

Long Pushed to the Margins, Pacita Abad's Art About the Immigrant Experience Gets Global Recognition



BY ALEX GREENBERGER April 15, 2021 4:15pm



A 2018 survey of Pacita Abad's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila.
COURTESY PACITA ABAD ESTATE/PHOTO PIONEER STUDIOS

The story of the thousands of immigrants who passed through Ellis Island in New York during the late 19th and early 20th centuries is well-known to many, and on a visit to it, you can learn about the Jews who left eastern Europe to escape oppression, the Italians who came to the United States seeking upward mobility, the Armenians who arrived amid a genocide at home, the Syrians who crossed the Atlantic to find new lives abroad, and many more stories like this. What you cannot learn about, the artist [Pacita Abad](https://www.artnews.com/t/pacita-abad/) realized when she came to Ellis Island as a tourist in 1991, is about the stories of the Asian, African, and Latin American immigrants who came to the U.S. Surprised by this lacuna in the history of immigration to the U.S., she knew she had to make art about it.

Abad, herself an immigrant born in Batanes, an island in the Philippines, understood that Asian, African, and Latin American immigrants had come to the U.S. by different routes, meaning that they never passed by the Statue of Liberty while en route to Ellis Island. She thought, too, of the Latinx and Asian immigrants who arrived in the mid-20th century: What of them? "Their experience was just as important and needs to be understood," she said in a 1994 interview.

And so she painted *L.A. Liberty* (1992), a brilliantly colored image in which Lady Liberty appears as a woman of color donning a multi-patterned robe. Rays of red, purple, black, green, and blue shoot out from behind her. In place of the Declaration of Independence, she holds a tablet

covered in pops of color—a new kind of U.S. history for an audience that has historically been ignored by it.

L.A. Liberty was among the most celebrated works in a 2018 Abad survey that opened at the Manila's Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, and that exhibition led to another devoted last year to the artist at Spike Island in Bristol, England. In its glowing review, *ArtReview* called *L.A. Liberty* an “exuberant banner for multiculturalism”—a sentiment that has been shared by many since.



Pacita Abad, *L.A. Liberty*, 1992.
PHOTO MAX MCCLURE/COURTESY PACITA ABAD ESTATE

These two exhibitions may have effectively fueled an Abad mania that is being felt worldwide. In 2020, Abad became the **subject of a Google Doodle** (<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/who-was-pacita-abad-pioneering-filipina-painter-1202695834/>)—a status typically attained by artists like Wassily Kandinsky, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Gustav Klimt, whose reputations are far more cemented than hers. This year, Abad's work is featured in the Gwangju Biennale, perhaps the most important recurring exhibition in South Korea; over the summer, it will figure in a Haus der Kunst exhibition alongside pieces by Isaac Julien, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Tschabalala Self, and the Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai is planning a solo exhibition for October. The new fervor for Abad's work will reach a fever pitch in 2023, when the **Walker Art Center** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/walker-art-center/>) in Minneapolis stages the first-ever U.S. survey devoted to her.

Many Styles, One Artistic Vision

Abad, who died in 2004 at age 58, has long evaded art history because her work and her life deny easy placement. She spent much of her career moving around the globe, rarely remaining in one locale for longer than a decade, and she worked in modes that at first seem to be at odds with each other: abstraction and figuration, painting and ceramics, deeply political concerns and also ones intended mainly to stimulate the eye. Fitting her into one movement is impossible, but art history exists in multiples, after all—artists of different genders, different races, and different nationalities respond to the same events in vastly different way. As an understanding of this grows among curators and scholars, Abad's work, with its emphasis on global living today as a prismatic, joyous, and multi-perspectival thing, is gaining new prominence.

“My aunt was a part of so many different art histories, but in a way, she wasn't part of any single one,” Pio Abad, the artist's nephew, who co-curated the Spike Island and Museum of Contemporary Art of Design shows, said in an interview with *ARTnews*. “The way her work occupies these different narratives is part of something that a lot of people find interesting or relevant, given that we're trying to make sense of multiple strands of art history—and of history in general.”

Abad went on to produce thousands of works over more than three decades before her career was cut short by lung cancer, but she never set out to be an artist. Born in 1946 in Basco, Abad was the daughter of two politicians. She herself had once planned on pursuing a political career—she studied political science as an undergraduate in the Philippines. As the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos closed in, amid threats of violence for her family, Abad's parents urged her to go abroad. In 1969, she left Manila with plans to go to Spain. Then, while visiting a relative in San Francisco, she stayed there, later attending Lone Mountain College, where she got her M.A. in Asian history—at the time still a nascent discipline in the U.S.

“This was right at the time when the Bay Area started to see the development of Asian studies and ethnic studies as courses for study,” Victoria Sung, a Walker Art Center curator who is organizing her forthcoming survey, said. “That was a result of late 1960s student protests, when Black and Asian students banded together to agitate for these courses of study. She was at the vanguard, in terms of her pursuing Asian studies in a U.S. context.”

