

ARTS

Overlooked During Her Lifetime, Filipino American Artist Pacita Abad Has Suddenly Become a Global Star

BY RAYMOND ANG

April 19, 2024



Pacita '98

Pacita Abad in 1998. Photo: Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate



It's easy to see why Pacita Abad's work resonated with Faith Ringgold. Like her American counterpart, Abad—a native of Basco, Batanes, in the Philippines—was both an expressive painter and a master of the narrative quilt, embracing and elevating a medium long dismissed for its folksy domesticity. Also, decades before the globalization of the art world in the 1990s, Abad was already creating work that referenced multiculturalism and immigration; her *L.A. Liberty*, like Ringgold's *American Collection #1: We Came to America*, riffs on the iconography of the Statue of Liberty, reclaiming the Mother of Exiles from American narratives that tend to exclude nonwhite people. (“An international woman of color” is how Ringgold described Abad in the 2003 compendium *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art*.)





Pacita Abad, *L.A. Liberty*, 1992. Acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons, mirrors, gold thread, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2022. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Spike Island, Bristol. photo: Max McClure

Yet when Abad died from cancer in 2004, aged just 58, she was still essentially unknown within the Western art world. It's only now, 20 years later, that she seems to be having a bigger moment. Not only is Abad currently the subject of a sprawling retrospective—one that has trooped from the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and, most recently, [MoMA PS1](#) in Queens (its next and final stop is the Art Gallery of Ontario in October)—but her work has also joined the permanent collections of some of the world's most important institutions, including the Tate Modern in London and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.



“She’d be jumping out of the grave to see paintings [of hers] being sold to museums, and at big prices,” says Abad’s widower, Jack Garrity, with a hearty laugh.

This weekend Abad makes her posthumous debut at the Venice Biennale as part of curator Adriano Pedrosa’s centerpiece exhibition, “Foreigners Everywhere,” which seeks to highlight artists from historically marginalized communities. (When, earlier this week, [Artsy](#) published a list of the artists at the Biennale who had seen the most inquirer growth between 2022 and 2023, Abad’s name was at the top of that list, ahead of people like [Lauren Halsey](#) and Salman Toor.)

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It’s been a dramatic turn of events for an artist who was mostly denied mainstream recognition while she was alive; at the time, work deemed as feminine, decorative, and ethnic as hers seldom attracted serious attention from Western critics. “We found about 100 rejection letters from different US museums,” says Pio Abad, Pacita’s nephew and an artist in his own right. “She made these proposals to show a social-realist series, and she wrote to all these museums. She got these rejection letters one after the other, a *stack*—she kept them all. Now she has one of the biggest touring museum shows in the US.”



Installation view of "Pacita Abad," on view at MoMA PS1 through September 2, 2024 Photo: Kris Graves

"People were like, 'Oh, this is regressive,'" Ruba Katrib, director of curatorial affairs at MoMA PS1, says of Abad's textile works. "A lot of these practices were seen as too traditional or connected to folk traditions or not using high art materials or whatever. I think, in fact, the way that these works came together, what they look like, how they operated, is quite radical."

As she attempted to navigate the art world, Abad was fully aware of the prejudices that held back artists like her. "She tongue in cheek—ly called herself a 'woman of color,'" says curator Victoria Sung, who edited the 2023 book *Pacita Abad*, a comprehensive survey of Abad's work, "in terms of the color that she used [in her work] but also recognizing, of course, a lot of the racism and sexism that women artists and artists of color faced, and continue to face, in the contemporary art world."

Jack Garrity can still remember the first time he met Pacita Abad. In 1973, he found himself at a World Affairs Conference in Monterey, California, representing Stanford, where he was a student. Amid the sea of people there, he immediately took notice of Abad, who had a "funky, Madonna-in-the-East Village look."

"Pacita always stood out," Garrity continues. "You would walk into a crowd and notice her—and if you didn't notice her, you'd *hear* her because she had this real guttural belly laugh. Everybody remembers that deep, deep laugh."

Their affair wasn't meant to last past the weekend. "I said, 'I'm heading off to Korea,' and she said, 'Well, I think I'll go with you,'" Garrity recalls. They ended up staying together for more than 30 years.

At the time, Abad wasn't an artist yet. She was at the conference to represent her own school, Lone Mountain College (now part of the University of San Francisco), and was determined to become an immigration lawyer. The daughter of two Filipino politicians, she had developed a political and social consciousness from her youth, routinely leading student demonstrations during the dictatorial regime of President Ferdinand Marcos. Such actions put a target on her back in Manila, so for safety Abad was urged by her parents to move abroad.

