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How Pacita Abad Wove a Multicultural Tapestry of Humanity

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11–13 minutes

An installation view of “Pacita Abad” at MoMA PS1. Photo: Kris Graves

In recent years, there has been a significant resurgence of interest in women’s textile practices. No longer confined to the undervalued realm of craft, they are now finally being elevated to the status of fine art and recognized as influential statements of cultural identity. It is within this context that figures like Pacita Abad make a case themselves.

Born in the Philippines but living a nomadic life worldwide, Abad developed a uniquely cosmopolitan view. In her textile works, she combined and stitched different cultures and spiritualities together in a continuous reviving and fluid blending of symbols and myths. Overlooked all her lifetime, Abad and her work have recently been the subject of broad institutional attention.

On the twentieth anniversary of her death, MoMa PS1 has hosted “Pacita Abad,” an extensive retrospective of the prolific Filipina-American artist’s works that was first shown at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis before moving to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and then landing in New York before traveling to its final stop at the Art Gallery of Ontario in October. Abad’s work was also featured in the 2024 Venice Biennale and entered the permanent collections of Tate Modern in London and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. Korean art dealer Tina Kim was instrumental in introducing more people to Abad’s work by

advocating for its importance and promoting it internationally.

Pacita Abad with *Bacongo I* (1983) in her Washington, D.C. studio in 1986. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate

Still, it was some time before the art world began to appreciate the depth of messages embedded in Abad's craft-forward works, which were long considered too "decorative," ethnic and folklorist. Her style's diverse and eclectic range of elements has, in fact, often been described using the Philippine concept of "borloloy," which translates into English as something like excess ornamentation. But the art world eventually recognized that it was precisely this variety of colors, symbols and materials that enabled Abad's work to not only bear witness to but also actively embody transnationalism and multiculturalism.

Color has been central to Abad's art, being for her a form of resistance to cold Western modernism. Animated by a fear of the "horror vacui," her works are exuberantly filled with pigments and elements, refusing any blank or white space. When asked in a 1991 interview how she had contributed to American art, Abad said she gave it color, proudly pointing to her richly decorated aesthetic as an acknowledgment and celebration of the traditions and sensibilities of her home country and the entirety of Asia.

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Textile has always been a practice that allows for the interweaving of different threads that connect communities, and Abad

made her work a platform for and a receptacle of human exchanges. She shows the potential of the stratification, overlapping and hybridization of iconographies and symbologies that have similarly attempted to give answers to some key existential questions humans share across latitudes.

Over her 32-year career, Abad has confronted various subjects globally, from ritual masks, deities and empathetic portrayals of immigrant lives to vibrantly patterned abstractions that tried to translate the cosmic energies animating the interconnectedness of all things.

From left: Pacita Abad, *European Mask,* 1990, and *100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo,* 1998. Photo: Kris Graves

Closing in just under two weeks, the exhibition at MoMa PS1 is organized thematically and succeeds in providing a complete overview of her endless experimentation through different mediums, including paint, textiles and paper.

Who was Pacita Abad?

Born in 1946 in Batanes, the northernmost island province of the Philippines, Abad grew up in the capital city of Manila. In the 70s, she was forced to escape the country and its political repression after being at the helm of a student demonstration against Marcos' dictatorship. From that moment, Abad began her pilgrimage to more than sixty countries around the world, from Bangladesh to Mexico, continuously and restlessly absorbing elements of different cultural and value systems. Immersing herself in communities of artists and makers, Abad engaged with this process of both the assimilation and exchange of practices, traditions and values embedded within them. The results of this include seemingly abstract totemic figures and faces thatappear reminiscent of ritual masks or some deity in control of nature and the cosmic order.

In the exhibition's first large room is a powerful example of that: *Masks from Six Continents* (1990–93), which Abad created for a public commission in the Metro Center in Washington, D.C. Given that it was a central transit hub where people from different countries crossed paths daily, she wanted to create a work that could speak to the six inhabitable continents of the

world by representing traditional local masks for it. Here we find masks from Oceania to Africa, including an Oceania Mask (Dancing Demon), a Hopi Mask for North America, a Mayan Mask for South America, an African Mask (Kongo), a Subali for Asia and a European Mask. So uncannily familiar and similar, proving how recurring archetypes and similar traditional techniques connect humans beyond national identities and boundaries. As French Philospher Roger Callois formulated in his exploration of the use of masks within rituals, play and culture, these items have been used by humans as a bridge between the real and the imagined, the self and the other, and the human and the divine, allowing individuals to step into different roles or personas and embrace a broader dimension of universal connection with something beyond this reality. In Abad's works, this concept takes on different symbolic representations, resulting in a universal community that shares the need to tap into something beyond our limited human existence.

