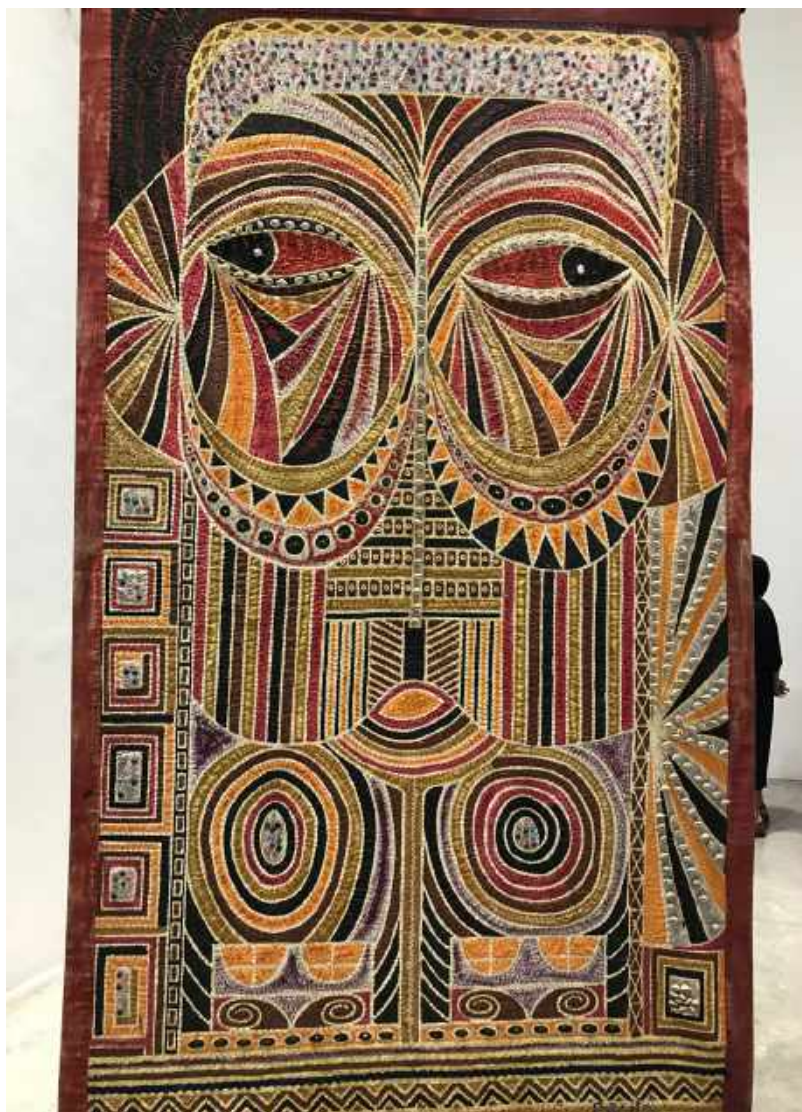


Pacita Abad: the global Filipino artist who had a million things to say

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ONE OF Pacita Abad's trapunto works which is on view at Benilde's MCAD. — *NICKKY FAUSTINE P. DE GUZMAN*

WHO IS Pacita Abad? In 1984, she became the first woman to win the prestigious Ten Outstanding Young Men (TOYM) awards for her contributions to the art world. She had broken barriers then, and, her legacy resonates until today, because 14 years after her death in 2004, Ms. Abad still has “a million things to say.”

The title of her posthumous exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD) at the College of St. Benilde, *A Million Things to Say* speaks of Ms. Abad's works that reflect on globalization, race and culture, and humanity, with her art serving as the platform for these discourses.

On view at MCAD are 24 works from Ms. Abad's 4,500-piece portfolio in a career that spanned three decades. Known for her colorful works, the pieces on display are all from her "trapunto" series ("trapunto" comes from the Italian word "*trapungere*," which means to sew and stuff), which she started in 1981. They are massive canvases of visually rich images that combine painting, embroidery, and quilting techniques.

MCAD director Joselina Cruz and the artist's London-based nephew Pio Abad curated the show which is ongoing at the museum until July 1.

"We decided on the title of the exhibition, which is taken from the work that she produced during the end of her life. We chose it to refer to the multiplicity of textures, materials, and narratives in the works of Pacita, but also because it reflects how complex her persona is — her facets as an artist, an activist, a committee organizer, a wife, the life of a party. She's so many things," said Mr. Abad, adding that the goal of the exhibition is to re-introduce his aunt's works to a new audience.

Born in Basco, Batanes, Ms. Abad flew to the United States in 1970 to study law, but ended up falling in love with the arts instead.