That context significantly informed Abad's life as an artist. As she traveled with Garrity, who would become an economist for the World Bank, her eyes were opened up to the world: refugee camps in Thailand, farmlands in Bangladesh, the townships of Papua New Guinea, and more. (Abad's friend Jeeva Perumalpillai-Essex once called her "a real social-scientist artist.") At about the same time, she started crafting. "First, she did some embroidery on my shirt, and then she embroidered her skirt," Garrity says. "She would go out into the streets by herself in Bangladesh, in a rickshaw, and just paint scenes and sketch." Soon, that technique—as well as the various textiles she picked up during their travels—made its way into her artworks.





Pacita Abad with *Bacongo I* (1983) in her Washington, DC, studio, 1986 Photo: Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate

Abad's signature format was trapunto, a style of large-scale quilt. Despite the playfulness of their textures and coloring, Abad's versions often tackled dense, complicated intersectionalities, from her identity as an immigrant Ivatan woman in the Western world to the social and political tensions of the authoritarian Marcos regime in the Philippines.

"What Pacita was doing, if you paid attention to it and got into it," says Katrib, "was actually very advanced and very sophisticated and very apropos to now—the politics, everything."

Pio remembers the first time his aunt showed *Marcos and His Cronies*, a massive mixed-media painting on display in the PS1 show, in Manila. Upon seeing the work, President Fidel V. Ramos, a former Marcos loyalist whom Abad was guiding in a tour, cracked: "So, Pacita, which one am I?"

Pio delights in the memory of that story. "In her work she's presenting you with an inconvenient truth in such a vibrant, beautiful way where it becomes like a sequined velvet hammer," he says. "She nudges you toward that truth. You always have to, I think, seduce people toward self-awareness, or their lack thereof." (It's a lesson he seems to have internalized: Within his own practice, Pio has tackled similarly thorny political issues in a visually enchanting way.)

Art-market success largely eluded Abad while she was working. "There was one period where she wasn't selling much, and somebody said, 'Your paintings are too big,'" Garrity says. "So she actually cut up about two or three of her big paintings into smaller paintings, and they sold, but it was painful." At another point, he says, after showing some 130 paintings in an exhibition, she only made about 30 sales.

All the same, she never gave up hope of one day showing in major museums. "She wanted lots of people to see her work," Garrity says. "That's one of the reasons I think that she painted so big—because they were meant for institutions."





Pacita Abad, *European Mask*, 1990. Acrylic, silkscreen, thread on canvas. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tate. Photo: At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios

In the years since Abad's death, Garrity and his second wife, Abad's former studio manager, have kept her work in storage, patiently awaiting her big break. "He kept them unseen [for so long]," Pio says, "that the colors, when they were opened, were just as vibrant as when she showed them for the first time... It's a testament to Jack's faith that Pacita [would have] a global audience."

So, what's finally changed? The steady churn of biennales and a flourishing art market abroad have forged a more multicultural creative landscape, one that has encouraged artists to work in more interdisciplinary ways—and left more space for the craft-forward work of artists like Abad.

A diverse new vanguard of arts professionals has also had their role to play. "I think Pacita's success is really down to incredibly visionary female Asian American curators who are finally in positions where they can say, 'This is history, and this deserves this much attention and research and museum real estate,'" Pio Abad says, citing the work of Sung, Katrib, and Joselina Cruz of Manila's Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, who co-curated an Abad show in 2018 that helped to kick-start her resurgence. "They really stuck their necks out, and it's through them that all of our efforts have become seen," Pio adds.

For Sung, there was never any question about Abad's importance. "I mean, she made thousands of artworks, and the fact that so little of it had been shown publicly was really befuddling to me," she says. "I thought there was a real opportunity for us to see her work differently and also then to see *art* differently."

The sudden visibility of Pacita Abad's output comes at a moment of tremendous visibility for Philippine art in North America more generally. Last year, the contemporary Filipino artists Josh Kline and Paul Pfeiffer had major shows at the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) and the [Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art](#), respectively. This June, the late David Medalla, a pioneer of kinetic art, will be the subject of [a retrospective at the Hammer Museum](#) in Los Angeles. The Manila-based Silverlens Gallery is thriving at its [outpost](#) in New York. And beyond Abad, Filipino artists Anita Magsaysay-Ho, Joshua Serafin, and Maria Taniguchi are part of the "Foreigners Everywhere" show in Venice.

"I think [we can learn a lot from] just her view of the world—how she experienced it and brought it together and made these connections between different cultures, practices, artistic practices, histories," says Katrib. "She literally wove and stitched it together, and she saw solidarities and alliances there. That's a really inspiring and quite moving message right now."