

Pacita Abad, MoMA PS1 review – the joy of colour and a magpie instinct

The Filipina artist used fabric and bric a brac from her global travels to powerful emotional effect

Ariella Budick YESTERDAY

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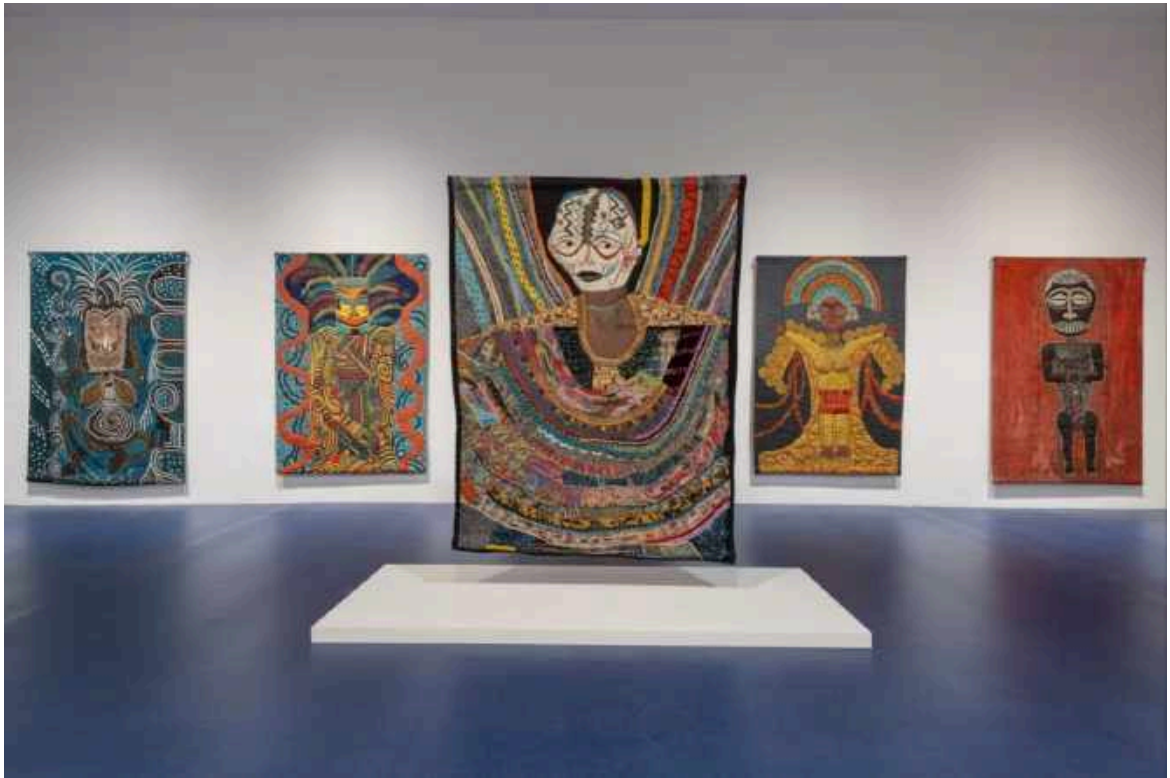
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Pacita Abad's giant artworks have staged a friendly takeover of MoMA PS1 in New York. They've infiltrated the ordinarily gloomy galleries, animated the walls and set the place aglow. Maybe it's because her work buzzes with such disreputable quantities of joy that Abad is getting her first retrospective only now, 20 years after her death at 58.

In a video made three years before she took US citizenship in 1994, Abad was asked about her most important contribution to the art of her adopted country. With a wide smile and throaty laugh, she cried: "Colour! I have given it colour!" It's not as if American art was all shades of taupe before she came along, but her palette comes with that festive exclamation mark, signalling unbounded exuberance and a desire to make everything – living spaces, clothes, mural-sized paintings – bright and bold.

Abad did more for the US than just broaden its range of usable hues. She crammed her art full of folk traditions, making political messaging and feminism safe for pleasure. Even her most pointed works quiver with delight.



An installation view of the MoMA PS1 show © Kris Graves

Abad had to build up positivity the hard way. The fifth of 13 siblings, she was born in the Philippines in 1946. Her parents served in the government and in Congress but fell afoul of Ferdinand Marcos in the 1960s. After Abad led opposition protests against the dictatorship, Marcos's goons machine-gunned the family home, injuring nobody but prompting her to emigrate. In 1970, she wound up in San Francisco, where the heady atmosphere, burbling with countercultural creativity and political protest, induced her to stay. She pursued a master's in history, took a daytime job as secretary and worked as a seamstress at night, all at the same time.

