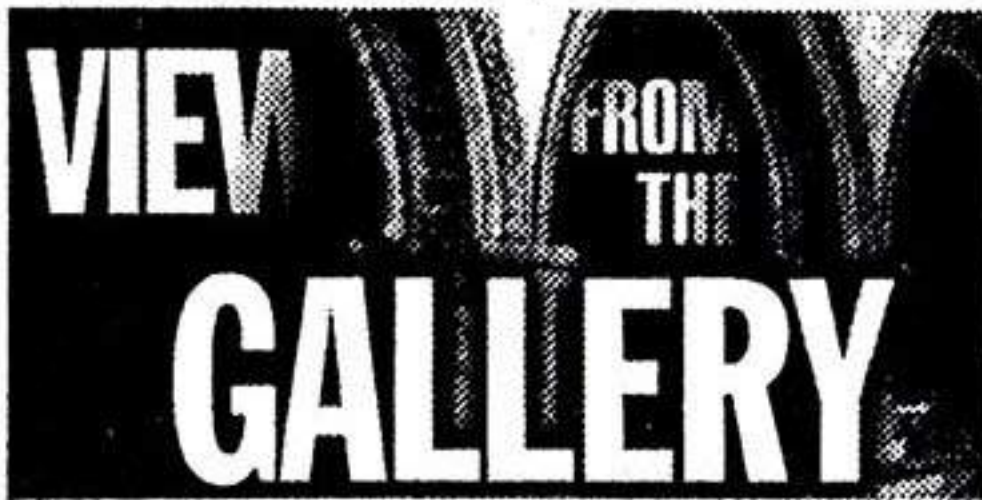




STYLE TODAY



By RUBEN D.F. DEFE0

PACITA ABAD'S NEW BOOK

EXPLORING THE SPIRIT

THE signature that identifies her works has been appropriately lifted to title a book on her art. Now off the press, the full-color volume brings to a head the various sources and influences that account for much of the art of Pacita Abad.

The stark signature appears upper center of the cover in white against a sumptuous fully bled color reproduction of *Jane's Addition*, a 1988 work, and underneath it in the title page on page 3 is the subtitle of the book: *Exploring the Spirit*.

The 140-page 9"x11" book is published in Jakarta, Indonesia, where she now resides. It is authored by Ian Findlay-Brown, founding editor/publisher of *Asian Art News* and *Asia-Pacific Sculpture News*, who in the March-April 1994 cover story of the *Asian Art News* featured the art of Pacita Abad in an alluring account entitled "Assaulting the Senses," clearly another appropriation of a title of one of Abad's singular series of works, *Assaulting the Deep Sea*, presented at the Art Museum of Western Virginia the same year.

Trapunto painting is what probably, if not popularly, distinguishes Abad from other Filipino contemporary artists. It is a technique she developed in 1981 by way of stitching and stuffing her canvases to give them a three-dimensional effect. In fact, many feminist groups the world over have identified with Abad's art, calling it feminine because it involves needlepoint. Abad, however, does not see her art this way. She says: "I always think of myself as a painter although I admire many women artists such as Leni Riefenstahl, Frida Kahlo, Käthe Kollwitz and Georgia O'Keefe, it has never occurred to me that I am a woman painter."

To circumscribe Abad to trapunto painting, therefore, is not only superficial but lacking in appreciation, especially when taken in the context of the actual extent and scope of her art.

As the new art book attests, Abad is a prolific artist. Her works vary from small- to big-scale works, employing a multiplicity of processes, approaches and resources.



KENTA Girl, mixed media on handmade paper, by Pacita Abad, 1993

'There are so many visual and emotional experiences wrapped up in her work that to attach a single genre term to it would be to inhibit the experience of learning and enjoying her art.'

The introductory essay by the author entitled "Exploring the Spirit and the Senses" organizes the art of Abad as practiced within the past 20 years. Following thereafter is a catalogue of works classified by Findlay-Brown into six general headings, each section introduced by some kind of an artistic manifesto written by Abad herself. They are "A Passion for Color," "Expanding the Surface," "Painting on Bark," "Playing with Paper," "Oriental Abstraction" and "Abstract Emotion."

As chronicled in the book, Abad's beginnings from Basco, Batanes, to her being a multicultural artist are all part of a grand design of destiny. That she was born in the provincial post office in the northernmost part of the country already augured a life for Abad that literally assumed a peripatetic direction in much the same traffic that postcards take to get to their destinations. Hence, Abad's art and life have been affected, inspired and bared by the copious travels she has taken in her half-a-century life.

Abad is one well-traveled Filipino artist who has lavishly and obsessively synthesized both images and anima gleaned from such travels in her art. The result is a most cosmopolitan worldview. As Findlay-Brown puts it: "To be confronted by Abad's paintings is to remove oneself immediately from all the conventional frames of reference that one has taken for granted about art. There are so many visual and emotional experiences wrapped up in her work that to attach a single genre term to it would be to inhibit the experience of learning and enjoying her art."

This cosmopolitanism in sense and spirit is matched by the all-overness in the application of images, signs, symbols and other appurtenances on a variety of supports, whether canvas, paper or bark. On page 45, one work, a component of a quadriptych entitled *Money, Power, Leadership and Determination*, is inadvertently reproduced upside down. But the orientation by which Abad approaches her pictorial surface allows the viewers to look at it from all directions or vantage points, whether upside down, or left or right side down.

Abad has traveled and lived in various places, among them Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Côte d'Ivoire, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, England, France, Germany,

Guatemala, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Korea, Mali, Myanmar, Oman, Pakistan, Papua Guinea, Peru, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Sudan, Taiwan, Thailand, the US and Zimbabwe.

And as Findlay-Brown continues: "Each country has not only given Abad a new cultural focus on which to expand her exploration of people, places and her artistic vision, but has also provided her with a fresh and evolving perception of her own identity and the problems and concerns of all peoples with whom she has had contact. This perspective has helped her to develop her own very singular approach to social awareness. It is through this perspective—in many ways initially inspired by her politically and socially active parents as a child and young woman, as well as from constant education—that Abad has been able, consciously and unconsciously, to saturate all her works with an immediacy that appeals to the spirit and the emotions of people from radically different cultures and beliefs."

Hence, one finds the cheerful world in the art of Abad. There is nothing deliberately didactic in her art. She simply prefers to be known and "seen as a painter" whose work is very informative, narrative. As Findlay-Brown emphasizes, Abad's works reveal "an artist at ease with various forms through which she seeks to redefine constantly her vision of the world without prejudice."

Abad's success as an artist has been convincingly registered. One only has to look at the various collections and institutions all over the world where her works are proudly on display.

Through all these achievements, Abad has remained humble in her ways. She sums up her dictum, thus: "I am continuously looking for ways to expand my skills and to develop my art. And this comes from dedicated work, being open to surrounding cultures and issues and also not being afraid to experiment and make mistakes."