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When you regain your balance from her humor and her penetrating involvement with the world that she pictures in a 120-piece exhibit of quilted tapestries, silkscreens and oil paintings (called "A Philippine Painter Looks at the World", ongoing at the MOPA until Mid-April), you might have some questions: Is her art Filipino? Is it Asian?

She unabashedly basks in the cosmopolitan sunshine but she has a warm eye for the primitive details that it lights up. So her MOPA exhibit is cosmopolitan and ethnic, but is it relevant art? Like a formula question this is a button calling for the usual diet of tasteless food for thought. Should relevance have one recognizable form? What should be its color?

But we are after aesthetic nourishment: Can an ideal reformist sense the relevant as quickly as a deaf radio technician? If no radical aesthete can appreciate the art would it be less relevant?

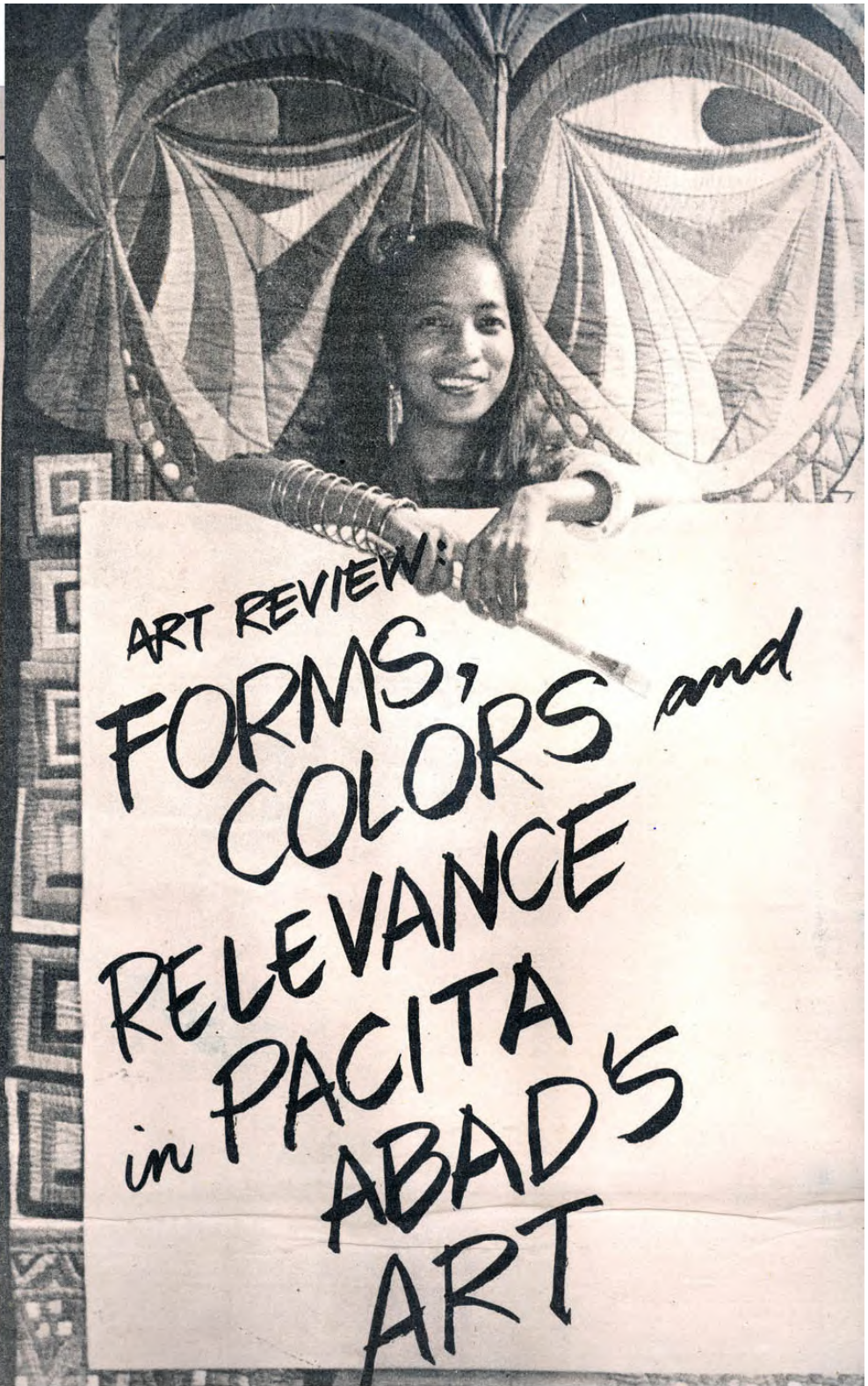
Stop quibbling and tell everyone whether Pacita Abad's works are nourishing or relevant!

