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ASIAN ART NEWS

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Pacita Abad, *Written on the Body*, oil, printed cloth, rhinestones stitched on canvas, 15 x 15 cm.



Pacita Abad, *Fears and Tears*, oil, painted cloth stitched on canvas, 15 x 15 cm.



Pacita Abad, *Sunday and Sunny*, oil, painted cloth stitched on padded canvas, 15 x 15 cm.



Pacita Abad, *Forbidden Fruit*, oil, glass stitched on canvas, 15 x 15 cm.

In The Spirit Of Color

Filipina-American artist Pacita Abad knows the world well. Her travels have taken her to some of the remotest places on earth and to some of the most dynamic. The art forms she discovered there have been abiding influences on her work and thinking. Her most recent work recalls memories of times and places in an abundance of color and energy.

By Ian Findlay

There are journeys, romantic and intellectual, rugged and adventurous, that artists have taken down through the centuries which have left us with a vibrant visual and literary legacy of different eras and places. Many of their visions have formed the foundations for the histories of our visual cultures, both in the East and the West, that continue to inspire the creative spirit. Perhaps the most famous of established journeys in Western intellectual life were those that came to be known in Europe as "the Grand Tour." From the mid-16th century onwards, "filled by the ideals of the Renaissance," artists, sculptors, poets, intellectuals, diplomats, and aristocratic young men traveled initially to Italy and then later to France, Greece, Spain, Austria, Hungary, Holland, and Germany to broaden their education. Such journeys introduced the art and antiquities of these countries to a much broader audience than ever before. The results and influences—for good or ill—



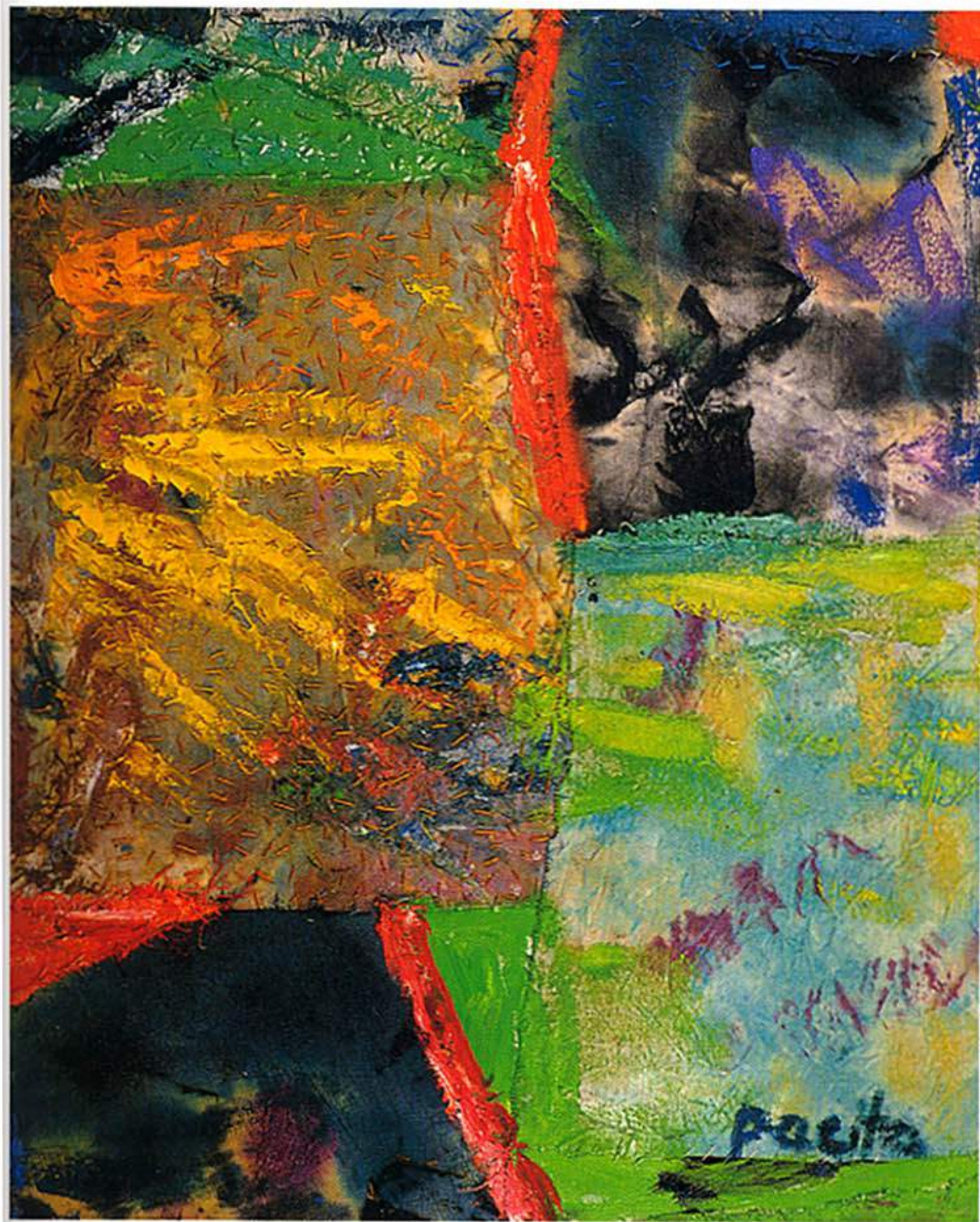
Pacita Abad, **Better Than Gold**, oil, glass stitched on canvas, 90 x 128 cm.

