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Art

Pacita Abad Stitched the Immigrant Experience into Her Embroidered Paintings

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At 24 years old, Pacita Abad faced the wrath of Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos head-on. In 1970, her family home was machine-gunned in the middle of the night, presumably by the authorities, following her involvement in organizing mass demonstrations against the regime. Having persuaded her family to flee the Philippines, Abad planned to continue her law studies in Madrid. Instead, she arrived in the United States, where she dropped law school for painting in 1974.

The memory of Ferdinand Marcos looms in one of Abad's most notable pieces, made nearly 15 years after her escape: *Marcos and His Cronies* (1985–95), a painting on canvas embroidered with textiles, mirrors, shells, buttons, glass beads, gold thread, and padded cloth. This colossal work, measuring 16.5 by 9.5 feet, portrays the dictator and his regime as demonic figures consuming people, who are depicted as plastic dolls in Marcos's hands and mouth. This piece exemplifies Abad's signature "trapunto" technique, which she developed in 1981, where she layered and stitched fabric and miscellaneous materials onto her paintings, creating a rich, tactile surface.



Installation view of "Pacita Abad" at MoMA PS1, 2024. Photo by Kris Graves. Courtesy of MoMA PS1.

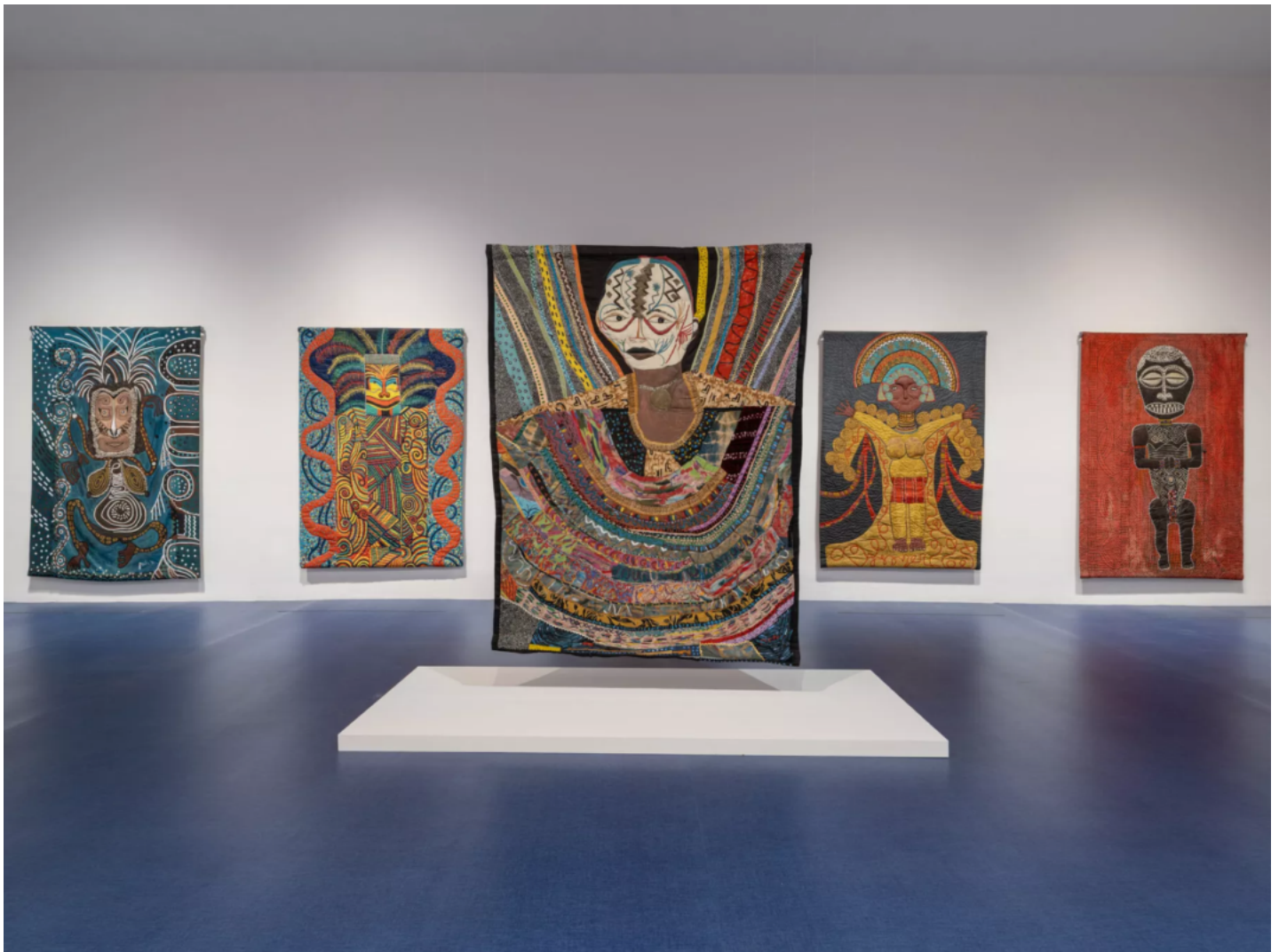
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The persecution she experienced, illustrated by *Marcos and His Cronies*, catalyzed Abad's lifelong mission: to share the experiences of marginalized people by threading their stories into the fabric of her art. Today, this imposing artwork is a cornerstone of the artist's retrospective, "Pacita Abad," featuring more than 50 works on view