Both the range of subjects and the details of each work are frequently abstract but they are full of the original identity, substance, and, even, the suggestion of the odor in each subject. Her relevance is penetrating and artistically effective. This is hard to illustrate in ten sentences. The confusion in the world in the last two decades serves as the space or time frame for her views. And it was only in the last nine years (1975-83) that she learned her art and reassembled her view of the world by travelling.

A CURRENT IN TIME,
LIFE AND RELEVANCE

This artist's life sounds too middle class and non-committed: It is a resume of an AB graduate of UP who embarked on a Law course to follow her father's political footsteps (as a frequent Batanes Congressman and a former Chief of Public Works and Communication). But she interrupted her law studies for a trip abroad where she turned down a law scholarship at Berkeley.

What story is this and what did she give up Law for? For marriage to a travelling economist who is now assigned to ADB Manila. This personal turning point has weak social foundation. It is not just irrelevant but also a-legal in this age of single motherhood.



Talking to marriage like a fish committed to water, she studied art like a fledgling bird who suddenly flies overseas on the well winged airways of touring matrons.

"Are you compatible (with Jack)?" I asked of their responses to various cultures.

"Yes," the artist replied. Notwithstanding that her husband is no artist, she still has a lawyer's mind to rationalize her art.

While meeting various cultures and broadening their own experiences, Jack was cross examining each one's economic profile through his work. Pacita did not strike a mine of relevance. She grew it with her traditional creative sense, perhaps spurred by the trials and errors in her native home (Batanes) which she calls "the typhoon capital" of the Philippines.

Ok, they are compatible and they can weather the storms, but can the two selves of the artist Pacita be reconciled?

"One thing common to artists and lawyers is a deep interest in people," she explained. Her artworks indeed fill your eyes with fascinating people. And as I myself see it, penetrating the depth of people and covering the full range of their colors, forms, smells and needs are in fact the condition for tasteful relevance.

It is creativity, not material content, that makes relevance a captivating sight. Moreover, some relevant or realist art need no censorship to be ignored and mislaid through their sheer conventional predictability.

THE SUBJECT AS A PORTER ON THE DOORWAY TO DISCOVERY

The involvement of Pacita's senses in her subjects is what draws up this thing called relevance. The bulk of her tapestries are careful arrangements of colors. She poses them on canvass as though midway through an explosion. These suspended break up of colors in mid explosion however shows the unbreakable archetype design of the old subject(s) (whether forms, figures or scenes) being analyzed. But the arrested movement simply fails to reach complete deformation or reformation after that explosion.

In fact this creative boom of pat-

terned colors is just an optical illusion, certainly reinforced by old configurations in the viewers' mind. They look like bold brush strokes at times but in truth they are stitches of threads, painstakingly and precisely handsewn for weeks and months into a muslin overlay that snugly blankets the regular artist's canvass underneath (which contains her conceptual drawing and color keys). This is the facsimile that art or talent has made accurate and meaningful. It is art that makes relevance. Pure relevance only exists in the mind. Pacita's works show how carefully she has turned concept into textured image while simulating the spontaneous, creative bang of nature.

Her lightheaded tapestry of Hanuman is sewn over acrylic on muslin, a process by which Pacita creates "trapuntos". She depicts her visualization of the fabled Monkey King of Indonesia which has kept Indonesian culture intact via the ideals of legendary devotion to truth, faithfulness, love boosted up by courage and physical strength. In the original Hindu Vedic literature, Hanuman was a simian devotee of Rama, or a low natured monkey who found enlightenment.

To omit Hanuman from the artist's experience of Indonesia is akin to a Filipino balikbayan's or a foreign tourist's ignorance of the Bulol — the rice granary god central to the Ifugao. So Pacita renders Hanuman with respect but her lightheaded humor casts a life-like shadow over the dead outline of Hanuman. Poses like a half-man, half-god monkey-figure in an Indonesian backdrop of a cosmic universe — apparently meaningless but (perhaps) existing with a unique presence, and as catching as a rose in a perfect photo in which the artist forgets to ask: Hey rose! (Or Hanuman!) What is your relevance? Isn't a mango more nourishing, and don't you see that this is the age of industrialized mango plantations?

