

One Fine Show: ‘Pacita Abad’ at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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By [Dan Duray](#) · 11/17/23 12:20pm

Welcome to One Fine Show, where Observer highlights a recently opened exhibition at a museum outside New York City—a place we know and love that already receives plenty of attention.



Pacita Abad with her trapunto painting ‘Ati-Atihan’, 1983, wearing garments and jewelry collected on her travels.

Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate

There is a term in the Philippines, *borloloy*, that seems tailor-made for the work of the Filipino-American artist Pacita Abad (1946-2004). According to a new catalogue published on the occasion of her first retrospective, *borloloy* means “groovy,” “funky” or having “excess ornamentation,” and can be used as slang for “over-the-top accessories and the women who wear them.” What a great and complex word, a relic of the time when “excess ornamentation” could be considered notable, or even possible, when it came to personal style.

Yes, the world has finally caught up to Abad, and just in time for this retrospective, which has come to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, having opened recently before that at the Walker Art Center. The SFMOMA iteration features more than 40 major works from her 32-year career, including many rarely seen by the public. These bombastic works borrow traditions from as diverse as Korean ink brush painting, Indonesian batik and Nigerian tie-dye. Their multifariousness is on display even in the names of her series: Social Realist, Immigrant Experience, Masks and Spirits.

The show comes to MoMA PS1 this spring, but San Francisco may be the right place to see it. It was there that she met her husband, the counterculture and the Asian and Latin American immigrants for whom she would want to advocate. She turned down a scholarship to go to law school and turned instead to painting works like *If My Friends Could See Me Now* (1991), wherein a garish and disappointing “American Dream,” labeled as such, cramps a Cambodian immigrant who has been literally transported another painting in Abad’s Cambodian Refugee series. For the most part, she’s more optimistic than this, though. Even *My Fear of Night Diving* (1985) is beautiful in its chaos, the shark and octopus verging on cubism as they threaten the viewer in a waterscape made from cotton yarn, broken glass and plastic beads.



Pacita Abad, 'European Mask', 1990; collection Tate Modern, purchased with funds provided by the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee 2019. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tate; photo: At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios

It makes sense that Abad was a diver, and it's not hard to picture her luxuriating in all the colors and lifeforms there are to see down there. Looking was clearly so much fun for her. Though she was a maximalist it's not like she wasn't capable of doing *less*. You get the sense that she just doesn't want to. The designs of her *Masks from Six Continents* (1990) are clean and simple enough, if still thoroughly hallucinogenic, with a tasteful sense of color. But then: these are also gigantic. They were initially commissions for the Metro Center in Washington D.C. and loomed over commuters with their funny stoned eyes.