

The Year of Pacita Abad — Positively Filipino | Online Magazine for Filipinos in the Diaspora

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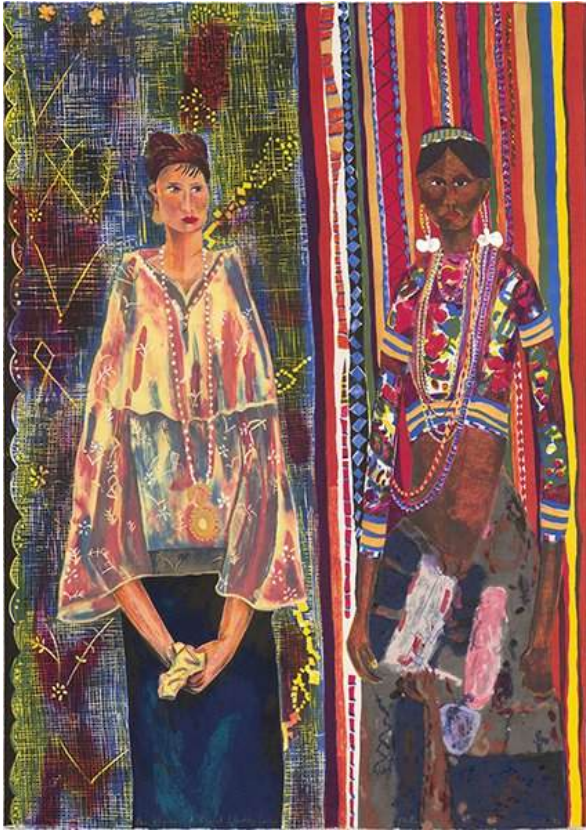


The multi-colored Pacita was a walking art work herself (*Photo courtesy of Butch Abad*).

Two decades after her death, Filipino American artist Pacita Abad is having her best year. A traveling exhibition that began last April at the Walker Art Center in Minnesota has launched Abad, a Batanes native who lived and worked in over 60 countries, into international stardom.

The exhibition went on to the SF MOMA in San Francisco, where Abad first decided to be an artist in the 1960s, and the MOMA PS1 in New York, where she first studied art under John Heliker and Robert Beverly Hale. In October, the exhibition will make its final stop at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where it will run until January 19, 2025.

While she was alive, Abad did not quite get the recognition she deserved within Philippine art circles. The exuberance and whimsy of her trapunto paintings, enormous quilts on which she painted and stitched beads, buttons, sequins, and broken glass, didn't quite fit in with the work of her contemporaries. In 2018, an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design in Manila, her first since her death in 2004, relaunched her onto Manila's art scene. The show, titled "A Million Things To Say," focused on works that reflected influences from her travels and curated to show off her work's precision, often ignored in discussion of her practice.



Filipina: A racial identity crisis (1991) (Source: pacitaabad.com)

Discourse surrounding Abad's work usually fixates on its most obvious qualities, the towering scale and exuberant color. Her trapunto paintings, which measure several feet high, are made more impressive by the fact that she never did studies, preferring to paint and stitch objects and textiles directly onto the fabric.



Abad's artistic practice is often overshadowed by her itinerant lifestyle and larger-than-life persona. It is nearly impossible to find writing on Pacita Abad that doesn't mention her loud, colorful personality. Stories of Abad, who once attended an exhibition opening at the Ayala Museum in full scuba gear, make it easy to see why she became an artist; in retrospect, it is difficult to imagine her any other way.



Pacita often depicted the struggles of women in her canvases – her work allows us to peek into refugee camps in Cambodia, houses of ill repute in Manila, and villages in many parts of the developing world. In L.A. Liberty, Pacita reimagines Lady Liberty as a brown woman clad in an array of colors– a visual and inclusive retelling of the American immigration story

With her very person as a canvas, Pacita embodies the liberation of the Filipina,
in all her bold and unapologetic *kayumanggi* glory.

Pacita Abad in scuba gear

Though Abad's father, a Philippine congressman, intended for her to become a politician and sent her away during the Marcos regime to study law in Spain, she took a detour to San Francisco and stumbled into the counterculture community of the 1970s. Although Abad had previously never picked up a paintbrush, it was there that she decided to pursue art. She studied art for the first time at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Art Students League in New York.





Pacita abruptly left school in the early 70s, flew to San Francisco and there, was drawn into the growing hippie counter-culture. It was her entry point into the art world (*Photo courtesy of Butch Abad*).

Abad's short but intense life leads one to wonder what else she could have accomplished had she not died so young. Her last exhibition, "Circles In My Mind," ran at the Cultural Center of the Philippines just a few months before her death. The show was revived by Silverlens Galleries this year, featuring collages of drawn, painted, and cut-out circles in the main exhibition space, and delicate oil-on-paper monoprints of flowers in a smaller room.

In contrast to Abad's most famous works, her trapuntos, the show at Silverlens offered a quieter, more introspective side to the artist that has largely been unseen by the public. As Abad's audience grows, as it will, especially now that she is featured at the 60th Venice Biennale's central exhibition "Foreigners Everywhere," so will the interest in her lesser-known works.

Abad is firmly situated in the international art world as an artist of immigrant experience. Her recent stardom is intertwined with connotations of exoticism and marginalization. One of her best-known works, "L.A. Liberty," portrays the Statue of Liberty as a woman of color, a description she herself claimed in reference to the flamboyant colors that dominate her practice and the othering she experienced as a Filipino woman in the United States.



It's easy to see why grand narratives about immigrant life in the US have become the bread-and-butter of Pacita's legacy; but while Abad might be most famous in international circles as an artist of the diaspora, her influence is strong in her native Batanes, where several artists have emerged in her wake.

While Abad has found stardom in the center of the art world, one can imagine her real triumph is her legacy among her compatriots in the margins.

In the years since her death, her family has exerted great effort to train Ivatan artists. Her studio in Batanes, which sits on top of a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean, hosts annual workshops for young painters. In the streets of Basco, there are numerous small shops selling art supplies and paintings by locals. While Abad has found stardom in the center of the art world, one can imagine her real triumph is her legacy among her compatriots in the margins.



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