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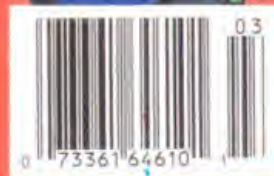
ASIAN ART NEWS

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 2 MARCH/APRIL 1994

SUPPLEMENT: INDONESIA

The Trapunto Art of Pacita Abad

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pacita '88

Assailing the Senses

Pacita Abad's highly original trapunto art is anything but tame. Her imagery is drawn from a wonderful range of sophisticated and primitive influences. It is work that speaks of high-energy creativity.

By Ian Findlay

To come face to face with the art of Pacita Abad is to enter a world far removed from our sanitized, neon-lit urban experience. Suddenly, the easy visual frames of reference on which we rely for snap interpretation are not as sure as they once were. Folk art, naive, Art Brut, abstraction, and primitive art, a clear attraction, might spring to mind, but they do not explain, nor do justice to, the potency and sophistication of her imagery that is expressed in a range of colors from bold and bright to muted earthy tones. Whatever *ism* one might care to attach to Abad's work, and she rightly avoids tags, the cultural memories in the shape of masks and everyday objects speak to us powerfully of ritual, dislocation, identity, and struggle. Her work hits right between the eyes and you can't escape it.

"I am a painter who paints from the guts and if I don't like it, then I don't like it," she says. "A lot of



people can't understand my work when they see it. They want me to explain it in mythological terms, but I don't think that way. Being a painter has opened my eyes to a lot of things that I couldn't see before. You begin to notice people's faces, the graffiti, which was once ugly but is now beautiful. I always think that my work is original. My work deals with social issues, and it is global. I have always thought of myself as a pioneer -- doing different things, taking chances."

Her creations, including oil paintings, watercolors, masks, collages, ceramics, and her trapunto paintings, are all products of her intense emotions and absolute belief in her destiny as an artist. Her vision has been honed through years of traveling within cultures that demand intellectual attention and close observation. Putting everything together and being as active as she is requires discipline and a great deal

L.A. Liberty, 1992, mixed media, 97 x 58".

of studio time. Each day represents a challenge of the spirit.

"I always feel good when I am in my studio because you don't have anything else to think about other than the image in front of you. Just being there in front of a blank canvas is like starting all over again," says the ebullient Abad, whose earthy laughter suggests a woman at ease with herself. "You wonder how you are going to start again but the experience makes you humble. It makes you clean. Facing the blank canvas I feel that this new piece is the most important thing that I am going to work on. You are faced with another future. To hell with what you have done.

"The problem of starting is a long process, you go around and go back to look at the work. Concentration is the thing as well as thinking about it. It takes a long time. I always paint with music and I start working and preparing my canvas, my paints, and think about what I am working on. At eight o'clock in the morning, I start but I am still at the blank canvas at noon, but the afternoon is so good for me when I start to see the image appear, even with collage. I am not slow, I am a fast worker once the image begins to appear. But the idea of disciplining myself is sometimes hard. I need more time. I want to have 36 hours in a day. My medium is time-consuming."

Abad has been influenced or impressed by a wide range of artists including Zainul Abedin from Bangladesh, Tagore from India, Lucian Freud from Britain, and Gauguin, of course. In her early work, she notes that she loved the German Expressionists as well as the work of architect Antoni Gaudi. Influences pass but remain kind friends who serve as personal points of reference. "In my early career I even followed Fauvism," she says. "You

finally get out of being influenced by others as you find your own way."

Abad's excitement and intense energy enable her to attack her subjects with a constant sense of delight, enabling her to return to subjects with refreshing insight. Because of this, the viewer sees the same subject as new, reinvigorated with bracing insight. An example is her first Indonesian *wayang* puppet series from 1984. Then, her characters seemed stiff, even a little crude in form and line for such slight figures. Her brush seemed to capture only the surface of the delicate, grace-

she says. "I like the idea of working on the *wayang* because of their concept and their individual nature. I like how the *wayang* are used in the villages for commentaries; they are message carriers, used for social statements. The bright colors of the *wayang* attract me.

"The thing I like about what I see when I create something is the amount of work involved in it. Creating the surface, I get really occupied with that, building it up whether it is just painting or adding mirrors, shells, and beads. That is exciting. And in many of my works the reality of using different indigenous materials is important to me."

For 20 years, Abad has labored in the field of art, rejecting possible careers as diverse as law and history. Her world travels have been well-recorded and the influences of her homeland, the Philippines, and such places as Bangladesh, Cambodia, the Sudan, Papua New Guinea, and Indonesia as well as many more distant places, have become central to all her art. In each place the growing awareness of the role of indigenous materials in making art has been solidly reinforced. Dissatisfaction with "standard" art forms and mediums resulted in the creation of her most famous medium, the trapunto, a collaged tapestry that adds a three-dimensional aspect to her work.

