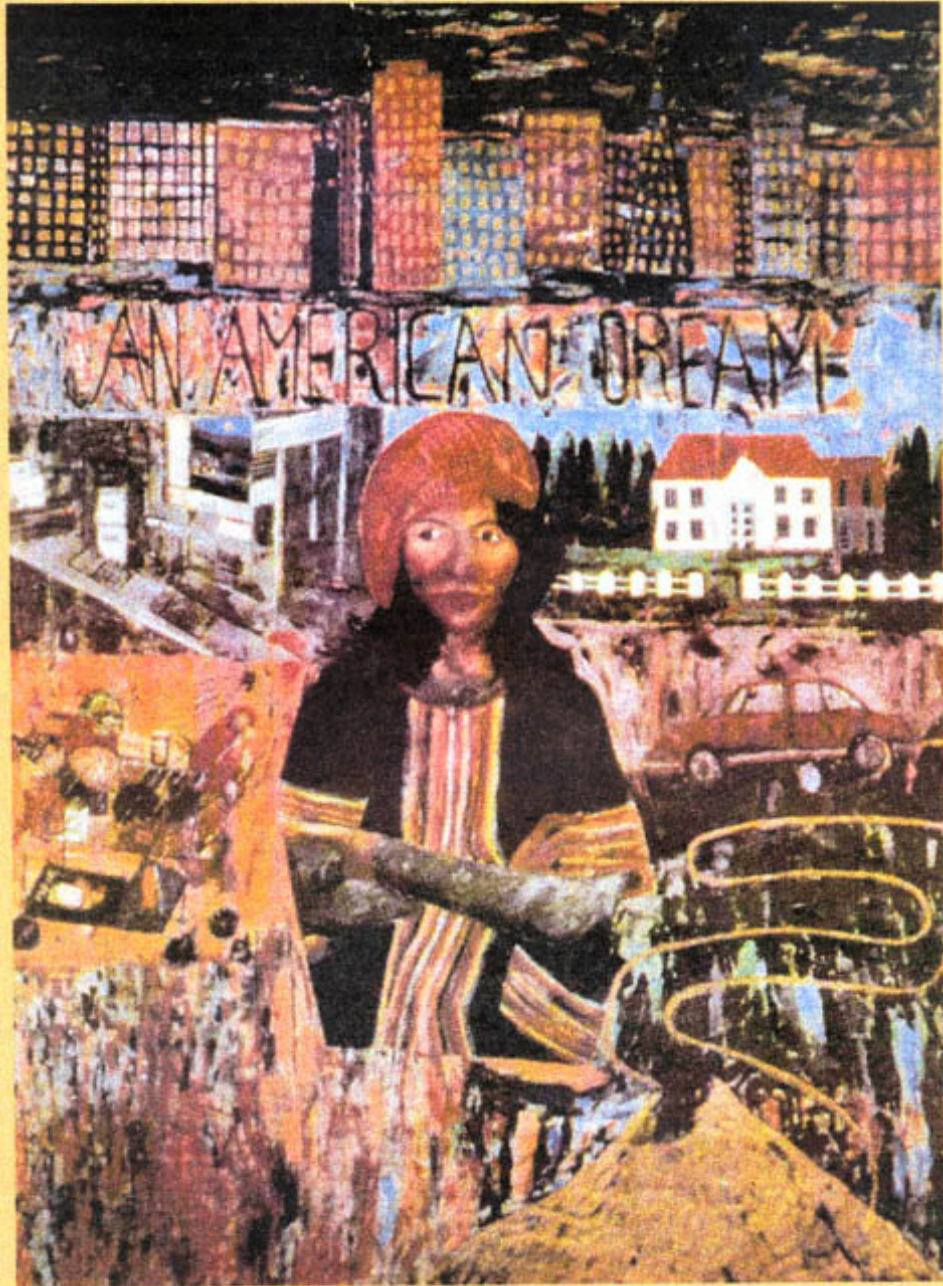


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Pacita Abad's
If My Friends Could See Me Now

Pacita Abad : If Her Friends Could See Her Now 1995

THE FIRST TIME she landed in the States, in 1970, visual artist Pacita Abad was like the thousands of immigrants before her: alone and broke. Saving what little money she had, Abad stayed with distant relatives in San Francisco and took the first available job—that of a seamstress. At the same time, Abad worked as a part-time typist and found herself in the midst of other immigrants from Vietnam, China and Mexico who were facing similar circumstances.

Twenty years later, the artist would recall these encounters and her personal sojourn in a strange country in a series of paintings called "The Immigrant Experience." The paintings depict the struggles, hopes and realities of people of color—the Asians, Africans and Latin Americans whom the artist met over the years when she lived and painted in Bangladesh, Sudan, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia and other third world countries.

People, Abad soon found out, will abandon roots and cultural ties in search of a better life or, in some cases, because of socio-political pressures.

Ethiopians escape to Sudan, Haitians go to work in the plantations of the Dominican Republic, Filipinos sell their domestic labor to Asian and Middle East households. Such observations eventually found their way into canvas in such paintings as "If My Friends Could See Me Now," "Mixed Marriages,"

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"Contemplating Flor," and "Torments of a Filipino Overseas."

"When I started going to refugee camps in Thailand, I was just helping out," recalls this artist from Batanes. "Then I started working on portraits of the children and over time, I built up a series of portraits of the Cambodian refugees. I asked the refugees what they carried when they crossed the border. One was carrying a dying uncle, another a sewing machine, another one a grandfather and yet another a rooster. There were pots, pans and many babies. Most of these refugees were fearful not because of the animals they might encounter in the jungle, but of the bullets coming from the Khmer Rouge behind them." Abad's painting, "Flights to Freedom" depicts the Cambodians' frantic escape across the border to Thailand.

Some paintings from the series, "The Village Where I Came From," "Korean Shopkeepers," and "Haitians Waiting at Guantánamo Bay" reflect the migrant's feeling of separateness and dislocation. A few other works celebrate the success that many immigrants have achieved in their new country.

The multi-layered migrant's experience works well

with the artist's trapunto paintings, which use a 14th century decorative technique of blending different materials using stitching, collage, silkscreen, tie-dye and embroidery.

The medium offers Abad an opportunity to create collaged, three-dimensional images that she cannot achieve in the flat two-dimensional world of painting. Notes an art critic: "Trapunto allows Abad to fashion forceful and poignant political and social statements that would otherwise lack weight as confined to a flat, framed canvas." And politics plays an important part in the artist's life: her father was a Cabinet minister and her mother a former governor and congresswoman. Her brother, Florencio Abad, was once detained during the Marcos era and was elected congressman under the Aquino administration.

"Trapunto also inspires a sense of freedom among its practitioners," observes Abad who has handled several art workshops on the forum. "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."

To be as forceful as possible, it would seem that Abad's pieces are best created in large sizes.

"Size is important to me. I like working on large paintings. I think big. I believe in art in public places," says this 46-year-old artist unabashedly.

Her paintings, done between 1984 and 1995, range in size from 4.5 x 9.75 to 10 x 10 feet, so big that there's no missing her message.

Abad's paintings from her "Immigrant Experience" and "Oriental Abstraction" series are on exhibit until July 31 at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila as part of the art show, "Thinking Big: Two Filipino Artists." The show also features fiber artist Paz Abad Santos and explores scale as a unifying element in the two artists' varied works. ▼