

Pacita Abad: Life in the Margins

Issue section: Art / Exhibitions (/issue-section/art-exhibitions)

Issue: March 2020 (/issue/march-2020) (455)

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Spike Island, Bristol

Until 5 April



Pacita Abad's tapestries are full of life

This is the first UK showing of 'Life in the Margins' by Pacita Abad, a worldwide recognised multimedia artist of the past 30 years; and how lucky we are in Bristol to host this fantastic debut to the country.

Spike Island's bare, open studio creates the perfect space for Abad's large tapestries. They burst with complex and loud colour, varying from story-telling portraits to abstract prints, heavy in cultural references through colour, shape and technique.

Every centimetre of Abad's pieces have something to say; even expressed in their size, some of which reaching 5 meters high, demanding space and attention to tell the story Abad wants to tell.

Raised in the Philippines, Abad moved to the USA in the 1970s for further education, something she says in her short film 'Wild at Art', was somewhere she would never have thought to end up, as "for many in the third world, USA means CIA".

Abad found the experience of being an immigrant corrupt and terrifying but also inspirational, and talks about the beauty of being at one with so many from all over the world, all after a better life. This inspired Abad to travel the world, working in 50 different countries, visiting 6 different continents.

She documented the beauty of the different cultures and stories she experienced through her art, "picking up gold thread from Burma, mirror embroidery in India, and tie dying in Nigeria", which culminates in pieces not set in one culture, but in human experience.

'Life is the Margins' doesn't call for recognition of Abad's talents or techniques, but more where she learnt them. Different techniques and patterns represent a swirling collaboration of the cultures she's absorbed. Sometimes this is obvious, such as in her paintings of food markets, temples, carnivals, as well as references to the American Dream, with large detached homes, Pepsi, baseball and lottery tickets lurking in paintings, where they don't really feel welcome.

What's particularly brilliant about these western infiltrations, is that they haven't been added to purposely make Abad's pieces political; Abad wants to tell the story of the world she sees through it's own lens, the influence of US imperialism in countries around the world is obvious, and in itself political. Abad doesn't have to add her own narrative.

In her short film, Abad was asked what she thought she brought to the US. After a second of consideration, she beams a smile and replies "colour". She goes on to talk of her time studying art in Washington DC, and how throughout the grey winters, her pieces persisted in the colours she grew up around.

I think this is beautifully represented in one piece, LA Liberty, in which a racially ambiguous woman replaces the grey, faceless 'Statue of Liberty', and with her brings the colours and patterns of the world. Abad successfully uses colour to symbolize the beauty, potential and hope of migrants from all over, and adding this to the iconography of the America, says more than words could express.

For Abad, art isn't for yourself, it's for everyone; to feel represented, to feel part of something. This isn't restricted to art exhibitions, the potential of art for everyone leaves you to imagine a different world of films, music, theatre and more. She makes a point of imagining a world where platforms were available to all those with a story to tell.
