

SCENE



Unbreakable

Cancer and 9/11 have done nothing to diminish painter Pacita Abad's zest. By Angelia Teo

Pacita Abad looks nothing like her pictures. Her hair is boy-short and spiky, retaining none of the luscious sheen of her previous do. Her skin is sun-bronzed and her eyes desperately happy. She looks more tribal princess than art sophisticate. But her smile – wide and white – is the same.

It is reflective of her “always optimistic” ethic, one that has seen her through difficult times, specifically the last 10 months, during which she has battled – and recovered from – lung cancer. The diagnosis came as a surprise as she is not even a smoker. “Cancer is a social disease,” she says, explaining the cause of the cancer. “It’s so common now. For me, I think it was stress-related. I had six shows around the world last year and I was going crazy trying to meet deadlines. I won’t put myself through that again.”

Abad, the Filipino daughter of a cabinet minister and a congresswoman and known widely as a social painter, also felt the aftershocks of 9/11 in a very personal manner. “Outside, in the world, it was chaotic. Inside, I was battling my own problems. I felt like it was the endless blues, happening over and over again.”

Hence, the title for her new series of more than 150 paintings that will be unveiled at Artfolio SPACE this month. “Endless Blues” began with her deriving inspiration from the musical genre of the same name, but ended up a testament to her struggle with cancer.

Several pieces in the series were completed before she even knew of her illness and they do not depart significantly from her previous works. The pieces from 10 months ago – when she was diagnosed with the disease – are more chaotic, with larger shapes and deeper colours revealing her inner turmoil. After her recovery, Abad’s work changed tack again and, in these pieces, the mood is calmer, the colours softer and the shapes in harmony with each other. It’s a reflection of the relief she felt, she says, after learning that she was in full recovery.

Through what she calls her “chop, burn and poison” therapy – one that consisted of surgery, radiotherapy and medication respectively – the 56-year-old kept her spirits up by painting, the most natural recourse for her own pain. “I would sleep at 10pm and wake up at 2am then paint non-stop till noon,” she explains. “I just couldn’t stop, it was like a tap that I couldn’t turn off. I could ill afford to waste time sleeping even.”

There is one more difference in her work. She has abandoned *trapunto* – a word she coined for the technique she made famous that incorporates painting, tie-dye, silkscreen, collage, stitching and quilting. Abad had always made strong socio-political statements with her work; the visual effect of *trapunto* served to make them more effective because, she says, the viewer spends more time examining the little details. But in “Endless Blues”, *trapunto* is nowhere to be seen. Instead, Abad has concentrated her efforts on creating “pure” paintings. “Trapunto is more process-oriented,” she says. “There is more depth to the works now. I like the feeling in these paintings. It is about me sharing the last 10 months. The optimism I kept close to me and how I fought against my illness so that it wouldn’t bring me down ... wouldn’t break me.”

There is just one thing that causes Abad’s otherwise happy demeanour to crumble. Terrorism. “There are people in my country that cannot help but take a bus, but they’re the ones hurt when a bomb goes off ... Why them?” she asks rhetorically.

The sadness in her voice is apparent, but it doesn’t last for long and she is soon back to her infectious happy self. “It’s good, you know,” she continues, her arms spreading to show off her massive wall-occupying paintings, “all of that became all of this.” ■

Pacita Abad’s “Endless Blues” is at Artfolio SPACE, Raffles Hotel Arcade, #02-25, from November 29-December 15. Call 6334 4866 for information.



Clockwise from left: Pacita before her illness; “Brohin And Wild”, 1990; “To Robert Crav”, 90x60cm, oil on canvas.