

The Trapunto Paintings of Pacita Abad

World travels have influenced the artist's work

by Victoria Alba

When viewed in a book or seen from a distance, Pacita Abad's unusually vivid and vigorous canvases look deceptively like mere oil paintings. However, as the viewer is magnetically—and inevitably—drawn closer, their true nature is revealed. Her works are, in fact, three dimensional: not only painted, but padded, sewn, and often festooned with sequins, beads, shells, buttons, tiny mirrors, bits of glass, rick-rack, swatches of precious textiles, such as Indonesian ikat and batik, and more—the list of possibilities is endless, as Abad gathers these items on her ongoing journeys to the far reaches of the globe.

Although Abad frequently just paints her canvases and leaves them flat, the aforementioned works are characteristic of her unique method of trapunto painting. Generally not painted or embellished, your run-of-the-mill, garden variety trapunto (Italian for quilted or embroidered: Latin, *trans*, through + *pungere*, to prick, pierce) is no more than a quilt with a raised surface, made by outlining the designs with running stitches and then filling each area with cotton. But in Abad's capable, creative hands trapunto becomes so much more; combined with painting it becomes a point of departure for aesthetic experimentation and improvisation, a vehicle for sociopolitical commentary, cultural celebration, or abstract exploration.

Abad is one of the few artists who successfully merges contemporary painting and textile techniques. At 52, she is riding an ascendant wave of critical approval. Before, she was able to spend an average of 12 to 14 hours a day painting or stitching in the studio of her Jakarta, Indonesia, home. Now, her schedule is constantly disrupted by a barrage of overseas calls and paperwork connected to her many exhibitions abroad; she also is repeatedly invited to lecture about her art and to offer trapunto workshops at museums on several continents. While she has had dozens of solo shows in the last 20 years, American audiences might have attended her 1994 one-woman exhibitions at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and at the Art Museum of Western Virginia in Roanoke, Virginia.

An avid textile collector, it's fitting that Abad presently resides in Indonesia, a country of rich and extraordinarily varied fiber traditions—from the famed woven ikats of the islands of Sumba, Timor, Bali, Sulawesi, and Kalimantan

to the definitive tie-dyes and batiks of Java. It has offered her fertile ground for contemplation and inspiration. Yet Indonesia, where Abad has lived for the past six years, is simply the most recent of the places she has called home. Since leaving her native Philippines in 1970, she has lived in San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Boston, New York City, Bangladesh, Sudan, and Thailand. The visa stamps for the countries she has visited could fill a diplomat's passport several times over.

These travels have greatly influenced her life, as well as the content and form of her art. Ironically, it was tragedy that propelled her into a peripatetic existence. Abad was born and raised on Batanes, the Philippines' northernmost island. Because her parents were both politicians and outspoken critics of then-President Ferdinand Marcos, the family home was machine-gunned. In response, Abad, who at the time was in law school, organized nationwide student-led demonstrations. When she, too, received death threats, her par-



Photo of Pacita Abad by Victoria Alba.

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I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold, 1991; mixed media on stitched and padded canvas; 101 by 70½ inches. Photo: Victoria Alba.

ents urged her to leave the country, suggesting she continue her studies in Spain.

En route to Europe, Abad stopped over in San Francisco and enrolled at Lone Mountain College (now part of the University of San Francisco), where she subsequently earned a M.A. in Southeast Asian History. Abad had intended to become an attorney and perhaps, following in the footsteps of her parents, a politician, but in the creative climate of 1970s

San Francisco, Abad's goals took a decidedly different turn. Like many immigrants, she arrived with little money. She supported herself with part-time catering and by making art-to-wear for friends (much later, in 1984, Abad taught trapunto and art-to-wear classes at the Smithsonian), but it was a job in the university gallery that turned her on to art.

"I had intended to finish my law degree, but somehow fate and fortune intervened," recalled

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Baongo, 1983; mixed media with buttons and mirrors stitched onto padded canvas; 94 by 59 inches. Collection of Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba. Photo: Victoria Alba.

Abad, who was interviewed during a recent visit to San Francisco where some of her works were on view at the city's Asian Art Museum. "As I saw the exhibitions come into the college gallery, I began to think, 'I'd like to do that, I really want to paint.' That's how I changed careers. I wanted a job that I would be happy doing for the rest of my life, that would allow me to be financially independent, and that was portable enough that I could do it anywhere."

