

Pacita bold and brave

'Circles in My Mind' shows that artist Pacita Abad's world is still suffused with color and ruled by art despite her illness

By MICHELE T. LOGARTA

SEPTEMBER 9 was a big day in the local art scene. As University of the Philippines College of Fine Arts Prof. Ruben Defeo observed, all roads led to the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) that night. It was the opening of Pacita Abad's major exhibit, entitled "*Circles in My Mind*", at the CCP's Main Gallery.

Abad -- with a wreath of crimson anthuriums and yellow poseys on her head -- was in exuberant spirits, and remarkably so, despite the fact that a medical condition has kept her in a wheelchair and made her voice low and whispery.



Pacita Abad, on her love for bright hues: "I feel like I am an Ambassador of Colors, always projecting a positive mood, that helps make the world smile."

"*Circles in My Mind*" is a rambunctious display of brilliant color -- splashed painted, printed, stamped, stitched, stenciled on paper, paper pulp and paper assemblages that Pacita created during her three-month stint as resident artist of the Visiting Arts Program of the prestigious Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI).

Abad is the first Filipino artist to have been invited by the STPI to participate in this program which aims to raise the bar in printmaking by inviting major artists to work with its international printmaking and papermaking team. STPI is committed to stretching and expanding the boundaries of artmaking, particularly in the creation of lithography, screenprinting, relief printing, intaglio and paper pulp as well as multi-media print and paper forms.



Big snail (2003)
by Pacita Abad
57 x 77 cm. (22 x 30 inches)
Oil, Cloth batik printed paper on
handmade paper

Abad is known for her bold and dazzling hues. Color is a constant in her works, be they in her acclaimed *trapunto* tapestries, in Singapore's Alkaff Bridge which she transformed into that country's first art bridge (see artsentralmanila.com Archives, March 2004), or in her new paper "sculptures". Color is what Pacita gives us, all with an open hand.

Why circles and not squares? Pacita answers that question and tells us a lot more about her art, her life and the places she has traveled to and lived in, as well as her studio in Batanes that overlooks the Pacific Ocean.

Everybody is excited about your show. It's considered a major event in the local art scene. What are your thoughts on this?

I am happy to show the Filipinos the works that I have been doing for the past few years. I am also pleased to be able to arrange a series of workshops for STPI's print experts to work with Filipino artists and students, and finally, I am honored to be able to show my works at CCP, in conjunction with its 35th anniversary.

Colors are all over your work. What role does color play in your life?

I always see the world through color, although my vision, perspective and paintings are constantly influenced by new ideas and changing environments.

Color plays an important role in my life. It is not only on my palette but also in my clothes, my jewelry, my home and even in the food that I eat. Throughout my career, the passion for color has remained strong and that is why I have always been attracted to colorful countries like India, Mexico, Turkey and Mali.

Somehow, no matter where I went, there was always vibrancy, brilliance and intensity in the colors and the people. I began to think of circles, magentas, reds, bright yellows, blue skies, gold and silver ornaments, stained glass, enameled bangles, expressive black eyes, coconut-oiled long black hair, colorful turbans, multi-colored saris and the exotic spices and scents.

Themes, colors and designs are all intensely subjective and personal for me. My work has always been colorful, textured and multi-dimensional, whether it was abstract or narrative. Trying to maintain this approach led me to develop both abstract and finally sculptural works on paper.

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Why circles and not squares?

During my three-month artist-in-residency at STPI, I made 57 print and paper pulp pieces, incorporating the techniques of lithography, relief printing, screen printing and hand colored paper pulp. What emerged was an explosion of monoprints, limited edition prints and mixed media pieces embedded with beads, mirrors, textiles and other exotic objects that I had collected during my travels. The motif of my print and pulp-paper pieces was circles. Circles have always been in my work, as they are simple, direct, intimate, modern, universal and playful. I love the shape of the circle.

Your works at the Main Gallery obviously entailed a lot of work. Was it difficult working with paper, pulp or mylar?

