

Artist 'brings home' the Cambodian refugees

By Christine Temin
Globe Correspondent

His head seems too large for his body, especially for those scrawny arms. There are deep circles under his eyes, and a look of scepticism within them. He is eating a meal of rice soup with pork blood and liver, which may be his only food for the day. He is perhaps 4, a Cambodian refugee in a Thai camp, and the subject of Pacita Abad's painting "Daily Ration."

Pacita Abad, a 34-year-old painter born in the Philippines and now living in Boston, spent much of 1979 and 1980 in Thailand, creating a series of 30 works depicting life in the refugee camps. She has also painted series of village scenes of Bangladesh and West Africa, although these, she says at the opening of her current show at the Boston University Art Gallery, were "not as serious" as the Cambodian portraits.

The style in the Cambodian works (which can be seen at BU through March 14) is primitive; Pacita takes liberties with proportions and simplifies forms. She applies paint in short, scratchy strokes, with a meagerness which seems appropriate to the subject. Her palette is bright, though, because, "The country is blistering hot — 110° sometimes."

What is most impressive about the paintings is that they are not simplistic propaganda; there isn't bathetic emphasis on tears, blood, starvation and death. They capture instead the everyday reality of life in the camps: a mother

lifting her weakened baby's head to a cup of water; even children grinning, as children will manage to do in even the most horrible circumstances. "These are normal people, beautiful people," Pacita says of her subjects. But their most typical expression is a blank stare. "What do they do in the camps?" she asks. "They sit and look. Men who used to be professors — they sit there and look for their destiny."

In her lectures to art students, Pacita cautions them: "Get out of the studio and be with people. Go to 10th avenue in New York, or Roxbury in Boston." It's advice she got early in life. Both her parents were politicians in the Philippines: Her father was the country's Minister of Public Works and Communications, and her mother, in addition to raising 13 children, was a congresswoman. Thirty-six people lived in their house, because her father would bring people home from his visits to the provinces.

As a law student she was slated to continue the family tradition until she decided to leave and study in America, because, "I didn't like the political situation in my country." After a master's degree in history from the University of San Francisco she studied art at the Corcoran School in Washington. In her terms, art was not big switch from politics and history. An artist, she feels, "has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility."

Pacita has painted wherever she's traveled with her husband, a development engineer.



Pacita Abad's "When Will This End?"

Sometimes she's met with resistance, as in Bangladesh, where Moslem law frowns on representational art. "It's amazing how far a smile can get you," she says of her success in charming the local populace into posing for her.

In Thailand she intended to paint exotic scenery, but a visit to the refugee camps convinced her otherwise. "I spoke my little bit of French to them, and I listened to their stories." She heard about their seven-month trek over the mountains. She saw families' luggage in the Bangkok airport, each suitcase marked for a different destination because "the sponsors only want to take in one person." And she concluded that we don't know the refugees' plight in enough one-to-one detail. "What you hear about is CARE and UNICEF and the Red Cross, and it's always numbers — how many lunches, how much water. It never touches the human aspect."

Her paintings do. She presents the irony of Cambodian women obediently waiting in line at a family planning clinic, despite the desire of many of them to have children. She treats her subjects with love, but with no false reverence.

The largest work in the "Portraits of Cambodia" show, the 7-by-15-foot "Flight to Freedom" is a monument to, and a condensation of, the Cambodians' entire struggle. A crowd of refugees in flimsy sandals or bare feet advances straight toward us, as if their salvation lies beyond the canvas, in our space.