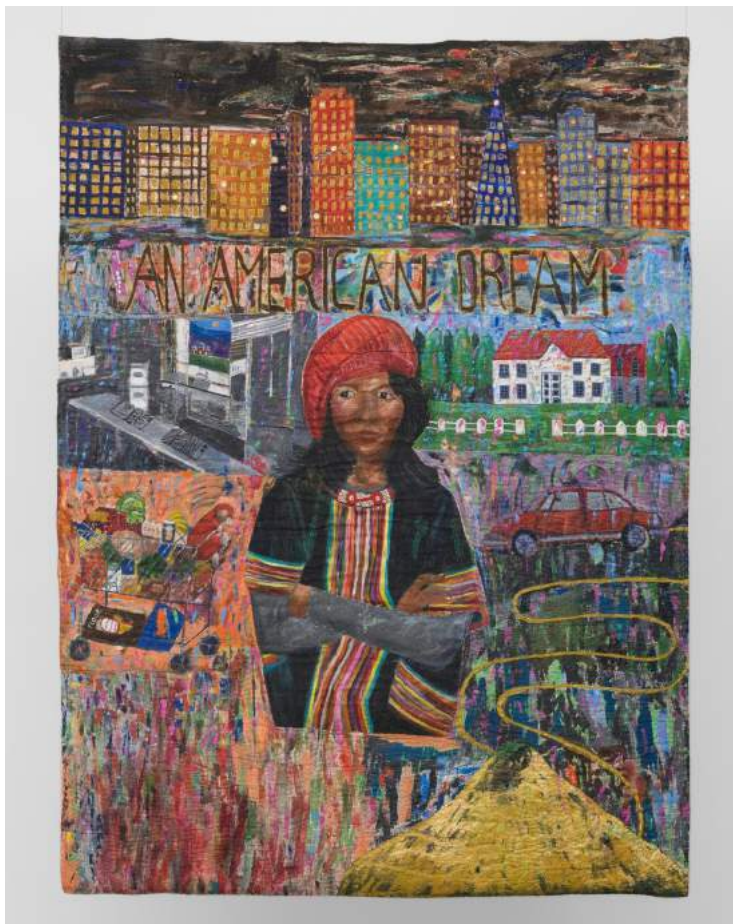


## A 350-Page Tribute to Pacita Abad's Boundless Art

A new exhibition catalogue illustrates the artist's dedication to humanity, managing a tender balance between self-expression and true global consciousness.



Sarah Rose Sharp August 2, 2023



Pacita Abad, "If My Friends Could See Me Now" (1991), acrylic, painted canvas, gold yarn on stitched and padded canvas (photo by Charles Roussel, courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tina Kim Gallery)

What is most remarkable about the life and work of Filipina artist Pacita Abad? The expansive catalogue that accompanies the artist's career-spanning survey exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, [\*Pacita Abad\*](#), explores many potential answers to this question.

Certainly remarkable is the singular course charted from Abad's birth in 1946 in Basco, Batanes, the northernmost island of the Philippines. She was brought up in a political family, threatened by the rise to power of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, leading her to organize student protests as she began studying law. After her family's house was targeted in an armed attack, her parents urged her to leave Manila to finish her degree in Spain. Abad stopped over in San Francisco where she witnessed the peak of the 1960s counter-culture movement.