She was about to start law school at the University of California, Berkeley, when she met Jack Garrity, a graduate student in international finance at Stanford. Together, they took a transformative trip across Asia, hitchhiking from Turkey to the Philippines via Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Wherever they alighted, Abad was besotted by traditional fabrics and jewellery, which she stockpiled, wore and worked with for the rest of her life. That year of travel led her to abandon a legal career. She and Garrity, who ultimately became an economist at the World Bank, continued their relentless travels, pausing just long enough for her to take courses at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC and at the Art Students League in New York.



A detail from 'Subali' (1985-95) © Kris Graves

In the early 1980s, Abad launched a series of “trapunti”, ambitious, room-sized works that combined the heroic dimensions of conventionally male genres such as fresco and history painting with more traditionally feminine techniques of embroidery and ornamentation. She painted large canvases and quilted them together, layering the surface with beads, bits of fabric, ribbons, mirrors, shells and sequins. The results, which puff out from two dimensions into three, are monumentally assertive and gloriously ornate.

In these works, Abad staked out a proudly globalist stance. At a time before cultural appropriation was considered a no-no, she gathered up influences wherever she found them, and the fact that she was neither male nor African didn't prevent her from producing “Masai Man” (1982), a quilt based on a Kenyan mask, encrusted with little mirrors in the Indian manner and cowrie shells from Papua New Guinea, blending vastly disparate regions in a great cosmopolitan mash-up.



'LA Liberty' (1992) © Pacita Abad Art Estate and Spike Island, Bristol/Max McClure

In the 1980s and '90s, the art world tilted towards conceptualism and painters joined the battle to strip art of transcendental aspirations. ("Beauty is lulling, boredom is liberating" could have been their motto, though they were rarely so direct or concise.) Abad moved in the opposite direction. She veered away from the tastefully sleek, towards clutter and craft and profuse sensuality. In this, she followed a generation of feminists. Miriam Schapiro invented "femmage" in the 1970s by fixing fragments of paper and fabric to surfaces and invoking the quilt as a paradigm of women's expressivity. The critic Linda Nochlin dubbed Schapiro's explosively gaudy patterns a "patchwork liberation."

Abad linked the unshackling of women with the emancipation of her native country. She celebrated the Philippines' centennial with "100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo" (1998), a banner assembled from textiles she collected while traversing the archipelago from its northernmost island (Batanes) to its southern tip (Jolo). The overload of pattern and texture, collaged together and stitched on to a wedding tent she bought in Zamboanga, concentrates the Philippines' immense cultural variety. The nation incorporates more than 7,000 islands, more than 180 ethnolinguistic groups and innumerable histories of exchange with colonists, traders, invaders and rivals.



'Old Dhaka' (1978) © Pacita Abad Art Estate / Rik Sferra for Walker Art Center

The banner functions as a catalogue of personal and collective memories, and its meaning depends heavily on Abad's list of the various scraps she used: "Igorot hand-woven cloth from Baguio and Bontoc", "hand-woven ikat weavings from the villages in Kalinga-Apayao", "tinalak, tabao scarfs and malongs from Mindanao", "Chinese floral silks from Binondo", "my grandmother's Spanish lace mantilla from Cebu", "crocheted curtains and dresses made by my mother", "pañuelos worn by my aunts" and "the old jusi barongs of my father".

You don't need to know the origin story of each fragment of fabric to register the emotional impact of this complex, polychrome, multi-layered reliquary or her other, similarly expansive concoctions. It's enough to sense Abad's magpie spirit, her talent for stirring together Sinhalese masks, Hmong story cloths, Tibetan thangkas and dozens of other bits and bobs picked along the way. You understand that she saw the world as a vast button jar, a collection of good ideas to be avidly picked over and relished.



'Spring Is Coming' (2001) © Pacita Abad Art Estate

Towards the end of her too-short life, she channelled this plenty into abstractions that are among my favourites. “Spring is Coming” (2001) evokes a cosmic meadow ruffled by a breeze. Slashes of green, blue and orange invite you to sink in and wiggle your toes in its cool blades. “Early One Morning” (2003) is as unabashedly loud as a marching band coming around the corner. It’s a festival piece alive with confetti, streamers, flashing lights, reflections — all the glister of daily celebration, conjuring cheerful chaos.

To September 2, momaps1.org

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