

# Artists on Artists

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# Pio Abad on Pacita Abad

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*Pacita Abad, L.A. Liberty, 1992, acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons, mirrors, gold thread, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 239 x 147 cm. Photography by Max McClure. Image courtesy of Spike Island and Pacita Abad Art Estate.*

# Her iconic reimagining of the American monument as a woman of colour clad in bejewelled patchwork robes.

I have vivid recollections of visiting my aunt, the late artist Pacita Abad's studio in Washington D.C. in the summer of 1994. At that time, she was preparing for a solo exhibition at the National Museum for Women in the Arts, which opened in November that year. Her studio was filled with the elements of what would soon become her "Immigrant Experience" series—one which brought together her "trapunto" method and her interest in social realist imagery. On one wall was *L.A. Liberty* (1992), her iconic reimagining of the American monument as a woman of colour clad in bejewelled patchwork robes. Large scale painted portraits of people of colour, mostly women, populated her studio walls in various stages of completion, some finished, others waiting to be quilted and embroidered. On the floor were different materials organised in plastic boxes—rickrack, sequins, seashells, buttons and even plastic fruit that would later find themselves embellished on the painting's elaborately constructed surfaces. Despite the frenetic pace of production and the amount of labour involved in each piece, she found the time to humour the 10-year-old me, giving

me space to make my own work from leftover canvases, paint and buttons. If memory serves me right, this may have been the first painting on canvas that I ever produced.

25 years later, I once again found myself surrounded by these works; unrolling them in preparation for the first ever UK exhibition of her work, which would go on to open at Spike Island in Bristol this January. After a quarter of a century in hibernation, the colours had not lost any of their vibrancy and the layers of material and processes within each painting continued to astound. If anything, the works had gained the resonance of time, accruing the weight of witnessing their depicted histories being repeated. Her 1994 exhibition was part of an effort by the museum to include local artists of colour in their programme and came as the United States was emerging from the culture wars of the Reagan-Bush era and asking difficult questions about sexuality, race, nation and empire. In 2020, Abad's kaleidoscopic tableaus of migrant life in the United States continue to insist on inclusion and complexity as the country goes through another state of cultural emergency.



**Pacita Abad, Caught at the Border, 1991, acrylic, oil, mirrors, sequins on stitched and padded canvas, 238 x 173 cm. Photography by Max McClure. Image courtesy of Spike Island and Pacita Abad Art Estate.**

## Pio Abad

Pio Abad, born 1983, Manila, is a Filipino artist living and working in London. He began his art studies at the University of the Philippines before receiving a BA from Glasgow School of Art and an MA from the Royal Academy Schools, London. Recent exhibitions include Phantom Limb, Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai (2019); Kiss the Hand You Cannot Bite, Kadist, San Francisco (2019); Splendour, Oakville Galleries, Ontario (2019); To Make/Wrong/Right Now, The 2nd Honolulu

Biennial, Hawai'i (2019); Imagined Nation, the 12th Gwangju Biennial (2018) and Soil and Stone, Souls and Songs, Para Site, Hong Kong (2017). He has also curated exhibitions at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila (2018) and Spike Island, Bristol (2019). Abad is also a lecturer in Fine Art at Goldsmiths, University of London.

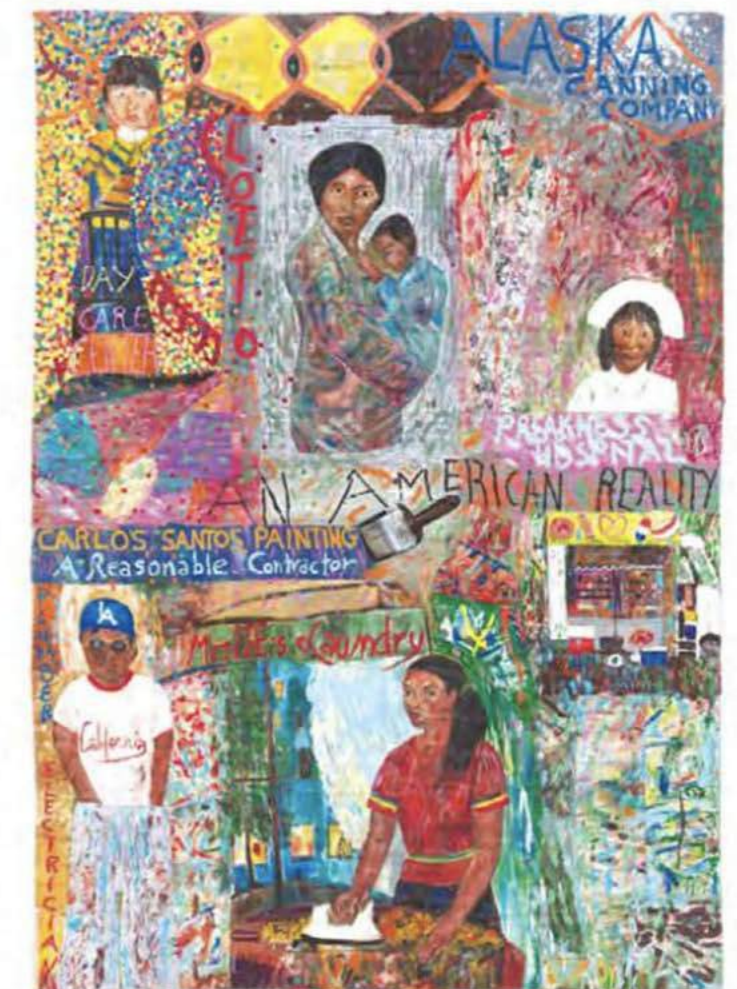


The “Immigrant Experience” series began from her own experiences as a Filipino immigrant, but it is her depiction of the intersecting lives and struggles of other immigrants of colour that sets the work apart: from fellow émigré artists and Korean grocers, to Bangladeshi restaurant workers and Cambodian refugees. In *I Thought the Streets were Paved with Gold* (1991), Filipino cannery workers in Alaska share the same pictorial space with Dominican house painters and New York street vendors. *Caught at the Border* (1991), which depicts an incarcerated asylum seeker in the Tijuana border amidst a swirling frenzy of blue and grey paint, thread and sequins, was painted in 1991 but speaks of a vilification of the marginalised that has never truly abated. What shines through in Abad’s depictions is her insistence on empathy and solidarity with those that have been patronised and shunned in equal measure. Through her use of colour,

sensitivity of form and attention to detail, she provides a voice to members of society who are claimed to be spoken for, but never listened to.

In the time that I have been involved in bringing her work to a new audience, what has struck me most is how startlingly contemporary it is. I am writing this text as Britain wakes up no longer part of the European Union and America confronts the inevitable acquittal of Donald Trump. When the weaponization of nationhood is ascendant and cultural and political borders are closing down, Pacita Abad’s works are both prescient and urgent.

Pacita Abad (1946-2004) was a Philippine-American contemporary painter born in Basco, Batanes, a small island in the northernmost part of the Philippines. In a career spanning three decades she created over 4,500 artworks, and her paintings were exhibited in more than 200 museums and galleries around the world.



**Pacita Abad, I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold, 1991, acrylic, oil, wood bristle, painted canvas, painted cloth on stitched and padded, 238 x 173 cm. Photography by Max McClure. Image courtesy of Gino and Denise Dizon.**