

PACITA ABAD: COMMITMENT TO THE STUDIO

11.04.2020 | JULIETTE MILBACH



Pacita Abad, *The Sky is Falling*, 1998, 1800 x 1200 cm, Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Spike Island, © Photo: Max McClure

Conceived by Spike Island and Pio Abad - the artist's London-based nephew who is also an artist - *Life in the Margins* is the first exhibition dedicated to the work of Pacita Abad (1946-2004) in the United Kingdom. Featuring textile works from 1983 to 2002, the display and the subject matter invite us to re-examine the variations in Abad's work in the light of a retrospective reading: they politicise the narrative. Here, multiculturalism and artistic voices that carry forgotten stories are highlighted.

One may consider P. Abad's originality that distinguishes her from, for example, Faith Ringgold (born 1930) who became particularly recognised in Britain after her 2019 London retrospective. Another consideration would be to remove P. Abad's production from the decorative sphere in which the abundance of motifs, repeated ad infinitum on various supports, could confine her. The Spike Island exhibition provides answers that overcome these possible reservation. The public is invited to wander clockwise around a central room that houses later works. This circular path reveals a narrative, showing an intense and figurative body of work, while the central room brings together more abstract compositions produced by P. Abad when she was ill and confined to her studio. The path suggests a dichotomy between narrative (circular) and abstract (central) forms. It is the interweaving of these aspects that are what is most fascinating in P. Abad's work.

Her approach, her use of sewn and painted textiles, sometimes rendered pictorially - evident in pieces dating from the 1990s - sometimes assembled - as can be seen in later works - are highlighted through the exhibition display. It allows visitors to see the fragility of the support and the extreme finesse: the works are suspended and move with the air. The presentation of both sides of the works doubles the interest. The reverse side reveals the abstraction or the weaving of a narrative that is represented on the front. The path the visitor takes is brought to life. The ensemble reveals a dazzling production: joyful because of its colourful, courageous because of its commitment.

The curators of the exhibition have made a selection from P. Abad's prolific body of work in order to organise it around themes, risking the imposition of an overly interpretative framework. The result is exciting. The pieces presented are an invitation to discover, or rediscover, an artist who is completely distinct from tutelary figures.

Pacita Abad: Life in the Margins, from 18 January to 5 April 2020, Spike Island, Bristol, United Kingdom.

Translated from French by Katia Porro.

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1946 – BASCO, PHILIPPINES | 2004 – SINGAPORE, SINGAPORE

Filipino painter.

Born to parents engaged in politics, Pacita Abad studied political science at the University of the Philippines. In 1969 she was sent to study law in the United States on account of political unrest at the Marcos regime. In 1970 she decided to remain in San Francisco to paint. She later studied painting at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C., (1975) and at the Art Students League of New York (1977). Travels, in particular to Mexico, India, Afghanistan, the Yemen, Mali, Papua-New Guinea and Indonesia, had a powerful influence on her life and provided her with sources of inspiration for her art in terms of ideas, techniques and materials. Her painting is distinguished by constant changes, experimentation and development and her works cover such subjects as socio-political portraits, primitive masks, underwater scenes, tropical flowers and wild animals, as well as including a number of small collages.

Pacita Abad experimented with the surface of her paintings using the *trapunto* technique (used in sewing and stuffing) which gives her canvases a three-dimensional, sculptural appearance. She transformed the surface of the canvas with various materials, such as fabrics, mirrors, beads, shells, plastic buttons, etc., which she combined with pure colours. She worked with a wide range of supports, like canvas, paper, bark, metal, ceramics and glass. Her colourful works are lively and vibrant, and express her personal experiences and her pursuit of her dreams. She produced more than 3500 works, including a 55-metre bridge in Singapore. An unquestionably complete artist, her work has been shown around the world in some 40 solo exhibitions and 50 group shows.

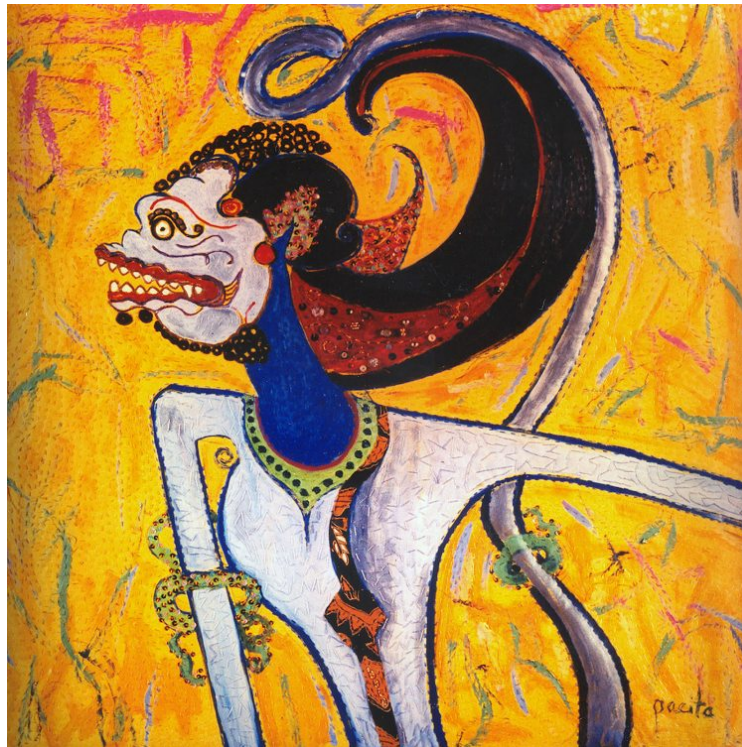
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Pacita Abad, Portrait of Hanuman, 1997, oil on batik cloth with broken glass on stitched and padded canvas, Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore, © Pacita Abad Art Estate