It was also in San Francisco that Abad met her husband, Jack. "We decided to hitchhike around the world for 11 months with \$5,000 between us. When we came back, we settled on the East Coast. And, of course, I had to study art—the basics, such as drawing, anatomy, and painting technique." Largely self-taught, her formal training took place at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington,

D.C., from 1975 to 1977 and at the Art Students' League of New York in 1978.

It wasn't until 1980 that Abad created her first trapunto. "While living in Boston, I joined a women's artists group. There were five or six of us and each week we'd meet at a different house. There were two painters, a watercolorist, a ceramicist, and a dollmaker named Barbara Newman, who would stuff her life-size dolls with hosiery and sell them on Madison Avenue. They were nice, like Red Grooms'. I remembering asking her, 'If you can stuff your dolls, then why can't I stuff my paintings?' And she said, 'Why don't you?'"

The result was *African Mephisto*, featuring a figure with a white mask that was stuffed and then encircled by pieces of yarn, trim, ribbon, and strips of cloth. Abad was dazzled by the potential of her new discovery. "I would stand back and look at it and tell myself, 'Wow, imagine, I can paint it and stuff it and sew it.' This turned my painting around 180 degrees!"

Abad begins her trapuntos by painting in acrylic or oil on a piece of unstretched canvas. Next, she sews the painting onto a canvas backing, stitching around the borders and around all the designs. She sometimes puts polyurethane foam or sheets of fabric, such as tablecloths, between the two. "I delineate all the lines in the painting and every stitch is done by hand, I don't like the look of machine stitching. Besides, sewing is so therapeutic and meditative," she says.

"After I'm done sewing, I'll decide what objects, if any, to add to it—although I'm very careful not to overdo it. Still, I'm not afraid to experiment, sometimes the best thing is to make a mistake, because you can learn from your mistake. I'll play with different ideas: Should I add sequins or glass, attach other fabrics, or add more stitching? Maybe I'll just stuff one side of it, so I'll open it up and add more stuffing. Or after I've sewn on it, I might paint it again. The work is finished off with Soluvar varnish, which protects it from dust and water and helps preserve it." Typically, she will spend about six weeks making a trapunto, but she'll work on two to five at a time.

Over the last 20 years, Abad has continued to produce both oil and acrylic paintings and trapuntos, with most of her works falling into four main categories: sociopolitical; masks and puppets from around the world; nature scenes; and abstractions, or what she specifically terms "abstract emotions."

Raised in the Philippines with its startling contrasts of haves and have-nots, Abad at an early age understood the meaning of injustice. Her exposure to the corruption of the Marcos regime also heightened her sensitivity. It is no wonder that many of her early works acknowledged the perilous state of the world and questioned the historical processes, and economic

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Night of Shooting Stars, 1985; mixed media with cowrie shells, buttons, beads; 89 by 91 inches. Collection of Christopher and Su Chan. Photo: Jason Horowitz.

and social developments wreaking havoc on the lives of the poor.

Holding her looking glass up to reality, Abad has documented political demonstrations in the Philippines and Indonesia, and tackled such painful subjects as domestic violence, and more. A few years after their return to America, Abad's husband was offered an overseas assignment in Bangladesh, followed by another in Sudan, and then Thailand. "My first paintings of Bangkok were of river scenes and daily life, but the newspapers were full of articles about Cambodian refugees in Thailand. It's very difficult for us artists to isolate ourselves from what is happening around us—so I went to the refugee camps. I asked 100 refugees, 'What were you carrying when you were crossing the border into Thailand avoiding the Vietnamese invaders?' Many people were carrying rice, some sewing machines, one girl was carrying a rooster because that was her most prized possession. Many were carrying their aunts, uncles, or dying grandfathers." These refugee stories and her observations of life in the camps coalesced into a poignant series of oil on canvas paintings titled "Portraits of Cambodia."

Immigration, by force or by choice, has been one of the recurrent themes of Abad's art. *I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold* is a montage of Asian- and Latin-American working class immigrants in the United States: a day-care worker, a house painter, a laundress, a nurse, and a homemaker—a mother with her child who Abad has set against a lottery form (symbolizing the tenuous hopes and unattainable dreams of the poor). In the middle of the work rests an actual paintbrush, the kind used for painting

walls. Certainly it refers to the house painter depicted in the lower left-hand corner, but it also could allude to Abad herself.

