

## Coloring in the Margins: Pacita Abad

A retrospective in Minneapolis aims to give greater acclaim to an artist whose work expounded on the immigrant experience and challenged Western art practices.

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5 MIN READ

This article is part of our Museums special section about how art institutions are reaching out to new artists and attracting new audiences.

On a wintry March day in Minneapolis, a small group gathered underground to look at monumental and hyper-colored works of art. In the sprawling storage area beneath the Walker Art Center, Jack Garrity pulled one toward him, a towering piece by the artist Pacita Abad, his wife who died in 2004.

“This piece was our tablecloth,” he said. “We were always having parties, and I spilled my red wine.”

As guests fretted about the white brocade fabric at the couple’s Washington, D.C., apartment, Ms. Abad already had an idea. “She goes, ‘No problem. I’ll paint it,’” Mr. Garrity recalled.

The wine-stained cloth became “Baguio Fruit” (1981-83), a textile bounty swelling with guavas, bananas, mangos and more, referencing an area of the Philippines famous for its produce. The piece is one of Ms. Abad’s first trapuntos, a type of stuffed and quilted painting that the artist made her signature.



“Baguio Fruit” (1981-83). The piece is one of Ms. Abad’s first trapuntos. Pacita Abad Art Estate, photo by Rik Sferra

“Baguio Fruit” and dozens more trapuntos, among other works, are the subject of “Pacita Abad,” the first retrospective of the artist in the world. It brings together work spanning Ms. Abad’s 32-year career, reflecting the accumulated color of diasporic life. Ms. Abad was born and raised in the Philippines to a large politically active family — both parents served in the national congress while raising Ms. Abad and her 12 siblings. She moved to San Francisco in 1970, where she met Mr. Garrity, who became an economist for the World Bank. Spurred by his work, they would go on to live and travel in more than 60 countries.

Ms. Abad, who became a U.S. citizen in 1994, created more than 5,000 works of art, which were directly shaped by the couple’s nomadic existence. At the heart of her life’s work are the trapuntos, maximalist hanging textiles embroidered with mirrors from India, cowrie shells from Papua New Guinea, beaded fabric from Indonesia, buttons from the Philippines and other travel-gathered bricolage. She died at 58 from cancer while creating artworks, including a multicolored “art bridge,” in Singapore.

As Mr. Garrity and the show’s curators explained, Ms. Abad used her work to expound on the immigrant experience and skewer colonial paradigms and Western art practices, whether by paying homage to Cambodian refugees or fully committing to a medium that the art world dismissed as “primitive” or “craft.”

“She was much like a foreign correspondent in a way, telling people, this is what’s happening in these places,” Mr. Garrity said. She called hers a “life in the margins.”

Ms. Abad would think the retrospective is “long overdue,” Mr. Garrity said with a laugh. It’s a sentiment shared by many. In interviews, and in the show’s catalog, those who knew the artist called her “visionary,” “ahead of her time” and a transnational artist decades before that was a buzzy designation.

Mr. Garrity and his wife, Kristi Garrity, have been tending to Ms. Abad’s estate, making her life’s work and story readily accessible and visible online, and reaching out to museums and curators for almost 20 years to find the artist a larger audience. While Ms. Abad’s work has been collected by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and featured in solo shows at venues such as the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., (in 1994) and the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila (in 2018), they say the scope has always been limited.

Then Victoria Sung, the Walker associate curator of visual arts, reached out.

“I just felt like she was an artist who had been so underrecognized and overlooked for so many years,” said Ms. Sung, the show’s curator.

In a telephone conversation from Berkeley, where she recently became a senior curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Ms. Sung said she came across Ms. Abad’s works in the Walker archives from the ’90s exhibition “Asia/America” that toured through the Minneapolis museum. Discovering Ms. Abad for the first time puzzled Sung.



“Anilao at Its Best” (1986). Pacita Abad Art Estate

“One of the central questions I grappled with was how an artist like Pacita — who was remarkably prolific and whose works have such a robust physical presence — was at once visible and invisible,” Ms. Sung said. “She was at the center of her communities, artistic and otherwise, but, like so many other women artists of color, was relegated to the margins when it came to mainstream art spaces and art histories.”

She added: “It’s only now that Pacita’s work is being recovered in the context of American art histories, but also Philippine, Southeast Asian and transnational art histories.”

Ms. Sung suggested a few explanations for the delay: In addition to being a woman and a woman of color, she was considered a craft artist operating on the fringes of the art scene. Ms. Sung pointed to the trend in the ‘80s and ‘90s toward conceptual, sleek minimalism popular in Western art centers like New York and Los Angeles. Ms. Abad’s aesthetic, she said, was the opposite of what “would have been defined as good taste.”

“She’s intentionally using this female, non-Western form of labor that’s historically been marginalized as craft,” Ms. Sung said. “With her trapunto paintings, she’s essentially collapsing the boundaries between painting and quilting.”



