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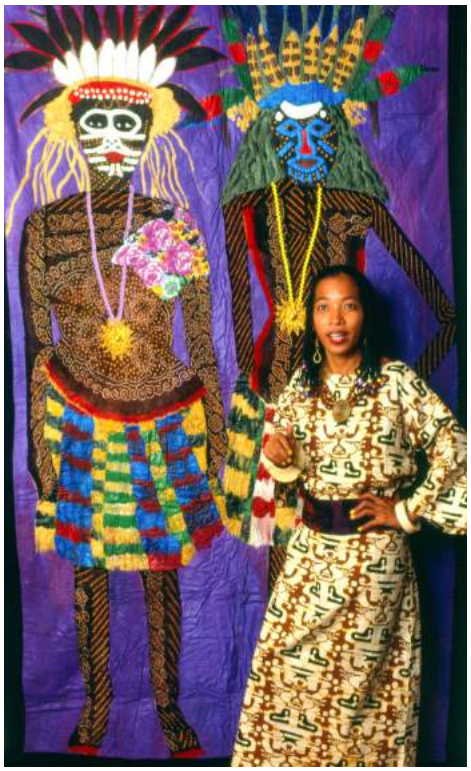
Pacita Abad: Stitched, Padded, and Layered Senses of Self

BY NICOLE M. NEPOMUCENO



Portrait of **PACITA ABAD**. Courtesy the Pacita Abad Art Estate.

Despite being the largest non-Chinese population in Hong Kong, and the providers of many essential forms of labor, the city's 200,000-plus Filipino residents are largely absent from its cultural ecosystem. Having landed in Hong Kong from the province of Bulacan at the cusp of adolescence, I grew up with an awareness of this invisibility. Entering the art world—one that is rich in discourses of migration but not in tangible, empathetic spaces for working-class migrants—only amplified this void. My navigation of this selectively inclusive

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ISSUE NOV 01, 2022
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ISSUE NOV 01, 2022
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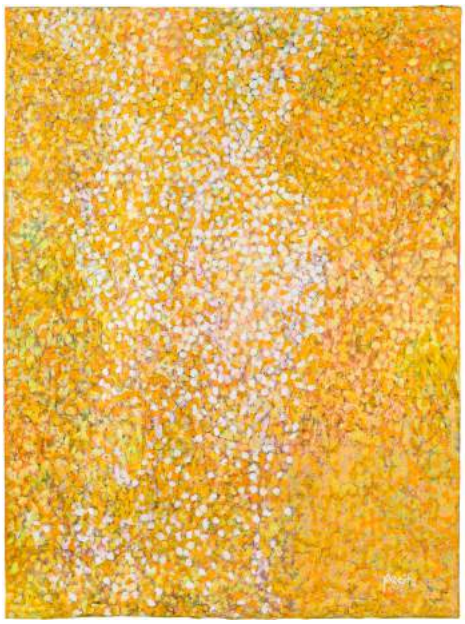
environment, as with being a minority in any space, has thus been punctuated with periods of loneliness. Therein lies the significance of representation: the comfort of companionship, the relief of being seen. Of the thousands of works in the collections and opening exhibitions at Hong Kong's M+, it was a bright canvas by Filipino itinerant artist Pacita Abad (1946–2004) that gave me great camaraderie, and at times during my employment at M+, even empowerment.



I Have One Million Things to Say, 2002, from the series Endless Blues, 1998-2003, oil, and painted muslin cloth stitched on canvas, 245 × 180

With its title speaking to the urgency of making oneself heard, I Have One Million Things to Say (2002) is a large oil painting consisting of short, animated strokes that overlap in a multitude of yellows, greens, and whites, culminating into a radiant blur. When viewed up close, one notices that the painting is heavily layered, not just in paint but in its textile construction. Abad stitched muslin cloth onto the canvas before applying paint to create an added thickness and dimension, a continuation of her textured approach to the two-dimensional medium most apparent in her quilted paintings known as trapuntos.

