

# Art Radar

Contemporary art trends and news from Asia and beyond

## Hungry to create: re-exploring the work of Filipino Pacita Abad – artist profile

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**Art Radar** has a look at late Filipino artist Pacita Abad's practice on the occasion of her latest exhibition in Manila.

Museum of Contemporary Art and Design's current exhibition delves into Pacita Abad's many years of colourful telling, reminding audiences why this world-renowned Filipino artist's work matters now more than ever.



"Pacita Abad: A Million Things To Say", 12 April – 1 July 2018, installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila.  
Image courtesy MCAD.

While it is an undeniable fact that art is best viewed when it stands right in front of you (as opposed to its digital or reprinted forms), there are just some pieces that seem to exemplify this characteristic more than others. Among these is the oeuvre of Filipino artist **Pacita Abad** (1946-2004), which despite its impressive presence and circulation in various countries, still has plenty to reveal about Abad's creative practice and the times she has lived in, especially if one were given the opportunity to look closely at the brushstrokes and stitches she cleverly blended in her works. Highly prolific, during her lifetime and career Abad created 3,500 artworks and had 40 solo shows, while also participating in 50 group and travelling exhibitions.



Abad, 'Pacita Sailing', 1983, acrylic, rick rack ribbons, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 270 x 140 cm. Image courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and MCAD.

The Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) in Manila provides the public with such opportunity in their latest exhibition, "**Pacita Abad: A Million Things to Say**", curated by MCAD Director **Joselina Cruz**, and **Pio Abad**. Presenting large **trapunto** pieces of the female artist from the 1980s up to the time when her health was failing due to lung cancer, this exhibition does more than revisit her artistic technique or underline her contributions to Philippine contemporary art. This show highlights how advanced and expansive her thoughts and sensibilities were, revealing how, more than a decade after her passing, the issues and techniques she integrated in her pieces are more relevant than ever.



Abad, 'L.A. Liberty', 1992, acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons, mirrors, gold thread, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 238.8 × 147.3 cm. Image courtesy MCAD.

### Unmasking the Artist

Immediately greeting the viewer at the entrance of the exhibition are pieces that depict tribal masks, which due to its varying hues and shapes, tell one that these have been inspired by different cultures, which Abad herself had encountered in **her travels**. What is interesting here is that these mask-inspired works reveal she and her partner Jack Garrity, a transport economist, did not just target the touristy and the comfortable. They approached far-flung and

unheard of places – the “Baongo” series and the *Masai Man*, for example, were informed by her visits to Africa – which establishes that her art practice was inclusive, explorative, and willing to go beyond several borders.



“Pacita Abad: A Million Things To Say”, 12 April – 1 July 2018, installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila. Image courtesy MCAD.

Her art’s expansiveness also surpassed her choices of subject matter. As seen through Abad’s many curious portrayals of ritual masks, she redefined painting as an art form. For her, painting was not limited to applying ready-made pigments on to a canvas the way it has been established throughout the years. Painting could embrace craftsmanship, such as needlework, collaging of objects and stuffing, which she mastered and soon referred to as ‘trapunto’ painting.

All her craftwork, which later on even included African tie-dye and Indonesian batik painting techniques, enhanced her painting and colouring skills. The stitching and sticking of accumulated materials did not cover-up her lack of talent. Her tapestry-like works, although packed with details, never projected slack and excess. Every stitch and stroke was intended, which this exhibition made sure to underscore by hanging the pieces rather than mounting these on the wall. Such impressive labour-intensive practice was carried over to Abad’s other series of works.



"Pacita Abad: A Million Things To Say", 12 April – 1 July 2018, installation view with (far right) 'My Fear of Night Diving: Assaulting the Deep Sea', at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila. Image courtesy MCAD.

### **Into the Deep and the Blues**

It has been recorded that Abad travelled to more than 80 countries, giving her enough material content to work with, and eventually, the contentedness to slow down when it comes to exploring. The latter, however, did not happen. Before turning 40, the artist overcame her fear of diving and became obsessed with **underwater views**, which would soon find their way into her trapunto works in the mid-1980s. This move only made sense, for the life in the deep sea and she had the same language: the layering of vibrant colours. Combining colours, in fact, was always something natural to Abad; she admitted that she only learned how to master drawing after she had undergone formal art training in the 1970s, specifically in the Corocan School of Art (Washington D.C.) and Art Student League (New York, N.Y).



Pacita Abad, 'Puerto Galera II', 1983, oil, acylic on muslin, hand-sewn trapunto, 259.08 x 251.46 cm. Private collection. Image courtesy MCAD.