Trapunto, coming from the Italian *trapungere*, meaning to embroider, was developed by Abad in 1985 while traveling.

"I used to paint oil on canvas but it became a nuisance for me to have paintings in frames. I wanted my work to be more portable and free. I did not want to think about it in a frame," she says. "I wanted my work to be more accessible to me. It is what I wanted a work of art to be, not something so precious. I wanted it so that eventually other people could do the same. When



Pacita Abad in front of **Korean Shopkeepers**, 1993, mixed media, 97 x 58".

ful figures, with just a hint of the emotions that these figures represent in Indonesian culture. They were decorative. Today, there is a deeper understanding of the figures, their postures, and personalities that adds quality to the finished works. Even though they may appear more formal than their predecessors, Abad seems much more comfortable with them.

"I am excited with the new *wayang* series that I am doing now. The recent ones are more painterly,"

I give lectures to non-professional artists, I tell them that this is a medium that can be done by anyone and can be done with your hands. I don't like the idea of painting as elitist.

“A curious thing about creating trapunto is that it seems to inspire a sense of freedom among its practitioners. Men and women bring very different materials to the work,” Abad has noted. When she taught a trapunto workshop at the University of the Philippines in 1991, she asked her students to bring something from their homes that they could use in the workshop.

“It was interesting to watch how the male students worked on their pieces. What fascinated me about the male artists was that they brought things like the bark of trees, typewriter ribbons, and cassette tape. The women used regular lace, thread, yarns, and fabric.”

Trapunto has been a way of giving Abad's creations an identity in the world of the easy *ism*. The name sets her work apart from that of quilt and tapestry makers, but not with any intention of belittling them.

“Many people used to ask me what it was I was doing. I thought I had to have a word to identify what I am doing, something unique that many other painters would like to use later on. I came up with trapunto but I didn't think that it was enough so I added painting and called my work trapunto painting. It is painted on unstretched canvas on oil or acrylic and then added to. It is painted, stitched, and stuffed to make it three-dimensional. It is original work and it is like a large wall-hanging.”

The medium offers Abad an opportunity to create collaged, three-dimensional images that she cannot achieve in the flat two-dimensional world of painting. Trapunto allows Abad to fashion forceful and poignant political and social statements that would otherwise lack weight as confined to a flat, framed canvas. Politics has played an important part in Abad's life — having grown up in a family where her father was a cabinet minister, her mother a governor and congresswoman, and her brother, Florencio Abad, a congressman and cabinet minister under Aquino. From this experience came one of her most political and monumental works, a series of paintings during the Marcos era depicting the corruption and social ills under his regime. One painting, *Marcos and His Cronies*, was 250 inches high.

Abad creates in series which so far have included subjects as diverse as immigration and masks, flowers and walls, and an abstract series, as well as vigorous social and political commentaries. Each series is attacked with a vigor that approaches the relentlessness of a search for an absolute truth and a creative rigor that seeks to capture the most powerful statement. Abad's *Flight to Freedom* is typical of her intensity in seeking veracity in her political, social, and cultural commentary.

“When I was in the refugee camps in Thailand, I started just going and helping out. I started working on

Moonlight, 1990, acrylic, oil on canvas, plastic buttons, and trapunted, 31 x 33”.







portraits of these children and then I built up a series of portraits of the Cambodian refugees. I did murals which consisted of 50-100 refugees crossing the border. And I asked them what they were carrying when they crossed the border," she says. "One was carrying a dying uncle, another a grandfather, another a sewing machine, and yet another, a rooster. There were pots, pans, and many babies. All of these portraits were incorporated into my work when I moved to America, including trapuntos on mixed marriage, the growing ethnic community, the Koreans, Chinese, and Filipinos in their stores, education at Ivy League schools, and the growing presence of multi-ethnic neighborhoods."

In her *Immigration Experience* series, such works as *How Mali Lost Her Accent*, *If My Friends Could See Me Now*, *The Village Where I Came From*, and *I Thought The Streets Were Paved with Gold* (all 1991) would not, one feels, be quite as successful depicted simply in oils on canvas. As her titles suggest, the dreams of immigration hold myriad hopes; the reality holds an abundance of deceptions.

It is a medium that has consumed her energies for almost a decade and which she loves not only for its action of painting but also for the physical elements that are more often associated with craft practice. It is partly this crossing into the realm of craft that lends significant impact to the finished images. There remains always some artistic constraint for an artist dissatisfied with established art practice. Trapunto has liberated Abad's style and visual repertoire.

