

WALKER



## Unapologetically Pacita



Pacita Abad with *Puerto Galera I* (1983) in her Manila home, 1985. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate. Photo: Wig Tysmans.

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Born into a political family on the remote island province of Batanes in the northern Philippines, Abad developed a nonconformist flair in early adulthood. When her father, Jorge Abad, lost a reelection campaign to the Philippine House of Representatives against a pro-dictator opponent because of election fraud, Pacita donned a mini skirt and organized a student demonstration. The event was so impactful, it led to her meeting with the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, himself. Capturing significant media attention and sparking demonstrations around the country, this act of resistance led to the Philippines's Commission on Elections and the Supreme Court overturning the election in her father's favor.



Pacita Abad (seated, with handbag) and student demonstrators meeting with President Ferdinand Marcos (far right, seated at desk) after marching to Malacañang Palace, 1969. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate.

This marked the beginning of Abad's commitment to social causes. Only a few months later, she participated with a group of activists in protesting rampant political corruption tied to the rise of the Marcos regime. However, less than a year later Abad was urged to relocate to San Francisco as threats on her life increased. But she did not go quietly, instead becoming a vocal opponent of the 14-year dictatorship that instituted martial law and violently suppressed freedom of speech, press, and assembly in the Philippines.



Pacita Abad in her Bangkok studio, 1979, with the painting *Floating Market* (1978) in the background, at right. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate.

Abad's refusal to conform and her experiences across cultures synthesized into her art making. Her artwork drew from the traditions she lovingly absorbed during travels in over 60 countries, including Sudan, Thailand, Bangladesh, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Papua New Guinea. Abad created vibrant tactile, three-dimensional, quilted canvases—*trapunto* paintings, she called them—with maximalist color and flair to mesmerize the senses. Just like the artist who made them, these artworks refused to speak with a soft voice while incorporating elements of her social activism.



During a trip to Sri Lanka in 1984, Abad encountered traditional masks used for healing ceremonies. These masks portrayed various diseases as demons. In her painting *Marcos and His Cronies*, Abad transposed the masked demons onto the Philippine dictator and his cabinet. Surrounded by 18 generals, Marcos is depicted in the center, devouring the bodies of the Philippine people. Abad's artwork also embraced an unabashed flair to create resistance in times of violent political repression. Through the seemingly harmless use of dolls, fabric, and costume jewelry, Abad playfully constructed one of the boldest dissident statements about one of the most tumultuous periods in Philippine history.



Pacita Abad (center) celebrating her Ten Outstanding Young Men Award with family and friends in Manila, 1984. To her right is her mother, Aurora; to her left, Jack Garrity and her brother Jun. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate.

Only a year later, Abad would become the first woman to win the Ten Outstanding Young Men (TOYM) of the Philippines Award to an uproar of controversy in the Manila Press, which *Manila Times* critic Isagani R. Cruz claimed made her “a household word for the wrong reason.” Abad’s refusal to conform was on full display once again when she arrived at the opening of her 1986 exhibition *Assaulting the Deep Sea* in a bathing suit, swim fins, and a scuba tank. One shocked reviewer wrote in the *Philippine Express* that the artist had “scandalized” the public.



Pacita Abad in scuba gear at the opening of her exhibition *Assaulting the Deep* at the Ayala Museum, Makati, Philippines, 1986. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate. Photo: Wig Tysmans.

Abad's refusal to conform was on full display once again when she arrived at the opening of her 1986 exhibition *Assaulting the Deep Sea* in a bathing suit, swim fins, and a scuba tank. This caused the *Philippine Expresso* to write that the artist had "terrorized" and "scandalized" the public.



When Abad won the public art commission for Metro Center in Washington, D.C., in 1991, she decided, in homage to the diversity of the U.S. capital, to create *Masks from Six Continents*. Comprised of six *trapunto* paintings larger than 50 feet each, *Masks from Six Continents* drew from textiles of the world's six most populous continents. Inspired by the traditions of the Hopi peoples in North America and the Mayans of South America, *Masks from Six Continents* highlighted the historically unseen peoples throughout the globe.

Abad's interest in championing those too-often overlooked in society continued during a trip to New York's Ellis Island. There she noted how immigrants from primarily Western and Eastern Europe had the grandiose monument of Lady Liberty dedicated to their arrival, but nothing existed to mark the migrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. This led to the creation of her work *L.A. Liberty* in 1992, where Abad replaced the archetypal image of the Statue of Liberty with a brown-skinned woman proudly emitting rays of polychrome.



Pacita Abad, *L.A. Liberty*, 1992. View of the exhibition *Life in the Margins*, Spike Island, Bristol, 2020. Courtesy the Pacita Abad Art Estate. Photo: Max McClure.

*L.A. Liberty* was the first in Abad's Immigrant Experience series, which portray the realities of migrants of color, topics still resonating decades after Abad explored them. This series would go on to include *Korean Shopkeepers* examining the so-called "L.A. Riots" of 1992, a historical flash point between Black, Latinx, and Korean American communities in Los Angeles. In *Haitians Waiting at Guantanamo Bay*, Abad depicted the plight of Haitians fleeing poverty, persecution, and discrimination, while *Caught at the Border* depicts a youth, forlornly peering from behind a wire barricade at the US and Mexico border.

Although Abad's work continuously tackled vital topics using rigorous techniques, the press often fixated on her appearance and joie de vivre. For instance, when Abad arrived at her 1991 exhibition at the Ayala Museum in the Philippines capital, a critic for *Manila Chronicle* wrote, "She wore black high-heeled pumps, a black backless dress with a mini tutu-like skirt and a hand-painted bodice. . ." Abad's flamboyance stood starkly in the face of patriarchal and sexist ideas of what femininity can be. Instead of letting misogynistic ideas discount flair as superficial and "unserious," Abad employed it in her life and art to challenge inequities in society, whether in her native Philippines or in America.



Abad once playfully remarked in a response to *Malaya* newspaper, “I prefer the Third World. Give me Haiti over Paris anytime.” Abad dared to be visible, in her bathing suit and scuba gear, a contrarian face to a presumed Eurocentricity. With her unbridled exuberance, Abad spoke truth to power not through brute strength, but via unapologetic expression in artwork and style. ■





Portrait of Pacita Abad taken during the opening of *At Home and Abroad: 20 Contemporary Filipino Artists*, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1998. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate.

*Discover more about this one-of-a-kind artist in the exhibition Pacita Abad. On view at the Walker Art Center through September 3rd, 2023. Want to bring Pacita home? Grab an exhibition catalogue, poster, or even a re-creation of an original t-shirt by Abad at the Walker Shop.*

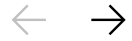
#### ENDNOTES

1. *Textile Collages: Pacita Abad's Painted Textiles*. Pacita Abad Art Estate, [https://issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/painted\\_textile\\_collages\\_by\\_jkgarri?fr=sNjVIMTE0OTg3NDg](https://issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/painted_textile_collages_by_jkgarri?fr=sNjVIMTE0OTg3NDg), 18. ↩
2. *Pacita Abad*, Victoria Sung, ed., exh catalog (Walker Art Center: Minneapolis, 2023), p. 28. ↩

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*Pacita Abad*



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