

LIFESTYLE | ARTS

## Defying Convention: A Pacita Abad Retrospective

By Marga Manlapig  
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**COVER** Detail from *The Sky is Falling* reveals the richness of colour and the variety of materials in a piece

**In her lifetime, critics were hard-pressed to categorise Pacita Abad. But a new exhibition is set to open the public's eyes to her creations**



**T**here are people who, despite the best attempts of those around them, cannot be described simply as one thing or another. These people are defined by their complexity, their

ability to present themselves as any of a dozen or more things all at once.

Such is the case of Filipino-American artist Pacita Abad. Over the course of a career that spanned over three decades, art scholars and critics have pondered as to what specific category or genre she would best fit into. She has been referred to as an “itinerant artist” or even a “global artist,” both allusions to the scope and inspirations behind many of her works. There are those who categorise her as an OFW, given that she was a Filipina working overseas though not in the conventional capacity of the famed migrant workers. But that barely scratches the surface of who Pacita Abad and what she stood for during and even after her lifetime.



**ABOVE** BREAKING THE MOULD. In a 1986 photograph, Abad gamely poses in her scuba gear with her underwater paintings

A new exhibition of Abad’s work, the first to be held in the country since 2005, invites the public to take a closer look at the artist who passed away in 2004. It could, perhaps, give a better understanding of who she was and what inspired the creation of over 5,000 pieces which range from paintings to an entire bridge in Singapore covered with multi-coloured circles.



Mounted at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design at the De La Salle University-College of St Benilde in Manila, *Pacita Abad: A Million Things to Say* takes its name from two things. The first is *I Have a Million Things to Say*, the title of a mixed-media piece made by Abad towards the end of her life. The second is the fact that her work always seemed to convey hundreds, even thousands, of ideas and sentiments all at once.

“We wanted to reorient how we see Pacita Abad,” explains MCAD director and curator Joselina ‘Yeyey’ Cruz. “She is one of the few Filipino artists who looked outside the Philippines for inspiration and influences on her work. We want this exhibition to show the complexity of her identity as both person and artist.”



**ABOVE** Abad’s work was usually done on a massive scale

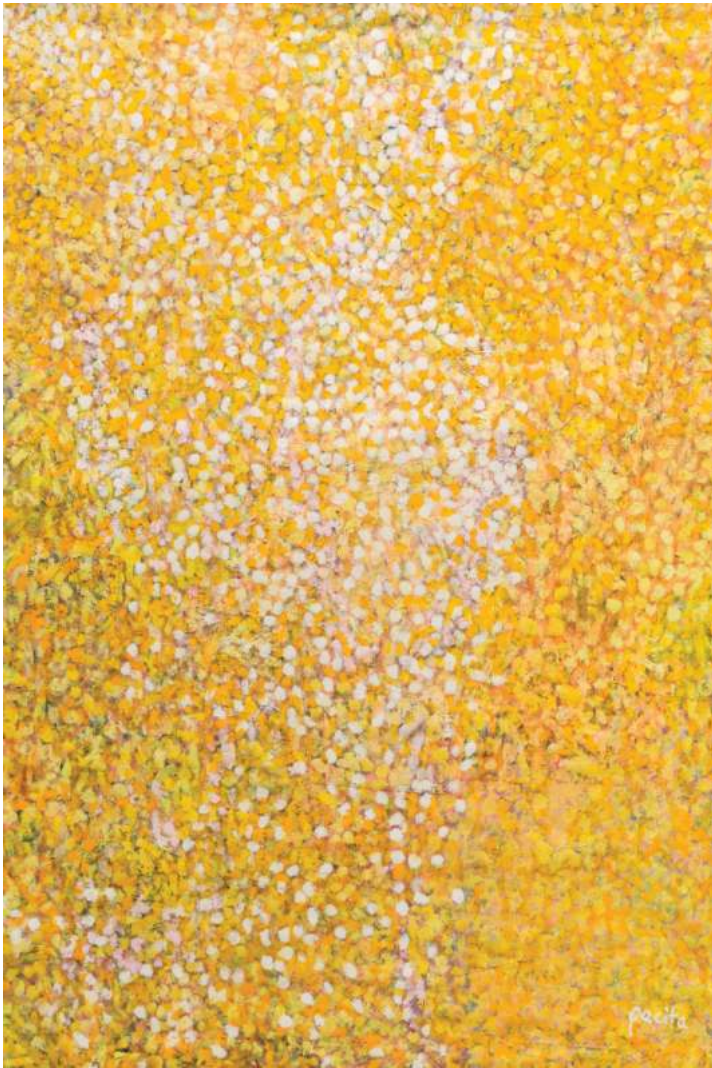
## Political Roots

But before one can even delve into Abad’s work, one has to know her history as an individual—and that, in and of itself, is rather unusual.

