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Pacita Abad surrounded by trapunto murals in her Washington studio.

Pacita Abad's amazing trapunto world

BY ANJIE BLARDONY URETA

Wild art. That's how world class visual artist Pacita Abad describes her twin solo exhibitions opening at 4 p.m. at the Luz Gallery and at 6 p.m. at the Ayala Museum tomorrow.

But aren't her art works characteristically *wild*? "Well, this time it's even *wilder!*," replies the Batanes-born, Washington-based, multi-awarded painter. She continues, "When people ask me what's new in this exhibit, I tell them: First, they are comparatively smaller in size and second, these ones are really outrageous. If I go beyond this, I'll be painting the walls!" This time, she only went as far as – believe it or not – painting the frames. "I want the paintings to look like they're stretching out as far as the edges of the frames...And I'd love to see people turning the frames over to see if there's more at the back..." she quips in between chuckles.

A taste for the bizarre

Pacita's exhibits are always orchestrated, theatrical presentations that tickle both the senses and sensibilities of their viewers. There is always something to see, to touch, to feel, to ponder upon and to marvel at. She also has a taste for the bizarre.

She recounts a defiant experiment in 1987 while ex-

hibiting at the Philippine Center in New York: "I was installing the paintings over the weekend when I had this great idea. I told the janitors to borrow an industrial ladder – the one with wheels and pulleys – because I wanted to cover all four walls with paintings, from floor to ceiling, which measured to about the height of a two-storey building. Nobody from the gallery found out until we opened the following Monday. *Pagpasok ng tao, wow! Nabulabog sila! Sino 'to?! Talagang mind-boggling!*" Pacita got reprimanded by the gallery manager, but she couldn't care less. The crowd was spilling over, even queuing up outside the hall for a glimpse of the awesome installations.

Back home in Manila, she mounted an exhibit at the Ayala Museum and turned the gallery into an oceanic microcosm, with stuffed sea urchins, black lights, sand on the floor and aquatic music piped in. She opened that show by cutting – not the customary ribbon – but the tentacles of a soft-sculptured octopus.

"When I put up a show, I want it to have a total concept. I'm not contented with just hanging my works. I don't want them to look pretty – I want people to feel my art," Pacita explains. She derives tons of fun and unbelievable highs from such projects, but admits, "Man, it's really exhausting!"

Cross-cultural influences in a portable profession

Pacita has been an itinerant citizen-of-the-world for the past two decades, probing the farthest corners of the globe for inspiration. "I love travelling, so I decided to have a 'portable' profession – one I could take with me everywhere."

Pacita is a pioneer in "trapunto art", a style she developed by using an unlimited variety of materials. In a nutshell, she describes the process as such: "I work on unstretched canvas and prime it with acrylic to make it white. I draw the subject matter with charcoal, paint over it with oil or acrylic – then – proceed with collaging, silkscreening, tie-dyeing, the works. That's trapunto – stuffing it with materials. It's collaged, it's sewn, it's in relief, it's not flat; even the paperworks are pasted on top of each other. It's got glitters, rhinestones...You name it, baby, you've got it!"

Pacita's trapunto art evolved in the course of her frequent globetrotting. Picking up indigenous materials and cultural influences and blending them together in exciting handiworks has enabled her to create a definition for her unique style. Searching for ways to improve her paintings, she was inspired by the Burmese's adeptness at

embroidery with gold threads, the Indians' talent for incorporating tiny mirrors into fabrics, the tie-dyeing in Kenya, and so on. With her innate flair for mixing and matching colors and objects (a trait that is very much Pinoy), Pacita started a new trend in art.

"When I travel, I look around for both subjects and objects. And for this, I prefer going to the Third World countries. Give me Haiti over Paris anytime," says the artist. "The more underdeveloped a country is, the better it is for my art."

Pacita's search for novel ideas has brought her to the far-flung corners of Sudan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Burma, Mexico, India, Somalia, and other culturally endowed places in Asia, South America, Africa and Europe. "These places are beautiful – they're real. The moment you step out of the plane, there's something peculiar you can see, smell, hear, taste and touch. That's the kind of pulse I want my works to have."

Last January, Pacita's one-of-a-kind art found another niche – she installed a six-piece wall-to-wall mural at the Metro Center subway station in Washington, DC. Millions of commuters will be suffused with trapunto, day in and day out, as the murals would remain there for the next two years as part of the MetroArt award grand prize, which she won over 200 contenders.

Pacita believes that

trapunto art would be very suitable for Filipinos, because we have "the colors, the creativity and the materials for it." "Besides," she adds amusedly, "it's very recycleable. After you've grown tired of the buttons and appliques in your clothes, you can always paste them on the painting..."

Trapunto, in the hands of Pacita Abad, takes on a life of its own. Each art piece presents a tapestry of divergent cultures, meeting and finding a common ground in a manifold phenomenon of shapes and textures, captured in splashes of chromatic ebullience, locked together in a sphere where racial and cultural prejudices are transcended – echoing only the artist's vision of global harmony and co-existence in the realm of art.

For Pacita Abad, the search for fresh ideas has no dead-ends. The disciple of trapunto will continue to go to the ends of the earth to seek novel notions. And she travels well-equipped.

"The two things I never forget to carry around in my bag are my staple gun and my glue gun – and of course my box of beads and buttons. Wherever I go, I staple paper on the wall and start glueing on it whatever odds and ends I find. The only hassle is that my 'guns' always get me into trouble at the airport – they get alarms ringing like crazy...". But, really, it beats keeping a diary anytime.