

CRITIC'S PICK

Stitch by Stitch, Pacita Abad Crossed Continents and Cultures

The Filipino American artist is having her first retrospective at MoMA PS1 as the mainstream art world finally catches up to her work. “You will regret missing it,” our critic says.



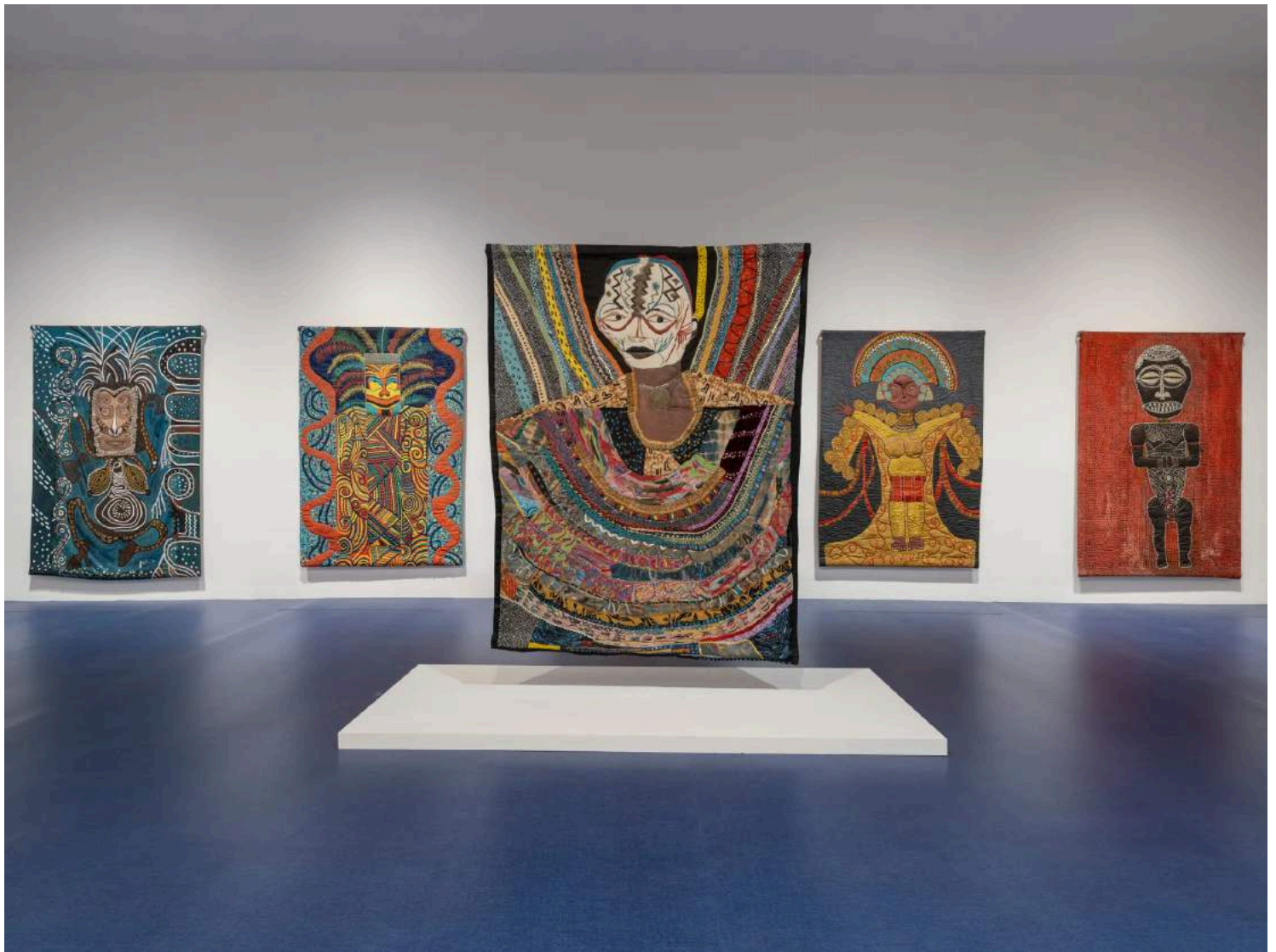
Listen to this article · 5:05 min [Learn more](#)

By Andrew Russeth

Aug. 1, 2024, 5:03 a.m. ET

About a year before she died of cancer, in 2004, at the age of 58, the artist Pacita Abad and a team painted a pedestrian bridge that crosses the Singapore River with exuberant colors and more than 2,000 circles. Surrounded by ho-hum hotels and apartment buildings, it radiates joy. Abad’s work is in museums throughout Asia, and in Manila, where she grew up, the National Museum’s holdings include a painfully lucid 1980 painting of two wary children, Cambodian refugees, holding each other.