Before I started at STPI I had not worked on paper for almost ten years, so I decided to keep my focus simple; and to use circles as the unifying theme of my prints and pulp-paper pieces. The change in medium from canvas to hand-made paper was the biggest challenge.

When I first presented my circle drawings to the printers, we spent endless hours discussing and working on each drawing and discussing whether to use lithography, intaglio, collagraph, relief or silkscreen. After deciding on the technical aspects of the print, like the size and shape of the paper, the color of the pulp to be used, the printmaking techniques to be applied and the materials to be added to the print, then the real work began.

When we used lithography, I painted each color directly onto a clear plastic sheet called a mylar. This was my first introduction to mylar and at first it seemed strange, but eventually I got used to seeing my drawings through the many layers of plastic, which were later transferred on to aluminum printing plates.

One of my main concerns was to make sure that the prints had texture. I wanted to create a three-dimensional effect and fortunately, I found that this was possible in many different ways.

What is your favorite medium, if you have a favorite? What do you like about working with paper?



Pink zigzag (2003)
57 x 77 cm (22 x 30 inch)
Oil, mylar, printed paper, batik on
handmade paper

All the different media complement my work. The availability of materials has a lot to do with the decision or the choice of work I will do.

I like working on paper because it is more spontaneous and allows me to be freer. There is no chance to go back.

Recently I worked on three different series using different kinds of medium. The first, "Circles on my mind", was done on paper (57 x 77 cm) and were started right after my Visiting Artist Program at the STPI and my "Circles in my mind" exhibition. I just could not stop, as I fervently continued to work on the circle motif with acrylic, oil pastel,



Pop art (2003)
by Pacita Abad
57 x 77 cm (22 x 30 inches)
Oil, fabrics, batik, acrylic, pastel,
sequins on handmade paper

mylar, circuit boards, fabric and other available materials. It was very spontaneous and exhilarating.

The second part, the "Squares" series, consists of 90 small (13 x 13 cm) paper paintings, created when I was an artist-in-residence at Centre d'Art, Marnay Art Centre (CAMAC) located in a small village in France, in September and October 2003.

The third series, "Circles collages", was made by playing with cardboard (135 x 70 cm) and combining paint with small paper circles, tin cans and fabric. I then used materials gathered on trips to Tokyo, Bangkok and Yogyakarta to collage onto my 50 colorful paintings.

I read that you like to work with music playing in the background. For this particular group of works that you did with STPI, what songs or music did you listen to?

I like different kinds of music, but especially the blues. I have been listening to the blues for the last three decades and was very much influenced by their music. My "Endless Blues" series was inspired by the blues musicians from America. This body of work was created during the time when there was so much turmoil in the world. Along with this was my personal encounter with an illness. I was diagnosed with lung cancer and so I have to have surgery, radio and chemotherapy, which I refer to as chop, burn and poison.

Alone with my paints and brushes, music day and night, is when I feel most relaxed – this is my therapy.

Is it true that you were born in a post office in Batanes? How has your birthplace figured in your art?

I was born fifty-eight years ago on the island of Batanes midway between Luzon and Taiwan. In 1946, Basco was a very small town and our house also provided postal services for the whole island.

Over the past year, I built a studio in Batanes which will enable me to be away three months of the year, to be alone and paint. The studio, high on the top of a hill, surrounded by pastureland and overlooking the Pacific Ocean, is built of stone with walls one meter thick to withstand the typhoons. The inside is covered with tiles, narra and mahogany wood, and high white walls for me to work. It is so wonderful to paint there, inspired and comforted by the sea and the people of the island where I was raised.

Were you always an artist and painter?

My father was a congressman and a Minister of Public Works and Communications. My younger brother is currently serving as the congressman from Batanes.

Given this background, I was politically active and when I became too active in the student demonstrations against the Marcos government, I was urged to go abroad to further pursue my studies.

When I left the Philippines in 1970, my intention was to finish my law degree in the United States. However, fate and fortune interceded and in San Francisco. I decided to give up law and pick up a paintbrush. I then pursued art studies at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Arts Students League of New York.