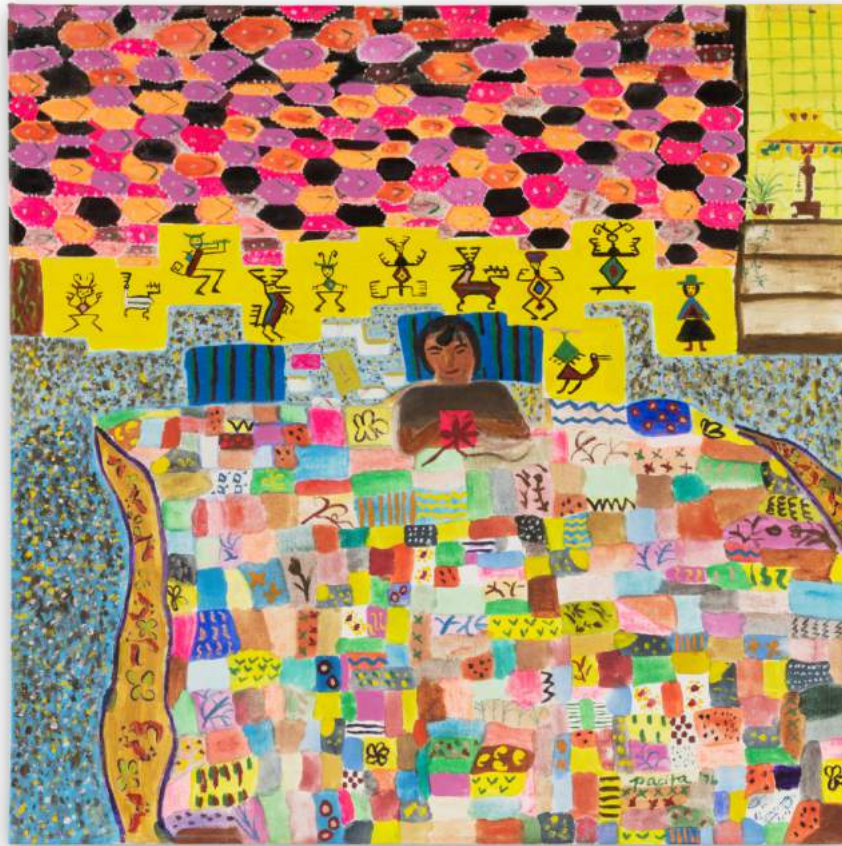
She decided to stay and pursue a career in art — a move that certainly defied the expectations of her traditional Catholic family. No less remarkable is the trail she blazed beyond that, connecting with her life partner Jack Garrity in 1973 and preceding to hitchhike with him across Asia, traveling overland from Turkey to the Philippines through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. It was during this yearlong journey that Abad began to collect and wear traditional fabrics and jewelry and absorb the techniques and aesthetics that would ultimately shape her work for decades to come.



Pacita Abad with a *phulkari* purchased in Lahore, Pakistan in 1973, later depicted in “Foothill Cabin” (1977) (image courtesy Walker Arts Center)

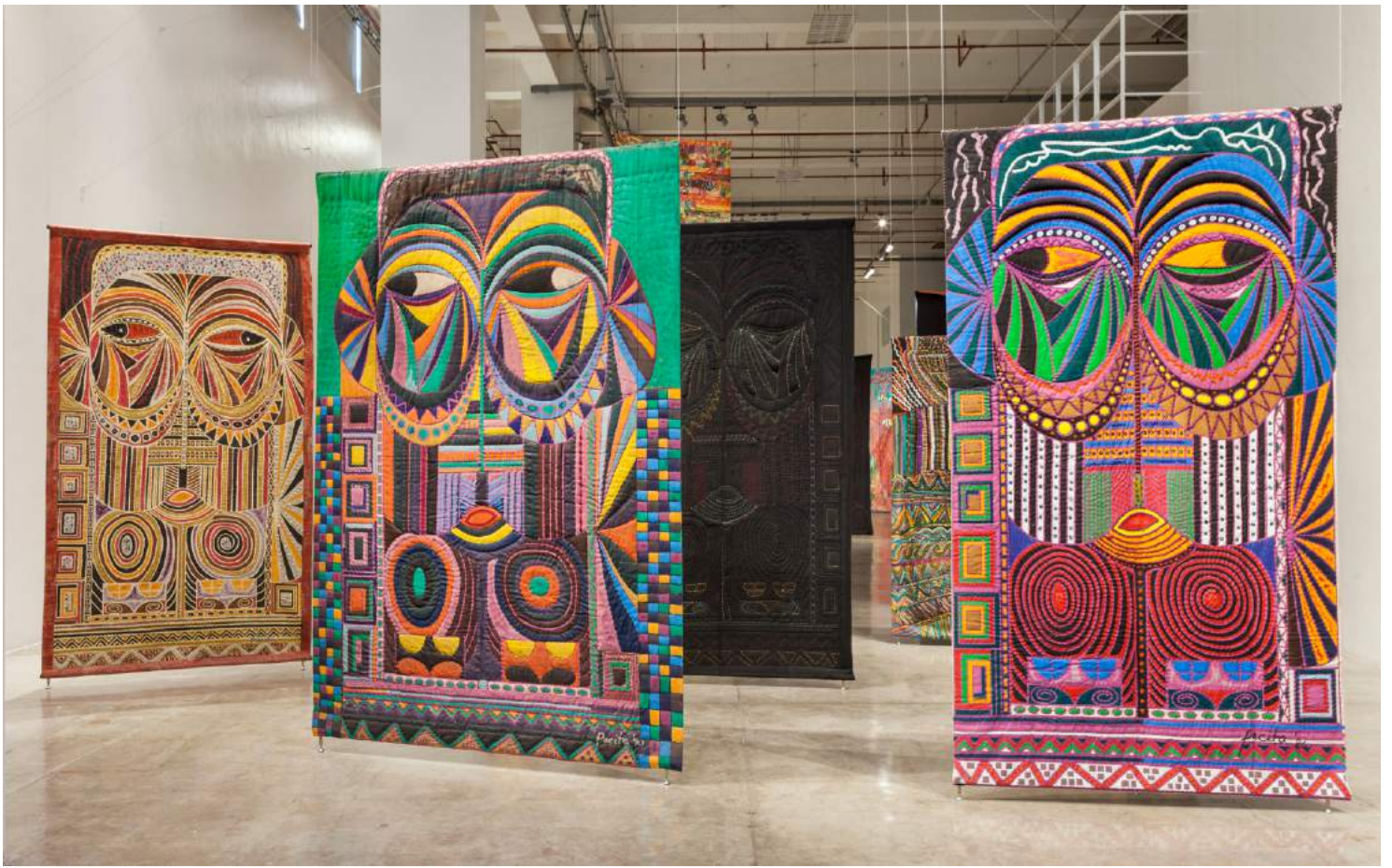
Then there is the work itself. Examples of the artist’s earliest sketches, paintings, pastels, and linocuts indicate an early love of maximalism and color-play, but the influence of fabric motifs became readily apparent in the ’70s. One archival photograph pictures Abad backdropped by a *phulkari* from Lahore, Pakistan (purchased in 1973), a motif that later appears in the upper field of the painting “Foothill Cabin” (1977).

