

LIFE & WORK IDEAS ICONS

Pacita Abad's Art of Excess

The Philippine-born artist made big, joyful, multicolored works that broke down barriers between painting and quilting

By J.S. Marcus

April 7, 2023 1:57 pm ET



Artist Pacita Abad with her work 'Ati-Atihan' (1983). PACITA ABAD ART ESTATE

A peripatetic life and a more-is-more sensibility were the key ingredients in the career of textile artist Pacita Abad, whose monumental artworks broke down barriers between painting and quilting. With a steadily rising reputation in her native Southeast Asia, where museums collect her work, she is now receiving her first major retrospective, nearly two decades after she died of cancer at age 58 in 2004.

“Pacita Abad” opens April 15 at Minneapolis’s Walker Art Center, before traveling to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, New York’s MoMA PS1 and Toronto’s Art Gallery of Ontario. The show features around 100 works and related objects, from mural-size padded-canvas paintings to prankish, joyous portraits of the artist, posing in multicolored costumes in front of her own richly embroidered textile works.

Abad came from a family of politicians in Batanes, a remote archipelago in the northern Philippines. Her “hybrid of cultural influences,” says exhibition curator Victoria Sung, reflected a vast range of experiences and interests, from the Roman Catholicism of her youth to a later interest in textile traditions of Pakistan and Panama. A unifying factor, suggests Ms. Sung, was what Filipinos call “borloloy,” a Tagalog word that means excess ornamentation and can suggest anything from gaudy purses to garish street signs.

This visual predilection is on view in Abad’s early textile work “Baguio Fruit” (1981-83), a stained tablecloth that the artist converted into an artwork by painting it with fruit cornucopias outlined in hand stitching. The same spirit of excess can be seen in more mature works on display, such as “Subali” (1983/1990), which depicts a figure based on a Javanese shadow puppet. Measuring over 8 feet high, the work combines acrylic and oil paints applied to stitched and padded canvas, decorated with gold cotton, batik cloth, sequins and ribbons.



Pacita Abad, 'Baguio Fruit' (1981-83). PHOTO: PACITA ABAD ART ESTATE/WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS/RIK SFERRA (PHOTO)

A largely self-taught artist, Abad first visited the U.S. in 1970 while on her way to study law in Spain. A few years later, Ms. Sung says, she had a creative awakening while hitchhiking from Turkey to the Philippines. Traveling with the man who would later become her husband, economist Jack Garrity, she started embroidering their clothes. Within a decade, she had embarked on what she called “trapunto” works, adapting a term for a traditional style of Italian quilting, in which she conflated painting with quilt-making.

This technique allowed Abad to produce fully realized, highly mobile paintings that she and Mr. Garrity liked to transport in enormous duffel bags. The show will make the most of this frameless format by suspending trapuntos from gallery ceilings, allowing visitors to view the thread-crossed reverse sides of the works.

One gallery in “Pacita Abad” is devoted to figurative depictions of immigrant and refugee experiences. In later paintings she used more abstract imagery to address social issues, as in “The Sky is Falling, the Sky is Falling” (1998), which drew on her firsthand experience of the breakdown of civil order in Indonesia. An avid scuba diver, Abad also created marine-inspired art, such as “Hundred Islands” (1989), a nearly 8-foot-long work made with glitter, gold thread, buttons, lace and sequins on stitched and padded painted canvas.

The exhibition includes some highly unusual works, such as “Lost in New York” (1992), an oversize, stencil-like steel screen that served as the front door for Abad’s Washington, D.C. home. In 1981’s “Merengue Mask I” the artist converted a printing plate into a work of art in its own right, through the addition of paper, cloth and thread.

Abad is an auction mainstay in Hong Kong, where both Sotheby’s and Christie’s have sold her work.

Near the end of her life, Abad transformed Singapore’s Alkaff Bridge, a boat-shaped pedestrian bridge, by fancifully painting it in shades of pink, green and blue. Inaugurated in 2004, months before Abad died, the bridge project is recalled in the exhibition with photos and studies.

Singapore is home to a number of Abad collectors, says Michelle Yaw, a Sotheby’s specialist based there, in part because “it is something that can be stored or displayed in our climate.” Abad is also an auction mainstay in Hong Kong, where both Sotheby’s and Christie’s have sold her work.

Manila’s León Gallery set an auction record for the artist in June 2022, when a 1982 oil-on-canvas painting of a Batanes scene sold for \$176,000 to a local collector, far overshooting the presale estimate of \$5,600. The record price for an Abad textile work was set at a Christie’s Hong Kong sale in 2018, when “Orange Punch,” an abstract painting on stitched canvas, sold for just under \$90,000. Ms. Yaw says that the market for Abad’s works “is still developing” but that the new North American show “could mean a resurgence.”