

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art celebrates first retrospective of artist Pacita Abad



View of the exhibition Pacita Abad A Million Things to Say.

SAN FRANCISCO, CA.- The [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) is carrying out the first retrospective of Pacita Abad. Featuring more than 40 major works, including many rarely seen by the public, this exhibition is the most significant U.S. presentation of the artist's multifaceted and mesmerizing art practice.

Throughout her 32-year career from the 1970s to the early 2000s, Abad centered the triumphs and adversities of people on the periphery of power, as seen in her Social Realist, Immigrant Experience and Masks and Spirits series. This exhibition celebrates an artist whose vibrant and inventive practice generated thousands of daring artworks—from intricately constructed underwater scenes to abstract compositions—and whose themes are as urgent today as they were two decades ago.

Pacita Abad (born 1946, Basco, Philippines; died 2004, Singapore) traveled and lived in more than 60 countries in her lifetime including Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, the Dominican Republic, Kenya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sudan and Yemen. In particular, San Francisco was a place of creative origin for Abad, as the city inspired her artistic career in the early 1970s.

Abad interacted with myriad communities through her travels, incorporating a diversity of artistic traditions and techniques—from Korean ink brush painting to Indonesian batik and Nigerian tie-dye— into her expansive practice. These lessons found their greatest expression in her trapunto paintings: canvases that she painted, stuffed and richly embellished with buttons, cowrie shells, beads and mirrors. She created hundreds of these magnificently textured works, occasionally enlisting the help of family members and assistants, thereby evoking the communal making that inspired her. Abad's embrace of quilting and other kinds of needlework confounded critics, who dismissed her works as naïve, childlike and ethnic. In fact, Abad's multifaceted practice articulated a powerful material politics, reflecting her vision of a nonhierarchical world. This exhibition celebrates Abad's bold self-determination, commitment to social justice and radical artistic experimentation.

"Building on SFMOMA's recent acquisition of Abad's trapunto, *If My Friends Could See Me Now* (1993), we look forward to foregrounding her singular artistry and spirit with this long-overdue retrospective," commented Christopher Bedford, the Helen and Charles Schwab Director at SFMOMA.

"Abad's exuberant work, informed by a sense of humanity and social responsibility, gives visibility to communities and timely issues around the world."

"When curator Nancy Lim and I learned that this exhibition was being planned, we knew that it had to come to San Francisco—the city that inspired Pacita Abad to commit her life to artistic expression," said Eungie Joo, curator and head of contemporary art at SFMOMA. "While some of the works gathered here were shown locally during Abad's lifetime, this is the first exhibition to reveal the profundity of her prolific practice."

Pacita Abad

"I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility." – Pacita Abad

Born in the Philippines to a family of politicians, Abad was greatly influenced by her family's public service. In 1970, after leading a student demonstration against the Marcos regime, Abad left the Philippines to escape political persecution. She intended to move to Madrid to finish a degree in law, but a stop in San Francisco to visit relatives became a long-term stay that would change the trajectory of her life.

1970s San Francisco was a hub of counterculture and social movements and, for Abad, a formative place of creative origin. Here, she met Asian and Latin American immigrants who had left their home countries for economic or sociopolitical reasons. Their stories initially inspired her to pursue studies in immigration law so that she could advocate for their causes. At the same time, Abad immersed herself in the local art scene and fell in love with art as a master's student in history at Lone Mountain College (now the University of San Francisco) after working as the school's Coordinator of Cultural Affairs. Though Abad received a scholarship to attend law school at UC Berkeley following her master's degree, the artist chose to forgo her acceptance for travel and research. Art soon became the conduit and catalyst through which she advocated for marginalized people.

Abad became a prolific artist, and her choice of unstretched canvases as her primary medium gave her mobility as she traveled to and lived in over 60 countries with her husband, Jack Garrity, who worked as a development economist for international organizations. "This had an enormous impact on her practice as far as forms, materials, motivations and visual traditions she'd learned about," says Nancy Lim, associate curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA, "whether sewing and stitching techniques from Rabari women in Rajasthan, mirror embroidering in India or embroidery in Burma."

Exhibition Overview

"After the media coverage ends, my paintings keep staring at you." – Pacita Abad

Pacita Abad is organized in a loose chronological order that emphasizes overlapping themes and material engagements. Abad's Social Realist works from the late 1970s and early 1980s include powerful portraits of individuals escaping political persecution and economic injustice. Her first significant body of work, these drawings and paintings emerged from on-the-ground visits to refugee

camps along the Cambodia–Thailand border, during which Abad resolved to increase awareness of global issues through her artwork. Her Immigrant Experience works from the 1990s capture the contemporaneous experiences of diasporic communities from Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Also featured in the exhibition are works that are inspired by Indigenous mask traditions Abad encountered in Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas, including *Masks from Six Continents* (1990–93), originally installed in 1990 as a 50-foot-long fabric mural commissioned for the Washington, D.C., Metro Center.

The artist's decades-long engagement with patterned abstraction was in part inspired by late nights listening to jazz and blues, with numerous works capturing the idiosyncratic spontaneity and syncretic sensibility of those musical genres. Other abstractions embedded references to social and political contexts. The intense, chaotic environment in Indonesia following the 1997 Asian financial crisis inspired *The Sky is Falling, The Sky is Falling* (1998), a trapunto with a carefully orchestrated tangle of painted patterns, beads and stitching. In the monumental work *100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo* (1998), Abad gathered samples of patterned fabrics from every province of the Philippines, sewing them together in a celebration of Philippine identity, independence and resilience.

Also included are works from Abad's Underwater Wilderness series inspired by the electric colors of marine wildlife. The trapunto paintings *My Fear of Night Diving: Assaulting the Deep Sea* (1985), *Anilao at its Best* (1986) and *Dumaguete's Underwater Garden* (1987) create a subaquatic world teeming with tropical sea life through a combination of oil and acrylic paints, plastic buttons, rhinestones and iridescent fringe on stitched and padded canvas, highlighting Abad's sensitivity to the beauty and precarity of the Earth's ecosystems.

"Abad's ease in moving through distant geographies and connecting with different peoples afforded her a uniquely transnational perspective," says Victoria Sung, former curator of visual arts at the Walker Art Center and organizer of this retrospective. "She found community and built relationships with artists, exchanging ways of making and incorporating new materials and methods into her art. In the eighties and nineties, few artists were truly global in the sense that she was."

Together, the featured works showcase the energetic interplay between abstraction and figuration in Abad's practice and illuminate her engagement with people, places and critical issues of her time. When asked in 1991 what she had contributed to American art, Abad answered, "Color! I have given it color!" Pacita Abad invites viewers to immerse themselves in the artist's vibrant practice.

Pacita Abad is accompanied by a 352-page catalogue edited by Victoria Sung, Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), with texts by Sung as well as Matthew Villar Miranda, curatorial associate at BAMPFA; Julia Bryan-Wilson, professor of LGBTQ art history at Columbia University; Ruba Katrib, curator and director of curatorial affairs at MoMA PS1; Nancy Lim, associate curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA; and Xiaoyu Weng, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. It also features an expansive oral history edited by Sung and Pio Abad, the artist's nephew and curator of her estate, with 20 contributors, including artists, curators, family members and friends.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Pacita Abad: Retrospective

October 21st, 2023 – January 28th, 2024