However, in New York, where Abad lived briefly in the 1970s, while studying painting at the Art Students League, her work has been scarce. The Museum of Modern Art owns nothing by her, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art just acquired its first piece. During her life, she proposed shows to U.S. museums and received around 100 rejection letters, her family has said. Through Sept. 2, though, we are in luck. MoMA PS1 is hosting the first retrospective dedicated to Abad, which was organized by Victoria Sung at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, where it ran last year. It consists of more than 50 works, and while it should be two or four times larger — she was protean and prolific — it is still thrilling. If you miss it, you will regret it.

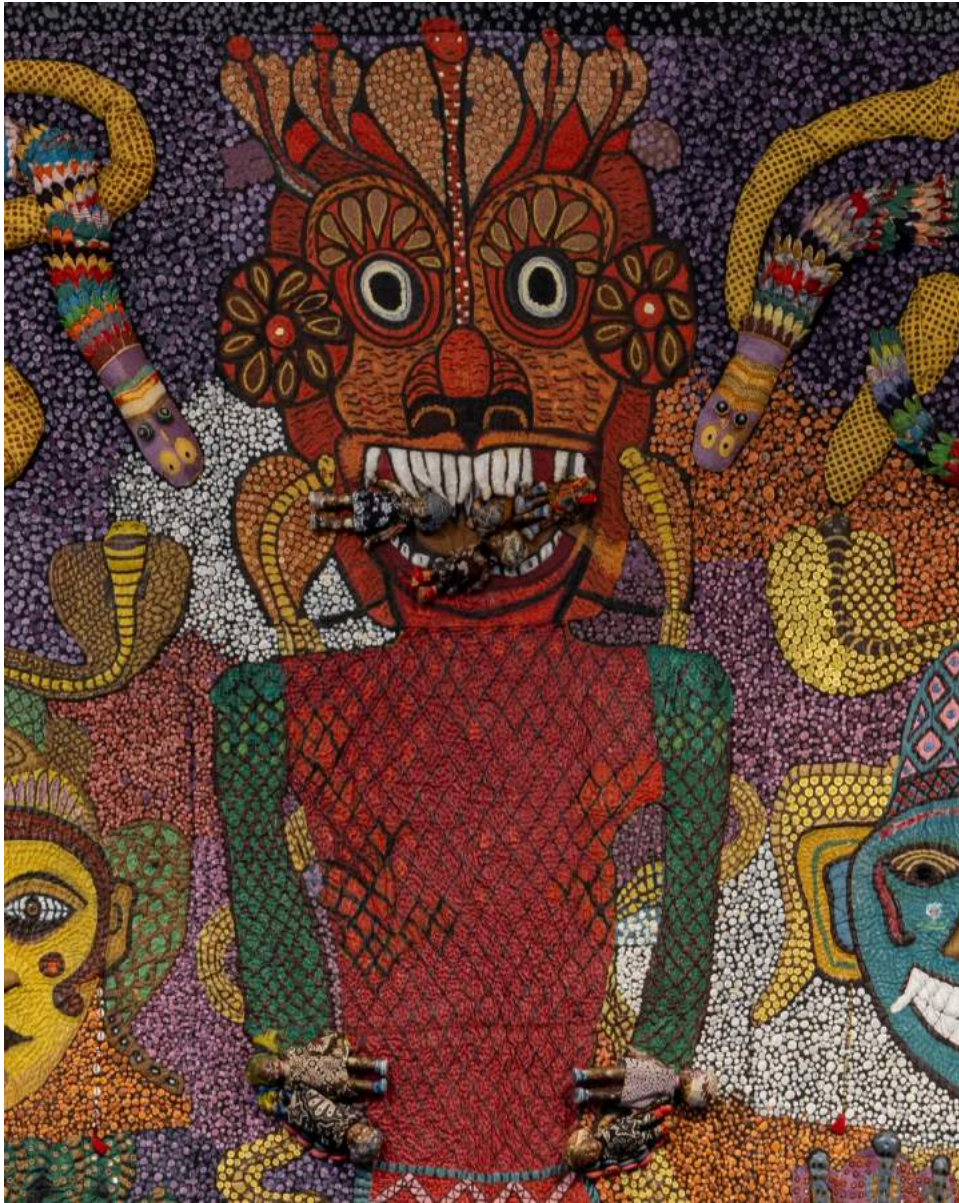


From left, “Oceania Mask (Dancing Demon),” 1983/1990; “Hopi Mask,” 1990; “African Mephisto,” 1981; “Mayan Mask,” 1990; and “African Mask (Kongo),” 1990, on view at MoMA PS1. Kris Graves/MoMA PS1

Abad’s signature works are her trapuntos, quilted paintings that she stuffed and stitched, a technique she learned from an artist-friend in Boston in the early 1980s. The pieces have a warm, confident presence, and they take many forms: hypnotically patterned abstractions, aquatic scenes that teem with plant and animal life (eight comprise a gemlike show, “Underwater Wilderness,” at the Tina Kim Gallery, through Aug. 16) and masks from numerous cultures.

A jaw-dropping trapunto that Abad spent a decade making, “Marcos and His Cronies” (1985–95), is more than 16 feet tall, and represents Ferdinand Marcos, the corrupt dictator and former president of the Philippines, and his cabinet members, as fearsome, fanged demon masks used in exorcism rituals in Sri Lanka. As she often did, Abad stitched thousands of

sequins, buttons and other elements to the painting, so that it almost vibrates off the wall at PS1. Marcos is gnawing on a few tiny dolls and grasping others in his hands: not subtle, not easy to forget.

