

ART & CULTURE

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Variety

Pacita Abad would rather be great

By RACHEL P. MAYO

IT'S wonderful to meet an artist whose personality is consistent with his works. Who doesn't leave you baffled when you try to link the person to his art. Such an artist is one who paints with his heart.

Pacita Abad is one such painter. You meet her, and she is just like her painting, garbed in a multicolored outfit and the words "ethnic" and "tribal" come to mind. Listen to her talk, so freely, so strongly on the things she believes in, on things she loves, such as her brush strokes, and you learn what firmness and purpose are all about.

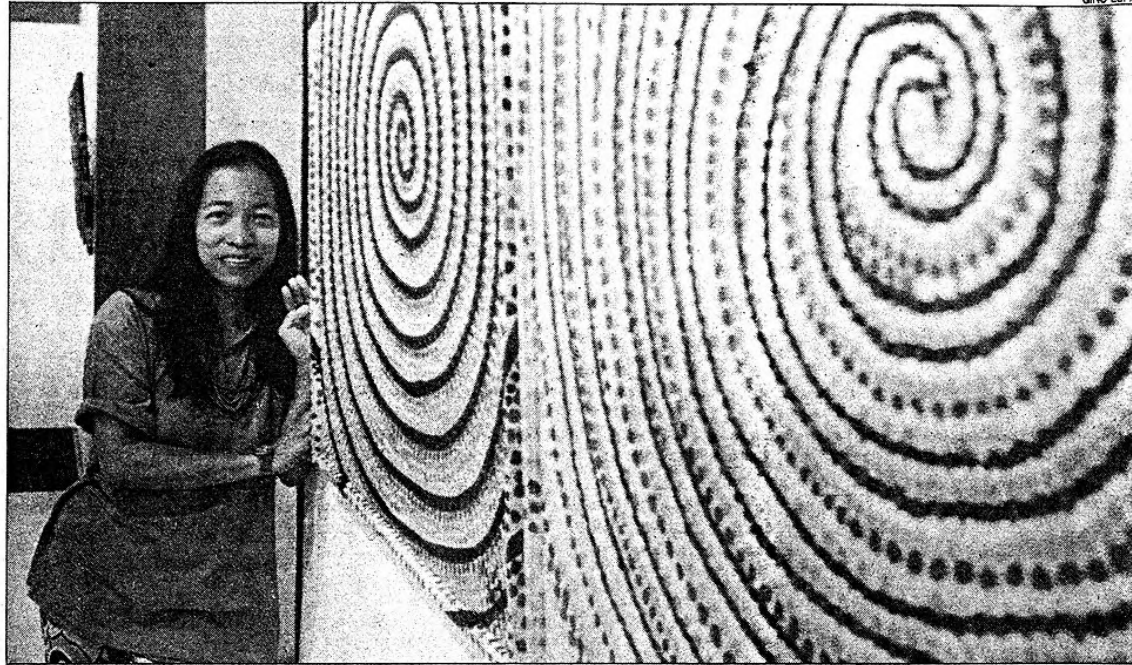
For Pacita, life is a celebration of colors. Her paintings are an extension of herself, of an energy that cannot be contained in a single color or a single line.

"Wild," "fiesta," "splash," "explosive," "bright," "happy," "festive," "tribal," "primitive," "childlike" — these could all best describe Pacita's present collection of 67 paintings — part of some of the works she started doing three years ago. Now on view in two galleries, the Luz and Ayala Museum, the colors of these paintings simply overwhelm the viewer, making it difficult to digest the lot in just one visit.

Pacita Abad is known for her "trapuntos," a form of art she herself conceived and is continuously developing. She describes what *trapunto* is: "It's an Italian word that means 'to put stuffing into, to fill and then to sew. And trapunto painting is just that."

Pacita explains that she had to think of a word to describe the works she was doing in 1982. "I got the idea from a friend of mine in Boston who is a dollmaker. I told her, if she can stuff those in her dolls, I could stuff them in my canvas too!"

In the process, Pacita has created her own artform, a school away from the general Western styles we see around. For this, she has been invited by governments, schools, art



KNOWN for her *trapuntos* and honored in many countries, Pacita Abad never studied Fine Arts.

organizations as well as the Smithsonian Institute to teach her *trapunto* art.

According to the artist, the process of *trapunto* painting begins with an unstretched canvas on a wall, priming it and painting it with oil, acrylic, oil pastel or whatever. Then she stuffs the canvas with cotton or any soft material (quilting comes to mind) and then sews it on. She accents the work with buttons, beads, shells, mirror, embroidery, tie-dye, silkscreen, which she again sews or glues on the canvas to achieve a highly-textured, three-dimensional composition, like a

reel.

So it looks like Pacita gets away with colors and texture. Practically all the primary and secondary colors are found on her canvases — red, blue, yellow, orange, green, magenta, with black, gold, and silver. The lines and forms are all in there too — circles, squares, waves, dots, zigzags, swishes, whirls and splashes. The textures vary from the smooth cold feel of glass to the rough touch of a piece of net. All these make up for the richness and vibrancy of her works.

She paints anything, picking up images, experiences and feelings

from her many travels around the world. "I just love to travel. Travelling for me is my art school."

Pacita, who has been awarded honors in three countries and exhibited in some of the best galleries and museums worldwide — never studied Fine Arts. She has an M.A. in Asian Studies from the University of San Francisco. But she did take up a few basic art courses after she decided to be a painter. It was in one of those apprenticeships in a museum that Pacita felt the inclination to paint.

"Even as a child I was never into drawing or did I have any interest

in the arts. I started late."

The study of various cultures rich in ethnic and tribal art fascinated Pacita. This eventually seeped into her artistic sensibilities and took form in her art.

Through her travels ("I was still a student when Jack and I decided to hitchhike around the world with only \$5,000 between us. We dropped everything and travelled for eleven months."), Pacita collected in her mind the rich, varied images of the different cultures around the world, finding African and Latin folk art akin to her style. There was simply no way for Pacita but to paint these

stimuli in colorful imagery.

Pacita's subjects in the collection vary from social statements to personal views. Her life in Washington, D.C. now and the previous years she spent in the States are seen in her art. Though the total image would be taken from tribal cultures, her *trapuntos* hint at an American acculturation.

The titles of her works as well as her language nuances reflect this: *Finger Licking Good*, *The Kid Who Grew Up in Chinatown*, *It's All Over Now Baby*, *Sugar Pie Honey*...

One drawback though about Pacita's "bright, happy" pictures is that it would be difficult to portray sadness, desperation or angst. Works such as *It's All Over Now Baby*, *Why Do We Have to Go to War* and *Dead Serious* have difficulty in transmitting the mood what with the bright colors and childlike drawings. On the other hand, *Shattered Dreams*, *Voyuer* and *Moriones* successfully achieved their purpose.

Pacita continuously develops her art by experimenting on new approaches. In the Luz and Ayala shows, she has framed her paintings, with the design spilling over to the frames. It's like if you let Pacita have her way, she'd paint even beyond the frames, all the way to the walls, the building, the street outside...

"You should see my house in Washington, there is not a single square inch of white left."

Pacita and her art has one particular thing to say, "Look at me, I am here, this is what I can do!"

She knew what she wanted, she went out to get it and no matter where she is, her art remains not only true to itself but also to herself. So how can she go wrong?

"I believe in determination, I believe in doing your kind of thing and believing in it. As for myself, I don't just want to be successful, I want to be great!" ... and her laughter booms just like her canvas.

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