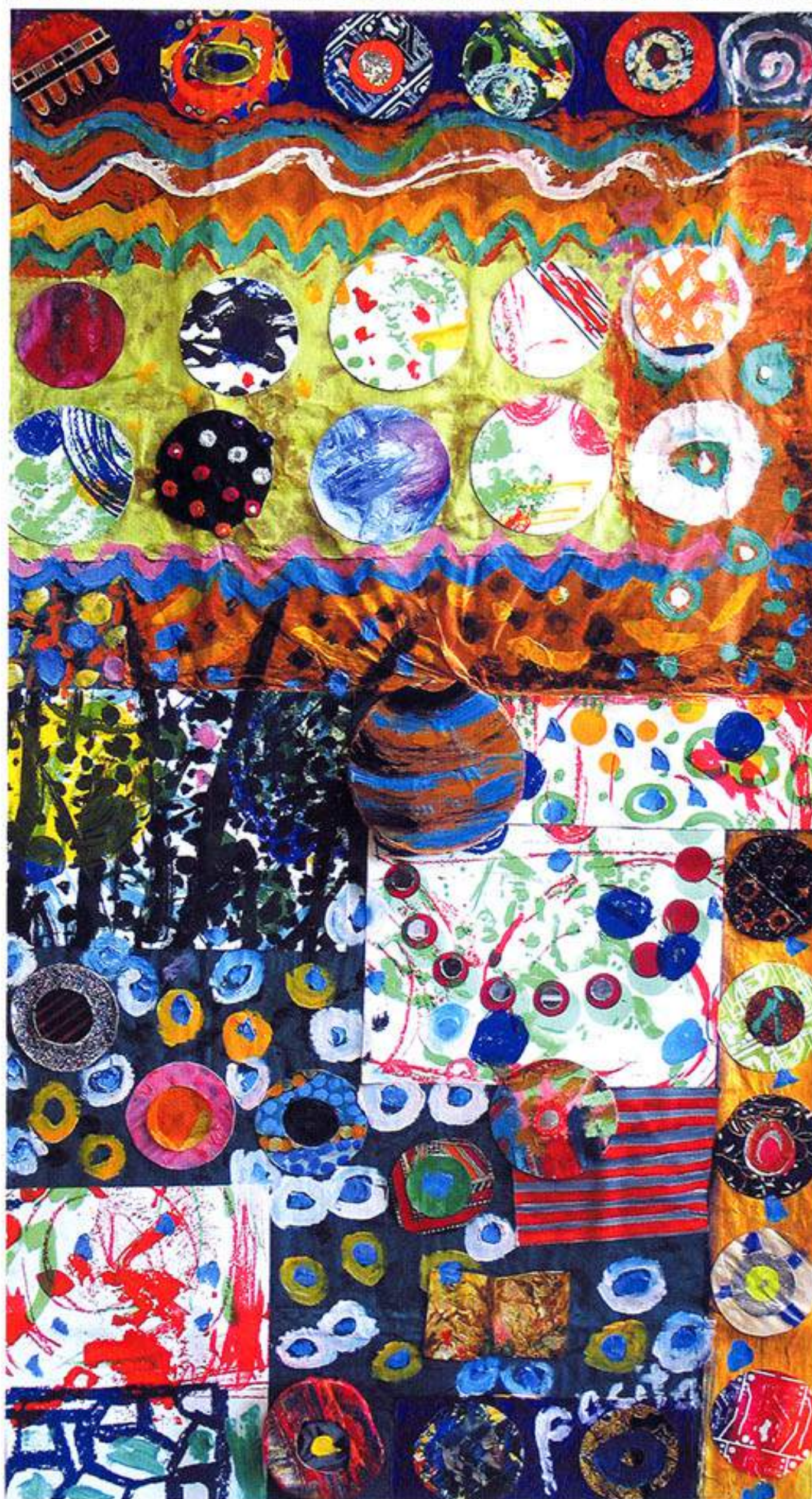
There are many who may feel that Abad is at her best and most dramatic and expressive when her work is large in scale. This, of course, is very far from the truth as many of her early and recent range of work clearly shows. For some artists large-scale works signify the defining of the artistic ego, strength, and that the power of ideas requires the dramatic of huge space. For such artists small works act as stepping stones to larger ideas. This, as Abad says, is not the case for her. Small-scale works represent "different places and different feelings" and "they are like jewels and though they are small, they generally require the same amount of time and energy as larger works. I like the focus of working on small works. They have their own separate identity and sense of space. On occasion, I have tried to make a small work that I particularly liked on a larger scale, but it just didn't have the same feeling."