At the bottom-right-hand corner, her signature is written in white and in lower case—"pacita"—a name so familiar to the Filipino tongue, written so decisively as a marker of cultural production and ownership. Yet it was the painting's yellows that first drew me in. Yellows were the floral dusters my grandmother wore, it was cheese sorbetes stacked onto wafer cones, and, in the 1980s of my mother's youth, yellow was revolution. Flooding the streets of Metro Manila with crowds in yellow shirts, it was the People Power movement that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos's 14-year dictatorship in 1986. But the Yellow Revolution could not undo the damage caused by decades of unchecked greed and corruption; a struggling economy could not stem the Filipino exodus, it could not bring

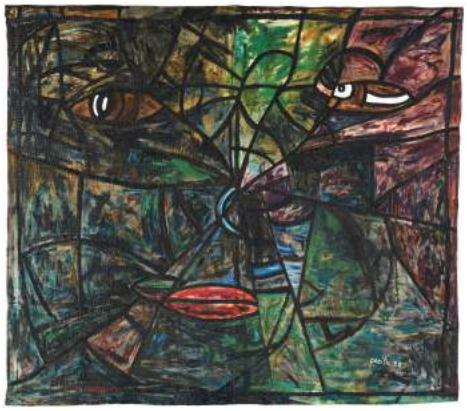
our families back. While many left as political exiles, others sojourned in search of better futures to other places from the Americas to the Middle East.

Positioned as an itinerant artist by critics and curators during and after her lifetime, Abad's odyssey across the globe was also provoked by the turbulence of Marcos's political reign. With both her parents as politicians who opposed the dictatorship, and Abad herself organizing student protests in Manila following Marcos's fraudulent second-term reelection, the Abad family home in the northern Batanes islands was machine-gunned by Marcos's associates in 1969. Her parents then urged Abad to finish her graduate law degree in Madrid, for which she left the next year. But what was planned to be a quick stopover in San Francisco on the way to Spain proved to be a pivotal turning point for Abad's trajectory: from law she turned to art, from future politician to painter—and she never reached Madrid. In 1973, she met her partner Jack Garrity and subsequently traveled with him throughout Asia, marking the beginning of the couple's peripatetic life driven mostly by Garrity's occupation as a development economist—which later implanted them in many different Asian countries over the years, from Bangladesh to Indonesia. It was upon their return from their year-long trip in 1973 that Abad decided to become an artist, and it was in the journeys that followed that she developed her practice of incorporating objects and techniques from her temporary residences.

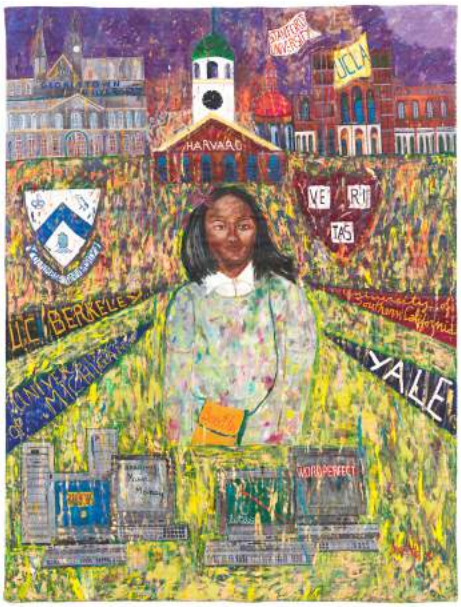
Flight to Freedom, 1980, acrylic and oil on canvas, 213 × 457 cm. Courtesy the Pacita Abad Art Estate and National Gallery Singapore.