"It is more personal, free. It is using indigenous materials. It incorporates materials that create a very different line than that of painting with a brush. I like the idea of doing needle-point and mixed media which involves painting, stitching, collage, silkscreen, tie-dye, embroidery, stuffing, and recycled materials," says Abad.

To be as forceful as possible, it would seem that Abad's pieces are best created in large sizes. The experiences that are viewed in the likes of the *Immigration Experience* series, *Korean Shopkeepers*, *Rap Dancing*, *Hookers Green*, and *Did I Say Something Rude* all have a feeling of deep understanding of separateness, dislocation. The incidents and people are separate, removed from the mass experience of life and out of the ordinary, and to become highlighted and special to the viewer. The upsetting ordeal of immigration, for example, is one filled with private delight and fear as well as public trauma and humiliation. It is one of life's tough challenges that deserves to be writ large for all to see, and for the viewer to experience vicariously and so hopefully understand better the strangers in their midst. Such images do not need the constraints of small canvases.

"Size is important to me. I like working on large paintings. I think big. I believe in art in public places," says Abad unabashedly. "But I also do a lot of little studies that I see as complete works, but many of the ideas I will eventually make into a trapunto. The *Six Masks from Six Continents* is a huge mural at Washington's Metro Center. I find the small

Above: *I Thought The Streets Were Paved with Gold*, 1991, acrylic, oil on canvas, wood and nylon bristle, printed cloth, collaged, stitched and padded canvas, 95 x 60". **Left: *Filipina: A Rapid Identity Crisis*, mixed media, 100 x 64".**

ones time-consuming but just as challenging as the big ones. I never had small ones about the *Immigration* series."

Abad speaks with first-hand experience of uprooting and being a stranger in a foreign land. As a student in San Francisco and as an artist today in Washington D.C., and New York, the process of adapting never comes to an end. "In their varied ways, each of these artists makes it clear that this process of adaptation is a permanent fixture in the lives of immigrant peoples," Mary McCoy wrote in a review of the 1991 show, *Eight Paths to a Journey, Cultural Identity, and the Immigration Experience*, at the Ellipse Art Center.

The question of assimilating into a new culture and the rejection of one's ethnic identity is something every immigrant, from the East and West, North and South, must confront regularly. Many strive to retain some aspect of their ethnic background. It is a question that Abad refers to often. But perhaps she, more than many other immigrant artists, has taken on the cloak of many other cultural experiences and yet her creative points of reference are so much wider.

"It is important to be a Filipina painter and part of the Asian art scene and at the same time to be international," says Abad. "My travels over the world are very important, not just because of the exposure but also because I have been able to observe firsthand the works of other artists and to incorporate many aspects of primitive art into my work. That is probably why the feeling of ethnic art comes out in my work."

Born on Basco Island, Batanes province, in the northernmost part of

the Philippines, Abad, 46, is, like her people who are known as Ivatan, adventurous. It is place full of natural beauty which has instilled in her a love of nature which she has invoked in an *Under Water and Flower* series. Nature, she says, is most important for her. And it is clear in many works that this is an abiding influence and her use of natural things comes from long experience. As with other series, Abad strives to create emphatic textures, whether it is fabric, paper, or painting.

"I always like to put things in the texture that build it up rather than to have it flat. Many people think that this work is quilting because they don't

adults come in they often laugh at it. I think it is full of energy."

Abad's energy is immense, yet she is not as prolific as one might imagine, averaging 15 large paintings a year, with perhaps 10 being made into trapuntos. Given her international reputation trapunto paintings sell from US\$5,000 to US\$50,000, while smaller paintings are sold from between US\$2,000 and US\$10,000. Her work is now in many major collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Korea, the Museum of Philippine Art, Fukuoka Art Museum, Chase Manhattan Bank, and the First National Bank of Chicago, as well as the Museum of National Afro-American Art in Boston.

Success has not diminished Abad's energies. Indeed, she seems to be constantly in the grip of a new idea, a new inspiration, a discussion of politics, social concerns, color and how she moves so that she may recharge herself. "The *wayang* are so beautiful and colorful. In the United States I was getting muted in my colors so I came back to Asia to go back to my bright colors," she says. "I like the



House of Incest, 1991, mixed media, 57 x 70".

