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Still lives in Cambodia

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PORTRAITS OF CAMBODIA—
an exhibition of paintings by Pacita
Abad. At the Boston University Art
Gallery through March 14.

If you've never visited a refugee camp, but have only heard the stories, stop by the Boston University Art Gallery for an all-too-real glimpse inside the Cambodian holding centers in Thailand. In a series of 30 works which captures the everyday reality of the camps, Phillipino artist Pacita Abad helps us relate to the refugees on a personal level, powerfully reminding us of their desperate plight.

The paintings, produced in 1979 and 1980 during a trip to Thailand, convey the artist's sense of social responsibility in art. Abad had first intended to paint the country's exotic scenery and wildlife, but a visit to a refugee camp changed her mind. She quickly became involved in the plight of the refugees for, as she says, "I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility."

And her reminders are direct and often brutal: Her paintings

don't try to sentimentalize her subjects by turning them into make-believe characters in a far-away land. Nor do they attempt to propagandize the refugees' plight with the expected emphasis on death and starvation. Instead, Abad paints life in the camps as she actually sees it—filled with despair and hope, misery and happiness.

Her people are men and women, young and old. Her scenes depict all aspects of camp life: families gathered helplessly behind cold gray wire, with nothing to do but wait for the future; pairs of refugees trekking across the once-beautiful countryside, black eyes filled with both hope and fear; and children playing outside thatched huts, their laughter and smiles giving courage to all those within.

The largest painting in the exhibition, the 7' x 15' "Flight to Freedom," is a monumental symbol for all the refugees. The scores of men, women, and children "stumbling to the safety of Thailand," carrying all their worldly possessions, reminds us that Abad's paintings depict just a few of the thousands of fleeing refugees. In

"Happy Days," the artist focuses on two Cambodian children—a representation of all the young. Abad writes, "The games and laughter of the children...almost shut out the sounds of shellings not so far away...These children, in spite of malnutrition and disease, seem happy."

Abad's style reinforces the powerful emotion she expertly conveys. She primitively simplifies her subjects to linear forms, distorting bodies, heads, and hands for greater expression. And her quick short brushstrokes emphasize the immediacy of her scenes. Her palette is unusually colorful for such a serious subject. Warm greens, loud oranges, and bright yellows fill her canvases—because these are the colors which the people genuinely wear.

Portraits of Cambodia is the artist's "most important series" of village scenes. She has traveled all over the world, painting people in Bangladesh, Africa, Turkey, and Thailand. But in no other work has Pacita Abad more forcefully, and aesthetically, shown her audience a glimpse of truth to which we can all relate.



"Happy Days," by Pacita Abad.