

Artist with a heart

By ANGEL G. DE JESUS

There is no better way to start this column on painter Pacita Abad and her outstanding show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (MOPA) than to quote an excerpt from the brochure accompanying the exhibition.



She wrote:

"I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility and for this reason I believe that my thirty oil paintings entitled 'Portraits of Cambodia' are my most important series. These portraits provide a deeper understanding of the Cambodian tragedy and tell the story of adversity, bitterness, boredom and not too often happiness."

Now that she is back in her own country, I wish that she would apply the fullness of her social consciousness and sensitive conscience to portraying the same conditions existing in the Philippine countryside.

I describe her exhibition (alas! over by April 15) as outstanding because her work, shown in the two galleries in the first floor of MOPA, captivates the eye and arouses the emotions with

Vignettes

its rainbow of colors and emotionally charged subjects. It is far, far different from the usual run of Manila art exhibitions with their placid exhibits.

Abad is showing 132 pieces painted from 1976 to 1983, many of them large and mural-sized, done during her travels with her husband in Cambodia or Kampuchea, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, India, Papua New Guinea in Micronesia, and the Philippines. She painted places and people — especially people — and for each painting she wrote a capsule story, hoping, in her own words, "to help people understand the wondrous things I had seen." And they are

wondrous indeed for her paintings have such titles as "Omdurman" (Africa), "Masai Man" (Africa), "Goroka Man" (Papua New Guinea), "Dancing Demon" (Papua New Guinea), "Arjuna" (Indonesia), "Turkana Women" (Africa), "Cha, Chief of Awan Village" (Africa), "Egyptian Mosque," "Cape Haitian (Haiti) and "Thai Umbrellas" (Thailand). She does not neglect her country for she has pieces entitled "Mahatao" (Batanes), "Sampaguita Girl in Quiapo," and "Manila Fashion Show" and "Girls in Ermita," two scenes of Manila's less reputable neighborhoods. For her Cambodia series she has titles that speak for themselves, such ones as "Flight to Freedom," "Two Orphans," "You Are Never Safe," "Kampuchean Children," "What's The Matter, Can't You Help My Mother?" and "When Will This End?"

She shows her exotic, fantastic, color-drenched paintings in one gallery and the sad and tragic people and scenes of Cambodia in the other. Her medium is varied — oil on canvas; acrylic on canvas; serigraph; monoprint; collagraph; oil on paper; acrylic on muslin, sewn and trapuntoed; and batik, mirrors, cowrie shells, rickrack and buttons sewn to her trapuntoed work.

Trapunto lends itself to the sewn innovations as it is quilting having a raised effect made by outlining the design with running stitches and then filling it with cotton. Trapuntoing gives body to the work, a third dimension to the subject. Thus, "Hanuman, the Monkey King" (Indonesia), "Papuan" and other colorful trapuntoed work come to life.

However, the portraits of Cambodia cause the maximum emotional impact of the viewer. After seeing the colorful trapuntoed work in one gallery, the Cambodian paintings in the other make the heart cry with pity.

Abad writes:

"In these canvases, vivid colors are fused with moral convictions and human emotions to present a powerful commentary on the plight of the lost souls of Cambodia. What I have shown is suffering with a human face, not emaciated children or swarming hordes, but people scared and scarred by their experiences. There are scenes of children staring out of barbed wire enclosures, a man holding his sick baby, a woman giving her baby water; and mothers with their infants waiting in line at a government clinic. My paintings have a purpose. They serve as a reminder, because after the media coverage of events ends, may paintings keep staring at you and let you know that the refugees are still there in the camps."

She fulfills her role as a member of the community of artists who serve as the conscience, not only of their race, but of the whole world as well. Like Picasso in "Guernica" with its condemnation of fascist brutality, she does her part.

But will the super-powers who manipulate the fate of the helpless Cambodian people have eyes to see their tears and ears to hear their weeping? And the hearts to ease their pain?