There are no five-year plans for supplying Hanuman qualities and roses. But with the local artists of Sto. Domingo for her neighbors, Pacita had watched the peddlers, shoe shine boys and dollar changers passing by and painted "The Flower Vendor" — showing a Sto. Domingo character in her similarity with Filipino vendors. This subject is alive and Latin American, but why does she reach out to our warm Filipino senses from an imported canvass?

MORE RELEVANCE, OVER INSTANT RELEVANCE

There are no tourist pictorials on exhibit. These are personal visions artistically rendered with more, not less, relevance.

Ergo the tapestries, serigraphs and oil paintings almost touch your senses. The more you know of the background (of the common subjects) the more relevant and arresting they become.

Though nothing in Pacita Abad's artistry is censorable by either leftwing or rightwing art or media standards, her art is relevant. They are not meaningless calculations nor abstractions.

Her Cambodian refugee series (flowing into Thailand while she was there) do not portray carnage nor manifestos fighting against vicious explosive hardware but human conditions that simply intend to keep you awake to the fact that in various countries (despite all the multinational researches; diplomatic, military, political, economic programs plus the intent to create relevant technological outputs); the war of liberations and the casualties among the "beneficiaries" are multiplying.

The question is how the liberation is blooming through all these programmed surgeries and campaigns? This thought is not just the artist's. It is yours and mine: But how we answer it would reveal our relevance. Pacita has done her part (and goes on doing so) as far as Cambodian refugees and stimuli go, and as far as she can paint and provoke artistic responses on this subject in the viewer.

"Seeing their faces," she explains, "I was determined to paint them . . . to remind society of its social responsibility. I believe that my thirty oil paintings entitled "Portraits of Cambodia" (an exhibit within the exhibit) are my most important paintings . . ."

Her concern is to provide a depth of understanding this Cambodian adversity, bitterness, boredom — including (would you believe it) the rare, paradoxical happiness.

The blossoming of this simple moral conviction measures the corresponding failure of many committed painters in replaying instant and formula "relevancies" via the predictable patterns of established socialist realism.

THE UNPREDICTABLE IN A SHOWCASE OF WORLD IMAGES

In catching the faces, vulnerabilities and feelings of six refugees via oil on canvass in the piece called "Watching and Waiting" (1979), Pacita may have been one of the first artists to continue searching for Vietnam developments after the liberation of Vietnam. She calls these works her "social realist paintings" since she aims to catch the struggle of a disinherited community in its real act or state of desperation.

But Pacita has not limited herself to one aspect of reality. Her eyes, brushes, stitches and silkscreens regularly penetrate the character of Masai warriors or women, Afghan people, as well as the mosques and camel traders in the Mid East etc.

She has portrayed the "Girls of Ermita" in a poster type tapestry featuring the colorful flesh and figures in bright lit humor, alongside another trapuntoed tableau of the lunch-fashion show which pegs the state of the macho world in its midnight and noon moments. These two irrelevant also exist.

But to my mind her most glorious vision is that of the African Mephisto, called The Dinka. Her medium is acrylic on muslin, later trapuntoed and handsewn with rich rack, ribbons and dyed cloth. The face of the witch doctor of undeterminable, classless sex is masked in various paints, framing the eyes of power while his arms spread so that a rainbow of deep and light colors fan out widely like a crescent butterfly against a backdrop of surrealist color streaks (perhaps standing for flattered tree trunks).

Whether she features Papuan, Bangladesh, Guatemalan or Egyptian images in silkscreen, oil or tapestry; this artful defector from legalisms and politics has an unerring penetration of the subjects and the audience i. e. peoples' feelings and cultural details.

To watch her artworks is almost as fun as participating in view, conceptual response or emotional involvement with the scenes she has observed and chosen to replay.

"Before I studied paintings, I couldn't even draw a line," she laughs at the irony of her life. Now she is dipping into her color keys to compose more laughter and sorrow in art. There is no sign that she will ever defect again. The exhibit shows a laughing mind that appreciates the difficulties, responsibilities as well as surprises of seeing. So when she gets very serious you know for sure that she is no longer joking. She surrenders to the moments of relevance. And now she is letting that grow in all (Not just in one prescribed) dimensions.