

Pacita Abad in Singapore: Finding common ground in color | ABS-CBN Lifestyle

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Pacita Abad painting the Alkaff Bridge over Singapore River

Just a short walk from Alkaff Bridge — the pedestrian span Pacita Abad once transformed into a ribbon of radiant color — the Singapore Tyler Print Institute (STPI) Creative Workshop & Gallery recently mounted "Pacita Abad: Common Ground," an exhibition that felt less like a historical return than a renewed encounter with the artist's irrepressible spirit.

The show revisited Abad's 2003 residency at STPI, a formative moment for both the artist and the institution. At the time, STPI workshop was just a young institution, testing the limits of its printmaking and papermaking facilities. Abad, already an internationally exhibited artist whose life and work crossed continents, arrived with curiosity and infectious energy. She became STPI's third

artist-in-residence — and its first woman resident — and immediately embraced the studio as a space for play, risk, and discovery.

She was especially drawn to the circle. “Direct, simple, modern, universal, intimate, fascinating, and playful,” Abad once called it. In the works she produced at STPI, circles multiplied and drifted — becoming suns and moons, mirrors and portals, floating bodies and planetary forms. She layered them with luminous inks, glitter, mirrors, buttons, and textured surfaces, pushing printmaking toward something tactile and almost sculptural.

What emerged from those three months were works that seemed to pulse with life. Color, for Abad, was never an afterthought or embellishment. It was a declaration. It spoke of joy not as escapism but as insistence — a way of facing a fractured world without surrendering to it.



Pacita Abad, Best of Both Worlds

Exile and movement

That conviction was rooted in a life shaped by movement and displacement. Born in Batanes in

1946 to a family active in public service, Abad grew up attuned to political realities. In her early twenties, following her family's opposition to the Marcos regime, she was forced into exile. She settled first in San Francisco, where she immersed herself in immigrant communities and social justice work, convinced that art and activism could not — and should not — be separated.

Travel became both necessity and method. Over the years, Abad lived and worked in more than 60 countries. She painted in refugee camps along the Cambodia–Thailand border, documenting faces marked by loss and endurance. Those encounters never left her. Nor did the colors she gathered along the way — Filipino palettes enriched by Indonesian textiles, African masks, South Asian patterns, Middle Eastern geometry, and Latin American exuberance.

These influences entered her work not as decorative quotations but as lived experience. Beneath the glitter and brilliance lay memory, politics, and care.



