

Feminist Views

by KRISTINA T. SUBIDO

Some thoughts on women's art

PACITA ABAD may have been the only woman among last year's Ten Outstanding Young Men awardees, but her current exhibit at the Ayala Museum (until 25 June) raises certain observations unique to women artists.

The underwater showcase Abad presents is not "a collection of recent works" in the way most exhibitions go. It is, in the awkward language of the gallery crowd, an "installation show."

One approaches Abad's environment in the same way a diver confronts the water: first a walk through a sandy beach past the fishing nets and then the plunge into the blue where all those deep, dark secrets are. Here, however, one simply swings open a door, and it might as well be Puerto Galera, Sombrero Island or Anilao...

Abad has covered every inch of gallery space with serigraphs of sea anemones, out-sized quilts ("trapuntos") of undersea scenes, acrylic por-

traits of water creatures and soft squid sculptures.

Lengths of fabric, tie-dyed in blue, float from the ceiling suggesting waves, while below, splinters of glass, mirrors and tiny shells poke through fine-mesh netting that cleverly transforms the gallery's beige carpet into the sandy floor of the sea.

But the visual impact all these brightly colored and texture elements create is second only in effect to the overwhelming

energy one immediately senses leaping from Abad's work.

The feeling is an exalted version of the enclosing warmth one experiences in a living room crowded with quilts, lace curtains, throw pillows, ceramics, macrame etc. — all made by the same hands, the proverbial woman-of-the-home.

Designer Sheila de Bretteville, co-founder (with artist Judy Chicago and art historian Arlene Raven) of the Women's Building in Los Angeles,

an exhibition center for "women's art and culture," once observed that "women's art often shows multiple peaks instead of a single center of interest."

The tendency may be biologically based. Because of hormonal differences, a male body is said to be suited for "all-out peaks of activity at short intervals" while the female body

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seems to prefer sustained activity without high peaks or deep drops of energy output."

Many writers suggest that this, along with women's bicameral brains, may be the basis for women's non-specializing nature. A contemporary philosopher of art, Jose Arguelles, argues that the idea of the artist as specialist is a myth that has been

propagated by the left-brained (read: "male-dominant") thinking of the past centuries.

Indeed, proponents of feminist art are now reacting strongly against "the elitist separation between 'high art' (like Rembrandts, Picassos or Manansalas) and 'low craft' (like china painting and applique)."

Writes art historian

Charlotte Rubinstein, "In a deliberate expression of their femaleness, women artists began to incorporate needlework, embroidery, weaving, fabrics, glitter, beads,

lace, quilts, and ornamentation of all kinds in their work. This new approach strongly influenced the 'Pattern and Decorations' movement, which developed among both men and women in the 1970s. For the first time in the history of western art, women were leading, not following, a major art movement."

(We must note, however, that in the country fiber as a medium of art has been exclusive domain of women for cen-

turies.)

The way these tactile, sensuous, highly experiential expressions fill the beholder's senses is markedly different from the effect "traditional" paintings on canvas have on viewers. Arguelles identifies this as another characteristic of the male-dominant perspective in art, wherein aesthetic experience, both on the part of the maker and viewer, is localized in the eye and the intellect.

Certainly Abad has her reasons for choosing fiber as medium.

Says she, "The materials are available inexpensively anywhere you go and you can do anything you want with them. Plus, fiber art is easily transportable." Moreover, fiber art is a fulfilling outlet for women's creative energy. It is an absorbing process that requires total involvement from an artists, more than just the precise eye-hand coordination of a technician.

This perhaps explains why, like Paz Abad Santos, her colleague in the field of fiber art, Pacita

Abad is far less effective on canvas. Many of the paintings in her present show are, in fact, unimpressive, especially when taken individually.

For now her trapuntos remain her best works, especially those with "multiple peaks of interest" like *Sombrero Island*, *Apo Reef*, *Sumilon Island* and *Anilao*.

Does Abad like the label "woman artist"? (Several of her peers do not, considering the label as delimiting.)

"I'm proud of it!" she exclaims. "Art should also be felt and

touched by viewers. I don't want my paintings to be merely hanging on a wall. Traditionally, painting is a male occupation. What I'm trying to do here is to present new dimensions in art."

We supposed every woman, artist or not, struggling within her newfound awareness arising out of the women's movement, can succumb to inconsistency. In Abad's case we find a distracting note in the show's title, *Assaulting the Deep Sea*. Why the violent, macho imagery?