Many artists are born into their respective crafts, but Abad was not one of them. In fact, she was born into a family that was—and still is—firmly entrenched in the political arena.



Pacita Bersana Abad was born on 5 October 1946 in Basco, Batanes to five-time congressman Jorge Abad and the former Aurora Bersana who served the province as its governor and congresswoman. Her younger brother Florencio (Butch) would eventually become a congressman himself and would serve as Secretary for Budget and Management under the presidency of Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III.



**ABOVE** I Have One Million Things to Say, 2002



**ABOVE** A piece from Abad's Bacongo series

"We want this exhibition to show the complexity of her identity as both person and artist"

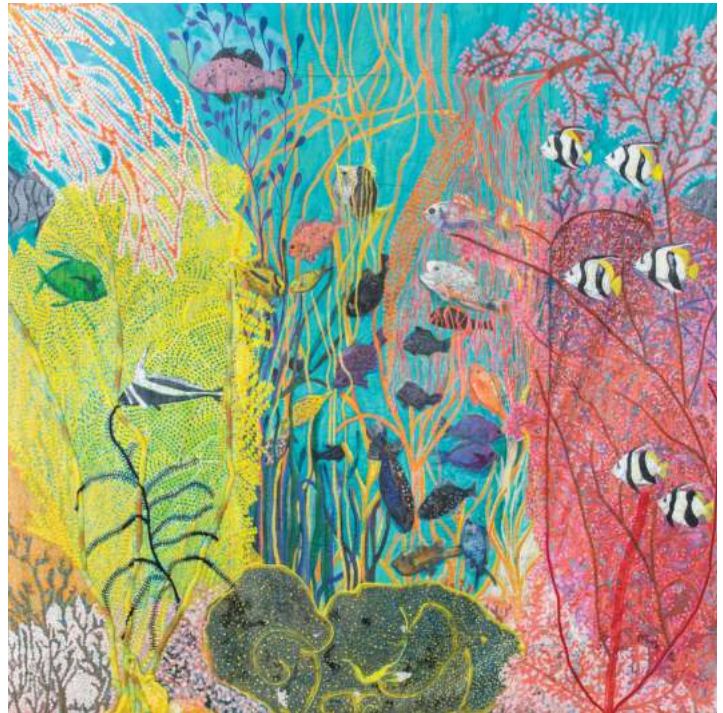
At first, it seemed that Abad herself would follow in her parents' footsteps as she earned a degree in political science from the University of the Philippines in 1967 and left the country, ostensibly, to study law in the United States. However, she ended up studying for a graduate degree in Asian history at the University of San Francisco instead. In the process, she found herself in the thick of the San Francisco art scene. Her experiences there, and her subsequent travels across Asia with investments advisor Jack Garrity (whom she would end up marrying) eventually led her to study painting at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington DC.



The works she produced in the early years were charged with socio-political undertones, inspired for the most part by the plight of the indigenous peoples she encountered during her travels.



**ABOVE** LUST FOR LIFE. The artist, in 1986, poses in front of one of her Bacongo pieces which were inspired by tribal art encountered during her trips through the African continent



**ABOVE** Shallow Gardens of Apo Reef, 1986

“Travel informed her practice,” Cruz says of the early years of Abad’s career. Indeed, many of the paintings she did from the late ’70s to the mid-’80s reflect a diverse array of cultures: Sudanese, Bangladeshi, the Wau people of Papua New Guinea, and—in what was seen as controversial at the time—the displaced people of Kampuchea, now Cambodia.