Garrity's assignment in Bangladesh relocated the couple to Dhaka in 1978. Between 1978 and 1980, Abad traveled across the country, and then to Nepal, South Sudan and Sudan, Thailand, and Kenya, all the while painting their landscapes and scenes of daily life. Following her encounters with displaced Rohingya communities in Bangladesh in 1978 and Cambodian refugees in Thailand in 1979, Abad's paintings took a social-realist turn. Her visit to Thailand coincided with the outpouring of Cambodians into the country, prompted by the turbulent aftermath of Vietnam's invasion and ousting of the Khmer Rouge regime. Abad visited refugee camps and documented their dire circumstances. Paintings such as Watching and Waiting (1979), of Cambodian refugees standing by the barbed-wire fence of the camp, and Flight to Freedom (1980), where a large, crowded mass of men, women, and children is depicted journeying through a mountainous landscape, relay in equal weight the struggle and persistence of the Cambodian exodus to reach safety.

These early social-realist paintings were produced in parallel with the Filipino social realism movement of the late 1970s, which was induced by the Marcos era's compounding socioeconomic inequalities. But while their visible brushstrokes and themes of marginal realities echo qualities of Filipino social realism, Abad's paintings do not have the latter's nationalist undertones. This absence is likely because the refugees whom Abad portrays inherently exist outside of nation-building narratives: they are uprooted, stateless individuals who were failed by the nations that were supposed to protect them. In their documentation of social strife, albeit from a privileged position, these early paintings display Abad's continued interest in social welfare, and initiate her lifelong reflection on migrating bodies, fluid identities, and layered senses of self.



Torments of a Filipino overseas worker (1995), from the series Immigrant Experience, 1983-95, acrylic and oil on stitched and padded canvas, 260 × 300 cm.

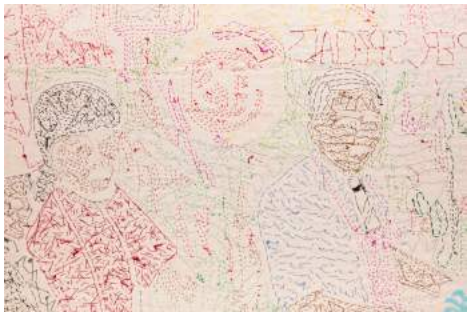


How Mali lost her accent (1991), from the series Immigrant Experience, 1983-95, acrylic and oil on stitched and padded canvas, 238 × 173 cm.

From these early forays would come her more artistically mature series, Immigrant Experience (1983–95), which likewise captures the internal and external conflicts induced by migration. But unlike the prior body of work, this series'

stitched and padded trapuntos possess a deeper self-reflection on Abad's own position as a Filipino immigrant in the United States—she and Garrity lived in Boston in early 1980s and, again, in Washington, DC, from 1986 until 1994, when they embarked to Jakarta—and the shared experiences with migrants elsewhere, especially the Filipino diaspora's. In particular, two paintings on stitched and padded canvases, How Mali lost her accent (1991), depicting a teenage girl born to parents from Southeast Asia surrounded by the buildings, flags, and crests of distinguished American universities, and Torments of a Filipino overseas worker (1995), a somber portrait of a face cracked into fragments, show the unquantifiable loss of self that often accompanies the process of assimilation.

Installation view of Korean Shopkeepers (1993), from the series Immigrant Experience, 1983-95, acrylic, oil, plastic buttons, sequins, beads, yarn, and painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 244 × 145 cm, at "Life in the Margins" at Spike Island, Bristol, 2020. Photo by Max McClure. Courtesy Spike Island.



Detail of Korean Shopkeepers (verso). Photo by Max McClure. Courtesy Spike Island, Bristol.

With her figurative paintings chronicling the migrant experience, how can we then understand Abad's later career shift to highly textured abstractions? Created in the final decades of her life before her passing in 2004, the series The Sky is the Limit (2000) and Endless Blues (1998–2003)—the latter of which includes I Have One Million Things to Say—became largely devoid of figures and are instead troves of form and materiality. How do we unravel these embellished surfaces and their relationships to the artistic practices of the places she visited? As an itinerant artist, can these abstractions point us toward a deeper understanding of our shifting identities in a post-colonial, globalized world?