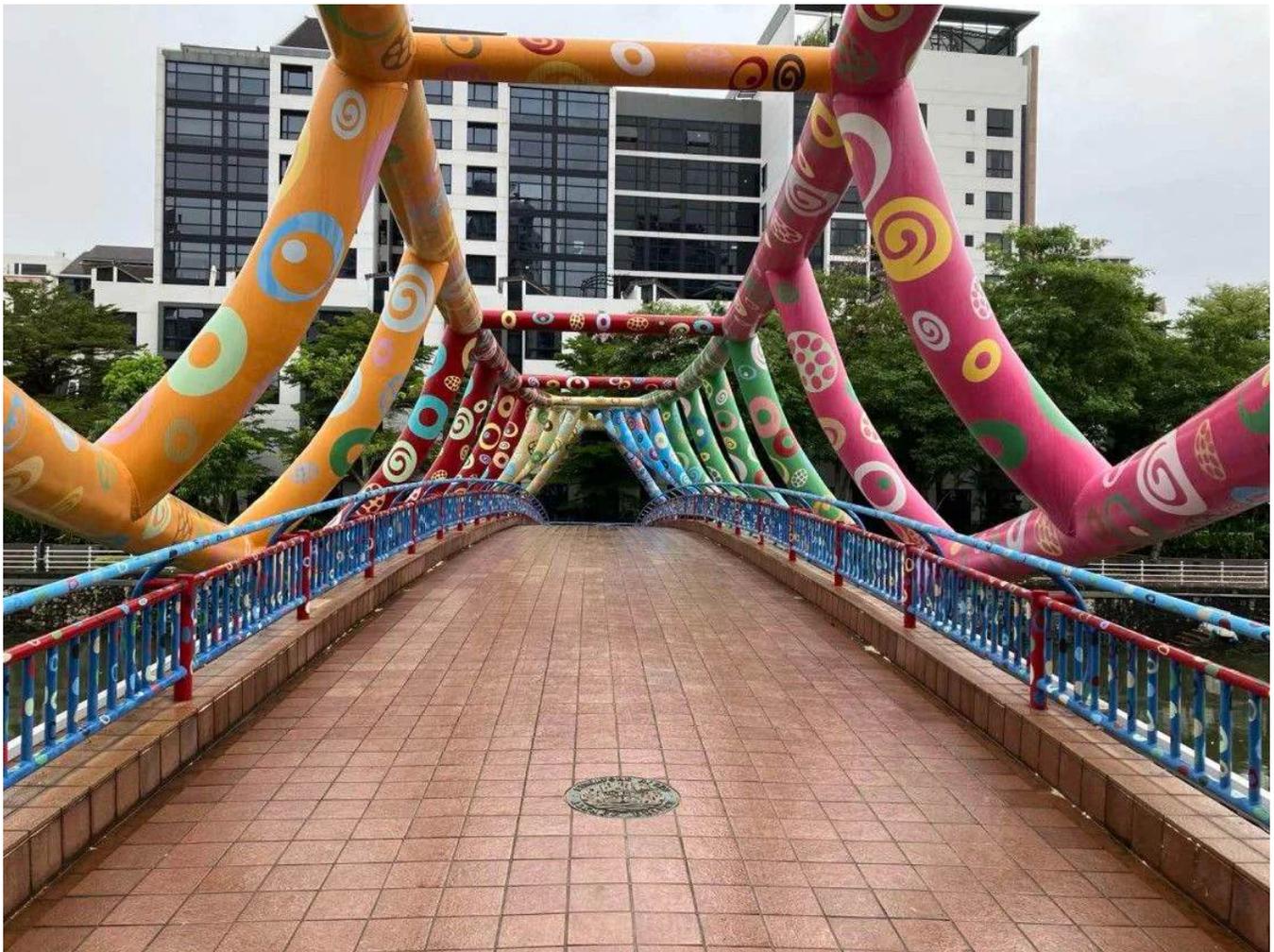
Pacita Abad, Self-

portrait. *Photo by Lito Zulueta*

Trapunto innovation

Her most recognizable innovation, trapunto — quilted, padded painting — allowed her to merge painting with textile traditions and material culture. Beads, buttons, ribbons, and stitched cloth gave her canvases weight and volume. Trapunto was bodily and haptic, inviting touch while asserting presence. It reflected Abad herself: layered, generous, cosmopolitan, and unstoppable.

More than 20 years later, the works she created at STPI returned to the same space, accompanied by two major trapunto pieces from the Pacita Abad Art Estate. The exhibition made clear that her experiments in paper and print were never a detour from her textile practice but part of the same visual language — spoken in different dialects, animated by the same belief in connection.



Alkaff Bridge from Robinson Quay in Singapore which Pacita Abad painted for seven weeks in 2003. *Photo by Lito Zulueta*

Color and force

Collaborators still recalled Abad in the studio — “always laughing,” as many fondly put it — her warmth filling the space as much as her color. That sense of vitality lingered in the gallery.

“Common Ground” did not feel like a retrospective exercise. It felt alive.

The common ground Abad proposed was not uniformity but coexistence: cultures meeting without

erasure, differences held together by curiosity and care. To walk through STPI's immaculate gallery was to experience that generosity first-hand — a celebration of a Filipina artist whose work continues to bridge worlds, much like the brightly colored bridge just outside.

Abad did not merely paint color. She gave it material force.

And as STPI looks ahead — participating in Singapore Art Week 2026 from January 22 to 31 with "The Print Show," which features works by celebrated names such as David Hockney, Jeff Koons, Yayoi Kusama, and Sol LeWitt — it does so carrying Abad's legacy forward: that art, at its most generous, builds bridges, gathers differences, and invites the world in.