Pacita Abad Sees the Soul of an Artifact

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Pacita Abad, "L.A. Liberty," 1992. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Spike Island, Bristol. Photo: Max McClure.

Daniel Faria Gallery

(https://danielfariagallery.com/)

Pacita Abad, the Filipina artist who roamed the world like a traveling bard, was twenty-four when she left home in 1970. By the time she died at fifty-eight, she had gone on more adventures than the typical woman of her generation, visiting over sixty countries and living in eleven. Quickly, she realized the West bored her. Her art sought instead to exalt life outside centers of power, gathering the myriad energies of the Global South into one agnostic temple. In her posthumous retrospective at MoMA

PS1(https://www.momaps1.org/programs/359-pacita-abad), Abad's works swarm with centuries of disparate cultures, commingling, copulating, and begetting new futures. These are loud pieces, both in their sumptuous color and in the volume at which the ancestral voices embedded in them clamor for attention. They resonate across rough terrain: Abad was the pioneer and perfector of *trapunto* painting, in which canvases are stitched together, stuffed with polyester, and adorned with beads, buttons, seashells, and other ephemera. The result is a sort of abrasive quilt, pliant enough to be rolled up and stuffed into a suitcase. Yet one would never describe these works as light. On view, they appear to shape-shift dramatically, trespassing their four corners. Abad's *trapunto* works are living organisms, exposed for viewing. You see the arteries throb, like a heart in surgery.

During her lifetime, Abad was noted for her deference to the past and her allegiance to folk spirituality. This didn't always win her favor. While she was tireless and prolific, receiving institutional recognition frequently enough, she never became a major name in the art market of the eighties and nineties. One reason was that she was dismissed as a mere craftswoman—a New York curator once told her that her *trapunto* paintings were "not 'high art,'" implying that folk art, in its ostensible ancientness, cannot break any new ground. In an era inflected by minimalist trends, critics called her work busy, unrefined, decorative. This discursive ousting defanged her political project. People couldn't see that she was unmistakably an archivist of the contemporary, postulating a folk tradition written in the present tense. How might modern people, she asked, be served by the aesthetics of their forebears? The fact that she preferred time-worn mediums belied this progressive ambition. Her true sorcery lay in her ability to resurrect the fossil, encouraging its mutation in a new climate. An artist with this gift can find no better subject than the immigrant experience.