Installation view of African Mask (Kongo) (1990), from the series Masks and Spirits, 1980-2000, acrylic, colored beads, shells, handwoven yarn, padded cloth, and painted canvas stitched on cloth, 264 × 175

Readings of Abad's works often begin with their colors but I find their textures an equally potent element, because it is in these layers that the artistic practices and visual cultures of peoples in Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, from which Abad drew extensive formal and technical influence, are most prominent. In the Immigrant Experience trapuntos, there are beads and buttons: spherical, conical, opaque, and transparent. Ribbons and yarn are sewn across the painted surfaces of masks from across Africa, Oceania, Asia, and the Americas in her long-running series Masks and Spirits (1980–2000); Rajasthani shisha embroidery informs the sequins and mirrors nestled onto the miniature canvases of The Sky is the Limit; and Indonesian batik are stitched onto the cloth in the Endless Blues works. Abad used the methods and materials that were accessible in her location, but as she amassed them, over time, she began employing objects and techniques derived from various communities simultaneously. In turn, her paintings became accumulations of the artistic labor of peoples historically excluded from the global art world, or at best categorized as secondary producers of "craft" compared to Euro-American "art." Each strata is informed by lasting textile practices which, though overlooked in formal institutions, thrive in homes, on bodies, and through memory. This is the art that clothes and comforts, that resides in the hands of our mothers, and that moves along with their practitioners, through and beyond arbitrary national borders and artistic categorizations. Art in developing countries, as with Abad's, is not static; it has a beating pulse and always in polychromatic flux.

Abad's unique trapunto technique facilitated such saturated syntheses of the many haptic textures of enduring fiber- and bead-art traditions, alongside the optical textures of 20th century modernist abstract art. She began to develop the technique over the decades beginning around 1980. Derived from the Italian for "to quilt," the term trapunto refers to a quilting method of layering cloth and cotton sheets to create an embossed effect, but Abad expanded the term to include surface ornamentation. "The initial idea," Abad shared during an interview at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC, in 1994, "was inspired by a friend of mine, Barbara Newman, a doll-maker who made life-sized dolls. I was

interested in the concept because I saw how it could add dimension to my painting." Abad's trapuntos thus acquire their tactility through two distinct ways: the artist's stuffing of the canvas itself and her vigorous application of found objects onto the surface. While the padded canvas provides a sense of depth akin to bas-relief sculptures, the sewn and pasted appliques onto the canvas pull the inherently two-dimensional picture plane outward.

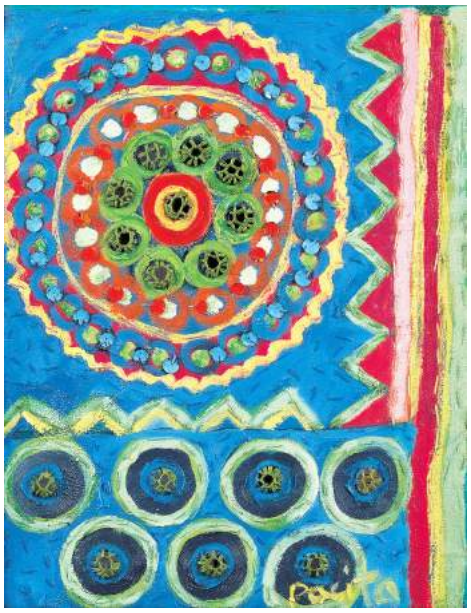
The first trapuntos are part of her Masks and Spirits series, where the ceremonial masks she encountered in Kenya, Papua New Guinea, and the Congo in the 1980s become vessels of experimentations on texture. For example, Masai Man (1982) references a wooden Maasai mask from the Nilotic ethnic group of warrior-herders in southern Kenya and northern Tanzania. The two-meter-tall trapunto depicts the mask's characteristic hooded eyelids and ajar mouth. Painted lines—swirling, spiraling, straight, diagonal—exude outward from the center of the padded canvas in a variation of patterns and colors. Their energy and textures are accentuated by appliques: plastic beads sewn onto its eyelids, ribbons stitched vertically across its cheeks, and button-sized mirrors embroidered into the interiors of its mouth. Abad did the same in the Immigrant Experience works, simultaneously quilting her canvases and embellishing them with appliques to create layers upon layers of different surface qualities that tease the borders of three-dimensionality—seducing our instinct to touch, feel, and caress.

