


FALL CULTURE PREVIEW

She expanded consciousness with her exuberant use of colour. A bold new AGO show spotlights an underrated artist's singular career

Our art critic on what makes the gallery's new showcase on the work of Pacita Abad unmissable, plus five other recommended fall exhibitions.

Updated Oct. 6, 2024 at 1:07 a.m. | Sept. 2, 2024  



"Pacita Abad," an exhibition celebrating the work of the Filipino-American artist, opens Oct. 9 at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Abad's canvases are shown top left, centre and top right.

toronto star photo illustration

By Brandon Kaufman Special to the Star

The AGO's [retrospective of Pacita Abad](#) — a standout show of the fall [art](#) season in Toronto — is the first major retrospective dedicated to the Filipino-American artist's singular 32-year career.

Abad, who died in 2004 at age 58, had a practice that spanned a variety of media. She's best known for “trapunto paintings,” named for a 14th-century Italian quilting technique. She explained her innovative method in a 1991 interview: “I paint, using either oil or acrylic, on canvas and then collage. This top layer carries the design. To this I add a backing cloth and stuff polyester filling in between. These two layers are then joined with running stitches.”

Abad's bricolage yields extraordinary results, like “European Mask,” 1990. In this nearly nine-foot-tall trapunto painting, a kaleidoscopic face composed of geometrical shapes looks out to either side of the canvas.



Pacita Abad, *European Mask*, 1990. Acrylic, silkscreen, thread on canvas. Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee 2019. Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tate.

At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios

Abad's use of colour in this work is extraordinary. The canvas is animated by highly saturated pinks, blues and oranges, contrasted against a bright green background. Colour rhymes throughout — warmer reds and yellows contrasted with cooler blues and greens — giving the piece a lyrical chromaticism. Abad prided herself on the exuberant colour play of her work. When asked what she contributed to American painting, she said "Colour! I have given it colour!"

"European Mask" is also animated by a play between shapes. The masks' eyes are made up of triangles, and the friction between curved forms and sharp edges ripples throughout the painting. She places checkered, gridlike structures on the sides of the piece, lending the composition a sense of order.

The painting was made as part of a series called "Masks From Six Continents," a commission for the Metro Centre in Washington, D.C. As the writer and curator Xiaoyu Weng explained, "While her masks from other continents reference specific cultures ... 'European Mask' is an outlier in that it is designated simply with the continent's name."



Pacita Abad at work. The AGO exhibition is organized by the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis.