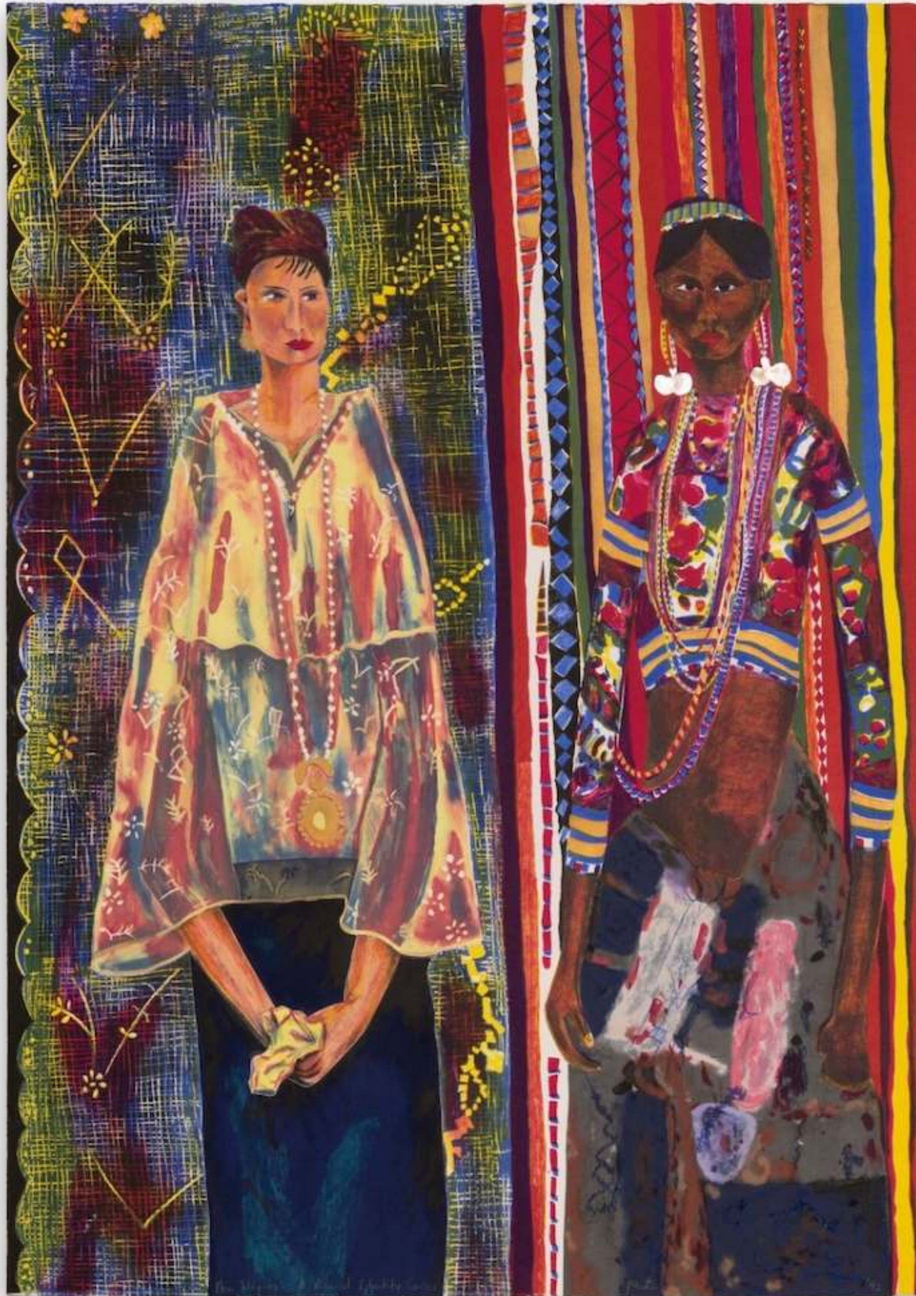
(https://momus2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/5-PacitaAbad_Folder2_InfrontOfHerWork_012.jpg)

Pacita with her painting *Subali*, 1983/1990. Image courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate.

The past and the future met at Abad's birthplace. She was delivered in 1946 at her family home in Batanes. Rural and spellbound, it is the Philippines' northernmost province, so far north that when you approach the shore on a clear day and squint at the horizon, you can see Taiwan. Once a week, when the plane from Manila made its grand landing, all the island's people set out on foot to the airstrip to watch its descent. This was the ethos that defined Abad's childhood: the sense of a planet expanding, of undiscovered lands hovering just within reach.

Just before the dictator Ferdinand Marcos declared a violent period of martial law, Abad took her first step toward a nomad destiny, moving to California in 1971. The dominant narrative typically dilutes this saga into a few nebulous lines about Abad fleeing for her own safety, but an artist's motives are rarely so cut-and-dried. Her father was a politician in Batanes; during elections, a Marcos ally named Rufino Antonio ran against him. To intimidate locals, Antonio hired an armed gang of motorcycle-bound men who tampered with ballot boxes and destroyed the telegraph office on voting day. Abad had been a law student and activist in Manila, and she rallied fellow student activists to bring the issue to Malacañang Palace, the president's official residence. The night before the hearing, thugs machine-gunned the family home in Batanes. Bullets hit the ceiling, ricocheting downward. One landed by Abad's sister's foot. If her brother had sat up in his bunk bed, he would've been shot. Abad left shortly after, though she might have also been impelled by another breed of trauma. In the oral history of her life presented at the Walker Art Center, which organized and first exhibited the retrospective, her brother Butch asserted that only heartbreak could've driven her out of the country. One morning, she opened the newspaper to discover that the man she believed to be her boyfriend had become engaged to another girl. Once so hospitable to her needs, home had turned its back on her, becoming in one wrenching instant the site of "profound, deep, emotional disappointment."