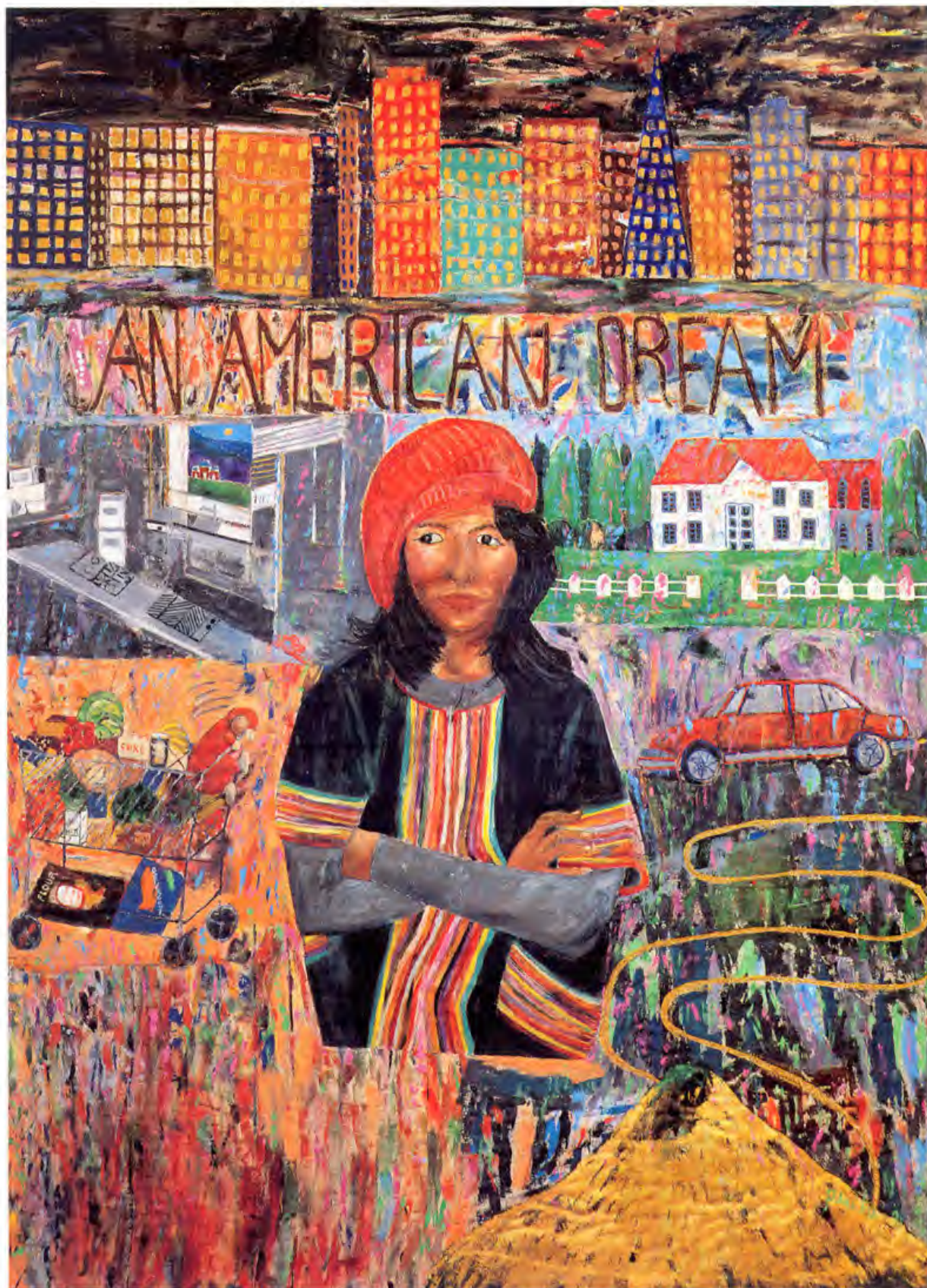
have any frame of reference," Abad says. "When I work with my masks and I am sewing cowrie shells in them, it is because I have been where these are used. Combining different materials is something that I have always been good at. I have never been happy about only flat surfaces. I want them to be more alive since it reflects my lifestyle.

"My strength is that my work is very expressive because of the energy and colors and the combining of lots of different materials. I like collage. For me it is so alive. When children come into a show they live it, but when

idea of using Jakarta as my base because I can do things that are important in my work like batik. And I am planning to go to Irian Jaya and Sumba to do a series of works."

Abad's accomplishments have been hard-earned. Currently her works can be seen in the Asia Society's major contemporary show *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*. And later in the year in October, she will have a one-person show at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D. C., the first Asian artist to have such a show at the Museum. Δ

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If My Friends Could See Me Now (Immigration Experience), 1991, acrylic oil on canvas, stitched, collaged and padded canvas, 95 x 69”.