

# Trapuntoe—a celebration of life

By CLARISSA BROWN

I WOULD recommend anyone to go and see Paciba Abad's exhibition. I left my desk after a long day and just one step inside and *yahoo!*

Paciba's work is not only colourful, challenging, exciting, exotic, big and overwhelming but it is unique.

Often it can be easy and safe to categorise an artist's work with "Clearly influenced by so and so," describing her as abstract, or even has too many associations, which are not true to her work.

This is the reason Paciba felt she had to discover a word for herself which truly describes her work — "Trapuntoe."

Trapuntoe is a method, so in explaining its meaning we can follow the process that Paciba herself follows in producing her artwork.

The earliest known example of trapuntoe was in Sicily in the 14th century and Paciba starts with the same basic principles of "a high relief worked through two layers of cloth." She takes a large canvas, then using charcoal outlines her ideas and shapes — these lines delineate the spaces which are then filled with colour.

"I mainly use water-based paints . . . you can wash it, I've tried!"

The top layer, which holds the design, is now laid over another layer of material: usually muslin or cotton, and the two are hand-sown together. The canvas starts to take on a patch-work effect as the stitches along the original charcoal lines emphasise the areas of colour.

This is followed by trapuntoe, which means stuffing in Italian, producing the high relief, as each separate area is treated individually.

Paciba uses whatever materials are at hand for the stuffing process: feathers,



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foam, cotton bits, old blankets, woollen yarn . . . creating a rolling three-dimensional surface. This stage complete, a black cotton border of about six inches, which acts as a frame, is sown around the trapuntoe, and neatly extends over the back to present a uniform surround.

Widely travelled and completely open to any opportunity which may come her way, Paciba's truly eclectic nature now takes form in her art.

Every work is enhanced with the embellishments she collects on her travels, excited by the idea of incorporating a culture's indigenous art and everyday bits and pieces. With cross-stitch she attaches tiny mirrors as the Indians wear on their clothes, buttons appear everywhere, shells have started to appear since her visit to Papua New Guin-

ea, Nepali beads, Ifuagao weaves and tie-dyed material; her supply is limitless.

These embellishments give us an insight into Paciba's imaginative, humorous and creative nature, all contributing to her infectious *joie de vivre*.

Born in 1946 on the island of Batanes in the Philippines, Paciba has virtually "painted her way around the world."

It was in the early 1970s when she was curator of the Art Department at the University of California that she said to herself: "Hey, I'd like to do this!"

So, off she went to the Corcoran School of Art in Washington (1975-1977), followed by The Art Student League in New York (1978).

"For the first five years I kept painting seriously," she said, and never lost the will-

ingness to learn and experiment in her work.

"Through experimentation you must fail, too. Never be afraid to fail . . . you also learn so much."

Her travels to 65 countries "have been very rewarding because my exposure to different cultures and interesting people has been an important catalyst for my painting," she said.

Her completely natural, cross-cultured background thrives in her art. Wherever she may be she always has a sketch book in hand. Paciba related one incident in to the Sudan to me:

"I found a beautiful woman surrounded by her cattle, camels and children and with such love and joy in her face, that I asked if I could draw her. Although we could not speak we had no problems in understanding each other — she offered me cow's blood to

drink, which of course I could not accept. We laughed and shared the special experience together. Although she was poor she loved the good things, and that is what I want to express."

"Life is good, life is great, I love it."

Paciba's work exudes her attitude and perspective, but it is never without sensitivity. She has painted a series on refugees depicting their plight within the closed camps — a subject riddled with despair and often seeming hopelessness, but still her positiveness shines through in her optimistic understanding of human nature.

"One orphan was causing trouble, he just sat around all day. I asked him: 'What are you going to do when you leave here?' 'I'm going to Harvard,' was his incredible reply."

In 1984 Paciba became the first woman to receive the Philippines' prestigious TOYM (The Outstanding Young Men) award in the field of art.

Since her first one-woman show in Washington, she has exhibited in a number of group and individual exhibitions from Bangladesh to Thailand, Bulgaria to New York.

Paciba attributes her success as an international artist to her understanding of the importance of business alongside art.

Her painting is her work; in her studio she clocks-in and through counting the hours spent per week can quickly assess why her work is developing the way it is.

She advised other young artists that they should go to formal and business events involving art, like museum openings, and meet the people in management so that they know who you are.

"One thing leads to another," she said.

This week Paciba races back to Manila for another exhibition, then returns to close this, her first exhibition in Hongkong.