THE JAKARTA POST SATURDAY, JULY 13, 1996

Features: The Arts

Pacita explores the spirit with trapunto paintings

By Parvathi Nayar Narayan

JAKARTA (JP): Pacita Abad's colorful personality and paintings are not unfamiliar to the Jakarta art scene. She exhibited her work here two years ago with *Wayang, Irian and Sumba*.

In *Exploring the Spirit*, her new show, there is some familiar work, namely the continuation of the wayang series. Most of the work on show this time is abstract, however. These include series like *Expanding the Surface* (1982-1996), *Oriental Emotions* and the beautiful *Oriental Abstractions*. She sees in abstraction the chance to experiment with color and texture in their purest forms.

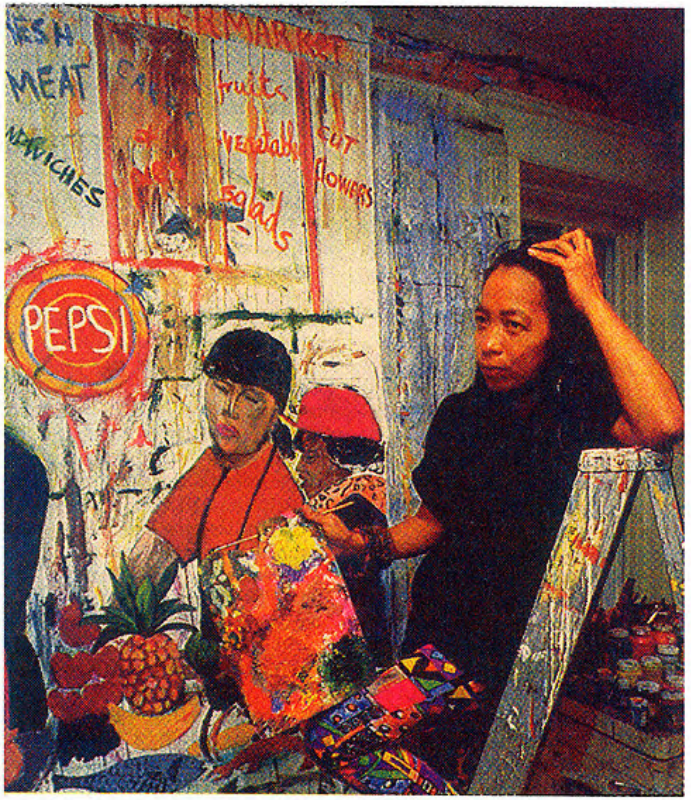
The *Oriental Abstraction* series, intriguingly, grew from experimenting with the form of the rice stalk. While in Korea (1993), Pacita decided to try her hand at the traditional form of Korean brush painting. As part of her training, Pacita was required to paint a stalk of rice again and again. This was designed to perfect her stroke and technique, but Pacita was more drawn to the form of the rice stalk itself. She decided to push herself to the limit with this one form, setting herself the task of painting the same design on canvas after canvas.

The motif that emerged ultimately was a completely abstract interpretation of the original, in work like *To Die For* and *Butterflies* done in a *trapunto* style.

Trapunto — the word is derived from the Italian *trapungere* which means to stitch and stuff. It is a term coined by the artist herself to describe a unique style that incorporates paint on canvas with appliqued fabric, stitching, padded and quilted effects and a variety of objects like mirrors, shells, and beads.

Pacita Abad has worked with different media like paper, bark, collage and oils on canvas. The trapunto paintings, though, are easily the most exciting of her works, tactile, richly textured and unusual.

Pacita's works are bright but the colors, while strong, are often not used in their full primary intensity, but as tints



Asian Art News

Pacita Abad in front of *Korean Shopkeepers*, 1993, mixed media, 97 x 58 inches.

Asian Art News

Layers of Earth, 1990, oil, acrylic, rhinestones, broken mirrors, plastic buttons stitched on padded canvas, 94 X 49 inches.

and shades that allow for a harmonious interplay. And, of course in the trapunto paintings, it's the textures that predominate.

Incidentally, Pacita enjoys conducting trapunto workshops for children and young adults — whose energy she says she finds stimulating. One of her most interesting trapunto workshops was at the University of the Philippines (1991). She had asked her students to bring whatever material they liked that could be incorporated into a trapunto painting. Because of the needlework involved, some were skeptical of how the male students would fare.

"Do you think boys can't sew? Oh yes they can!", she exclaimed, going on to say that the boys were exceptionally creative. They brought bits of bark, typewriter ribbon and cassette tape with which to stitch their paintings together.

Exploring the Spirit features around 90 paintings, of which 30 are large works. To give some indication of sizes, *Fiesta* (1990) is 233 x 143 cm and *Layers of Earth* (1990) is 94 x 49 inches. (An earlier work, *The Medicine Man*, was about 250 inches high, literally capable of covering a wall.)

Size plays a important role in the way her work impacts; there is the sensation of being enveloped, since at viewing distance, one's entire field of vision is taken up by the painting.

