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Pacita Abad brought back to life a lost fourteenth-century Italian art with her quilted, embroidered, painted and rhinestoned trapunto paintings.

PACITA *with the World Art*

PACITA

At the Wild Art

By Marla V. Garin

Sunday afternoon at the Ayala Museum, the crowd at international artist Pacita Abad's exhibit is a motley assortment of two couples, a matron, a family of three, a writer and a number of Fine Arts students from U.P.

The exhibit hall is a small enclosed area bathed in lighting, dramatizing Abad's colorful creations. We do the inevitable and look beyond each other's shoulders, get into each other's sight lines and listen to each other's comments along the way.

"Buhay na buhay ang colors niya, no?" one remarked tentatively. "Ang lakas ng dating, ginamit pati butones, salamin at saka—glitter nga ba 'yan?" queried another. "May pagka-wild mix nga, bok," still another judges, "but I like the way she painted even the frames..."

Certainly no art critics, these, but the artist's point is driven

home nevertheless. For "Wild at Art" is how Abad herself considers the two exhibits at Ayala and the nearby Luz Gallery, the latest of her shows in the Philippines after five years.

"There's really no particular theme," she had remarked two days earlier. "It's nonrepresentational, it just happened, it just came. I like it better that way because then the work comes on stronger. It's just wild, colorful and spontaneous."

One could easily say Abad is actually describing herself. In this interview, she has on a sleeveless and backless black dress, tribal beads on her arms and neck and yellow nail polish. Slim, of medium height, *kayumanggi* and high-cheeked with dark, almond-shaped eyes, she is after all an Ivatan—one among the fiercely independent natives of Basco, Batanes.

To appreciate her and her art is to know Pacita Abad.

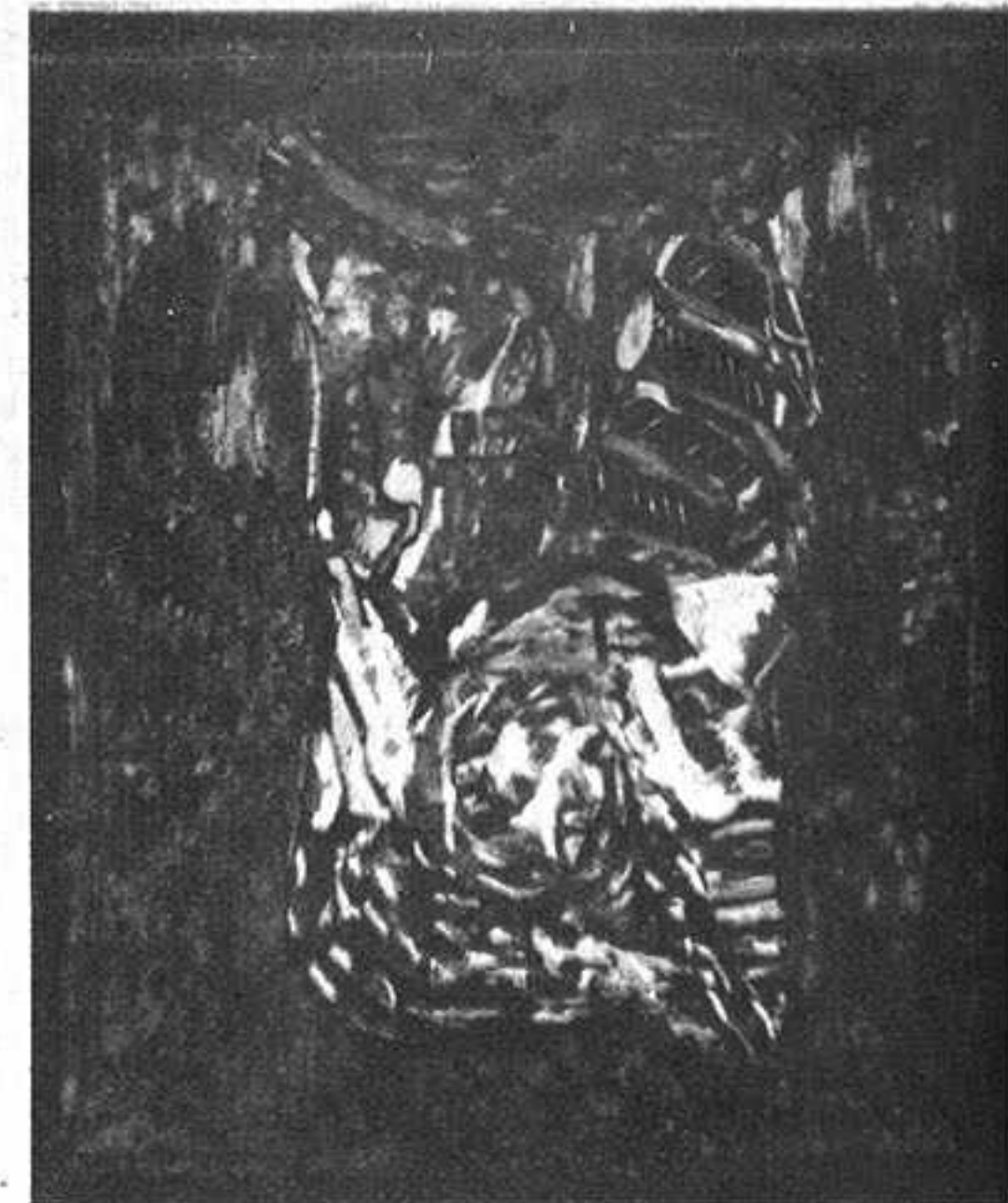
Abad the person is warm, engrossing and very confident and positive. With her, laughter is easy and infectious, almost as if she existed in perpetual animation.