of such Tours cannot be underestimated in their contributions to the understanding of art history. Journeys by Western

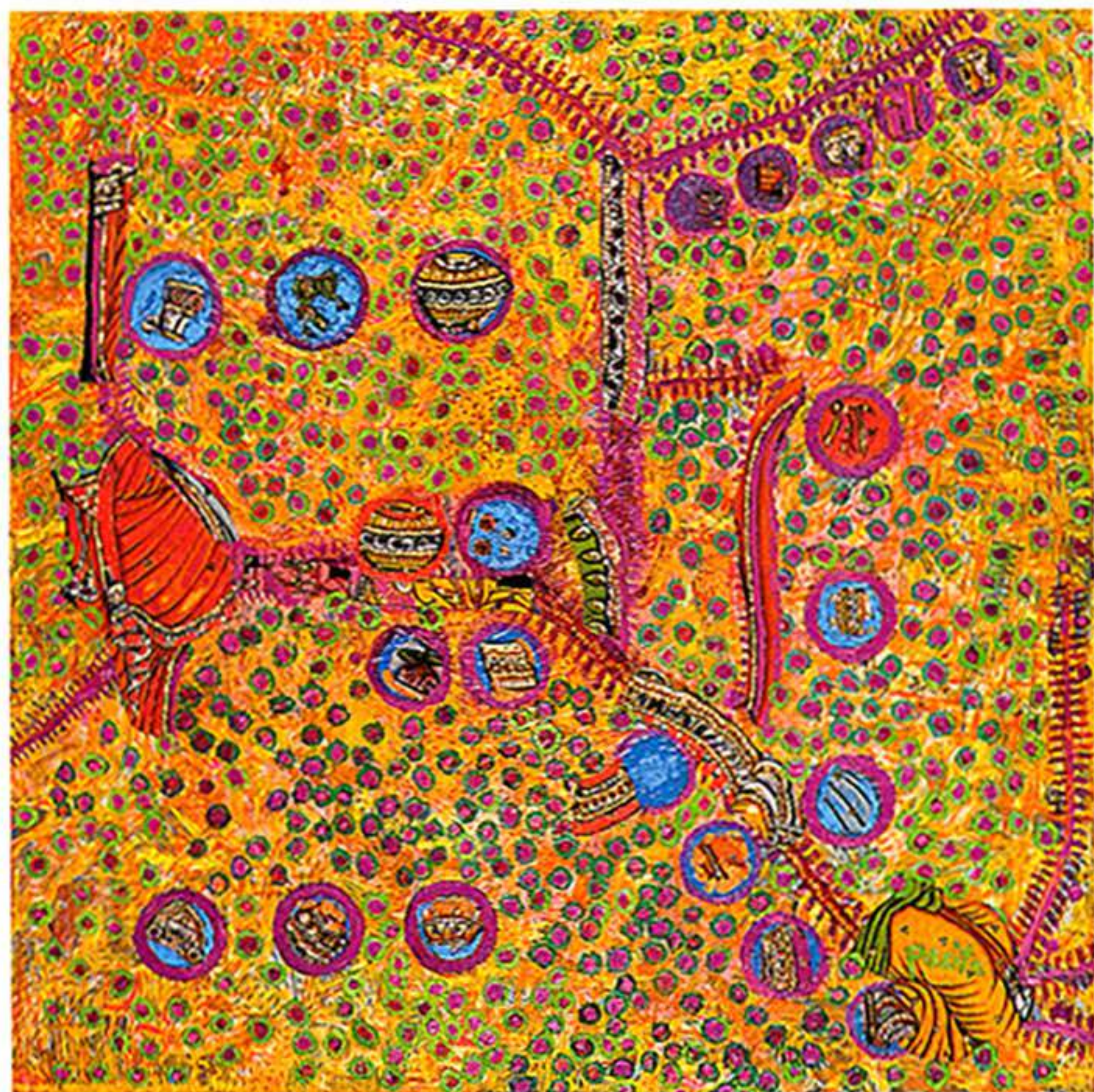
artists on ships of discovery, trade, and colonization to Asia and Africa produced paintings and drawings of remarkable range. Artists who traveled across the unexplored American West in the 18th and 19th centuries made an extraordinary array of landscapes and portraiture that formed a counterbalance to those traditions imported from Europe by early immigrants.