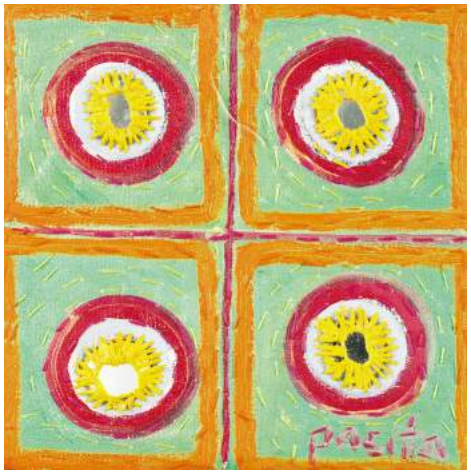
Her application of materials onto the surface also enables her paintings to emit optical effects that transcend those of pure color pigments. While paint absorbs light and reflects only a single color at a time, shiny surfaces such as beads, sequins, mirror embroidery, and rhinestones change their surface luminosity constantly. This adds gleam and shimmer to Abad's paintings and evokes the kinds of clothing adornment and jewelry common across South and West Asia. For Abad these references were a natural extension of her intuitive and empathic way of making art, as she said in the same 1994 interview at the National Museum of Women in the Arts: "I am not very conscious of crossing the line between art and craft. I do feel, however, that it is important that people can relate to my work."

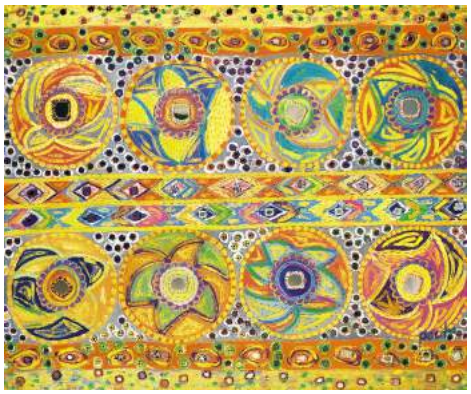
Abad had first come across shisha mirror embroidery in Rajasthan, India, in 1973 when she and Garrity hitchhiked from Istanbul to Southeast Asia. She recounted in the 2001 publication, The Sky is the Limit, from an exhibition at Artfolio gallery in Singapore and Finale Art Gallery in Manila: "India also had a major impact on my artistic development, as years later many of the Indian elements including embroidery, mirrors, buttons, beads and tie-dyeing were incorporated into my paintings." Twenty-seven years later, in 2000, Abad's return visit to Rajasthan reignited her interest in miniature paintings, Rabari textiles, and jewelry: " I began to think of

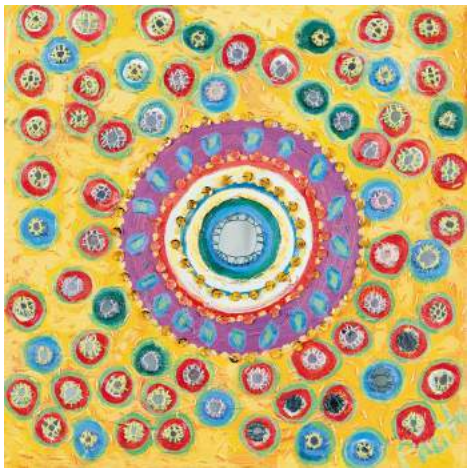
circles, magentas, reds, bright yellows, blue skies, gold and silver ornaments, stained glass, enameled bangles, expressive black eyes, coconut-oiled long black hair, colorful turbans, multi-colored saris and the exotic spices and scents. These overwhelmed me with a surge of inspiration to create a new series of paintings which I call 'The Sky is the Limit.'"

