

‘Pacita Abad’ is a kaleidoscopic retrospective of the late artist’s work

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11–13 minutes

Renée van der Avoird from the Art Gallery of Ontario joins STIR for an interview exploring Abad’s love of travelling and how it inspired her vibrant artmaking.

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The Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in [Canada](#) is currently presenting *Pacita Abad*, the Canadian leg of the first major [retrospective](#) by the eponymous Filipino-American artist (1946 - 2004), from October 9, 2024 - January 19, 2025. The solo show spans Abad’s career of 32 years, bringing together over 100 works, including [painting](#) works, prints and the technique of *trapunto* (traditional Italian quilts), which she used to create colourful quilted paintings that were embellished with accumulated materials, addressing various political topics through her work. *Pacita Abad* is organised by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in collaboration with the artist’s estate, and is curated by Victoria Sung, Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, and curatorial fellow Matthew Villar Miranda from the Visual Arts department at Walker Art Center. The AGO presentation is organised by Renée van der Avoird, associate curator of Canadian art, AGO, in collaboration with Carla Felix, community outreach advisor. Van der Avoird joins STIR for an interview that explores the artist’s perspective on transforming the language of quilting and how she channelled her global inspirations.





Shallow Gardens of Apo Reef, oil, acrylic, mirrors, plastic buttons, cotton yarn and rhinestones on stitched and padded canvas, 1986, Pacita Abad Image: At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios; Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate and MCAD Manila

{...By embracing (textiles) in her practice, Abad broke down barriers between fine arts and functional arts. – Renée van der Avoird, associate curator of Canadian art, AGO

Pacita Barsana Abad was born in Batanes, [Philippines](#) and became politically active during her youth. She migrated to the [United States](#) in 1970 to escape persecution by the infamous Marcos regime (1965 - 1986), which saw the nation under martial law from 1972 to 1981. An inveterate traveller, she visited over 60 countries in her lifetime, subsuming the crafts she encountered on her journeys into her practice. Her influences ranged from Indonesian batik printing to Korean beadwork, but it was perhaps medieval Italian quilting that left the deepest impression on her. 'Trapunto', as it is known, became Abad's signature technique. This style of quilting involves a design being added into a quilt through stitching, followed by stuffing being pushed into that particular portion from the back of the quilt to raise it.





Anilao at its Best, oil, acrylic, mirrors, plastic buttons and rhinestones on stitched and padded canvas, 1986, Pacita Abad Image: © Pacita Abad Art Estate LLC

Western art has traditionally held a gendered prejudice against quiltmaking—and more broadly textile work—which it has pejoratively associated as “women’s work”. The AGO [curator](#) addresses Abad’s focus on textile-based art, telling STIR, “...we can interpret Abad’s commitment to quilting and needlework as a strategy of resistance to traditional art forms of Western [modernism](#)...By embracing (textiles) in her practice, Abad broke down barriers between [fine art](#) and [functional art](#).”



Old Dhaka, oil on canvas, 1978, Pacita Abad Image: Rik Sferra for Walker Art Center; Courtesy of Pacita

Abad Art Estate

Many of the works at the exhibition highlight the artist's global and pluralistic approach towards artmaking. As an example, Van der Avoird references the trapunto, pointing to the series *Masks from Six Continents* (1990 - 1993). She says, "[This series was] originally on view over 30 years ago at the Metro Center transit station in [Washington DC](#) [and] these immense textile works reference [maskmaking] cultures from Oceania, [South America](#), [Africa](#), and [Asia](#)." She explains that this series presents an interconnected vision of a more equitable world and that the artist developed it through careful observation of mask-making traditions with ceremonial and artistic contexts.





Waiting in Washington, acrylic, plastic buttons and mirrors on stitched and padded canvas, 1990, Pacita Abad Image: Rik Sferra for Walker Art Center; Courtesy of Dan Baldini; © Pacita Abad Art Estate LLC

Like many women artists, Abad was under-recognised in her lifetime, perhaps especially so because of her commitment to [textile art](#). Her practice carries great value as it presents a modern vision of integrating diverse traditional art practices—free from hierarchicalism—as one unique creative voice. *Pacita Abad*, which has already been shown at the Walker Art Center, the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) and [MoMA PS1, New York](#) is making its only slated showing in Canada at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The [retrospective exhibition](#) will go a long way in correcting the historical error of overlooking Abad’s work. Additionally, it could spark a lasting curiosity in audiences to explore the work of other [women artists](#) who have been sidelined, as well as the [traditional art](#) birthed by Canada’s rich Indigenous heritage.

‘Pacita Abad’ is on view at AGO, Ontario from October 9, 2024 - January 19, 2025.

About Author



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As a writer, Manu mines the depths of the internet for subversive and evocative practices. He holds a Master in Asian Art Histories from LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore. Going beyond his digital and new media focus, his work also treads topics ranging from queer culture to the art birthed by conflict. When Manu is not busy with his writing, you can find him hard at work, making noise music and glitch art, as a member of multiple creative projects. He remains a strong believer that the medium is, in fact, the message.