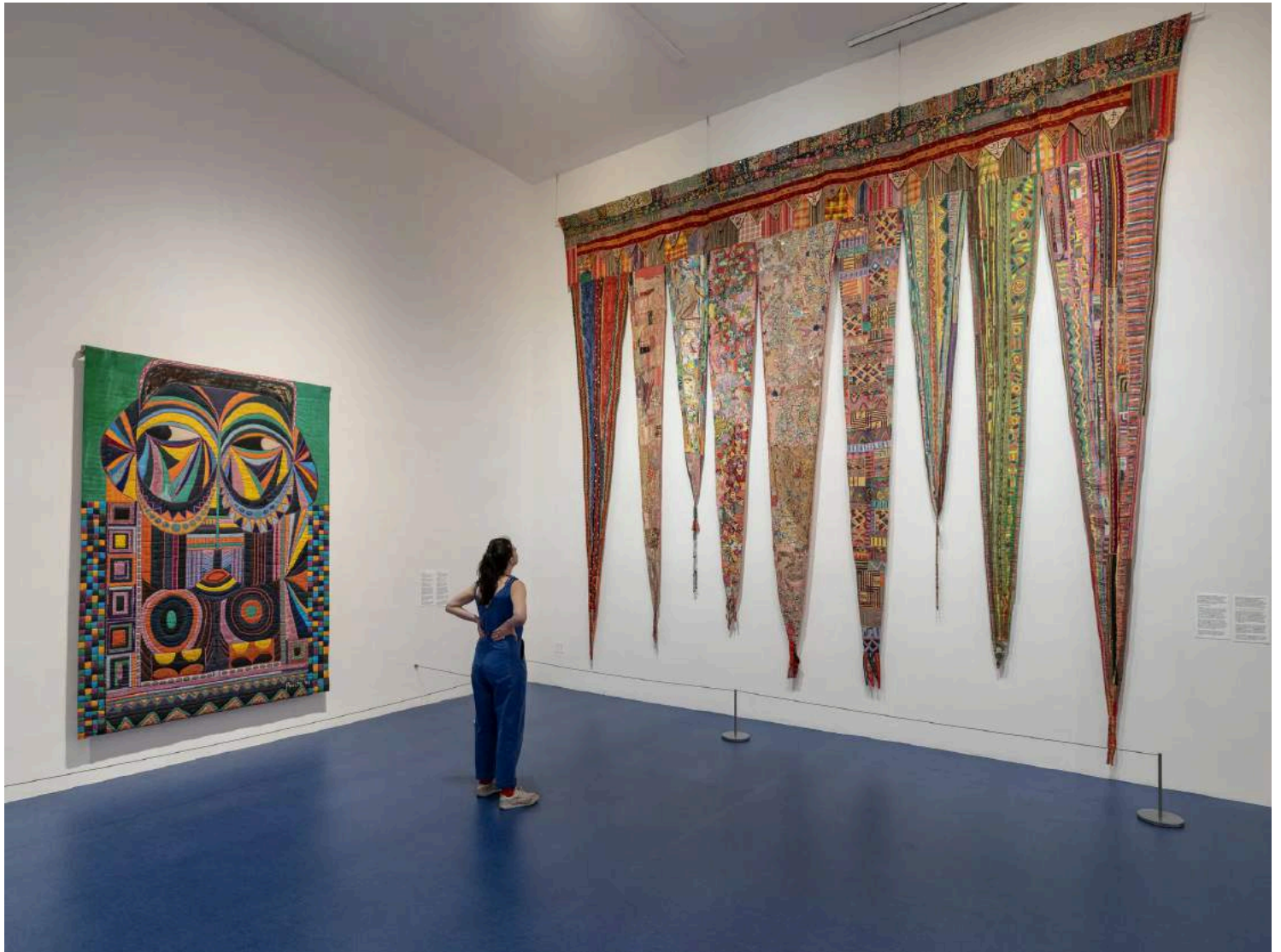


In “Marcos and His Cronies,” 1985–95, Pacita Abad depicts the former Philippine president and dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his cabinet members as fearsome, fanged demon masks. Kris Graves/MoMA PS1

Abad was born in the northernmost province, Batanes, the fifth of 13 children. Her father, and later her mother, served in Congress, and as a student in Manila in the 1960s, Abad helped organize against Marcos. After the family home was hit by gunfire, she went to San Francisco to see an aunt, intending to continue on to Madrid to finish a law degree in safety. Instead, she stayed, and the rest is a biopic-worthy story of one short marriage and a second, enduring one, to Jack Garrity, an American graduate student who became a

development economist. (Her life is charted in a weighty catalog whose contributors include Ruba Katrib, MoMA PS1's director of curatorial affairs, who staged this edition of the exhibition, which will wind up in October at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.)

The couple spent a year traveling from Turkey to the Philippines, largely by hitchhiking, and Abad decided to devote herself to art. In the ensuing years, they traveled extensively and she exhibited widely. Textiles Abad collected made their way into her work. One massive piece, "100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo" (1998), she built by painting and collaging fabric from throughout the Philippines, including, she wrote, "pañuelos" (scarves and shawls) "worn by my aunts" and her grandmother's "Spanish lace mantilla from Cebu."



At left, "European Mask," 1990; at right, "100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo," 1998, which Abad built by painting and collaging fabric from throughout the Philippines. Kris Graves/MoMA PS1

Abad's art evinces a deep reverence, a love, for the world — and for people, for what they make with their hands and for what they treasure. She painted and stitched vivid pictures of mothers, immigrants (some detained at the U.S.-Mexico border), Korean shopkeepers in Los Angeles after the 1992 riots, Lady Liberty with brown skin and, after learning to scuba dive, those wild submarine visions. On her aquatic adventures, she felt “like an infidel intruding into something sacred,” she said.

Abad's commitment to everyday people makes Alice Neel and Leon Golub forebears (she met both), and her rich cosmopolitanism and quilting method connect her with Faith Ringgold (who was an admirer). Really, though, she was *sui generis*, creating a freewheeling artistic universe (even ornamenting her clothes in her effervescent style), like a Yayoi Kusama. She was, by all accounts, indefatigable, as well as persuasive. Government officials congratulated her on her Singapore bridge project, and while that was nice, she said, she found the praise of “taxi drivers, hospital workers, shopkeepers and especially the children” far more rewarding.

Pacita Abad

Through Sept. 2 at MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Queens; 718-784-2086; momaps1.org.