

The Charismatic Vitality of Pacita Abad's Trapuntos

The New Yorker

9–11 minutes

[Jackson Arn](#)

The New Yorker's art critic

The Filipina artist Pacita Abad—who visited at least sixty countries, learning from Afghan embroidery, Mexican muralism, Javanese dyeing, Sri Lankan masks, and Pakistani quilts—makes me think of Reno, Nevada, the biggest little city in the world. In the thirty-two years preceding her death, at fifty-eight, in 2004, she stitched and painted whole metropolises of *stuff*, more than fifty of which appear in her *MoMA PS1* retrospective (through Sept. 2). And yet her creations (truly some of the biggest little art you'll ever see) never exhaust. All the shades and shapes and textures have been adroitly squeezed in—it's as though the entire visible spectrum were a thing that you could hold in your fist.





Detail of "European Mask" (1990).

Art work by Pacita Abad / Courtesy MOMA; Photograph by Kris Graves

Abad was living in Boston when, in the early eighties, she began sewing canvases into padded patches and encrusting the results—quilts called *trapuntos*—with paint, beads, sequins, and an archivist's nervous breakdown's worth of other materials. "European Mask" (pictured) is, if you can believe it, one of the more subdued examples in the show, which has received critical hosannas galore since originating at the Walker Art Center, last year. It is odd how certain "tragically unappreciated" artists are converted into marble busts of themselves shortly after they die. This is supposed to be a compliment, of course, but can sometimes seem like a guilty way of balancing out neglect, with much the same outcome: the artist, now presented as incapable of anything but greatness, is hard to see straight, the art even harder. Abad's work strikes me as more hit-or-miss than the raves suggest, though this is part of its charisma: in her *trapuntos*, as on any city street, there is plenty to delight in and plenty to wince at. She isn't going for perfection; her specialty is a bright vitality that's always a few paces ahead, inviting you to chase after it. Happy trails.