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PRINT FEBRUARY 2022



View of “Pacita Abad,” 2021–22. From left: *Filipinas in Hong Kong, 1995*; *The Village Where I Came From, 1991*. Photo: Daniela Baptista.

Pacita Abad

JAMEEL ARTS CENTRE

Born on the Philippine island of Batan in 1946, Pacita Abad was forced to flee Manila in 1970 owing to her efforts against the Marcos regime. Her peripatetic life saw her living and working in more than fifty countries on six continents, including Afghanistan, Cambodia, Guatemala, Mali, and Sudan; she died of cancer in Singapore in 2004. Each place informed her work: through its materials and traditional craft techniques and through its particular ways of subjugating and marginalizing women. Particularly influential were the Tibetan thangkas, or sacred scroll paintings, she encountered in Nepal—portable works for an itinerant, constantly migrant practice. Lacking access to conventional art supplies, she began experimenting with the burlap sacks used for refugee food relief. The result was entirely her own: large tactile paintings, puffily quilted and worked over with buttons, shells, and other materials in the signature style she dubbed “trapunto painting,” after the Italian word for quilting.

Abad’s global influences are writ large in the current exhibition, “I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold,” curated by Nora Razian—her politics, not so much. For an artist who made thousands of works in her life, often shown en masse, the tight selection is welcome. The show unfurls over three large galleries, each containing a few outsize works suspended from the ceiling, plus an archival display. The first room speaks to the artist’s early interest in masks and spirituality, with semifigurative cowrie- and bead-studded works inspired by Papuan and Kongo artifacts that are as beautiful from the back as from the front. While Abad’s oeuvre draws primarily from marginalized regions of the world—and it’s worth noting that she is able to bypass the censure of cultural appropriation that a white artist would face—works such as *European Mask*, 1990, which confront the dangers of flattening and essentializing cultural difference, are notably absent from this show.

The second gallery features the abstract works Abad made in great numbers, with an emphasis on those inspired by Yemeni doors. They distill a panoply of global craft and patterning techniques: The stained glass–like *Spider’s Web*, 1985, includes Korean ink-brush techniques; *Life in the Margins*, 2002, incorporates Indonesian textiles. Most exciting, however, is a third gallery with containing monumental works crowded with people, plants, and a profusion of signage that capture the richness of the immigrant experience. They depict settings both rural, as in the lush foliage and agricultural simplicity of *The Village Where I Came From*, 1991, and urban, as in *I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold*, 1991, where people of color are seen working in service jobs such as childcare, nursing, and laundry. Especially stunning is the bustling cityscape *Filipinas in Hong Kong*, 1995, featuring the kind of domestic labor that is as prevalent and invisible in the Gulf as it is there.

One might feel a twinge of cynicism at seeing this colorful oeuvre, suffused with a saturated multiculti joy, on view in Dubai, which prides itself on having two hundred nationalities and is currently hosting the World Expo. It’s the emirate’s first major show of an artist from the Philippines, whose denizens make up a significant chunk of the population. All the boxes are checked; everything clicks into place here—maybe a little too much so. One could easily, if ungenerously, imagine an Abad x Anthropologie collab.

In the archival area, vitrines display assorted objects from Abad’s travels: Rajasthani mirrored embroidery, batik textiles, Aboriginal clapsticks. One vitrine contains exhibition announcements and press clippings that hint at how the artist’s work was framed in the West, with exhibition titles such as “Scenes from the Upper Nile—Fantasies of the Sudan” or “Oriental Abstractions.” Also included is the August 1985 issue of the Manila periodical *San Juan* with Abad on the cover and the headline *Pacita Abad: Outstanding Young Man?* in

reference to the controversy over her becoming the first woman to win a prestigious Philippine art award for “outstanding young men.” A wall is devoted to a blown-up image of Abad’s maximalist house, all dark wood, trapunto, and busy textiles. Nearby, a grainy 1990s documentary plays on a small monitor. I watch the interviewer ask Abad, “What stories interest you?” She answers simply, “People like us.”

— Rahel Aima

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