

# Globally-inspired art star Pacita Abad makes Canadian debut at the AGO

Opening Oct. 9, retrospective exhibition showcases Abad's global influences and social consciousness

Philippine-born artist mixes painting and quilting to create richly textured wall hangings

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A vivid kaleidoscope of colour, the first major retrospective dedicated to artist [Pacita Abad](#) (b. Philippines, 1946–2004) makes its only Canadian stop at the Art Gallery of Ontario, opening on Oct. 9, 2024. Spanning her 32-year career and showcasing Abad's vibrant paintings, prints and trapuntos, this revelatory exhibition of more than 100 works celebrates the late artist's bold blend of global craft, feminism and social consciousness.

Born in Batanes, Philippines, Abad migrated to the United States in 1970 to escape political persecution after she led a student demonstration against the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos. A global citizen whose work reflects a lifetime of artistic and political engagement, she travelled extensively, visiting more than 60 countries in her lifetime. Abad incorporated into her work the textiles, colours and materials she encountered – from Indonesian batik printing to Korean ink drawing, macramé and beading. Her signature medium is the trapunto, a hybrid art form she developed in 1981, inspired by medieval Italian tapestries. In these signature pieces, painted and embellished canvas is stuffed then quilted, to create large, richly textured wall hangings.

Abad's desire to give visibility to political refugees and oppressed peoples, is as striking as her numerous abstract experiments with colour. "I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility," she said.

Developed in collaboration with the Pacita Abad Art Estate and organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, [Pacita Abad](#) is curated by Victoria Sung, Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive and former Associate Curator, Visual Arts, Walker Art Center, with Matthew Villar Miranda, curatorial fellow, Visual Arts, Walker Art Center. The presentation at the AGO is organized by Renée van der Avoird, Associate Curator of Canadian Art, AGO, in collaboration with Carla Felix, Community Outreach Advisor.

"Under-recognized in her lifetime, Abad's work is defined by her political engagement, her ceaseless artistic experimentation and by her celebration of everyday labour. Through her artwork, she tells stories of diasporic experience that are urgent and moving." said van der Avoird. "Abad's uniquely global perspective is one that I believe will resonate on many levels with our audiences, and I look forward to introducing her work to Ontarians."

[Pacita Abad](#) is accompanied by a 352-page catalogue, published by the Walker Art Centre and edited by Victoria Sung, with texts by Sung and Matthew Villar Miranda as well as by Julia Bryan-Wilson, Professor of



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LGBTQ Art History at Columbia University; Ruba Katrib, Curator and Director of Curatorial Affairs at MoMa PS1; Nancy Lim, Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture at SFMOMA; and Xiaoyu Weng. It also features an expansive oral history, edited by Sung and Pio Abad, with 20 contributors, including artists, curators, family members, and friends. The catalogue will be available at shopAGO this fall for \$91 CAD.

**Pacita Abad** is free for Ontarians under 25, AGO Members, Annual Pass holders, and Indigenous Peoples and is included in General Admission. AGO Members see it first, beginning Oct. 9, 2024. Annual Pass holders and single ticket buyers see it beginning Oct. 12, 2024. The exhibition runs until January 19, 2025. For more details on how to become a Member or Annual Passholder, visit [ago.ca](http://ago.ca).

Additional programming will be announced closer to opening.

### **About the exhibition**

**Pacita Abad** features more than 100 works from collections across Asia, Europe and North America. Key works in the exhibition are accompanied by panel texts in English and Tagalog. Organized thematically into seven overlapping, loosely chronological sections, the exhibition opens with *100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo* (1998), a series of draping triangles, featuring fabrics from every province of the Philippines.

Centering Abad as an activist, in *Marcos and His Cronies* (1985–95), Abad portrays the dictator responsible for her own immigrant experience, as a towering, highly ornamental dragon demon, surrounded by masks and shown consuming people. Made 15 years after her escape, the memory looms large – as evidenced by the artwork’s size – 5 meters by 2.5 meters, embroidered with textiles, mirrors, shells, buttons, glass beads, gold thread, and padded cloth.