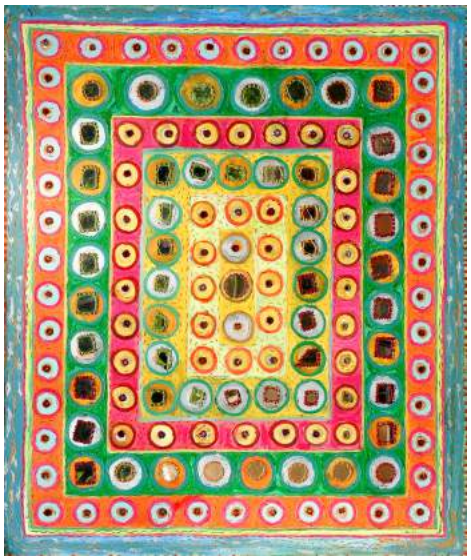
She produced more than 100 small canvases, some just 15 by 15 centimeters square and many of them embellished with coin-sized mirrors and buttons. The circular rows of supportive stitches that secure the mirrors onto the canvas echo those of Rabari garments, though Abad's stitches are looser and less refined. Unlike the full, symmetrical embroidered rings that hold mirrors onto Rabari textiles, Abad's stitches are dissimilarly sized and have wide gaps in between, revealing more of the mirrors' surface as well as the tactility of the threads themselves. Whether intentional or not, the haphazardly embroidered mirrors also begin to resemble blooming flowers that have sprouted from an abundant canvas.

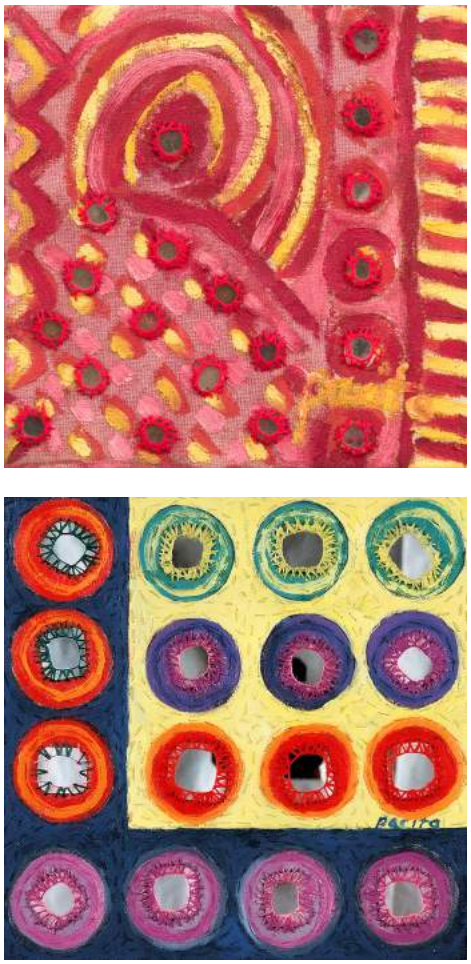










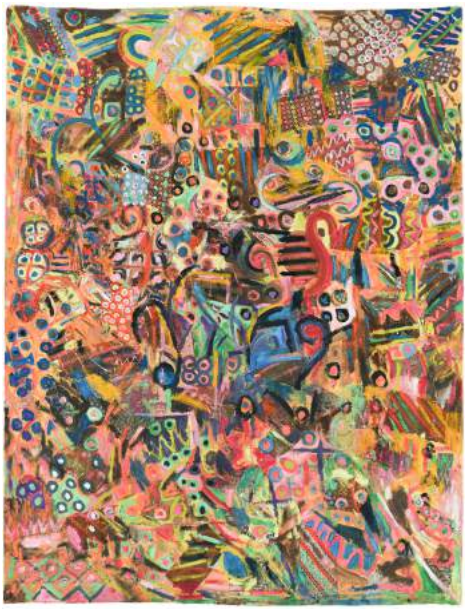


Top to bottom: Big blue sky, Saffron at Meherangarh, Life is a carousel, Staring at the sun, On a plate of rice, Hermes, Lobe Earrings, and Honey and Saffron, from the series The Sky is the Limit, 2000, oil, mirrors, sequins, and painted cloth stitched on canvas, dimensions variable.