AGO

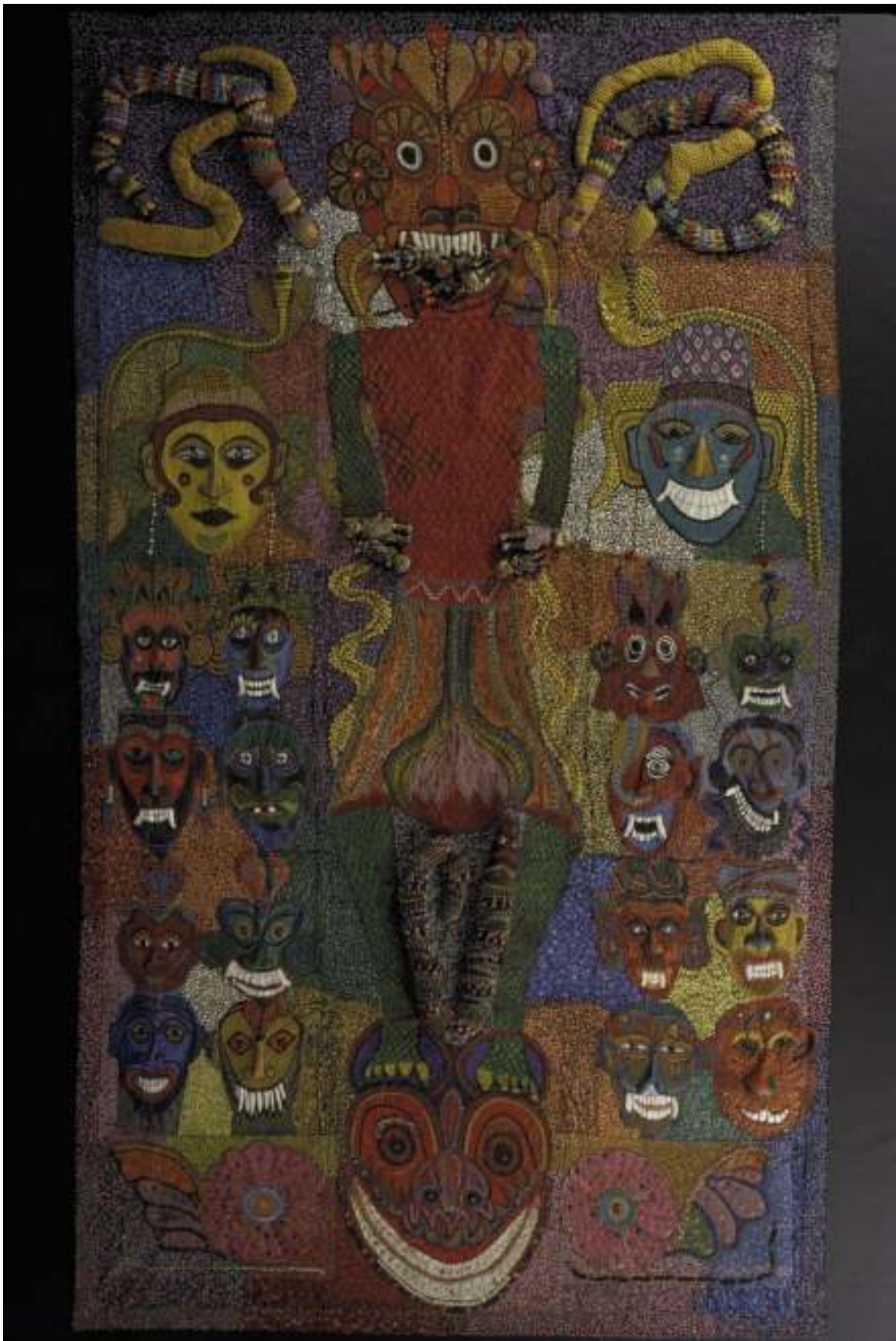
This work, Weng continues, "humorously and purposefully skewers the art and art practices of the West that have 'borrowed' from non-European esthetics: a generic form of trick that produces nothing but a same kind of European art."

Besides colour and shape, Abad's practice is also defined by her political and social commitments. "I've always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility," she once said.

Abad experienced injustice firsthand. As a student, she was targeted for leading protests against the brutal regime of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. In 1970, Abad escaped and settled in San Francisco.

She travelled extensively and incorporated many traditional art techniques she saw in Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic, Indonesia and Kenya, among the 60 other countries she visited.

Abad's liberationist politics found their suitable expression in these non-Western techniques. This approach reached its apogee in her monumental painting "Marcos and His Cronies," 1985. The 17-foot-tall work depicts Marcos as a dragonlike demon eating children. His cabinet is below him, hiding behind devilish masks inspired by ones Abad saw in Sri Lanka. Millions of dots are painted throughout the work, one for each Filipino who suffered under Marcos. Abad further embroiders the piece with shells, buttons, glass beads and textiles.



Pacita Abad. Marcos and his Cronies, 1985-1995. Mixed media painting. Collection Singapore Art Museum.

Courtesy Pacita Abad Estate and Singapore Art Museum

As the curator Victoria Sung pointed out, “The artist’s almost violent, labour-intensive process of pushing her needle through the various layers of painted canvas and padded fabric served as an exorcism of sorts.” It is astonishing.

Toward the end of the ‘90s, Abad moved back toward abstraction, her original painterly mode. The disappearance of figures from her work did not come at the expense of her political outspokenness. “White Heightens an Awareness of the Senses,” 1998, an explosion of colours done in oil, acrylic and pastels, suggests the political dimension of colour. Victoria Sung connects the title to Zora Neale Hurston’s famous declaration, “I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background.”



Pacita Abad. White Heightens the Awareness of the Senses, 1998. Oil, acrylic, oil pastel, dyed cotton, painted canvas, painted cloth on stitched canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Art Estate. © Pacita Abad Art Estate LLC

In 2001, Abad was diagnosed with aggressive lung cancer. She remained prolific despite a gruelling regimen of chemotherapy. Gorgeous brush strokes of gold make up “I Have One Million Things to Say,” from 2002 and its title, indeed, reads as undeniable.