The desire and the need to travel are wedged deep in the heart of many artists who are continually seeking new knowledge and fresh inspiration from the world. The ease of travel today and the access to even the remotest corners of the globe was unimaginable to the earliest traveler. Today, for example, artists from Asia are to be found in all corners of the world seeking new insights and knowledge and a fresh understanding of their own cultures. For an artist such as the Filipina-American painter Pacita Abad, travel and its revelations are both an integral part of her spirit and a driving force in her art as her recent Rajasthan-inspired collection entitled *The Sky is The Limit* clearly shows.

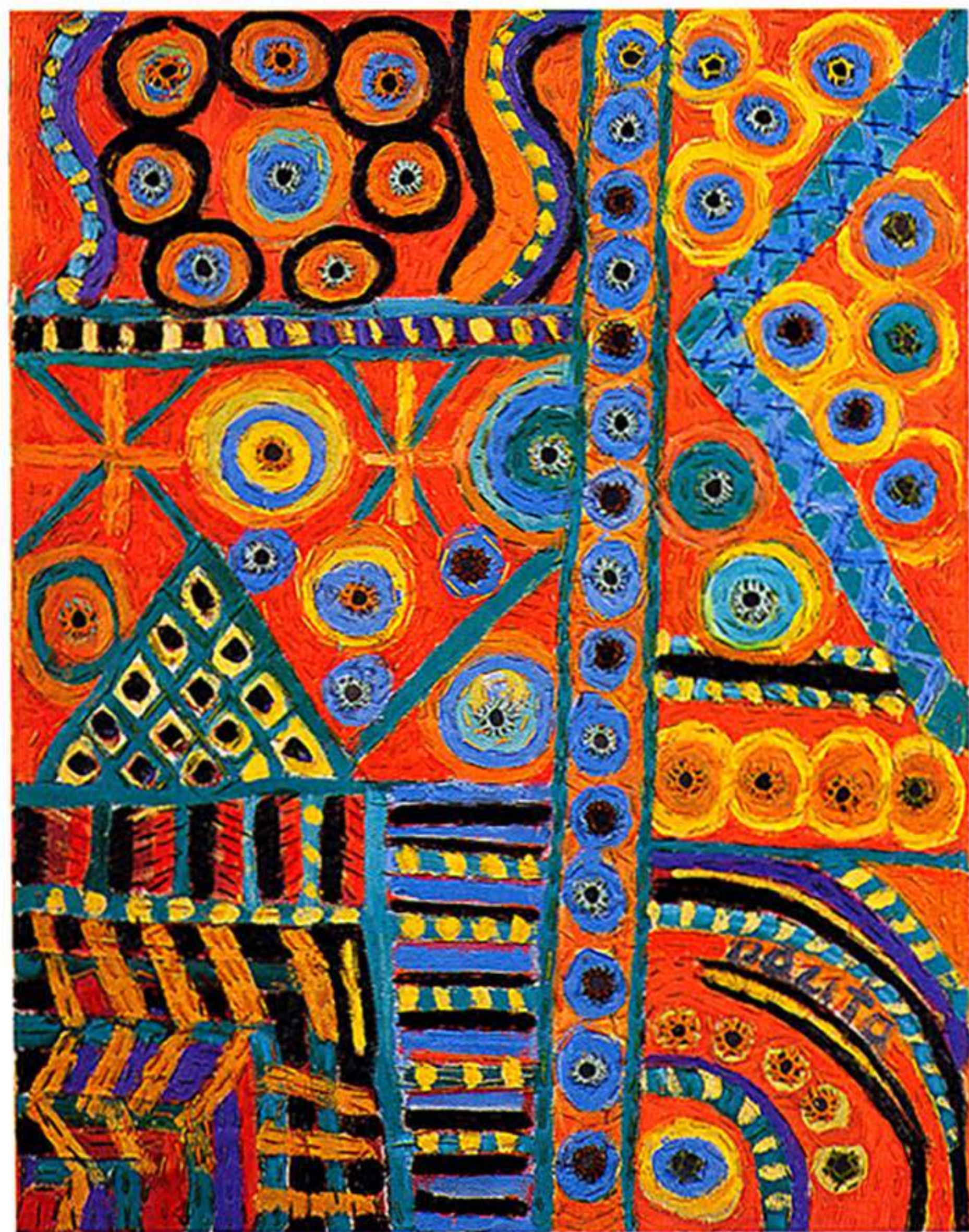
Abad's "Grand Tour" has not been one of merely one or two years: it has been continuous, from her earliest days as a political science student in the 1960s at the University of the Philippines to her current location in Singapore. During each step of her travels Abad has maintained the spirit and sense of enquiry of the earliest traditions of the Grand Tour. The result of her journeys has been an exceptional collection of work of varied experimentation in materials and themes that have included the immigrant and refugee experiences. At the heart of Abad's art, whether it is of the land or people, on canvas or on paper, lies a singular sense of color and its potential to stir the emotions.



Pacita Abad, **Into the Night**, dyed linen stitched on padded canvas, 48 x 38 cm.



Pacita Abad, *Stories of Love*, oil, printed and painted cloth, gold thread stitched on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.



Pacita Abad, *Bumbu Bumbu*, oil, glass stitched on canvas, 46 x 36 cm.