I then began my thirty-year artistic sojourn has brought me to more than a hundred countries around the world.

In terms of artmaking, what have been your favorite places?

My work has been influenced and inspired by my travels through different cultures.

My paintings reflect the spirit of each place I visited. Somehow I like to live in extreme places like Bangladesh and New York, Bombay and Berlin, Sudan and Paris and not too much in between. One art critic commented that my small works represent the sophistication of the big cities, while my large paintings have all the elements of a developing country with the use of local materials.

I lived in a small town called Wau, a sleepy Sudanese town in the middle of Africa, along one of the tributaries of the Nile. I spent most of my stay wandering about the market where people from the different tribes come early to barter their meager goods.

Their outfits are incredible! Most of the men carry three spears, and a club about the size of a baseball bat and some carry shields made out of buffalo hides. Faces scarred, bodies strong, their hair dyed red, ivory amulets and bracelets, beads in their hair, on their foreheads and around their waists. Fantastic people and I loved painting there.

After Sudan I lived in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, and it seems like most of the country's 100 million people live here, especially in the old part of the city. The buildings are packed together and alleyways are so narrow that only rickshaws, pushcarts and stray cows can squeeze through them. People are everywhere in old Dhaka, pushing and shoving, howling and screaming, yet somehow everyone seems to get where they want to go. When I was in Bangladesh, I did a series on the women in Bangladesh, who were happy to be painted, as most of them stay in their village while their husbands are working.

Later I went to Bangkok and for the first three months I would go to the Chaophraya River and paint the people working along the river. But then the local papers were constantly printing news about the Cambodian refugees, who were streaming for the shelter of Thailand. It is difficult for an artist to isolate herself from the events that are happening all around, so I became involved and made several trips to the refugee holding centers on the Cambodian border.

There I met and heard the stories from the refugees, journalists, relief workers and medical teams. These experiences provided me with a deeper understanding of the Cambodian tragedy and as a result, my portraits depict the faces and feeling of displaced Cambodians and tell the story of adversity, bitterness, boredom and not too often happiness.

When I returned to the U.S., I was still involved with many of the Cambodian refugees and that led me to the bigger issue of the immigrant experience. I personally could identify with the immigrants because I was one of them. When I first came to America in 1970, I was alone and this was my first time outside the Philippines. When I landed in San Francisco, I had very little money and like others before me, I took the first jobs that were available. I became a seamstress and part-time typist.

Having completed the STPI's Visiting Artist Program, what would you say is the most important lesson you learned there?

Anything is possible! That was the challenge the printers and papermakers at the STPI gave to me, when I began my three-month collaboration with them. I just said, let's do it!

The challenge was on! I started developing my drawings on paper and then brought materials like fabric, printed fabric, glass, tin, plastic buttons, yarns and found objects, with the idea of putting these on my drawings, so that they could find a way to translate them into lithographs and paper pulp works. I decided to focus on circles as the unifying theme of my STPI prints and pulp paper pieces. I found the day-to-day interaction with the printers to be very stimulating and educational, as we analyzed and planned the development of the work.

In the end, the challenge was met, and both the artist and the STPI team were exhausted and exhilarated by our collaboration. It was like this everyday – very spontaneous and very intense. I may have had only four hours sleep each night, but I was very happy with my work. All in all, it was an extremely provocative, productive and educational experience to work with the professionals at the STPI and to create my print and paper pulp circles filled with colors and materials.

On top of that, the detailed process of printmaking with a team of people was a different experience from working alone in my studio.

*"Circles in My Mind" runs until Oct. 31. The exhibition is curated by Prof. Ruben Defeo and is jointly organized by the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Galleria Duemila and ArtPostAsia Pte. Ltd. **The CCP Main Gallery is located at the third level of the CCP Main Building, Roxas Blvd., Pasay City.** Admission is free. Gallery hours are from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesdays to Saturdays. For inquiries, call 823-3702 or visit the website www.culturalcenter.gov.ph.*