

STAGE & ARTS

Filipina American artist Pacita Abad finally gets her due at the Walker Art Center

After self-exile from the Philippines and leaving law behind, Abad made a name for herself in art

By **Alicia Eler** Star Tribune | APRIL 18, 2023 — 5:05AM

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COLLECTION OF TATE MODERN. COURTESY OF THE PACITA ABAD ART ESTATE.

 Gallery: Pacita Abad, "European Mask," 1990. Acrylic, silkscreen and thread on canvas. 102 5/8 x17 15/16 in.

Inside a pink-painted gallery at the Walker Art Center, renderings of masks in an abundance of colors seem to watch you. They are depicted on top of hanging, large-scale trapuntos, quilted paintings made by stitching and stuffing canvases rather than stretching them over wooden frames.

The stairs leading to Filipina American artist Pacita Abad's first-ever survey at the Walker Art Center are covered in yellow and orange floral patterning. Organized in collaboration with Abad's estate, the exhibition showcases more than 100 works of her art, most of which have never been seen in

"Every gallery we painted a different color, and that's specifically because Pacita abhorred white walls," Curator Victoria Sung said. "In Pacita and [her husband] Jack's homes, you'll see every wall was painted bright red, purple, dark green ... and in that spirit we wanted to infuse the galleries with color."

The exhibition begins with some of her first drawings, made in the late 1970s. She called herself a "late bloomer." One of the early paintings is "Fish All Day," 1976.

"When I first went to their house in the Philippines, we ate fish for three weeks straight," said her widower, Jack Garrity. "So she made this for me."

Abad, who had works in more than 200 exhibitions during her 32-year career, now is finally getting her due.

"Creative women of color are working all over the world and are not merely minority figures within the narrow confines of the art world," [artist Faith Ringgold](#) wrote about Abad in 2003. "The tide is turning ... that day, thank heavens, is definitely coming, so let's all get ready."

In this rich survey, Abad deals with the immigrant experience, refugee crisis, masks and spirits, as well as abstraction, fashion and public art filled with color.

World traveler

Abad was born in Basco Batanes, the northernmost island province of the Philippines, in 1946. Her parents were both in politics. After she led a student demonstration against the Marcos dictatorship in the late 1960s, she left the Philippines in self-exile. In 1970, she landed in San Francisco, staying with an aunt, and decided to finish her law degree there. The United States was in the midst of countercultural movements. A few years later, she met her future partner Jack at a conference in Monterey, Calif.

They hitchhiked the world, and she discovered various textile and jewelry making traditions from Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Kenya, Singapore, Indonesia and Sudan. These fueled her creative practice, and when they returned to America in 1976, she started taking painting classes.

In one of her earliest trapunto paintings, "[Masai Man](#)," 1982, she took inspiration from a mask she saw in Kenya. Masks remained a consistent theme in her work, as did social realist paintings of immigrant and refugee experiences. Most of her subjects have brown skin, and she centered the stories on immigrants of color.

In "Caught at the Border," 1991, she portrays a man behind bars. In "[I Thought the Streets Were Paved With Gold](#)," 1991, we see snapshots of various immigrants of color, from a Filipina nurse to a man wearing an L.A. Dodgers cap.

"Something that is really close to me is that there is a Filipina nurse, and my mom came from a whole family of nurses. It's something we never thought critically about, why there are so many Filipina nurses," Curatorial Fellow Matthew Villar Miranda said. "It's because of U.S. colonialization, there was a ready-made English-speaking underclass that was already servicing the need for nurses during the American war periods."

The show ends with abundantly colorful abstract works and an entire gallery dedicated to underwater worlds.

For her last work, while undergoing daily radiation therapy, she worked with a team to paint the [Alkaff Bridge over the Singapore River](#). There were 55 colors and 2,300 circles on it, and it was finished on Jan. 29, 2004. In December of that year, she died after a three-year battle with lung cancer.

"I think for her, art was in some ways also a lifeline — it was the thing that kept her going even till the very end," Sung said. "[While working on the bridge], her doctor told her not to climb any ladders, because she was quite frail. But then she sends him a photo of her like, being hoisted up into the air on ropes. That was her spirit."

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Pacita Abad

When: Ends Sept. 3.

Where: Walker Art Center, 725 Vineland Place, Mpls.

Hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wed., Fri.-Sun.; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Thu.

Cost: \$2-\$15, free for members and ages 18 & under.

Info: walkerart.org or 612-375-7600.

Alicia Eler is the Star Tribune's visual art reporter and critic, and author of the book "The Selfie Generation. | Pronouns: she/they "

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