The drama and energy of Abad's early work has been maintained throughout her career in her paintings, drawings, collages, prints, and mixed-media *trapunto* art. The inspiration of her early travels remains a fixed point in her work and one feels that Abad could work every hour of the day making art if she possibly could, such is the depth of her experiences and the influences of her travels. "I spent three fascinating months in India in 1973, when I hitchhiked from Istanbul to Southeast Asia. During that trip, I became enamored with the puppets in Turkey, turquoise tiles in Iran, colorful tribal skirts and silver lapis jewelry in Afghanistan and embroidered fabrics in Pakistan. However, I was totally overwhelmed when I went to India, particularly Rajasthan, which had all of these things plus much much more. Every woman I saw in Rajasthan was a walking piece of art, covered with colorful fabrics, beads, bark, mirrors, buttons, tin jewelry, dyed yarn and multi-colored hair ornaments," Abad writes in the foreword to the catalogue for *The Sky Is The Limit*.

This exemplifies not only Abad's range of interests in the art and craft of the places she has visited, but also highlights her awareness of materials and color. There is nothing that Abad will not use to achieve the final visual impact in her work. It is the materials and the brightness of her palette that often suggests her work is well placed within the world of folk art, the naive, primitive art, and utter abstraction. But Abad has no truck with *isms* for one senses that she believes that to embrace any single *ism* is to fall prey to setting limits on her imagination. Abad is an artist of the everyday, not in the sense of making mundane art, but in the sense of using ordinary materials to make art that achieves extraordinary visual and emotional responses. She paints from the gut, with a strong social consciousness, from a belief that her art must speak directly to her spirit. Each piece must also challenge the viewer's spirit, seeking to enliven their world, expanding an awareness of color and form.