Planning to become a lawyer, Abad got a scholarship to continue school at the University of California, Berkeley. Then she turned it down and chose to go to art school, taking courses in Washington, D.C. and New York.



Pacita Abad's 2020 Spike Island show.
PHOTO MAX MCCLURE/COURTESY PACITA ABAD ESTATE

Global Inspirations

Having briefly married the artist George Kleiman, she began a relationship in 1973 with the development economist Jack Garrity, whom she later married. They traveled Asia together, and to later parts of Africa, too. Her biography can at times read like a rich travelogue: stops in Sudan, Afghanistan, Laos, Pakistan, India; time spent in Alexandria, Honolulu, Brisbane, Lima, Bamako, Barcelona, Jakarta; periods of residency in Washington, D.C. and Singapore. Constantly on the move, she lived a “global peripatetic existence,” as Sung put it, and she saw aspects of herself in the various peoples she witnessed.

Her earliest mature works, from the 1980s, are done in a social realist mode. We see women in burqas, veiled figures wading into water in Bangladesh, members of the Turkana people in Kenya going about their daily lives. Sometimes, more political material comes through—in one painting, Benigno Aquino Jr., a senator in the Philippines who opposed the Marcos regime, is shown shot dead. Not too long after making these works, however, Abad went in a different direction and produced brilliantly stylized images paying homage to the vast array of cultures to which she was exposed.

For many, Abad's crowning achievement is her “Immigrant Experience” series, done in the 1990s. These were personal works for Abad. One titled *Filipina: A Racial Identity Crisis* (1990) features two women positioned side by side. On the left is the Filipina actress Maria Isabel Lopez, a mestiza; on the right is a darker-skinned woman who comes from the Malay tribes. “As you may have guessed I lean more towards the tribal Filipina and that may explain why I am so interested in remote, exotic and distant places like Papua New Guinea, Cambodia and Indonesia,” Abad once wrote.

But Abad was also fascinated by people whose experience she did not share. She painted Korean shopkeepers living in the U.S., Haitians shown amid barbed wire at a refugee camp in Guantanamo Bay, and sex workers in Manila's Ermita district. To make these works, Abad relied on a technique she called *trapunto*, which involved stuffing and stitching her canvas, creating richly textured three-dimensional objects that marry traditional craft techniques with painterly ones. (They have been shown hung from gallery ceilings, allowing viewers to see the pieces from all angles.) Abad created these paintings in her home, which doubled as her studio, often producing several at once. One *trapunto* painting took her about six to eight weeks to produce, Pio Abad, her nephew, said.

These are celebrations of multiculturalism and hybridity, both in content and form. “She was pulling all these different cultural traditions to make these abstractions in a [way] that was very different from the kind of abstract painting that was happening in the U.S. or in Europe at the time,” Sung, the Walker curator, said.



Pacita Abad's 2020 Spike Island show.
PHOTO MAX MCCLURE/COURTESY PACITA ABAD ESTATE

The Root of It All

Abad's "Masks and Spirits" series, made around the same time, now also ranks among her most celebrated bodies of work. With these, Abad turned to Western modernist tropes about African masks, albeit with a twist. For one work called *European Mask* (1990) that was recently acquired by the Tate museum network, she envisions a face with giant almond-shaped eyes flanked with abstractions resembling Sonia Delaunay canvases. The title is intentionally general: What *is* a European mask, anyway? "She pointed to the way that Europe is a homogenous continent, which is the way that European artists treated Africa," said Kasia Redzisz, senior curator of **Tate Liverpool** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/tate-liverpool/>), where the work is now on view. "It was this notion of an 'African mask' without any identity or any roots."

If Abad's work is only now gaining recognition in the West, paintings such as these brought her acclaim in the Philippines and Indonesia. Early on in her artistic career, she turned heads when, in 1984, she became the first woman to win an Outstanding Young Men award in the Philippines, which historically went to males who made strides in the arts and sciences. Within the country, her work generated acclaim as it moved further into abstraction, bringing in techniques derived from Tibetan *thangka* painting, Panamanian Mola textiles, and Pakistani *ralli* and Bangladeshi *kantha* quilts. By the end of her career, while based in Singapore, she was chosen to paint the Alkaff Bridge, a giant pedestrian walkway with she covered in resplendent abstract forms.

During her lifetime, Abad's work was periodically seen in the U.S., at venues like the Bronx Museum of the Arts in New York and the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., but generally speaking, those in the West have been slow to catch up to what audiences in the Philippines and Indonesia have seen in her art.

Not artist Faith Ringgold, however. In 2005, for a book about Asian American artists, Ringgold wrote, "Widely traveled, Abad creates her work from the point of view of an international woman of color. Those of us who have traveled extensively know that creative women of color are working all over the world and are not merely 'minority' figures within the narrow confines of the Western art world. Who knows how contemporary art will be seen in the years to come, once women and artists of color gain equal opportunity to address their cultural concerns through art? That day, thank heavens, is definitely coming, so let's all of us get ready."

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