While her travels have exposed her to the struggles of society's disenfranchised, they have at the same time enriched her appreciation for the ingenuity and diversity of the earth's many cultures. In regions where handmade objects still prevail over the hi-tech and mass produced, Abad has acquired a deeper understanding of indigenous and tribal art. The textile-savvy will have no trouble discerning the multitudinous fiber traditions that have influenced her, such as Panamanian molas; Guatemalan and Mexican huipils; Burmese kalagas; the mirror cloths of Gujarat, India; and the screen-printed fabrics of Australia's aboriginal Tiwis.

Her admiration for indigenous art directly engendered her many works focusing on masks and puppets. Abad's most widely seen piece, *Metro Center Mural: Six Masks from Six Continents*, belongs to this group of works. Representing masks from Oceania, America, Africa, and Asia, the six-panel trapunto decorated the main entryway of Washington, D.C.'s busiest subway station from 1990 to 1995. She came up with the idea for the piece after visiting the subway every day for several weeks. "I studied the people who took the subway and saw all nationalities. I wanted to give these riders color and images that they could relate to," she said.

Abad's "Wayang" series is based on the popular puppets of Indonesia. Abad notes she was "overwhelmed" by her first encounter with the *wayang*, by "their colors, their costumes, their moral teachings." Indonesia has many forms of *wayang* (meaning puppet). Some, such as *wayang golek*, are doll-like rod puppets. Others, such as the wooden *wayang klitik*, are nearly flat. Abad based her series on the archipelago's shadow puppets. Fashioned from thin sheets of leather, the shadow puppets are ornately painted but, of course, during the performance the audience sees just silhouettes on a screen. By including them in her paintings and trapuntos, Abad gives them depth and restores their color.

Abad's works saluting nature are among her most joyous and whimsical creations. This group comprises paintings of flora, as exemplified by her "Flower Paintings" series, and fauna. Of the latter, large format coral reef scenes emerge as her most beguiling. Abad's trapunto fantasies of underwater life are akin to viewing a panorama from a glass-bottom boat as rendered by a Disney animator.

While Abad's sociopolitical works might engage the viewer intellectually, her abstract works can provoke a visceral, emotional reaction. Probing the realms of pure form, these

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100 Years of Freedom from Batanes to Jolo, 1998; mixed media; 193 by 216½ inches. Photo courtesy the artist.

colorful, dynamic compositions pulsate with an almost rhythmic intensity. These canvases are crowded with vibrant swirls, orbs, and beams that radiate in a myriad of directions. Here, daring pigments crash or caress, shapes gyrate through a Technicolor galaxy.

"They speak about emotional loss and change," explains Abad. "For instance, in 1991, when I was living in Washington, D.C., and about to have a show in New York, my brother called to tell me that our mother was ill with lung cancer. So I canceled my show and arranged to fly to the Philippines. By the time I arrived my mother was dead. I was so heartbroken by this, I tie-dyed yards and yards of cloth and when I returned to Washington, I started this series called 'Abstract Emotions.'"

Were it not for her mother, Abad might not be making the distinctive art she is so well known for today. It was her mother, Aurora,

who taught her how to sew. Although Aurora was a powerful woman who served terms as a congresswoman and later as a governor, she always reminded her daughters of the importance of sewing, cooking, and typing. "She always told us if you learn these 'basic' things you'll always be okay," Abad says.

"My mother was a phenomenal dresser who sewed all of her clothes," she says. "I remember one of our favorite places to go was Manila's Divisoria Market. We'd choose fabric and then go home and sew it. My mother and all of her sisters also crocheted. But it was my paternal grandmother who my relatives tell me I take after. She had trinkets, rhinestones, buttons, and sequins all over her bedroom, on her drawers and walls and on her clothes and in her hair. She wouldn't even come out of her room until she was all dressed up."

The Philippines is undoubtedly where Abad developed her love of textiles. In honor of the 1998 centennial celebration of the Philippines independence, Abad created a work for a special exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila that paid tribute to her homeland's textile traditions, of both the indigenous as well as foreign-introduced variety. Standing five-and-a-half meters high, the piece includes a Muslim wedding tent and ikats from the southern island of Mindanao; geometric weavings from the northern island of Luzon; piña, abaca, and banana cloth from the central islands of the Visayas; Chinese brocades and Spanish-style veils; American-style blue jeans and rustic checkered blouses; and her mother's crochetwork.

Abad, who prefers that her paintings and trapuntos hang freely from the wall instead of trapped in frames, had the museum install a fan, so the piece could be in constant motion—much like the artist who created it.

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Exhibitions of Pacita Abad's work will be held in September 1999 at Bomani Gallery in San Francisco, and in November 1999 at Gibson Art Gallery in Washington, D.C.