Since first setting foot in the US, she never stopped learning about art. She studied and created art while traveling with her second husband through six continents and more than 50 countries. She exhibited her paintings in more than 200 museums and galleries around the world.

"Pacita was global even long before the long arms of globalization embraced the art world," said Jack Garrity, the late artist's second husband, answering a question posed to him by Mr. Abad before an audience at the Saint Benilde School of Design and Arts (SDA) during the exhibit's opening on May 12.

“But more than that, her understanding of the global and the global artist was complex and compassionate — an understanding that is called for in the times now. This is the impetus for re-introducing and revisiting her work. What does it mean to be a global artist? How can we learn from artists who have been forging these arts long before you could see a BenCab hanging [next to] an international artist in a convention in Hong Kong?”

Mr. Garrity met Ms. Abad in 1973 in the US and they travelled the world together until Ms. Abad died after a three-year battle with cancer in 2004. Mr. Garrity was her manager, gallerist, husband, traveling companion, publisher, critic, and now archivist and historian. He is currently the director of the Pacita Abad Art Estate.

“There are lots of transnational artists now, but Pacita was a different type. She came from a developing country, went to the US and left, and went to places like Papua New Guinea, the Dominican Republic, Sudan, Haiti, whereas most artist would stay in New York, Paris, or London and then built a career from there. One time she was asked why did she do it. She said it’s the excitement of these places, the vitality. Not that she did not like Paris — she enjoyed Paris — but it did not give her the oomph that she was looking for. It was always the main thing,” said Mr. Garrity of his wife’s life choices.

But Ms. Abad was never a tourist in a each new country. Instead, she immersed herself in the culture and tried to understand the conditions of the unfamiliar land she was in.

“She was seeing the world in the context of development and how people’s lives could be improved. You can see how she depicted people in her works, how she painted communities, and how she sensitively used their materials. I think the biggest challenge in containing her work is how to present her work,” said Mr. Abad of the task of curating his aunt’s show.

In 1978, Ms. Abad had her first solo exhibition, called *Paintings of Bangladesh*, in Bangladesh, and soon made paintings about the refugees in Cambodia and Sudan.

“I think that the expected narrative trajectory of an artist who comes from a third world [country at] that time is to mind her place of origin. But Pacita knew better. Her first exhibitions show how her travels have touched her work,” said Mr. Abad.

Even before Ms. Abad returned to the Philippines with Mr. Garrity in 1980s, she was already creating her social realism paintings and trapunto series.

“When we went back to the Philippines she said ‘I want to have the same kind of trip in the Philippines because I’ve never had this in my country.’ So we hitchhiked to the Visayas, to Mindanao — in Cotabato, Marawi — and then we headed north,” said Mr. Garrity.

This was the time Ms. Abad decided to try scuba diving and discovered the world under the Philippine seas. In 1986, she had a solo exhibition called *Assaulting the Deep Sea* at the Ayala Museum, some of those trapunto works are on view today at MCAD.

But the couple did not stay. They went back and forth between the Philippines and the US in the 1990s, and then stayed in Indonesia for seven years — the longest the couple ever settled in a place — before moving to Singapore in 2000 and living there until 2004.

When Ms. Abad travel to and from the US, she would have problems getting her visa, and she met many people who shared the same frustration about the perennial problem, especially for people in color migrating to the US. As a result, one of Ms. Abad’s works tackle issues on immigration, politics, cross-cultural problems, and intermarriages.

In 1992, she made a trapunto work called *L.A. Liberty*, which is a tribute to people of color. It is an acrylic painting of the Statue of Liberty but with brown skin and black hair, embellished with buttons, colorful thread and yarn on a padded and stitched canvas. It is on view at MCAD.

Ms. Abad was literally and figuratively a woman of color. “She had a natural eye for colors. She could put colors together that nobody thought of and make them work. That was always one of her strengths,” said her husband Mr. Garrity.

It was during their stay in Indonesia that Ms. Abad was the most productive.

“Pacita loved Indonesia. She was introduced to the shadow puppet plays, and started painting them. It was culturally close to the Philippines in a lot of way. She used the Ikat, Batik, Ulu textiles, then used more and more of the textiles and incorporated them in her work, and then ended up doing [works] with ceramic plates with shadow puppet designs,” said Mr. Garrity.

Meanwhile, in Singapore, she created 1,000 works while battling cancer.

A Million Things to Say runs until July 1 at De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde’s Museum of Contemporary Art and Design. For more information visit www.mcadmanila.org.ph. — **Nickky Faustine P. de Guzman**