In doing so, Abad’s work drew attention to the concepts of hunger, oppression, as well as refugee crises born of war and conflict. As she herself put it, “Although I have tried to raise awareness of these issues through my paintings, I know that it is but a small effort to help address these problems and so much more needs to be done.”

**ABOVE** A curatorial display of a 1986 piece titled 'Through the Looking Glass'

## Innovative Approaches

Having said that, it would be so easy to pigeonhole Abad as a political painter. But that would do the artist injustice, as she is also known for her innovative approach towards the creation of every piece she produced.

"I always see the world through colour, although my vision, perspective, and paintings are constantly influenced by new ideas and changing environments," she said when asked about what inspired her work.

"She once said that her eyes were always hungry," Cruz adds with regard to how the way Abad saw the world affected and informed her work. "She was, so to speak, a glutton for the visual; she wanted to take everything in."

One particular influence that had a longstanding impact on her work was that of Barbara Johansen Newman, an American puppet maker and children's book illustrator. Abad was fascinated by the way Newman hand-stitched and stuffed her puppets and experimented with using similar techniques to add a three-dimensional look and feel to her own work.

This resulted in Abad's signature trapunto style: a unique combination of painting and collage that was uniquely her own. Taking its name from an Italian form of quilting, Abad's take on trapunto involved stitching and stuffing her canvases to give them depth and volume, creating a sculptural effect. Later, she worked on assembling collages of various materials on the stuffed canvases, resulting in vivid images that had some critics comparing her work with the Congregations, the found-art assemblages crafted by Filipino-American artist Alfonso Ossorio in his final years.

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Abad was also the sort of artist who tried her hand at everything that seemed to catch her fancy. She would paint smaller, but equally evocative pieces on sheets of paper; following the tragedy of 9/11 in New York, she would also create small paper collages that reflected her sentiments. Seven years spent in Jakarta, on the other hand, led to a foray into functional art that resulted in the 144-piece Wayang dinnerware collection which featured hand-fired ceramics embellished with images from traditional Javanese wayang [shadow puppet] performances.

## **A Life Filled With Colour**

But while Abad's work is diverse when it comes to theme and technique, one aspect that unifies her work is her vivid, virtually unrestrained use of colour.

Indeed, every piece she produced is an almost overwhelming explosion of colour: possibly a reflection of the artist's own colourful, multi-faceted life and vivacious personality. It was, in a fashion, her way of promoting optimism and a more positive outlook towards life.

"I feel like I am an ambassador of colours," she once said, "always projecting a positive mood that helps make the world smile."

It is, perhaps, what sustained her in the final years of her life even as cancer consumed her from within.

**ABOVE** Hundred Islands, 1989

Even now, nearly 14 years after her death, Pacita Abad's work continues to astound and even bewilder those who are privileged to encounter it in its many forms.

**ABOVE** Many of those who knew Pacita Abad in life remember her vibrant personality, her great heart, and her passion for self-expression (Wig Tysmans, c1986)

During her stint as visiting artist at the Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Abad decided to paint the 55-metre-long Alkaff Bridge which spanned across the Singapore River. Known today as the Singapore Art Bridge, it went a great deal into public beautification and raising public awareness on art appreciation. It would also be Abad's penultimate work; despite daily chemotherapy sessions, she managed to paint numerous vari-coloured circles onto the structure, helped in part by the spirit of public cooperation of the people of Singapore. The painted bridge was formally inaugurated on 29 January 2004; Abad lived long enough to see people fascinated and delighted by it before succumbing to her illness on 7 December of the same year.

Even now, nearly 14 years after her death, Abad's work continues to astound and bewilder those who are privileged to encounter it in its many forms. It could be that it is not for us to define the artist or even to categorise her work into any one genre. Instead, perhaps, her work is meant for us to ask ourselves if we, too, can be brave enough to try everything, see everything, and in doing so, enrich not just our own lives, but those of the people around us.

*Part of MCAD's 10th anniversary, Pacita Abad: A Million Things to Say formally opened on 12 April and will run until 1 July 2018. The exhibition is curated by Joselina Cruz and artist Pio Abad, Pacita Abad's nephew.*

*Photography: Wig Tysmans | Portraits: Marc Henrich Go and Kevin Evora*

## Topics

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