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Paintings that speak for the refugee

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Pacita's husband had dropped her off with her paints and easel at the gate of the Sa Kaeo refugee camp in Thailand. The sight of suspicious refugees milling about the gate made her uneasy.

She remembered a similar morning in Kenya's bush country when spear-carrying natives had come running out of their village to inspect the strange human who had happened upon them. Whipping out her pencil, she had instantly won them over with quickly-sketched portraits.

The same technique might work again.

She smiled at a refugee woman nearby and the woman's little boy came up from behind -- the opening Pacita was looking for. In a matter of moments she had sketched the boy's portrait, delighting his mother.

It was the beginning of encounters with the world's homeless that would absorb and fascinate this Filipino painter for nearly a year.

Pacita Abad had originally gone to Thailand in June 1979 to paint village life. Instead, she got caught up in the drama of Cambodian refugees flooding across the boarder into eastern Thailand -- and decided to document what she saw on canvas.

To walk through Pacita's Cambodian collection, recently exhibited for the first time in the United States at Boston University, is to become aware that something has been missing from the somber, gray news photographs and one-dimensional, gloomy reports that have come from the camps.

In a word, humanity.

Pacita has been able to convey this quality through a curiously appropriate use of dazzling color.

Dancing across her canvases are brush strokes of bold primary colors interspersed with the bright pastels so characteristic of the Southeast Asians -- rose and pink reds, lime and chartreuse greens, amethyst and lilac purples, azure and robin's-egg blue.

Pacita insists that her subjects do not inhabit a world without fascination and purpose. Not that their ordeals have been overlooked. But refugees who have so often peered out of photographs like statistics in a sea of nameless numbers, are here given a human face.

Pacita's secret is that she has discovered that there is much worth learning about in those faces -- even the more somber ones.

"I want my paintings to speak most for the children," Pacita explains to me at her current home on Boston's fashionable Charles Street. She is seated on a long makeshift sofa covered with rows and rows of festively colored quilt pillows, some in the shapes of playful snake-dragons and animals collected from all over the world.

"Obviously it takes more than clothing and food. They need a lot of love -- especially the hundreds and hundreds of orphans. That's why I like to paint kids. When you paint them, you give them attention and they respond to it."

The message reached workers at UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, who have selected four of Pacita's paintings for their famous greeting cards.

Other exhibitions this spring will display the range of Pacita's odysseys through countries around the world. The University of Massachusetts in Amherst will display her Bangladesh collection for the rest of March. The relief organization CARE will show her east African collection for its 35th anniversary celebration in New York on May 18. And from May 23-30 the International Play Group, which sponsors activities for foreign children living in the US, will exhibit her paintings along with those of other international artists at the Union Carbide building in New York.

It was Pacita's good fortune to marry a man whose career would harmonize so precisely with her own.

She is the daughter of a longtime congressman and public works minister in the Phillipines (the name "Pacita" means "Little Peace" in Spanish), holds a master's degree in history from the University of San Francisco, and once seriously considered a career in law before she turned to painting as the medium for expressing her concern for the developing peoples.

Since her husband, Jack Garrity, is a specialist in development economics, he is constantly being transferred from one developing country to another. And while he is advising on transportation projects, Pacita is working in the villages -- fending for herself with her brush and her wits.

Dangerous, I ask?

"It's all a matter of rapport," she explains, flashing a broad, warm grin. "It's so important how you talk to people -- that makes the difference in what you see and how you are received."

Spontaneity in her paintings is all-important to Pacita. First impressions are captured in her sketch book with a lightning speed, only later to be fully "dressed" with the rich colors of her palette and imagination.

She is capturing social reality in the refugee camps, moments filled with action and feeling: the woman who has dashed under a UNICEF water truck to catch drips of leaking water and draw her prize to her child's lips; the teenage boy who was an honor student before Pol Pot closed down Cambodian schools, kneeling next to a small open fire to warm his food; the rare appearance of a complete family of four - - mother, father, two children -- arriving at a camp carrying their sole possessions - - pots and some bright cloth tied to the mothers waist; the young child with the look of Pierre Trudeau, taking a spoonful of his meager ration of liver, pork blood, and rice, and offering it to the Filipino woman kneeling to paint his picture.

It is in such moments that Pacita believes the refugee story can be told for what it really is. In her effort to capture those moments, detail has been abandoned. Brush strokes are fast and sometimes random. Backdrops are often as busy as the stir created by the arrival of relief trucks with the daily rations, or the excitement when Thai merchants line up to sell their brightly colored cloths, or by the sound of bombing in the distance that interrupts children's laughter.

The result is not stylistically beautiful painting in the traditional sense, reflects one thoughtful observer, the gallery manager at Boston University, Amy Lighthill.

But Pacita's primitive style, she suggests, "frees her to enlarge and thus emphasize the particularly expressive elements of eyes, head, or hand. She leaves a sketchy, washlike surface, emphasizing the immediacy and the awkwardness of daily events happening before our eyes.

"She denies us refuge in admiring her work for its formal qualities, but insists we consider the pictures as moments of life -- real people. A mother's hand, guiding her emaciated child's head to a drink of water cuts off the view of another child's

round head, leaving only one distant, unfocused eye showing. Yet that eye conveys a world of feeling."

Pacita herself sees in her works a kind of "social expressionism" with a warning to political systems that have brought so many millions into homelessness.

"I'm searching to go beyond the form or color to the stories behind the people. With this kind of painting, you must involve yourself in your subject. I talk with them. I capsule the stories that go with them. Without those, my compositions would not be complete. Without them the refugees do not have a chance to speak."

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