The numerous small works—five by five inches—made during the past two years possess the essence of Abad's aesthetic and reveal her intense creative energy in an astonishingly compact manner.

Pacita Abad, *A Memory from your Lonesome Past*, 2004, acrylic, painted canvas and cardboard, fabric, mirrors, glitter collaged on handmade paper, 134 x 72 cm.



Pacita Abad, *Say, Om*, 2004, acrylic, fabric, printed paper on handmade paper, 57 x 77 cm.



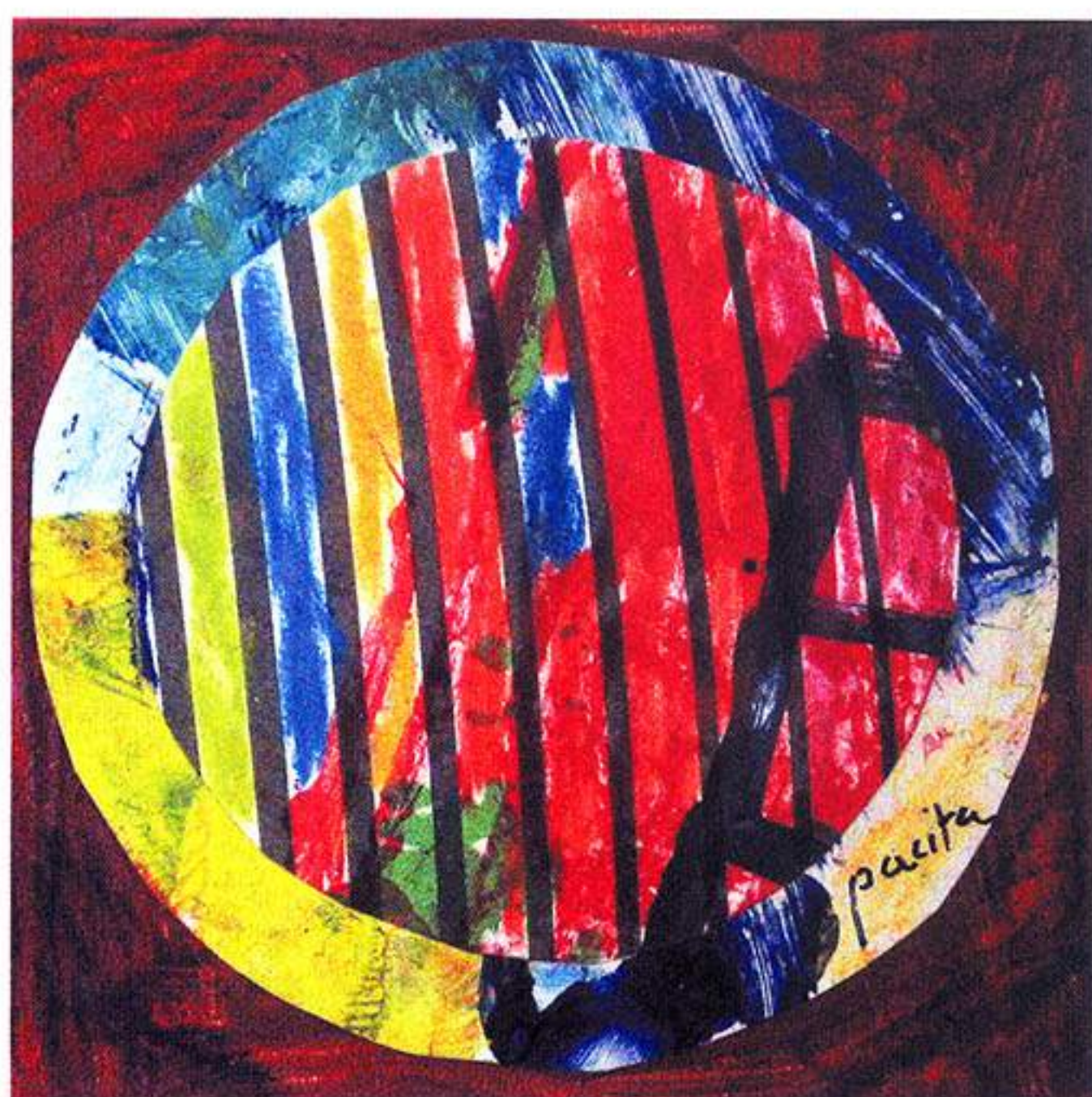
These works are clearly not expressions of small ideas waiting to be built upon or reworked into something much larger. They are of themselves, dramatic and lyrical expressions of a deeply personal nature, declarations of intimacy, and poems of the moment that challenge the imagination as forcefully as any of her larger pieces. And they are, like dynamic short poems, to be savored and often revisited in the mind.