Throughout her career, Abad defied the edict of a narrow focus on a singular medium, instead experimenting with silkscreening, etching, painting, and drawing — referencing abstract, figurative, and political subjects from her travels.



Pacita Abad, "Foothill Cabin" (1977), oil on canvas (photo by Rik Sferra, courtesy Walker Art Center)

Abad is perhaps best known for her *trapunto* technique, which is inspired by the Italian embroidery method meaning "to quilt" that involves stuffing and stitching textiles to create a three-dimensional effect. These heavily embellished fiber fields are the synthesis of Abad's exposure and passionate interest in the Indigenous cultures and traditional crafts she encountered in her decades of international travel. She had a unique capacity for picking up techniques, not to imitate them, but to incorporate them into her own artistic vision. Abad's major trapunto works are stunning and a true *mélange* of cultures — running hand-stitching typical to Bangladesh-inspired *kantha* quilts; the application of cowrie shells traditional to African art; subjects inspired by Indonesian shadow puppets and masks; and an expansive palette that reflects the artist's roots.



Installation view of *A Million Things to Say* at MCAD Manila, De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, 2018 (photo by At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios, courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and MCAD Manila)

The new catalogue, edited by Victoria Sung and published by the Walker Art Center on the occasion of the current exhibition, extensively chronicles the artist's life and work, presenting an oral history that captures testimonies from Pio Abad (Abad's nephew and curator of her estate) and Jack Garrity, as well as insightful essays by art historians and curators including Julia Bryan-Wilson, Ruba Katrib, Nancy Lim, Matthew Villar Miranda, and Xiaoyu Weng. The publication places her work in the context of female makers, artists of color, and the role of craft in fine art, during a time when all these aspects were extremely marginalized with respect to the Western canon. Beyond that, many series of works throughout her career focus on social realism, specifically highlighting the lived experiences of people she encountered during her expansive travels.

Most of all, the book — cataloguing more than 100 works, most of which have never been on public view in the United States until now — extensively details the beautiful visual practice of an artist who was remarkably unbounded in terms of lifestyle, medium, vision, and process. It is a life befitting a nearly 350-page tome, one that strains, even at that size, to contain its subject. While it may be impossible to decide exactly what is most remarkable about Pacita Abad, one can start by appreciating her dedication to humanity as she offered a voice to those she encountered along the way, managing a tender balance between self-expression and true global consciousness.



Pacita Abad, "Orchids in Bangkok" (1979), oil on canvas (photo by Rik Sferra, courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate)



Pacita Abad, "Subali" (1983/1990), acrylic, oil, gold cotton, batik cloth, sequins, rickrack ribbons on stitched and padded canvas (photo by Rik Sferra, courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate)



Pacita Abad, "Self-Portrait" (2003), 24-color paper pulp, mixed-media collage on shaped, handmade STPI paper assemblage (image courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and STPI, Creative Workshop & Gallery, Singapore)



Installation view of *Life in the Margins* at Spike Island, Bristol, 2020 (photo by Max McClure, courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Spike Island, Bristol)





Pacita Abad, "Merengue Mask I" (1981), paper, cloth, threads on tin plate (photo by Rik Sferra, courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate)

**Pacita Abad**, edited with text by Victoria Sung, and with text by Pio Abad, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Ruba Katrib, Nancy Lim, Matthew Villar Miranda, and Xiaoyu Weng (2023), is published by the **Walker Art Center** and is available online and at independent booksellers.