The show also showcases Pacita's fondness for the wayang form. She was attracted to Indonesia's wayang puppets on her very first visit to Indonesia in 1983. She liked the color, the sense of surviving tradition where the teaching of moral values was via a story, even the use of the medium "... like a newspaper" as social commentary. She has been painting them ever since.

Besides, her own understanding of their characters has deepened, and many are like old friends revisited and reinterpreted.

In the process some old paintings get reworked or re-energized too. She points to one work in progress, saying that the wayang character depicted in it is getting "... groovier all the time. " The early somber tones and dominant blacks have been replaced with bright colors and appliqued batik.

One of Pacita's new perceptions of the wayang is to look at them like masks, thus incorporating some of the elements from her *Masks* series. There is in these a subtle commentary, perhaps, on life itself, in which most people have dual images of how they are and how they reveal themselves to the world.

A new addition to some of her work are frames. Earlier the artist had eschewed the use of frames, preferring her paintings to look like wall hangings. She felt that this made them more accessible to the viewer, and less elitist. Recently though she has been experimenting with frames covered with material like batik, that support the painting without detracting attention from them.

Pacita is very pleased with the results as, "... the batik frames make them complete paintings. "

Pacita Abad sees the role of a painter as a social and political commentator. It is a point of view in which her own upbringing, in a family with strong political leanings, must have been influential. She has spent time in refugee camps in Thailand, and painted a series on Cambodian refugees.

Immigration Experience, another series, tackles the issues involved in leaving the country of one's birth and going elsewhere. Some of her most political paintings, however, were those protesting the excesses of Marcos.

In a career littered with exhibitions at prestigious venues, *The American Dream*, a solo at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C. (1994) still stands out. This museum is practically one of its kind, devoted to the study of women artists in the history of art, about whom the world knows so little even today. The museum also promotes modern and contemporary female artists. Pacita Abad was the first female artist born in Asia to be honored with a solo there.

Butterflies, 1987, ocrylic, plastic buttons, broken mirrors stitched on padded canvas, 56 X 79 inches.

Asian Art News

Being in Indonesia is something Abad enjoys, for she has more time in which to paint, and has also found her colors becoming stronger and brighter here.

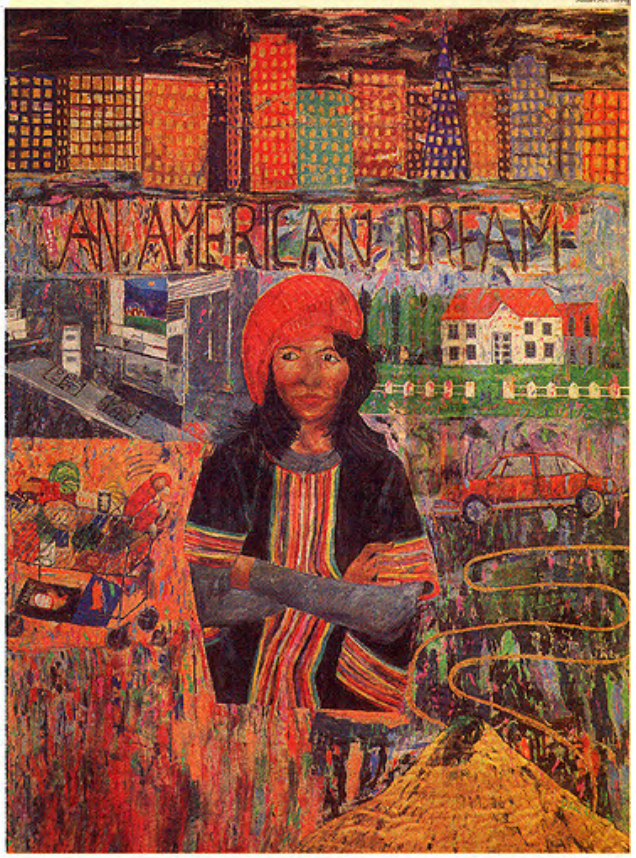
How has she grown in the years between her two exhibitions in Jakarta?

"I am more energized now, more challenged, more open to experimenting," she says.

Pacita Abad exudes energy and enthusiasm as she talks. Her words are punctuated by an earthy laugh, or by the stamping of a foot or a wave of her blue painted fingernails. I sit opposite a table from her, a table decorated with yellow orchids and straw colored wine that tones with the artist. She is dressed in beiges enlivened by sequin work on the batik top, her hair flowing down her shoulders, wearing dangling earrings put together with pearls, gold and lots of other little bits and pieces.

It occurs to me as I look at her that I could be looking at one of Pacita Abad's trapunto paintings...

Pacita Abad's *Exploring the Spirit* is from July 11 to July 28, at Gedung Pameran Seni Rupa (the National Gallery of Indonesia), Jln. Medan Merdeka Timur No. 14, Central Jakarta.



Asian Art News

If My Friends Could See Me Now (Immigration Experience), 1991, acrylic and oil on canvas, stitched, collaged and padded canvas, 95 X 69 inches.