A selection of powerful social realist works from 1970s and 80s follow, featuring scenes of diasporic communities from Asia, Africa, and Latin America facing persecution and poverty. These images set the stage again further on in the exhibition, for her series of trapunto paintings, *Immigrant Experience* (1983–95), which depict the layered realities of immigrant life in the United States. This tension is poignantly captured in *L.A. Liberty* (1992), in which a brown-skinned, patchworked Statue of Liberty poses triumphantly against a rainbow sunburst.

Non-western masks and spirits are reoccurring motifs for Abad. A highlight of the exhibition is the 15-meter six-part mural *Masks from Six Continents* (1990–93). Commissioned in 1990 for the Metro Centre in Washington D.C., the multicoloured trapuntos that comprise the series reflect each habitable continent through a different Indigenous mask. All that is, except Europe. Abad once said of the works that they were “all the different people I see on the train.”

The mid-way point of the exhibition provides a further introduction to the artist, with photos, a range of archival material and studio ephemera. In the short film, *Pacita Abad: Wild at Art* (1995), Abad discusses her background, passion for world travel, and the ways she sought to incorporate and highlight traditionally female art practices. Directed by Kavery Kaul, this film is an Asian Women United Presentation, a Riverfilms Production, and an Academy Film Archives Restoration.

Heavily inspired by jazz music, Abad’s experiments with patterned abstraction are celebrated with a selection of works from the 1990s, including *The Sky is Falling, the Sky is Falling* (1998), a vibrant trapunto evoking of what it’s like to stand in a protest.

Later in life, Abad learned to swim, and in scuba diving found a new source of inspiration. The exhibition includes eight large scale underwater landscapes, including *My Fear of Night Diving* (1985). In these images, drawn from life and made vibrant through collage, beauty and peril are shown in equal measure.

Exiting the exhibition, visitors encounter images of Abad’s final project, *Alkaff Bridge, Singapore*, a 55-meter bridge she covered in more than 2,000 colourful circles. It was completed a few months before she passed away from lung cancer in 2004.

### **ABOUT PACITA ABAD**

Pacita Abad (1946–2004) has been the subject of recent solo exhibitions, including *I Thought the Streets Were Paved with Gold* at the Jameel Arts Center, Dubai (2021); *Life in the Margins* at Spike Island, Bristol (2020); and *A Million Things to Say* at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila (2018). Her work has been featured in group exhibitions, including the 58th Carnegie International (2022); the

Kathmandu Triennale 2077 (2002); the 13th Gwangju Biennale (2021); and the 11th Berlin Biennale (2020). Her work can be found in the collections of Tate Modern, London; M+ Museum, Hong Kong; and National Gallery of Singapore, among others. Her art and archives are managed by the Pacita Abad Art Estate in Los Angeles.

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*Pacita Abad* is organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

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#### **ABOUT THE AGO**

Located in Toronto, the Art Gallery of Ontario is one of the largest art museums in North America, attracting approximately one million visitors annually. The AGO Collection of more than 120,000 works of art ranges from cutting-edge contemporary art to significant works by Indigenous and Canadian artists to European masterpieces. The AGO presents wide-ranging exhibitions and programs, including solo exhibitions and acquisitions by diverse and underrepresented artists from around the world. The AGO is embarking on the seventh expansion project undertaken since it was founded in 1900. When completed the Dani Reiss Modern and Contemporary Gallery will increase exhibition space for the museum's growing modern and contemporary collection and reflect the people who call Toronto home. With its groundbreaking Annual Pass program, the AGO is one of the most affordable and accessible attractions in the GTA. Visit [ago.ca](http://ago.ca) to learn more.

The AGO is funded in part by the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming. Additional operating support is received from the City of Toronto, the Canada Council for the Arts, and generous contributions from AGO Members, donors, and private-sector partners.

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