

# The Color and Controversy that is Pacita Abad

**A** WOMAN entering and winning a competition for men cannot expect to walk away with her trophy without meeting hostilities along the way, as in the case of Pacita Abad and the TOYM Awards.

Pacita Abad is this year's TOYM Awardee in the field of Arts. TOYM, as we all know, stands for Ten Outstanding Young Men, a yearly search for outstanding men under forty, sponsored by the Philippine Jaycees.

Pacita Abad was nominated by Arturo Luz, noted painter-sculptor, well-known and respected in the Arts as director of the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Philippine Art, and the Philippine Design Center.

The only woman nominee, Pacita won, and, with her proclamation as an "outstanding young man," broke tradition.

Well, that is historical. Reactions however are bordering on the hysterical. Male art critic Paul B. Zafaralla, for one, will not take it sitting down. "...the TOYM Awards itself — what is happening to it? Has it become bereft of even conventional wisdom as to allow a woman to invade this yearly search for outstanding young men, and make her win an award at that?"

Zafaralla has never been ang-

rier, he wrote three full length columns, one after another (*Daily Express*, March 26, May 28, June 6) attacking not only the paintings of Pacita, but even the person of Pacita, his "critiques" complete with words like *kakapakapa*, *nyak, nyak* and mention of Pacita's marriage! Fangs and claws Zafaralla goes:

"... What body of works has Pacita Abad produced to justify the awards? And is she or isn't she a woman?"

"... Is this its (TOYM Awards) way of putting one over its American clonage — give an award to a woman despite the fact yet that her works are not outstanding at all as in fact they are still in the *kakapakapa* stage?"

"... The female awardee was reportedly recognized as a 'young, dynamic, and original (sic) artist imbued with a global outlook (*nyak nyak*) and deep concern for and understanding of the less fortunate and oppressed.' Big words, whoever wrote them must be referring to another artist."

"... prestige, by merit, and not by accident of civil status like marriage."

"...Where lies her originality? In her uncertain use of color,

lack of thematic grip and limited thematic range, and other anachronistic paint dabbles which are examples that paintings need not say anything; need not be significant?"

"... Her reassembled shells, beads, sequins, etc. that are essentially craftworks?"

Zafaralla even went as far as to suggest that the Jaycees rescind the decision "to rectify the error."

But, cool as a cucumber, Pacita Abad, who was born and raised in tempestuous Batanes, has experienced and weathered more than enough vicious storms (literally) to be affected by Zafaralla's verbal assault.

She tells of a party that her parents gave on the occasion of their wedding anniversary. It was a stormy night. Typhoon signal number 3 in Manila. None of the Manilans they invited came, but all their friends and relations from Batanes were present. When Pacita thanked them for braving the storm, the *Ivatans* (what people from Batanes are called) replied: "You call this a storm? When the carabaos and the other animals start jumping, that is the time we will consider whether to go out of our houses or not."

"I do not know Paul Zafa-



Pacita Abad: Cool as a cucumber.

ALEXIES SANTIAGO



Watching and waiting

ralla. . . We have not met," Pacita states, flashing a smile, without a trace of resentment in her voice. "He loves me, this Zafaralla, doesn't he?"

The woman seems at home with critics, regardless of what they have to say. She seems to respect their views and welcomes all comments.

Like many artists, she prefers to be attacked than ignored.

"Eh, sino nga ba yang Pacita Abad na yan?" asks a former TOYM winner, "aside from being the first woman ever to be nominated for, and proclaimed one of the winners of the 1985 batch of T.O.Y.M.'s?"

**S**HE SIGNS her paintings *pacita*. All lower case, her signature resembling the handwriting of a child — letters stout, smooth and rounded. *pacita* '82, *pacita* '84, or *pacita* '85 as the case may be, can be seen at first glance on each of her colorful artworks (numbering five hundred to date) usually affixed at the lower right-hand corner of the pictures.

Her house, too, carries her signature, and how! Not in alphabet but in character. From door to floor, from floor to wall, from wall to wall, from room to room, and up and down the staircase. The mood bringing to mind the first lines of Jimmy Abad's poem, *Things* — "All in the room announce her. All in the room are presences of her."

It is a strong presence. A pervading one too.

"How can you not look at her paintings," one observer remarked.

"Every detail is screaming for attention and succeeds in getting it."

But whether the attention is given begrudgingly or obligingly, one thing is certain. A *pacita* or Pacita A. has got what it takes to make good copy: color that sometimes invites controversy.