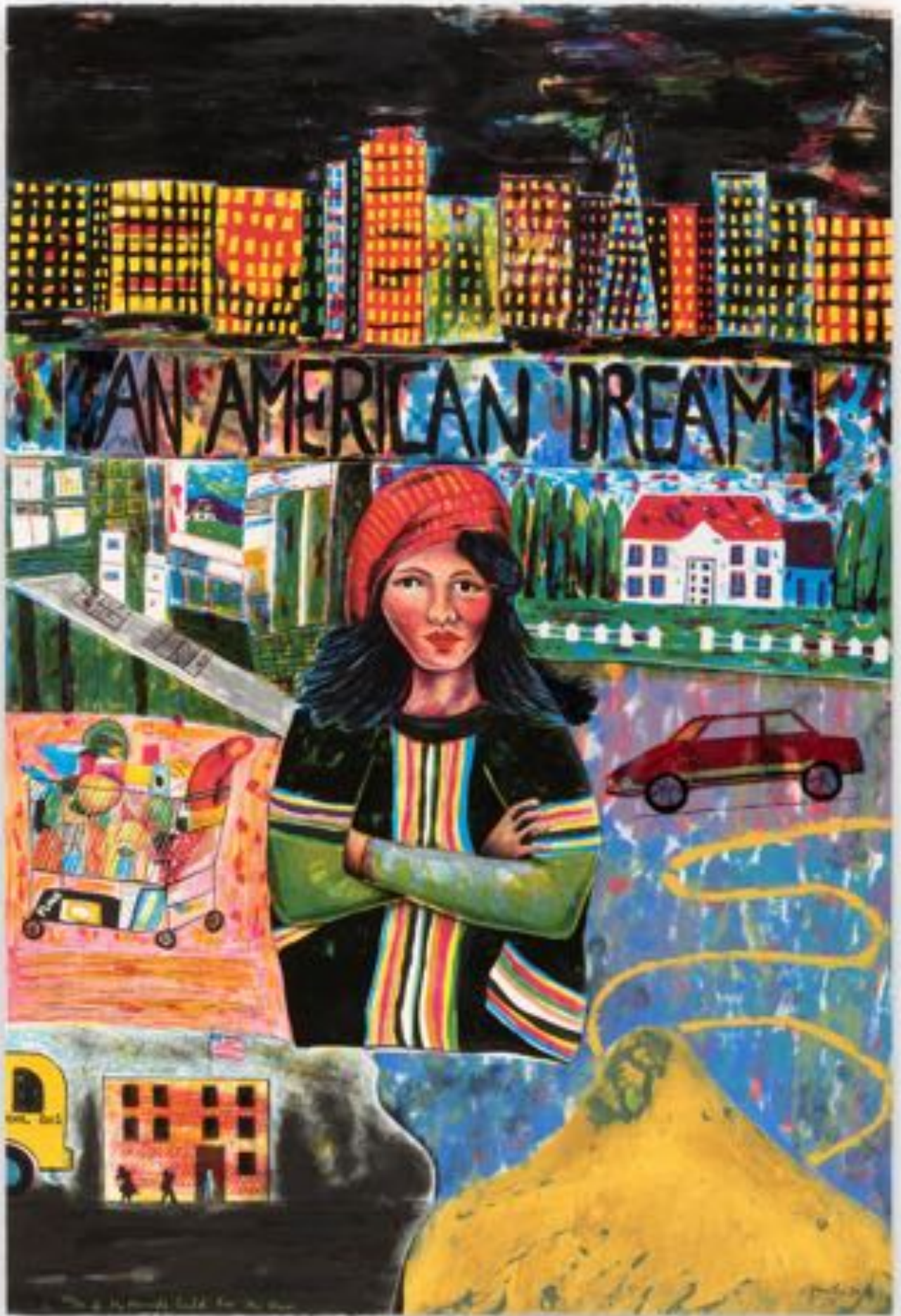
Works by Ms. Abad in a 2018 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila. Pacita Abad Art Estate; photo by Pioneer Studios

Perhaps the exhibition's most impressive feat is reinstalling "Masks from Six Continents." The 50-foot, six-part mural was originally a public commission on view from 1990 to 1993 at Metro Center in Washington, D.C. This will be the first time in more than 30 years that the six trapuntos will hang together for public viewing.

Each quilted mask represents one of the six "habitable" continents. As always with Ms. Abad, Ms. Sung said, the titles are intentional and pointed. Here, South America is "Mayan Mask" and North America is "Hopi Mask," referring to specific Indigenous peoples. Europe is the outlier, however, named simply "European Mask." Colonialism and the Western art canon flattened non-Western cultures into monoliths, Ms. Sung said.

"To me, that reads as this re-enactment of European Modernism's kind of appropriation of African art forms," she said, referring to the likes of Pablo Picasso and Constantin Brancusi, "and basically turning it on its head, what they were doing, and doing it back."

Ms. Abad's nephew Pio Abad, an artist based in London, said his aunt's trapuntos archived the world.



Ms. Sung said the Walker exhibition would not have been possible if not for Pio Abad, who is curator of the Pacita Abad Estate, and was also born and raised in the Philippines. With Joselina Cruz, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila, Pio Abad mounted an exhibition there of his aunt's career in 2018. It sparked a resurgence, Ms. Sung said.

"She would think it's fabulous," Pio Abad said.

"Pacita Abad" runs through Sept. 3 at the Walker Art Center and then will travel to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.