

Pacita Abad: Minding her own business

By Dayang MNT Yraola

MANY BOOKS have been written about her, describing her peripatetic lifestyle or analyzing her art. I met Pacita Abad in New Jersey when the Montclair State University Art Galleries sponsored "Palay: Trapunto Murals by Pacita Abad" from November to December 2001. Assisting the gallery staff on this project was part of my internship, which also gave me a chance to spend a week with Abad. And one question kept bugging me: "How can she manage to travel first class, treat people to a fancy French restaurant and remain a full-time artist to this day?" Her answer was simple: "Art is an industry. I run it as a business."

My sentimental nerve twitched when I heard this. But her following note introduced me to a whole new perspective. "My goal is to become a great painter and not a successful painter." For Abad, a successful painter has more money while a great painter has good quality works.

Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* preached that an artist must have food and a roof to be able to create good works. Abad does exactly this: she puts a roof over her head and food on her table from proceeds of her works, then creates her masterpieces, and goes around this cycle all over again. She does not have a manager or any staff to figure money matters.

Asked about her idea of arts management, Abad mentioned three major concerns. First, production; second, dissemination; and third, documentation—and everything in between.

In producing her art, she always finds out where to begin before spending three months to some years on each series. Her inspiration can be from her present environment, colors and shapes



Pacita Abad, *To Paint with a Twist*, acrylic on stitched and padded canvas, 1991



From right to left: Teresa Rodriguez, Montclair State University Art Galleries acting director and *Palay* curator; Pacita Abad; Samantha Butler, MSUAG registrar; Dayang Yraola, MSUAG intern from UP Diliman

of pop music, or both. For every piece, even for a series, she has to start with a blank space, moving finished works to an adjacent room to be left alone with a blank canvas, her materials and a radio. As her work moves from studio to gallery space (with every show overlapping another), Abad moves on to disseminating information about her art. She sends out publicity materials,



Pacita Abad, *Freedom from Illusion*, oil and fabric on stitched and padded canvas, 1984

she does lectures here and there, takes part in artists' forums, among many others. She talks about her art to any interested and willing listener, be he or she a writer, critic, an artist or even a simple viewer, at anytime possible. Such move mimicks a type of marketing. Also, part of this "marketing strategy" is having an updated mailing list that includes her collectors, friends, arts

people and the media. The idea is to let many people know that her works exist and are available for them. For documentation, she maintains an inventory of all her works, a file of press releases, invitations, catalogues, brochures and other write-ups. Any record that deals with the what's, when's, how's, who's and why's of her works is considered worth keeping and are kept.

Like any other business, things are not always bright and beautiful. Theft and deceit find their way to Abad's "business" (or what academics would say "violation of intellectual property rights"). There were some incidents—like when she and her husband saw copies of her work decorating a hotel in Indonesia; and another hotel in the same country that photocopied her works from a book and used them as a menu cover. In the second incident, since the hotel staffer she spoke to didn't know she was the artist, he confessed instantly how they did it. On another occasion, in London, Abad's dealers managed to sell two of her serigraphs, and until today she has not received any payment for them. This also happened with a dealer-friend in Manila. Obviously, bad business people can be at home and abroad. Eventually, Abad realized that she could and would only deal with people who believe in her art, those who see beyond the price tag

hanging at the edge of her murals.

Finally, I asked: "How exactly do you manage your art?" She said, "I think global, not racial. I go out, learn about the wider horizon, develop and evolve, and mind my own business." By this perhaps she meant finding her way and knowing exactly what she is doing and what she wants to happen now and in the future. ■