Another view of "Pacita Abad" at MoMA PS1. Photo: Kris Graves

Consistently maintaining an extraordinarily flamboyant and extremely independent spirit, from the 1980s onward, Abad developed her highly personal and unique technique of textile painting she called "trapunto" (from the Italian word trapungere, meaning "to embroider"). After painting her canvases, she would stitch, stuff and embellish them, creating three-dimensional surfaces with a tactility that further recorded the lived experience of human exchange. As Abad explained in a statement ahead of one of her first shows, "I paint, using either oil or acrylic, on canvas and then collage. This top layer carries the design. To this, I added a backing cloth and polyester filling in between. The two layers are then joined with running stitches."

Some works in the MoMA PS1 show are more directly political, commenting on the dynamics of power and unequal distribution of resources caused by globalization, which exacerbates differences between the Global South and the North, keeping alive extractive practices started with colonialism. The names of big fashion brands make an appearance in some of the works addressing the exploitation of Southern labor forces that produce for the wealthier societies in the North.

Notably, observing these phenomena from her specific Filipino background provided Abad with a unique transhistorical

perspective, allowing her practice to trace the course of historical and geopolitical dynamical repeating. The Phillippines were actively involved in what we can consider the first form of global trade when the Spanish Galleons (mostly made in Manila by indigenous people) sailed on the trade route Acapulco-Manila, the first to connect Asia with the Americas, passing through Europe. All this resulted in rich cultural and linguistic variety, with 182 ethnolinguistic groups—110 of which are Indigenous—in the archipelago.

This deep historical multiculturality is exemplified in the work *100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo*, which traces the threads of the complex narrative of the Philippines' history between the maritime trade and successive Spanish, Japanese and American colonization. The work is a combination of textile fragments Abad collected in different regions and communities, showing the wide variety of traditions from place to place, from "Igorot hand-woven cloth from Baguio and Bontoc; hand-woven ikat weavings from the villages in Kalinga-Apayao; talk, tabao scarfs and man longs from Mindanao; Chinese floral silks from Binondo; and my grandmother's Spanish lace mantilla from Cebu," as Abad noted in a statement accompanying the piece with the occasion of its presentation at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila in the late 1980s celebrating Philippines independence.

Pacita Abad, *Old Dhaka,* 1978. Oil on canvas. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate. Rik Sferra. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate.

In later works, Abad directly addresses her experience as a migrant and the illusion of the American dream, making space in her art for stories of working-class immigrants of color that are often misrepresented or ignored. Mainly conceived amid the so-called "culture wars" of the 1990s, a time of tremendous social and political debate around increasing diversity and rates of immigration, these works were first exhibited when Abad finally became a U.S. citizen.