In San Francisco, truly alone for the first time in her life, Abad experienced the special, formative thrill of living freely as a woman. At a world-affairs conference in Monterey, she met her future husband, Jack Garrity, an economist for the World Bank. She accompanied him on his research trips, visits that accreted onto the ornate palimpsest of her work. In Sri Lanka, she studied exorcism masks. In South Korea, she learned to paint with ink brushes. In Vietnam, she befriended Cambodians at refugee camps, inspiring social-realist works like the painting *Flight to Freedom* (1980). Among the first things we see at PS1 are the *Bacongo* series of masks, inspired by the Songye and Luba people of Central Africa; directly across is the charismatic blue imp of Subali in an eponymous painting, modeled after Indonesian puppets. If there is an aesthetic volatility to the PS1 exhibition, it is because the artist never slaked her ravenous thirst for the world. "They say I change from one style to the other," she said(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pm_2CJPz9PU) of her critics. "So? I'm alive." In this way, she hinted at the essence of her work as an ongoing draft of collective memory, of which she was the keeper.



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Abad always returned to the United States, a place that both contained the world and aspired to flatten it. She set herself on canonizing those who arrived most recently, asserting their place in a nation's imagery. In *L.A. Liberty* (1992), a brown-skinned Statue of Liberty dazzles the viewer in a corolla of gold thread and acrylic paint. Her robe is studded with plastic buttons, and mirrors are sewn into the sun of her crown. Dangling from one side of her face is a beaded earring, so realistic you can picture Abad transferring

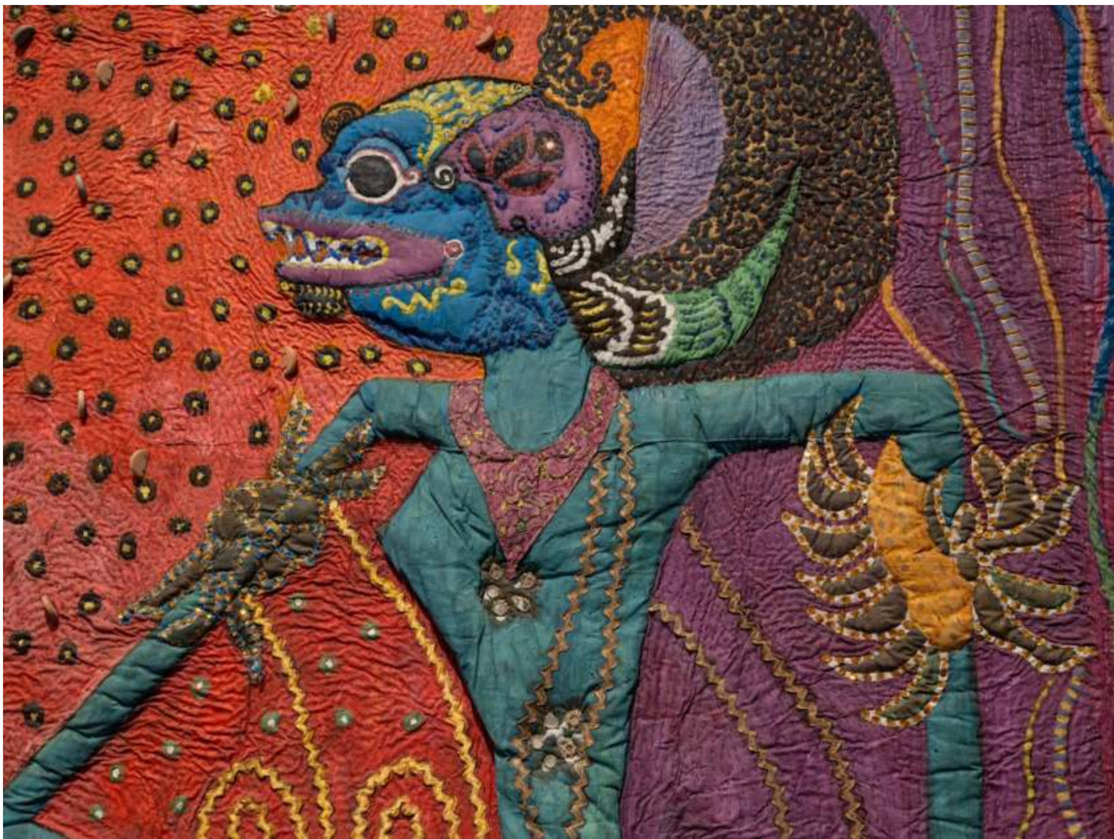
it from her own ear to her subject's. Vermeer affixed his famous pearl to a European girl in abstracted oriental dress. Abad shows us the image in reverse, but her muse hasn't ossified into a flat canvas. Textured and distended, she achieves dimension before our eyes.