In Abad's small works, made on board or paper, again the use of her many materials is done so sparingly and to reinforce the impact of the image in the viewer's mind. Collage, with such things as buttons, glitter, different papers and cloth or thread, suggests Abad's desire to work three-dimensionally. Sometimes the effect of the small works, as in *Absinthe*, *Pink Coral*, *Purple Circle*, and *Gold Circles* (all 2003) harks back to much larger trapunto works and Abad's concern with life's more cosmic rhythm. But this is only a thought in passing for each of these pieces has its own intrinsic strength, its own lyrical direction with no reference but to its own dynamic.

While many of the small works are clearly to



Pacita Abad, **All Those Tears I Cried**, 2003, acrylic, mylar, oil pastel collaged on board, 13 x 13 cm.



Pacita Abad, **Behind Bars**, 2003, oil, acrylic, fabric, buttons collaged on paper, 13 x 13 cm.



Pacita Abad, **Circuit Blinds**, 2003, circuit board, prints, oil on board, 13 x 13 cm.



Pacita Abad, **Stranger**, 2003, lithograph, glitter, oil pastel collaged on handmade paper, 13 x 13 cm.

he read as a general view of the world, there are many others that are obviously of a deeply personal nature, secret moments that stand at the door of revelation. Abad's skill here is not to disclose through the structure of her images, but rather to tease the viewer's imagination to the challenge of discovery. In works such as *All Those Tears I Cried*, *Behind Bars*, *Blue Triangle*, *Circuit Blinds*, *It Hurt So Bad*, *Purple Rain*, and *Stranger* (all 2003) there is a sense of artist's profoundly private self that we can only guess at. This self is revealed acutely in the simplicity and directness of the image's construction. Fre-

quently one wonders how such intensely felt emotions can be held within such a small space. There is, however, the notion that there is much, much more happening beyond the confines of the frame. This is very much a part of Abad's achievement as an artist—the ability to suggest the world far beyond each individual painting or collage. It is clear that time and space for Abad are as much part of the inner self as they are part of the wider world.

Abad's development as an artist is the result of great diversity of experience—emotional, artistic, physical, intellectual. With each new phase of her work she

makes us aware not of the limitations of life but of the extraordinary potential that life offers even under astonishingly difficult private circumstances.

Even in anguish she is able to smile and that is the center of her strength as an artist and inspiration to others. "I always see the world through color, although my vision, perspective and paintings are constantly influenced by new ideas and changing environments," said Abad during a recent interview. "I feel like I am an ambassador of colors, always projecting a positive mood, that helps make the world smile." Δ