

GALLERY HOPPING

A deeply personal, Expressionist style

By BUDDY FANEGA

SMALL GALLERY, Cultural Center of the Philippines, Roxas Blvd., Metro Manila.

For her seventeenth solo exhibit, Pacita Abad took her viewers to that emerald island of Batanes. She could very well have transported them to out of the Philippines; her oil paintings describe squat, box-type, sturdily-built bungalows which dramatically differ from the stereotypical nipa huts seen in rural Philippines.

Pacita introduced the viewer to some of the islanders (Ivatans, we are told). They are a hardy lot, sepia-skinned, with softly-contoured faces and alert eyes behind their mask of insouciance.

In a deeply personal Expressionist style, the artist did here straight portraiture, improved at times by a conscious desire to infuse psychological insights. The results bespeak Pacita's admiration for these appealing and venerable islanders.

Pacita provides revealing clues to her model's personality enabling the viewer to gain acquaintance, in an instant, with the likes of Tevan Galano, Gundina, Luis Ydel and Beata.

In "Tevan Galano" (1982), the dark figures of a man and his carabao are cast as prominent profiles at opposite sides of an idealized figment from the verdant countryside. Standing like two colossi guarding the riches of the land, man and beast apotheosize all tillers of the land.

The rope by which Tevan declares domination over his carabao becomes symbolic of the understanding forged between man and beast as to their roles and responsibilities in life.

"Beata" (1982) shows an old woman supporting herself with a cane. Her age betrayed by her golden hair, she squints her eyes, perhaps nearly blind, at the viewer and bites onto a large cigar-stump as an excuse for not greeting a hardly recognized or seen visitor.

Two obtrusive lines are detectable on the area of the woman's hair, strangely left without any attempt by the painter to correct their flattening effect.

When confronted with this seeming carelessness, Pacita admitted adding those brushstrokes to offset the smooth roundness of the painted head. The painting, in a way, attests to Pacita's capacity for an audacious gesture.

The portrait of "Gundina" (1983) shows more than a country lass wearing the local version of a wig (actually, batul or cape of straw). As portrayed in front of a row of houses, she is about to go out of the left frame, as if avoiding a direct and close encounter with a stranger.

Only her trailing batul and a basket carried on her back serve to counterbalance and halt her leftward travel. At this frozen instant, Gundina flashes the looks of rural folks when confronted by a stranger: alert, diffident, friendly, at once wary and trusting, the looks flashed from the eyes of an untamed deer before disappearing into the bushes.

The completeness that an artist could attain through a judicious choice of material is revealed in "Luis Ydel" (1982). The obvious simplicity of this close-up portrait of a cigar-chomping rural man-about-town is merely superficial.

The yellow hat, worn at a nonchalant tilt, and the red shirt with its blue polka dots proclaim the rakish side of the man. Since yellow, red and blue compose the primary triad from which other colors originate, they expose Luis Ydel as "orig talaga".

Still in the portrait of Luis Ydel, the artist demonstrated another masterly touch in her choice of the rough-textured canvas. The discerning viewer would note that for all the exhibited paintings, Pacita used smooth-surfaced canvases with the sole exception of the portrait of Luis Ydel.

(Doubtless, Pacita made this choice by conscious design in order to capture the air of rawness, crudity or rustic machismo exuded by the portrait sitter.)

Together with portraits of people, Pacita exhibited landscapes which, in a sense, are land-portraits. Batanes, like any sea-encircled isle, is replete with clean, clear views of cloud-kissed mountains adjacent to the deep blue sea or bordering verdent lowlands.

The atmospheric clarity allows the same degree of focus for near and distant subjects. For example, "House of Rey Cardeno" (1982) combines three separate horizontally-disposed areas (namely, the foreground fields in autumnal colors of maturing crops, the white house in the middle area, and the sullen mountains crops, the white house in the middle area, and the sullen mountains to the top) in a compressed perspective, recalling Bali paintings.

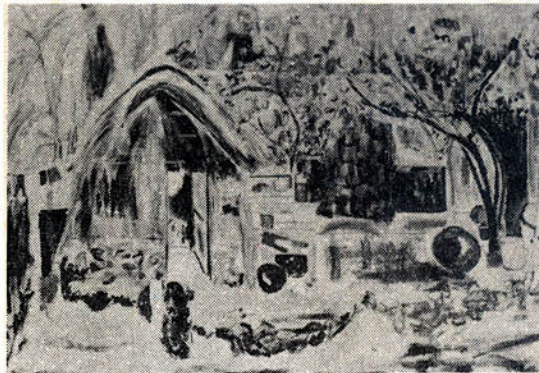
The sunlight might be intense or slanting, but does not create shadows, illuminating Batanes as a dream-world: idyllic, ideal and yet so real.

The panoramic "Basco Sunset" (1982) is enigmatic in the combined images of the red sunset skies, of darkened mountains as if seen after sundown, and of sparkling houses, trees and fields basking under an unseen sun whose brightness places it at high noon. Despite the intense luminosity, there is almost a total absence of shadows.

Yes, Pacita sees Batanes through the guileless eyes of a happy child. A youthful naivete informs "Barrio Salagaw" (1982), which is a rooftop view of a rambling row of houses that surge up a hillside like ocean waves, splitting apart as they hit a rocky shore.

Happy childhood memories are expressed in "Our House" (1982) through the use of multiple layers of brilliant, straight-from-the-tube colors for the trees and tropical vegetation that almost completely cover the house from view.

Pacita revealed in the joy of artistic creativity, driving her to repeatedly paint over the canvas to the point of obliterating any traces of it and, at the same time, to unleash



"PANISANAN (REST HOUSE)," an oil on canvas work in 1984 by Pacita Abad.

pent-up memories.

Such catharsis produced a series of opulent tapestries, as in "Ivana" (1982), "Horsehoe Drive" (1983) and "Charnarian" (1983).

As a sign of her imminent and maturing sophistication, Pacita revealed the processes by which her paintings evolved from the raw canvas. "Panisanan" (1984) appears as if it were the initial stage of a painting of a resthouse rather than the final work itself, because the charcoal drawing is still much in evidence.

Furthermore, the outlines of rocks and other motifs, delineated in red, orange or brown, have the nuance of a preliminary drawing of a beach scene. The underlying canvas breathes through the thinly-applied colors.

Faint washes of yellow and orange enunciate the sunshine falling upon the resthouse and its surroundings, but do not cover entirely their assigned territory.