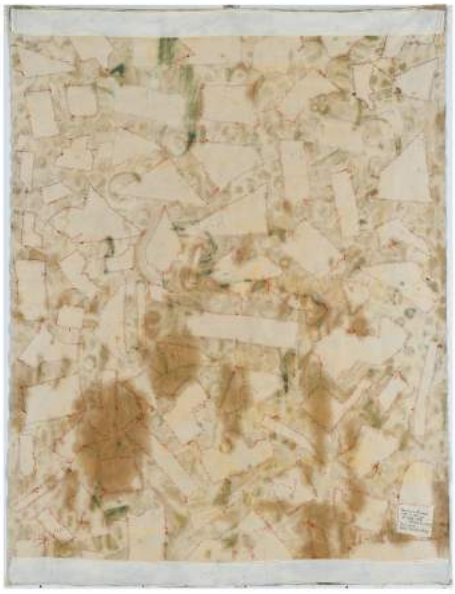
The titles of these miniatures emphasize the climates, flavors, and aromas of Rajasthan. Staring at the sun, where vibrant concentric circles of blue, white, and pink burst into small, shimmering mirror-orbs against a yellow background, evokes the heat of the state's warm desert climate. Big blue sky is a vivid cerulean composition embellished with mirrors that follow a circular pattern, like geometric fractals induced by bright lights. In its efflorescent mirror-work Saffron at Meherangarh Palace emanates the floral flavors of the deep red spice, while On a plate of rice, with its randomly-placed long running stitches and grain-like mirrors, reminds me of the beautifully textured Rajasthani Kabuli, a dish composed of vegetables, nuts, and dried fruits on a bed of basmati rice. Together these canvases are a homage to the people whose accumulated layers of cultural heritages and art provided Abad's with ample textures.

Abad's abstractions, like her figurative paintings, are maps of movement. But as her nephew, artist Pio Abad, shared when I asked how she was able to learn various artistic techniques: "She was never really just passing through. She was always very much embedded in the narratives of these makers and communities." His aunt's process, he explained, was a cycle of

learning, teaching, and collecting. She sought out makers who would know how to create certain materials or employ particular techniques, and in turn would offer to teach them how to oil paint. “It’s interesting because I learn so much from them and they learn from me—it’s sort of a collaborative thing,” the late artist said about a workshop she held in Mexico, where men brought cassette tapes as a substitute for thread. She was also a collector of fabric, which greatly informed her work.



Dancing in the dark (recto, 2002), from the series Endless Blues, 1998-2003, oil, and batik stitched on canvas, 240 × 180 cm.

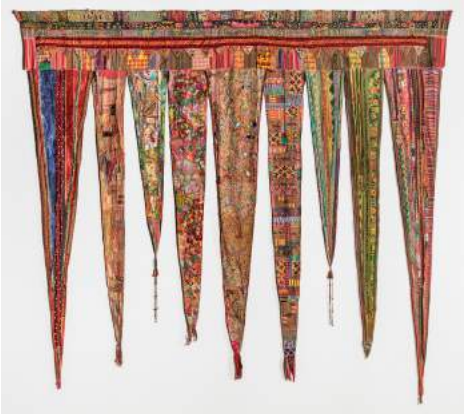


Dancing in the dark (verso, 2002), from the series Endless Blues, 1998-2003, oil, and batik stitched on canvas, 240 × 180 cm.