[Skip to Main Content](#) New York until September 2nd. Originally
Walker Art Center in Minneapolis last year and

bridge between past and present, underscoring the enduring sociopolitical ripples that stem from an exclusive and Eurocentric “American Dream.”

Instead, Abad illustrated working-class immigrants of color in her heavily ornamented, large-scale trapuntos at a time when the United States was embroiled in the “culture wars” and burgeoning xenophobia of the late 1980s and ’90s. These works emerged as a direct act of rebellion against the oppressive forces attempting to subjugate or silence these voices—a narrative increasingly relevant 20 years after her death.



Installation view of “Pacita Abad” at MoMA PS1, 2024. Photo by Kris Graves. Courtesy of MoMA PS1.

“The subject matter is still appropriate and meaningful today,” said

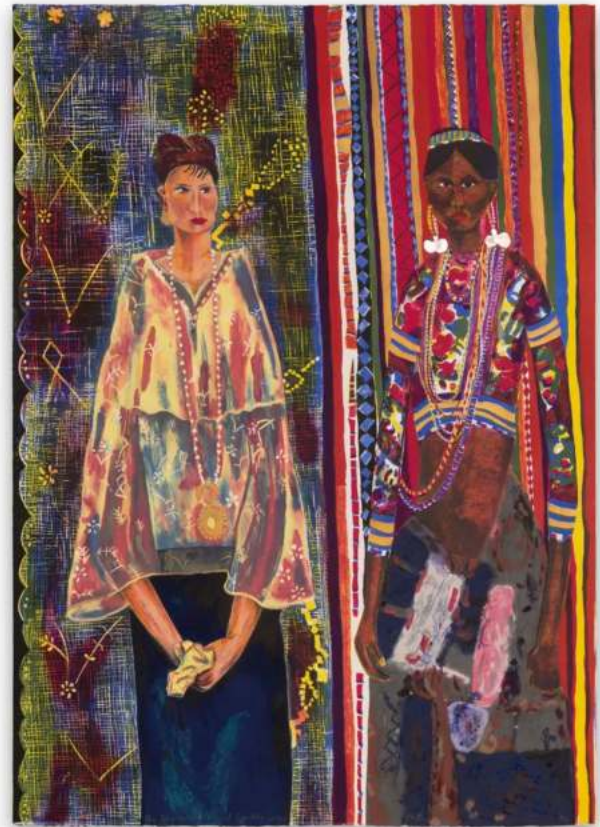
Duke Keshishian, curator and director of curatorial affairs at MoMA
[Skip to Main Content](#) kthrough of the exhibition. “It’s interesting to see

materials and approaches—feels very ‘now.’ She was ahead of her time, and it seems the rest of the world is just beginning to catch up with her.”