"I was born in the post office in Batanes," she says, "which is probably why I travel so much!"

With her father Jorge Abad the congressman and her mother the mayor, Pacita, along with eight brothers and three sisters, spent her young years on the island, later shuttling to Manila in between campaign years. "Talagang mailbag!" she laughs.

One only has to imagine typhoon-ravaged Basco, Batanes, where the wind and the waters can be anywhere at once to understand Abad's temperament.

Closer to Taiwan than the Philippine Archipelago, the island is another version of paradise, with its breathtakingly beautiful beaches, zigzag mountainous roads, centuries-old church and its wild horses. Isolated and constantly battered by the elements, the houses are peculiar combinations of thatched roofs and con-



"Core of the Matter," collage, acrylic and oil on canvas, 1990

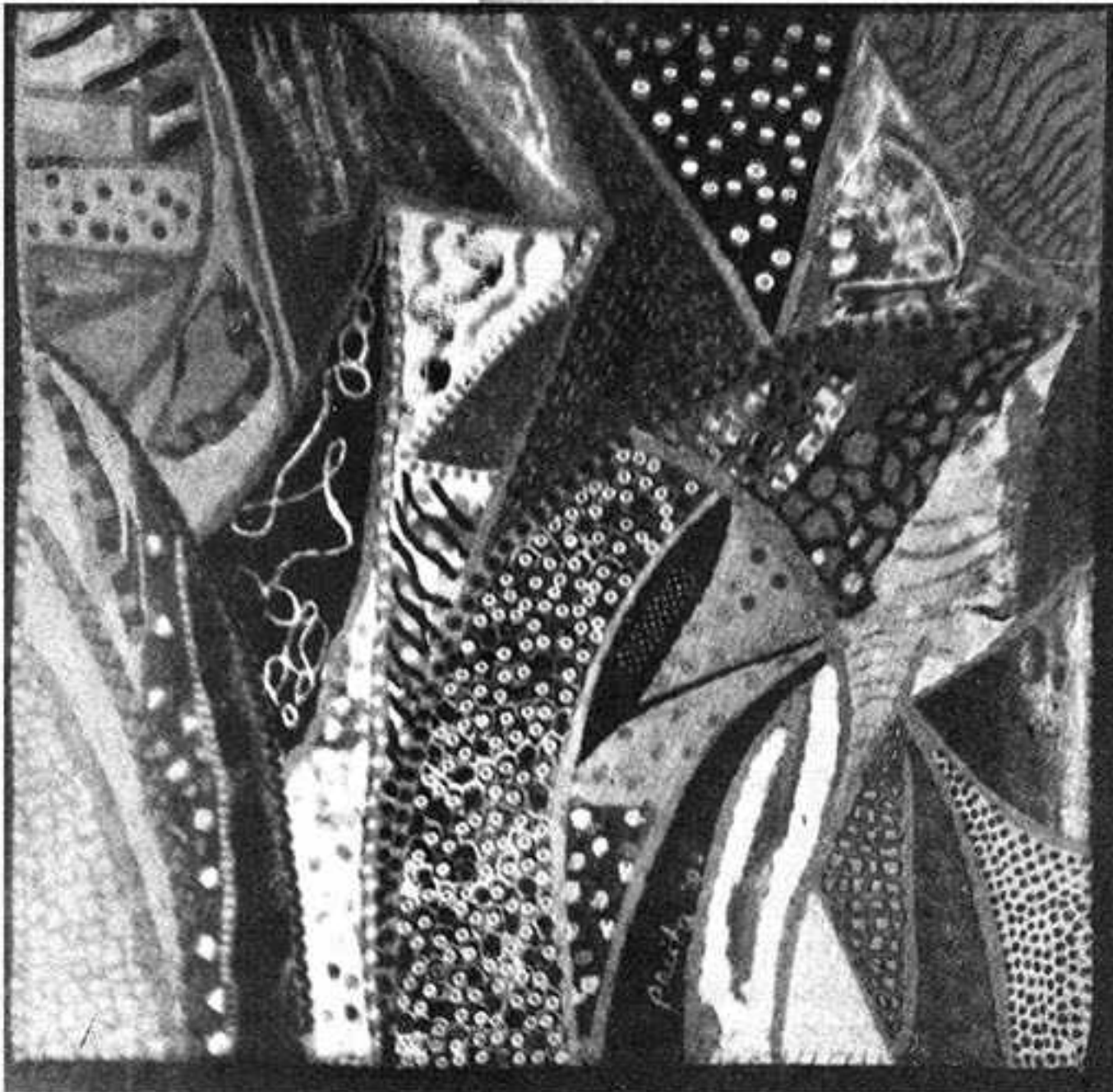
crete walls four to five inches thick.