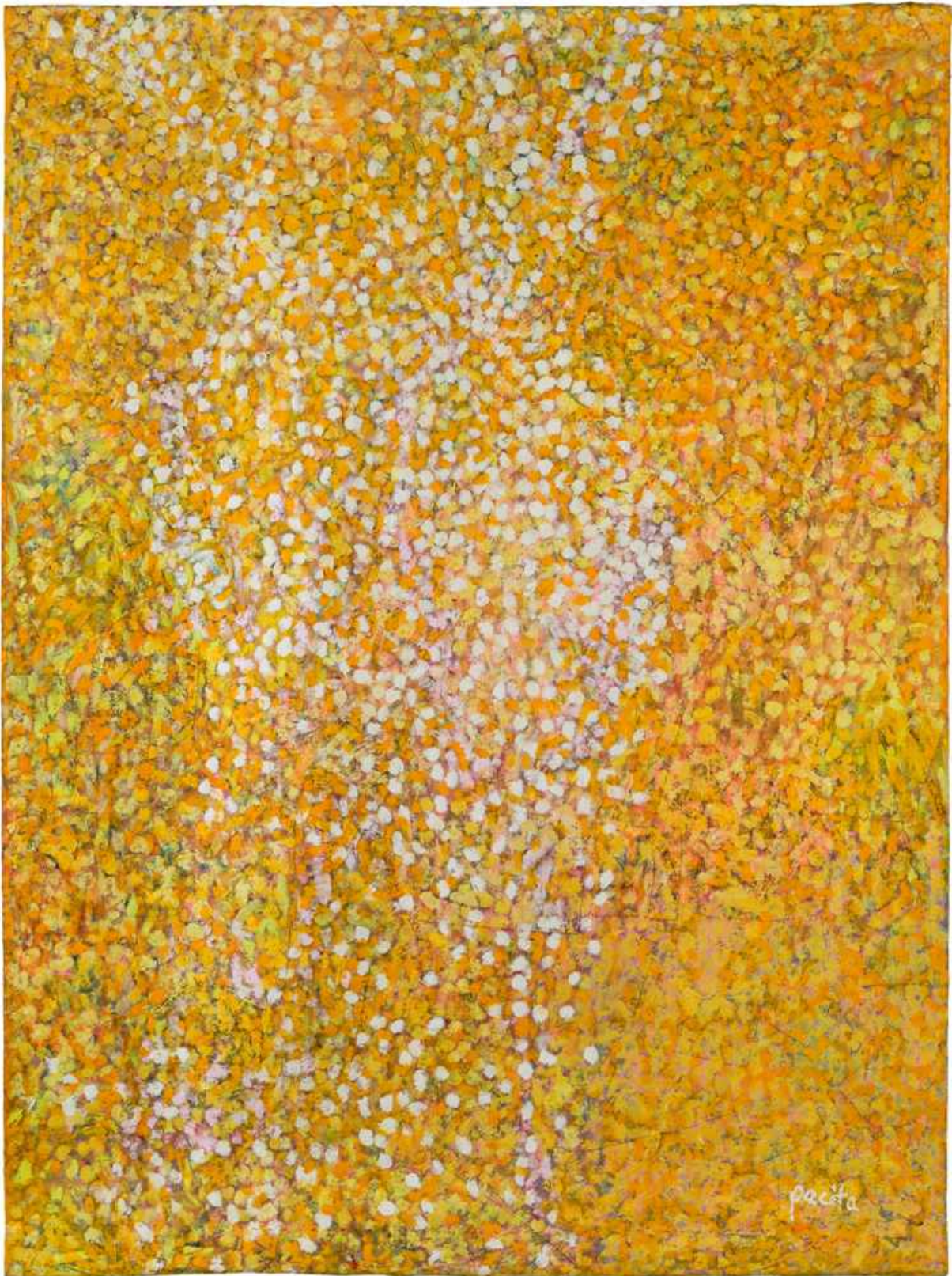
What her underwater scenes – most of which are even more massive mask-inspired pieces – put forward is her fearlessness. Due to the number of techniques she has applied and combined on these colourful views of nature, one realises that she does not hesitate to execute whatever approach enters her mind. She, however, sees to it that her portrayal of the sea respects its true beauty and that these views are meaningful to her.

The artist's *Puerto Gallera II*, for instance, accurately captures the rich and busy ecosystem found in that popular diving site, while her *My Fear of Night Diving: Assaulting the Deep Sea* speaks of the limits of her fondness for diving. What is more is in these two works, there is a strong correlation between Abad's emotions and her colour choices, a characteristic that is also found in her abstract trapunto paintings, which are found towards the end of the exhibition collection on the ground floor.



"Pacita Abad: A Million Things To Say", 12 April – 1 July 2018, installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila. Image courtesy MCAD.

Dated 2002 – a time when she was battling cancer – these **abstract works** capture a wide range of Abad's emotions that have to do with her race against time. In one work, her disappointment, pain and desire to explore and create art are effortlessly seen, and in another, her celebration of life and her acceptance of how her art would be the one to express the rest of her untold stories. Like her previous pieces, these non-figurative ones are not lacking in technique. Abad fought to create bold gestures on the canvas the way she had always done.



Pacita Abad, 'I Have One Million Things to Say', 2002, oil, painted muslin cloth stitched on canvas, 245 x 180 cm. Image courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and MCAD.

### **Still a Million Things More**

Due to the amount of work Abad has done in her lifetime, it is difficult to plot the development of her art and contributions of her practice in a single exhibition, and "Pacita Abad: A Million Things to Say" makes sure that the visitors are made aware of this aspect. In the museum's mezzanine, one discovers that Abad was more than an artist who immersed herself in other cultures, who learned and applied indigenous materials and techniques from her



travels, and who shared her personal curiosities and fears. She, too, discussed the lives of women she met, and paralleled these with her experience as an immigrant and a female artist. Through the technique she developed and her unwavering dedication to her art, she hoped that her voice, along with that of other women, would be noticed.



"Pacita Abad: A Million Things To Say", 12 April – 1 July 2018, installation view at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila.  
Image courtesy MCAD.

Throughout her career, Abad achieved many artistic feats, including being the first woman to receive the **TOYM Award** for the most outstanding young artist, participating in the 2nd Havana Biennial and the 3rd Asian Art Biennale, and winning the Metro Art Award in 1990 for a mural she did in Washington D.C. Metro Center subway station. She is also the first female to undertake a residency at the **Singapore Tyler Print Institute**. Today, many associate her with the painted Alkaff Bridge in Singapore, the last major project she did before her death.

Javelyn Ramos

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**"Pacita Abad: A Million Things To Say" is on view from 12 April to 1 July 2018 at Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) Manila, GF De La Salle College of Saint Benilde, School of Design and Arts (SDA) Building, Dominga St., Malate, 1004 Metro Manila, Philippines.**

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