

Spike Island, 133 Cumberland Rd, Bristol BS1 6UX

## Pacita Abad: Life in the Margins



**Artist :** Pacita Abad

**Title :** Life in the Margins (2020) Installation view, Spike Island, Bristol

**Website :** <https://www.spikeisland.org.uk/programme/exhibitions/pacita-abad/>

**Credit :** Works courtesy the Pacita Abad Art Estate. Photograph by Max McClure

Pacita Abad: Life in the Margins

Spike Island

18 January - 5 April 2020

Review by Lizzie Lloyd

The riot of full-bodied exuberance currently filling the spaces of Spike Island sits in welcome contrast to this colourless English January. Dividing up the space of the gallery, hang twenty or so large quilted canvases that froth with vivid colour, dense paintwork, and detailed needlework by Filipina-American, Pacita Abad (1946–2004).

The quilted nature of these paintings lends them sculptural weight and structure, without the physical mass of a frame. It allows them to retain their sense of spontaneity, which might otherwise be smothered by the degree of detail that Abad throws at them. Over her loosely applied paintwork sit lines of running stitch, partially embroidered fruit, flowers and palm trees, and strawberries made from bunches of strawberry-sized papier mâché beads. Other objects find their way into her surfaces too: glitter, plastic beads, shells, earrings, tiny mirrors, and even a large painter-and-decorator's brush. Sometimes these are used to represent what they are – the buttons of a coat, for example. At others, little bubble gum pink buttons accentuate a tree in bloom in 'In the Village where I came from' (1991). The paintings sing with the time and energy of their making, built up through layers of drawing, painting, stuffing, sewing and embellishing. They leave little space for distanced viewing and little opportunity to orientate yourself either; there is always some new painterly or textural detail vying for your attention. Quieter moments only really exist on the paintings' backsides where the 'wrong' side of the stitches show up like multi-coloured spider webs against a plain canvas background.

Cultural assimilation is key to these material assemblages. Made between 1983 and 2002, many were developed during extensive periods in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. As a result, the settings of Abad's paintings switch from, an unspecified American city, to a scene of Korean market traders, to a Filipino village. She doesn't present these through the superficial or voyeuristic gaze of a tourist, but injects them with a spirit of empathy, openness and possibility of the not-yet-familiar. The range of cultural markers – both textual and pictorial – in these works, alongside their references to foodstuff and brands, use of craft techniques, and inclusion of fabrics and physical knick-knacks lend Abad's work an excitement that feels contagious.

But it's not all life-affirming. While a first look might suggest naive ebullience, a second reveals darker undertones; the disenchanting reality of immigrant life, for example, features heavily. In one canvas, the words 'An American Dream' are painted and outlined in gold glitter; its large central female figure is set on a plane apart from the painted vignettes that surround her (a line of apartment buildings, a suburban house with a white picket fence, a supermarket, a mound of golden treasure). Her arms are crossed, her expression ambiguous as she looks askance, towards an overloaded shopping trolley with – what I imagine to be – a fractious child slumped over the handle. Elsewhere in the canvas, though, there is a distinct absence of people, heightening its sense of city-dwelling loneliness. In another painting, a range of immigrants are pictured in low paid jobs: an electrician, a nurse, a painter and decorator. Midway down, offset and compressed to ensure they fit the canvas, are the handwritten words 'An American Reality'.

What elevates Abad's works like these is their ability to engage with such loaded socio-economic global politics as immigration without didacticism or dryness. Diasporic experiences, like Abad's works themselves, are not one thing; they are poignant accumulations of experiences – variable, mobile and compressed, torn between hope and disappointment.

Published on 5 February 2020