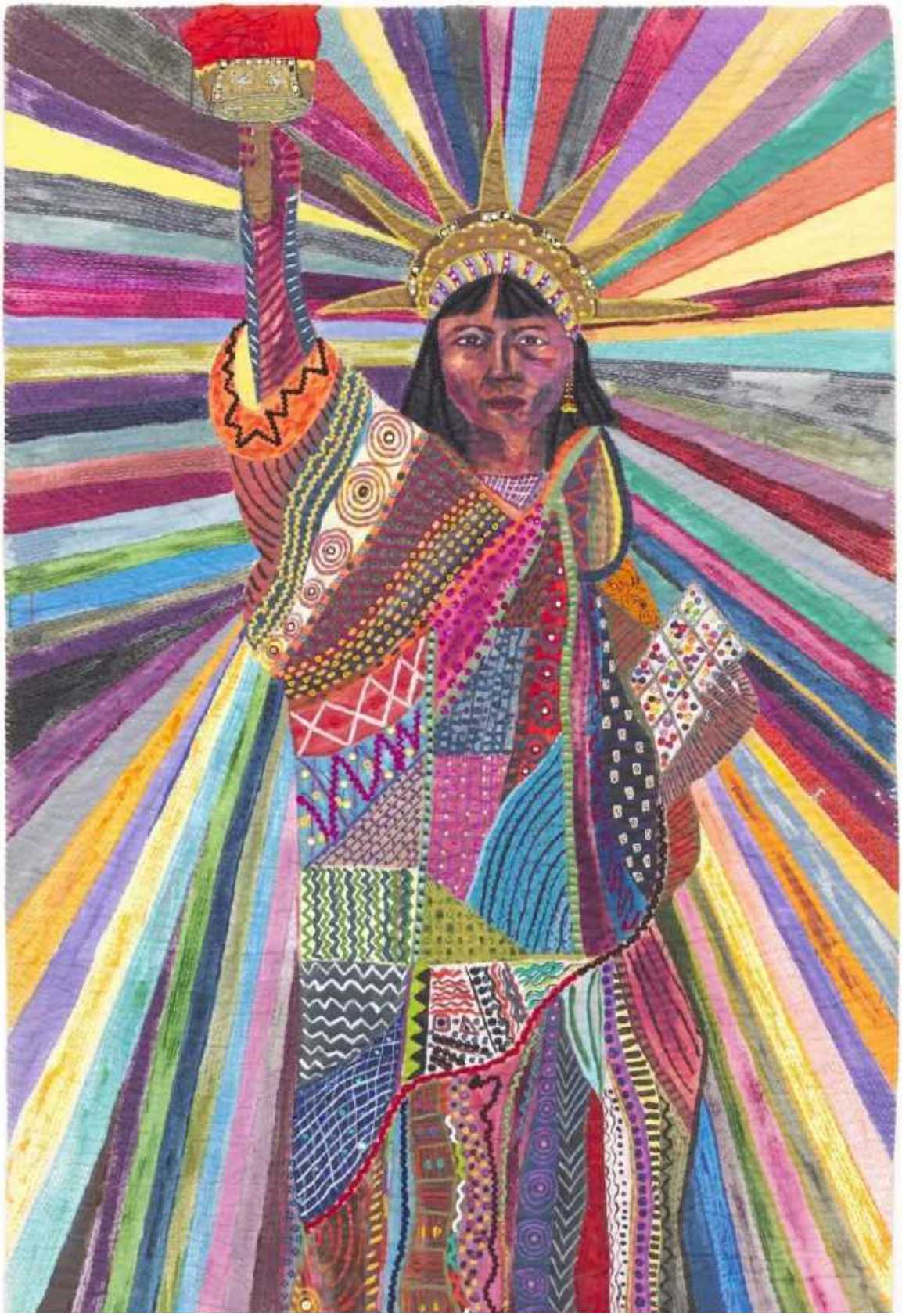
Abad also questioned how the migrant's history was told and recorded in the United States, often citing the contributions of specific ethnic groups. After visiting Ellis Island, she was surprised to see how little was acknowledged and documented about the immigration stories of Asians, Latin Americans and Africans in what seemed an intentional historical omission. To compensate, Abad imagined her version of the Statue of Liberty, *L.A. Liberty, L.A.,* as a brown-skinned woman, with "L.A." alluding to both "Latino American" and "Los Angeles."

Always traveling with a sketchbook in hand, Abad recorded the migrant experience in different parts of the world, showing the universality of the collective trauma of displacement and extending it to a commentary on the condition of exile, identity loss

and assimilation rapidly spreading worldwide.

The show successfully highlights Abad's unconditional openness to other cultures, listening and emphasizing humanity in all its variety while portraying both the positive and negative aspects of globalism in her work. Centered on this central notion of complicated intersectionalities that Abad has broadly explored throughout her work, the exhibition turns into a powerful statement encouraging multiculturalism and a radical acceptance of "the other" as part of a broader tapestry of our humanity.

"Pacita Abad**" is on view at MoMa Ps1 through September 2.**



Pacita Abad, *L.A. Liberty*, 1992. Acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons, mirrors, gold thread, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; T.B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2022. Max McClure. Courtesy Pacita Abad's Estate.