Her final series, Endless Blues, consisting of canvases more than two meters tall, most prominently displays her use of textiles from her collection. Abad first began Endless Blues when she still lived in Jakarta in 1995 and continued it in

Singapore from 2000 onward. As she was producing this series, the Twin Towers fell in New York City, followed by the United States's declaration of war in Afghanistan. A few months later in 2001, Abad was diagnosed with an advanced stage of lung cancer. As she explained in 2002: "Endless Blues are paintings that express the feelings I have had over the past two years, as one thing after another confronted me on both a personal and global level. During this period, I turned inward and spent a lot of time in my studio painting and listening to my favorite blues music." While the canvases in this series are no longer padded trapuntos, the Indonesian batik textiles she collected during her seven years living in Indonesia continued to provide layers of visual depth. A wax-resist dyeing method cultivated in Java, Batik has syncretic motifs that stem from Javanese animistic religion, elements from Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, as well as Indian, Chinese, Arabic, and European iconographies.

In works such as Dancing in the dark (2002), Abad stitched patches of batik onto the canvas and then painted over them. A closer inspection reveals that she followed, in parts, the batik's grid-like patterns—painting over them with checkerboard circles that go along the same direction. But soon these circles morph into scribbles and curves—until eventually they become bare, raw marks. I cannot help but speculate on Abad's process: that she began her painting by referencing the batik's intricate patterns and motifs in simplified markings, before expanding these forms into broader gestures that would then fill up the canvas. She ingests the batik and makes it her own without burying its essence. Symbolically, it is a clear example of how modern art often acquires an individual character by referencing art practices from the developing world; and metaphorically, it shows how we are culminations of the different knowledges and cultures we absorb.



100 years of freedom: from Batanes to Jolo, 1998, oil and acrylic; abaca, pineapple, jusi and banana fibers; Baguio ikat; Batanes cotton crochet; Ilocano cotton; Chinese silk and beads; Spanish silk; Ilongo cloth; Mindanao beads; and Zamboanga and Yakan handwoven cloth and sequins stitched on dyed cotton, 564 × 500 cm.

Her canvases carry small objects and forms from communities far from one another, yet they come together piece by piece in a single composition nonetheless uniquely reflective of its constituent parts. This echoes the inherently amalgamated

Filipino sense of identity, hailing from a collection of islands once governed by their own chieftains who traded heavily with Chinese merchants, colonized by Spain for over four centuries, and then by the United States in the following 50 years. Abad captures the nation's multiplicity most vividly in a wall hanging comprised of nine triangular flags put together, 100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo (1998), using abaca, pineapple, jusi, and banana fibers; ikat from Baguio; cotton crochet from Batanes; Ilocano cotton; Chinese and Spanish silks; Ilonggo cloth; Mindanao beads; and handwoven cloth from Zamboanga and the Yakan people of Sulu. Exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum in Manila during the country's centennial celebration for the end of Spanish colonialism in June 1998, the work highlights the plurality that exists within the nation beyond the cultural centrality of the Central Tagalog regions in Luzon. We, like Abad's works, are composites of times and places.

Returning to I Have One Million Things to Say, an abstract canvas void of figures: there I found representation. While in the beginning it was the familiarity of her name and our shared birth countries that had provided comfort, as I unraveled the layers in her works, I found deeper resonances through their embodiment of multitudes—that they are neither one place's or the other's but a collection of all the places she had been in her lifetime and where they will go in the future; that they are not fragments of disparate identities but fully formed compositions made up of rich layers. The title itself suggests an accumulation, a sense of fullness—of ideas, knowledge—and the urgency to share them. I found writing about Abad's practice was also riddled with urgency because it is so fluid, so ripe for disparate understandings unencumbered by specific formal or geographical art histories. In this way, Abad's work is liberating: it frees us from the constraints of identity politics, where we are defined, first and foremost, through our color and our origins. In a reading of Abad's abstractions, and her practice as a whole, that prioritizes texture over color, I hope to extend a realization: we are not just people of color. This is not our only defining factor. We are layered and textured, complicated and expansive—so much more multidimensional than what we are on the surface.

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