This sense of flux is a theme in Abad's American period, when her *trapunto* paintings writhed with the desires and anxieties of the Global South's evolving diaspora. In *I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold* (1991), she weaves a tapestry of disaffection. Six figures orbit one another, envoys of various pockets of the working class: a caregiver, a housekeeper, a street vendor. Their somber faces contradict the work's title, turning it into a postmortem for a dream. But Abad's most inspired choice is her inclusion of found mementos—real denim to clothe a man, a utility paintbrush to scrawl a slogan, and a sheet of lottery tickets to backdrop a mother and her child. These are the relics of common living, enshrined forever in Abad's *trapunto* works. Her insistence on confronting people in the US with the fact of marginalization within their own borders telegraphed her politics as frankly as those salvaged trinkets. She had a journalistic fascination with the aesthetics of identity, with objects that told you who their owners were. One of her more exuberant *trapunto* canvases is *Cross-Cultural Dressing* (1993), in which four figures wear the clothes of their countries. Plurality was the animus of Abad's work. She wove from having inhaled the world's vastness.

Abad was capable of seeing the soul of an artifact, a skill that propelled the folk sensibility for which critics belittled her into an uncharted future. On a drive through rural Sri Lanka in 1984, she spotted a wooden mask outside the home of a medicine man and made her husband stop the car. It was a Sinhalese Sanni exorcism mask portraying a demon face, used in religious rituals to ward off disease. Different masks, she learned, stood for different maladies: one demon might personify cholera and another, smallpox. The ritual itself takes on the form of a comic musical. The mask wearer steps onto a stage and engages in dialogue with the drummer, who humiliates the patient's tormentor with derisive jests. Abad took twenty of these masks back to her hotel and created *Marcos and His Cronies* (1985), a *trapunto* painting that cast Marcos, his wife Imelda, and their cabal of generals, politicians, and charlatans as tumors to be purged from Philippine society. Abad knew that likeness, so crucial to the exorcism, could be the most effective weapon of her work. It was her brilliant choice to adorn the mask representing Imelda with rhinestones, a nod to the first lady's blood-stained extravagance.

At PS1, I was struck by this painting's sheer size, its refusal to scale down its menace. Glamor can be blinding: *Here Lies Love*, the David Byrne–produced musical that premiered on Broadway last year, attempted to make an Evita out of Imelda, obscuring her and her husband's crimes beneath the gloss of their theatrical wealth. Today, barely four

decades after they were ousted by a popular revolution, the family has returned to power. Ferdinand and Imelda's son, who shares his father's name, is president of the Philippines, and their daughter is a senator. They clutch their stolen fortune and have dedicated themselves to whitewashing the memory of their parents' dictatorship. We might take cues from the defiance Abad modeled: in keeping with the exorcism ritual's sense of humor, she confronted her aggressors with a wild sense of mischief, a bratty irreverence. In *Marcos and His Cronies*, one of the snakes coils between Ferdinand's legs, dangerously close to biting him in the groin. He stands on his wife's head, a reference to a joke whispered around Manila at the time: when somebody found Marcos on an upper tier of hell rather than its lowest circle, he explained that it was because Imelda was under him, and he was using her head as a footstool. Abad complemented the Sanni masks with small mirrors from India and stuffed snakes from Thailand, and today it reads like commentary on the universality of evil and its persistence across time.



