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Life in the Margins @ Spike Island ★★★★★

ARTS © FEB 18, 2020

FULL ARTICLE

By **Maddy O'Neil**, *Final year French and Spanish*

The first exhibition in the UK celebrating the late Filipino-American artist Pacita Abad, 'Life in the Margins' delves into ideas surrounding immigration, marginality and multiculturalism through her vivid use of colour.

Entering Spike Island's exhibition space, we are immediately greeted by Pacita Abad's tremendous 'trapunto' paintings: large colourful quilted pieces which hang suspended from the ceiling, illuminating the room. Curated in collaboration with London-based artist, Pio Abad (the artist's nephew), the exhibition includes over 20 large-scale mixed media canvasses created between 1983 and 2003. Her kaleidoscopic collages are remarkable in their pluralist approach to image-making across cultures, and their in-depth look at those who live in the margins of society.

The first part of the exhibition celebrates the artist's unique style. 'Trapunto' refers to a quilting technique in which stitched and padded canvas is painted and embellished with printed textiles, sequins, beads and shells. Other paintings incorporate objects such as lace, fragments of glass and even a bristled paintbrush. Pieces such as *Grasshopper* (1990) and *Spider web* (1985) draw in the viewer with their visual power, demanding to be noticed, insisting on being looked at.

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Spider web (1985) | Maddy O'Neil

An immigrant herself, Pacita Abad felt a responsibility to offer her own perspective. Combining social realist imagery with her trapunto technique, Abad portrays the multifaceted nature of immigrant life in the United States. *Caught at the Border* (1991) depicts a scene we are uncomfortably familiar with: a woman incarcerated at a detention centre. We learn from the short video documentary on show at the exhibition that the artist herself was put in customs detention for a night in Hawaii for no reason other than bearing a Filipino passport. Regrettably nearly thirty years on, such images continue to permeate visual media.

L.A. Liberty (1992) recasts the Statue of Liberty as a woman of colour wearing a patchwork robe adorned with plastic buttons, broken glass and golden thread. In the background, a powerful rainbow of colour radiates from the woman's head filling the canvas with dazzling hues. Abad's work reimagines the icon of freedom and the American Dream to reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of the country's immigrant population, paying homage to all American immigrants of colour.



Caught at the border (1991), left, L.A. Liberty (1992), right | Maddy O'Neil

The main success of the exhibition is the reconciliation of the dualities of life in the margins. Her work celebrates the cultural hybridity of America, whilst acknowledging the struggle many face when crossing borders in search of a better life. Her paintings depict Korean shopkeepers, Cambodian refugees and mixed marriages to cleaners, mothers and sex workers. Through each 'trapunto' a personal story emerges, blending immigration into the fabric of the American Dream.



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It is precisely in this spirit of experimentation and discovery that Abad relocates different cultures from the so-called 'margins' to the centre of contemporary artistic discourse. At a time when Trump calls to build a wall to curb Mexican immigration, harrowing images of Chinese detention camps flood the news, and the threat of deportation looms for the Windrush generation, it was uplifting to take the plunge into Pacita Abad's multicultural utopia, where life in the margins is centralised, commemorated and celebrated.

As I leave the exhibition, I can't believe how contemporary these works are, despite having been made in response to their times. We face similar questions today: what does it mean to be multicultural? Who is considered marginal? And what forgotten stories need telling?



Featured Image: Maddy O'Neil

Have you made the trip to Spike Island yet to see Abad's work?

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