Where her colors for some of her earlier series, her Indonesian *wayang* puppet series (1984) and her *Immigrant Experience* series (1991), for example, may have been more muted and earthy than her current work, it is clear that color drives much of her imagination. Earlier works by Abad seemed also to be most effective on large-scale canvases. This was in large part dictated by her subject matter. In *The Sky Is The Limit*, however, there is a tendency to be less expansive, though there are large-scale works, such as *Stories of Love* (2000), that reflect her earlier experiences of scale and the use of materials and style to be found in her major *trapunto* pieces.

The contrast between the physical reality of Rajasthan and the vibrant, colorful culture, whether it be the visual arts or the crafts, is striking indeed. Abad chooses to concentrate on the intensity of the colors and materials to make multi-textured works which feature such items as beads, buttons, and glass. There is nothing flat about her works and this is as it should be. Abad's desire is to give the viewer a rich textural experience, almost a physical sensation, beyond the color and the abstraction of her art that suggests time, place, and memory, much as an earlier series entitled the *Door To Life* (1999), inspired by the rich decoration and paint of doors



Pacita Abad, *The Sky is the Limit*, oil, printed and painted cloth, and plastic buttons stitched on canvas, 150 x 424 cm.

to Yemeni buildings, had achieved.

Works in *The Sky is the Limit* such as *Bumbu Bumbu* (2000), *Into The Night* (2000), *Maharaja's Buttons* (2000), and *Better Than Gold* (2000) thoroughly exemplify this. The *trapunto* technique of her art with its padded elements in effect also lends a three-dimensional aspect to her art which also reinforces the direct emotional experience of her art. There is a sense always of the tactile in her work, which also enhances the personal element in her art. One senses the gestures of the artist's hand, whether in sewing and stitching or applying paint, in each work. This inexorably draws the viewer into the work. In a sense it is almost as if Abad were making art for the individual viewer alone.

In Abad's numerous small works (15 x 15 cm)—almost a separate series of miniatures on their own—in *The Sky is the Limit*, there is a different kind of tension at work, one derived not only from experience but from the concentration required to make such works. The small works, equally colorful and technically strong, possess a feeling of intimacy that is deeply personal. These include *Written on the Body* (2000), *Sunday and Sunny* (2000), *Stepping Out* (2000), *Fears and Tears* (2000), *Havelis at Mandawa* (2000), and

Forbidden Fruit (2000). Some of these function as landscapes, while others, the majority, are playful abstractions of time, place, and experience.

The circle in both the large and small works is a constant. The richness and variety of the colors that permeate her work is vital to their success. The geometry of line and circle and swathes of color

in each piece lends an exciting visual rhythm, one that is directly inspired by Abad's fascination with the clothing and accessories of Rajasthani women. Food, landscape, people, sky, smells, and tastes are also suggested in abundant forms, each one filled with a dynamic that is startling to the viewer. There is always in the boundless energy of Abad's creations an immediacy of spirit.

Abad's work has not emerged without painterly influences. Born in 1946 in Batanes, Basco, in the Philippines, Abad has sought to incorporate the early experiences of her family's need to be sparing. She is the fifth child of 12 and the skills of sewing and making clothes early in life followed her into her *trapunto* art, as well as her current work. But it has not only been the ordinary things in a culture that have influenced her. Artists such as Gauguin, Lucian Freud, Zainul Abedin, Rabindranath Tagore, Antoni Gaudi, the cultures of Africa and Asia, the German Expressionists, and the Fauve have all played a part in her vision and development and her thirst for knowledge. Although these influences have acted upon her imagination and her long art practice, her art has not been overwhelmed by them. Abad's art is unique and speaks directly to us, as all such art should. Δ



Pacita Abad, *Maharaja's Buttons*, oil, buttons on canvas, 30 x 23 cm.