(https://momus2.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/PS1_Pacita-Abad_50-2000x1500-1.jpg)

Pacita Abad. *Marcos and His Cronies* (detail). 1985–95. Installation view of Pacita Abad, on view at MoMA PS1 from April 4 through September 2, 2024. Photo: Kris Graves.

Abad's excess stood in contrast to the Marcos dictatorship's streamlined aesthetic. While Ferdinand and Imelda commissioned gray, Brutalist buildings and centered Manila in their choice of dress, Abad was vibrant, regional, heteroglossic. She never stopped scouring the

world for objects to weave into her alternative people's history, be it shells, textiles, or toys. She kept exhaustive record of each fabric's origins in her private notes: "Igorot hand-woven cloth from Baguio and Bontoc; *tinalak*, *tabao* scarfs and *malongs* from Mindanao; Chinese floral silks from Binondo; my grandmother's Spanish lace *mantilla* from Cebu." The list goes on, limning the sort of creolized sensibility that made her experiments with other art traditions feel so natural.

To what can we owe Abad's openness to the foreign—the preternatural ease with which she immersed herself in such diverse places, gained the trust of their locals, and became fluent in their ways? It can be hard for many Westerners, even many Asians, to fathom just how much of a melting pot the Philippines is. There are over a hundred languages and nearly twice as many ethnolinguistic groups. Foreign influences run deep, as do the legacies of colonizers, ancient encounters formed through trade, and more modern waves of immigration. The social fabric is Austronesian, Spanish, American, Chinese, Arab, Mexican, Korean. This multiculturalism is so casual, so unexamined, that its profundity can be lost even on locals. When I was growing up in Manila, it was easy to take for granted the everyday coherence of difference, the distance between my father's Tagalog and my mother's Hiligaynon, the proximity on the dining table of Chinese-inspired lumpia and Spanish-inspired lechon, the way complexions varied within families. It was only later, when I moved to the US, that I saw how different America's tediously adjudicated brand of diversity was from the organic kind that produced me and Abad. She must have been relieved whenever she returned home, though in the end it was clear she had outgrown it.

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Pacita Abad's former home and studio, Fundacion Pacita, in Tukon, Batanes.

It was her wish to die in Batanes, looking out on the same ocean that once beguiled her like an invitation. But there was a cruelty to the way fate dealt her its final hand. In 2001, she was diagnosed with advanced lung cancer and subjected to debilitating chemotherapy. Soon she was using a wheelchair. In Batanes, she built herself a home to die in, a stone structure shaped like an arrowhead, its terraces jutting out into the South China Sea. She moved in, feeble but determined, in 2004, and set to work on her last paintings. Quickly, her condition grew dire, and against her wishes she was flown to her doctor in Singapore. She took her last breath there, as her house perched on its hill, brand new and vacant.

It was this house I eventually came to stay in, as a boy in 2010. Abad's family had transformed it into a lodge for tourists, though Batanes is so remote that most Filipinos never bother to visit. Nevertheless, my parents decided to vacation on the island one summer. We spent our days wandering the mountains, cattle grazing nearby as we took in the pure air. Batanes's crime rate is nearly zero; the local joke was that the police had nothing to do during their hours. I remember going to a convenience store that was unmanned. People took what they needed, recorded their purchases in a logbook, and dropped their money in a box.

In the mornings we would wake slowly. Behind the curtains was the ocean Abad loved. What does it mean that she could not die where she wanted? Perhaps this is the bargain some of us make when we choose to leave home and become wanderers instead. Abad chose to be a woman of the world, and the terms of her cosmic mandate entailed that she would always belong to it. To have died where she was born would have been unsuitably cyclical. Her story needed to end elsewhere.

We must have gone to her grave, but this is where the memory fails me. There is a statue of her there, smiling, robust, her hair in many braids. She keeps watch over the dormant land, as far away a corner of the world as when she first left it. Ashes to ashes, that is how it goes. But always the lingering evidence of life, the ghosts that refuse to consign themselves to the past.

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