

An important show of Pacita Abad's trapuntos reveal her discipline behind the exuberance

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Posted at Apr 19 2018 07:15 PM | Updated as of Apr 19 2018 11:11 PM



Pacita Abad. *Image courtesy of Wig Tysmans, 1985*

Her favorite word was “fabulous.” And that’s exactly what Pacita Abad was, and the art she left behind.

Last week, the Museum of Contemporary Art and Design (MCAD), known for putting up stellar shows with an international flavor, opened “A Million Things To Say,” the first exhibition of Abad’s oeuvre in Manila since her passing in 2004.

While the artist made some 5,000 works in her career, the curators Joselina “Yeyey” Cruz of MCAD and Pacita’s nephew, Pio Abad, decided to exclusively put the spotlight on her trapuntos, these large quilted pieces of art which Pacita silkscreened, painted on, stuffed, beaded by hand, and painted on again. Each is a spectacle in itself. Each piece, to use the artist’s favorite word, fabulous.

The trapuntos formed a great part of Pacita's work from the mid-'80s to the early 2000s.

"The interest there really is the process of construction, how she made these," says Pio, an artist in his own right. "She traveled everywhere, and while she traveled she accumulated all these different references: from the use of seashells in Papua New Guinea to macramé to the patterns of doors in Yemen. These different geographies kind of found themselves in this one surface. And it was her vision and also her story that was putting all these things together."

Pacita was born in Basco, Batanes in the 1940s. She is sister to former cabinet secretary Butch Abad. When the family moved to Manila, the young Pacita ended up studying Political Science.

"In fact, she was supposed to be the one to enter into the world of politics," relates Pio, "but during the beginnings of the Marcos regime she left to study law."

While slated to live in Madrid, a stopover in San Francisco would alter her trajectory. She ended up immersing herself in the '60s Haight-Ashbury scene, birthplace of the era's hippie counter-culture movement, where she met the painter George Kleiman whom she would marry.

"But she didn't actually start painting until she did this trip in 1973 where she hitchhiked from Istanbul all the way to Manila via Iran, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Taiwan," continues Pio. It was a journey that has earned a sort of mythical resonance within the Abad family. "It was this kind of crazy year of just seeing Asian culture in that way [that] really made her decide that she wanted to be an artist."

Traveling was a great part of Pacita's life and it was a great influence in her art. Apart from San Francisco, she lived in Jakarta, in Washington DC, and in Singapore where her exuberant "Bridge of Art" which she painted in her final years remains an important landmark.

After her marriage to Kleiman, she married Jack Garrity, a development economist whose work brought him to different parts of the world. "But instead of behaving like an expat's wife who would normally be the one hosting dinners, she forged her own path," says Pio. "So Jack would be going to Port Moresby to check a bridge project for instance, and she would drive off to the jungle of Papua New Guinea and paint."

Gathering the 25 trapuntos on exhibition at MCAD until the first of July began with a call to the artist's estate in Washington, which is overseen by Garrity who was thrilled at the idea of the show. Yeyey Cruz and Pio spent three days in Washington last November going through hundreds of works inside two shipping containers, weighing in on which piece was significant enough to include in the exhibition. They also found pieces in the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund offices, and back home, at the Lopez Museum where Yeyey first encountered the trapuntos. The show also includes a piece that used to hang at the Fundacion Pacita in the artist's birthplace Batanes, and one from a private collector in Bacolod.











'Masai Man' (1982). Acrylic, plastic beads, rick rack ribbons, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 203 x 143 cm. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

'Baongo VI' (1986). Acrylic on stitched, silk screened and padded canvas, 258 x 150 cm. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

'Pacita sailing' (1987). Acrylic, rick rack ribbons, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 270 x 140 cm. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

'Put a Lime in my Coconut' (2002). Oil, painted batik and printed cloth stitched on canvas, 253 x 180 cm. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

'The sparks, the heat and the glow' (1998). Oil, acrylic, buttons, sequins, painted and dyed cloth stitched on canvas, 210 x 149 cm. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

'Endless blues' (2001). Oil, painted cloth stitched on canvas, 250 x 183 cm. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

'Hundred Islands' (1989). Oil, acrylic, glitter, gold thread, buttons, lace, sequins on stitched and padded canvas. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

'My Fear of Night Diving: Assaulting the Deep Sea' (1985). Oil, acrylic, cotton yarn, broken glass, plastic beads & buttons, stitched padded canvas, 334 x 439 cm. *Lopez Museum and Library*

'European Mask' (1990). Acrylic on stitched, silk screened and padded canvas, 260 x 150 cm. *Pacita Abad Art Estate*

Explaining the artist's process, Yeyey says Pacita would most likely silkscreen the painting or images onto a canvas first and start building on that foundation, quilting, painting a base color, and adding on more color, patches, beads, buttons, sequins. Despite the wild vigor of some of the images that her trapuntos conjure, there is a definitive discipline, a plan of action, involved in each. This can be gleaned once the viewer walks to the other side of the quilt where the threads reveal patterns that look both artful and deliberate.

It is this discipline that the curators want to showcase in "A Million Things To Say," apart from the known inherent power of the images in the tapestries and its multifarious colors. Like her works, Pacita was known for her overt fabulosity, her larger-than-life personality, her "colors"—that people tend to forget the artisan who chose to personally do the quilting by hand instead of by machine, and the citizen of the world attuned to the racial, political and economic issues of her time.

The show should only enhance the complexities of Pacita who once said, "I have always been hard to classify, and my work is an extension of me. People are always trying to put things in neat little boxes. My work does not fit in any of those; I have never been a traditionalist—I am not concerned about where I fit in and do not fit in."

More than anything, the show aims to introduce Pacita's works to a new generation of art audiences, one that is more exposed and aware of global contemporary art.

"It's important that we are able to start discussing craft in fine art in a site like MCAD," says Yeyey. "With all of us being so attached to social media, to computers, [where things are] very flat, everything is onscreen, to have access to a work which is this layered, this constructed, I think is going to be quite interesting. In contemporary art there's sort of this return to rethinking the idea of craft within the field of fine art—without it being traditional, or indigenous, or exotic."