Flower Vendor

The colors in a *pacita* are as difficult to overlook as the apple green nail polish Pacita wore that day we came to interview her; or the pair of light handcrafted earrings and matching neckpiece she had on, the shade of which softly echoed the colors of her luminous fingertips and contrasted with her black sleeveless blouse worn over trousers of bright blue — color schemes that went well with her smooth, dark, dark brown complexion. The deep blue leather shoes she wore did not show her toes, and we did wonder if her toenails, like her fingernails, were also painted green.

**T**HE ART SCENE took notice of the colorful Pacita Abad, 38, last year, when first she exhibited more than a hundred

paintings, including seventeen gargantuan tapestries which she calls trapuntoes, at the huge halls of the Museum of Philippine Art and then at the prestigious Luz Gallery which she followed up with a show early this year at the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

This series of one-woman exhibitions held in succession at the three most sought-after venues hereabouts made Pacita's name visible and audible in places where two or three people are gathered in the name of Art.

Pacita was in a group of five artists at *Pinaglabanan Galleries*, at the all-women show in *Sining Kamalig*, at the Gabriela sponsored women painters exhibit at the Mt. Carmel Social Hall, at the ASEAN show, at the AAP Exhibit, the MOPA Collection, Three

Faces of Philippine Painting in Munich, Germany and in the International Philippine Art Exhibit in Indonesia — her works, wild and free and flamboyant, stealing the show most of the time.

**P**ACITA ABAD's art career did not begin and bloom in Manila. She had her art debut eight years ago in Washington, D.C. and since then has held twelve individual exhibitions in different countries and major cities abroad, in places where she



Turkana Women

lived with her husband, Jack Garrity, an international banker. Right now the Garrity's are in Manila.

It was the travelling nature of her husband's job that made Pacita re-orient her professional goals (from Law to Fine Arts!!) and made her choose what she calls a "portable" profession, one that she could practice wherever and whenever space and time lead her.

One of the thirteen children of socially and politically prominent parents from Batanes, Pacita left the country fourteen years ago, after graduation (A.B. Political Science, University of the Philippines, '68), continued her studies abroad (Master of Arts, University of San Francisco, '72), met Jack Garrity and married him, gave up a scholarship in Law at Berkely, enrolled in an Art course at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. (1975-77) and at the Art Students League of New York, in New York City (1978), and pursued her new found interest, Art, relentlessly, like her very life depended on it. She treated it as a full time job (40 hours a week) and took it with her wherever she went. To date, she has brought her art to more than sixty countries and in return Art has brought her to places where artists are appreciated. Important galleries and museums in Washington, New York City, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Bangladesh, Sudan, Thailand, Bulgaria, Indonesia and the Dominican Republic, among others, have exhibited her works.

Her works, enriched by her extensive travels are long narratives of her experiences in different lands, people she met, folk festivals and tribal traditions she observed, seen ever from the wide-open and impressionable eyes of a child, and translated in all the world's available colors on trapuntoed tapestries, the largest of which can cover an entire wall of an average living room.

Trapunto is an ancient technique of quilting fabric or cloth by sewing and embossing designs through outlines of single or double stitches, padded with yarn or cotton.

This technique is what Pacita uses to tell her stories about the Dinka, the Papuan, the Hanuman, monkey king of the Ramayana, dancing demons and goddesses and other folk lore characters in boldest designs, patterns and unmatched colors.

"I l-o-v-e colors," Pacita drools, "and I will use anything that has them, the wilder, the brighter, the better." She does and the results are dazzling, sometimes almost blinding.

Red ribbons, orange rickracks, blue buttons, black beads, white lace, off-white seashells, silver mirrors, golden thread, yellow yarn, strips and strips and yards and yards of plain and printed cloth, and of course paint: galore, in tubes, in cakes, in cans, in bottles.

Like a child, she uses them all to produce pictures that are uninhibitedly primitive as they are refreshingly naive.

But not all *pacitas* are bright and sunny and nicey and folksy. Her travels have also taken her to places where people are sad and hungry, and this dark side of life, she has recorded, too, in her *Refugee Series* which she calls *Portraits of Cambodia*, not in trapunto but in oil on the traditional canvas.

"It is difficult for an artist to isolate herself from events that are happening all around. . . I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility. . . *Portraits of Cambodia* tell the story of adversity, bitterness, boredom and not too often happiness."

The *happiness* that Pacita talks about is a gift of the gods of which she has received her bountiful share. In childhood, a pair of devoted parents, a dozen siblings with whom she played on cloudless days and shared shelter during wicked weather, and later on, a supportive husband, man-friend-companion who lets her be, not counting the countless friends from all over with whom she continues to correspond. And, of course, her *Art*.

With all these, she can never be a loser.

— *pacita*, the artist, Pacita the woman, or Pacita Abad, the person, does not have to pose for a colored picture with a trophy in hand for naked eyes to see that she is a winner.

— ODETTE ALCANTARA