The main exhibition space—an expansive room with towering ceilings on the third floor—is packed with Abad’s massive trapuntos. It’s a crash course in *borlology*—the Filipino concept of “excessive ornamentation.” Each of these works is imbued with the techniques, styles, and materials of the approximately 60 countries she visited over her 32-year career. The centerpiece is *African Mephisto* (1981), an embroidered painting of a man dressed in vibrant kaleidoscopic fabrics. Most notably, it is her first trapunto painting and the inaugural piece of her “Mask and Spirits” series, which is inspired by Indigenous mask traditions worldwide.



Pacita Abad, *European Mask*, 1990. Photo by At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios. Courtesy of Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tate.



Pacita Abad, *Filipina: A Racial Identity Crisis*, 1992. Photo by Rik Sferra for Walker Art Center. Courtesy of Pacita Abad Art Estate.

public commission at the Metro Center in Washington, D.C. These six multichromatic canvases—including *European Mask* (1990), a 9-by-5-foot trapunto featuring massive gazing eyes among colorful geometric patterns—represent the six inhabitable continents. Abad once said of the works that they were “all the different people I see on the train.”

Elsewhere, in the back right gallery, the exhibition delves into Abad’s social realist painted works from the late 1970s and early ’80s. Works like *Water of Life* (1980), an oil painting of a mother feeding her children in a refugee camp, illustrate individuals fleeing poverty and persecution. These two-dimensional works, focused on the experience of immigration and marginalization, preview the themes and figures that would dominate much of her work in the ’90s and early aughts.



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Abad” at MoMA PS1, 2024. Photo by Kris Graves. Courtesy of MoMA PS1.

and paintings converges with her ideological focus on migration and identity. In this series, prominently featured in the back room, Abad portrays scenes from daily life in immigrant communities of color, inspired by her interactions with neighbors, friends, and strangers. Her work addresses the nuanced struggles of assimilation, conformity, and prejudice within these communities. For instance, her work *Filipina: A Racial Identity Crisis* (1992) depicts two archetypal Filipina women representing the nation's historical racial groups (one dark-skinned, the other fair) that, for the artist, end up incurring the "identity crisis" of the title.

Likewise, *Korean Shopkeeper* (1993), featuring a Korean grocer and two Black shoppers, documents a passing moment in a grocery store. However, the painted scene was made in the wake of the Los Angeles riots in 1992, following a controversial event where a Korean shopkeeper killed a Black teenage girl falsely accused of theft and the murder of Rodney King. This depiction of coexistence between communities of color creates a microcosm for the untold stories of Latin American, Asian, and African immigrants, between whom the media often inflamed conflict. It was through these works that Abad interrogated the Eurocentric "American Dream."



Installation view of "Pacita Abad" at MoMA PS1. Photo by Kris Graves. Courtesy of MoMA PS1.

"The whole series came out of her going to visit the Statue of Liberty and realizing that there's no story for Asians or Africans or anyone who came after the first [Europeans]," said Katrib. "The story of immigration and the U.S. is so captured to a particular time, but there are all these other stories that were being excluded or ignored, so she was trying to fill in that dearth with images and works that told different stories."

Yet Abad never shied away from the hardships and realities of displacement. Other works from the series, like *Caught at the Border* (1991), a trapunto depicting a man behind a grate with glistening sequins, explore the injustices and exclusion of the American immigrant experience. Today, as immigration continues to be a touchpoint for Americans across the political spectrum, Abad's sociopolitical conscience marks her out as a visionary, ahead of her time. ■

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