



T H E
WORLD
AT BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Cambodian
refugees

—by Pacita Abad



After the media coverage ends, her paintings keep staring at you. Page 3.

Her paintings a reminder of refugees

By KATHLEEN HIRSCH
Staff Writer

Pacita Abad, whose 30 paintings of Cambodian refugees will hang in the University Art Gallery from Feb. 13 through March 14, is truly a citizen of the world. At CARE's 35th anniversary celebrations in New York this spring, her one-woman exhibit will highlight festivities; in 1982 four of her paintings will be printed as UNICEF cards. These laurels are a reflection of the on-going commitment of a woman whose career has taken her to four continents and millions of Third World people.

A native of the Philippines and daughter of a congresswoman and a Minister of Public Works and Communications, Abad holds a B.A. in political science and a master's degree in history. "I planned to become a lawyer," she says. "But when I was in San Francisco and art director of a college, I found myself sketching all the time. I realized I'd always liked it, and that's when I became a painter"—10 years ago.

Abad's career has taken her all over the world, from Thailand and Bangladesh to Africa and Turkey where she has wielded her brush creating an art form she calls "social expressionism." Her paintings are not beautiful in the complacent sense of the term. Art Gallery manager and curator Amy Lighthill says of Abad, "She denies us refuge in admiring her work for its formal qualities, but rather insists we consider the pictures as moments of life—real people, physically and psychologically trapped in an all-too-real situation."

Abad's collection of Cambodian refugee paintings was somewhat of an accident. Her initial intention was to paint Thailand's exotic wildlife. But her plan quickly changed when she saw the Cambodian refugees fleeing from the Vietnamese invaders.

"I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility," Abad states. "'Portraits of Cambodia' is my most important series as it depicts the faces and feelings of the displaced Cambodians I encountered during my several trips to the refugee holding centers."



"A Little Help from My Friend," an oil painting by Pacita Abad.

Among the scenes depicted are mothers waiting in line with their infants at a government clinic or carrying emaciated children to a drink of water. Figures hovering by barbed wire fences reminiscent of the works of Kathe Kollwitz and Edvard Munch fill large spaces with their fears and dark anxiety.

What does Abad see as the social purpose of her work? "It serves as a reminder," she says. "After the media coverage of events ends, my paintings keep staring at you."

In conjunction with her exhibit, Abad will present a Thursday noon lecture Feb. 26 on her experience in Cambodia and on the theme, "Anyone can paint." Also presenting a Thursday talk will be Y Ly, a Cambodian journalist who escaped from the country and is living in Boston. For further information on the talks, contact Lighthill at 353-3329.