Peculiar too are the natives the island has bred—ferociously rugged individualists, yet aesthetes all, as seen in the gaily flowered European-inspired window boxes decorating each home, the neat and clean paved roads all over the main town and their rows of colorful fishing boats not unlike the Greek boats we see only in movies.

"Hard-working, adventurous, survivors," are qualities which Abad admits are reasons why in her travels, "a lot of the Ivatans I've met who have also left the island easily make it out in the world."

But more particular to this Ivatan is that the Abad family is by nature a family of achievers, not at all scared to do things differently. Familiar to this generation is brother Butch, who remains a committed public servant even after his brief and rather controversial stint as Secretary of Agrar-

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"Hooker's Green," trapuntoed collage featuring acrylic on canvas, buttons and rhinestones, 1988

Pacita: Wild about art

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ian Reform. Another brother is George Abad, considered one of the top market analysts in the corporate world. A friend of both brothers describes them as "very benign-looking, very laid-back, though their heads explode with knowledge and ideas."

Two seconds of conversation with Pacita Abad confirms this family trait. But the idea of pursuing art as a profession never crossed her mind until she left the country in the early seventies.

"In my generation we were asked to be a doctor, a lawyer," she recalls. "My father wanted me to be a lawyer because he himself was a lawyer. And an architect, and an engineer..."

After college and a year at the U.P. College of Law, she left to pursue a scholarship at the University of California in Berkeley. While waiting for the next 18 months, she worked on her graduate studies in Asian History and became a curator at the university's art department, where she got hooked on painting. By the time her Law scholarship came through, she was already so steeped in art, she asked that it be put on hold for the next five years. But she never went back, and with no regrets.

With her American husband Jack Garrity in tow, the years of globe-trotting which followed made up for her late start. Always there was something for her to study and learn in the 65 countries she has traveled.

"I would go to a country like Korea and ask around for the best Korean airbrush instructor," she

relates. She would then ask for lessons for the duration of the time she would be staying, which could be anything from two to three weeks a month. In the Dominican Republic it was paintbrushing silk fabric; in Africa it was tie-dyeing; in Papua New Guinea it was macramé. Everything Abad has picked up in her travels, she incorporates in her work.

As an unofficial art ambassador of sorts, everything she learns from one country she also shares with another, during workshops and interaction with students, local artists and whoever else would be interested. As on previous visits here, for instance, her schedule includes a lecture to a feminist group in U.P. and a workshop with U.P. Fine Arts students, among other sharing sessions.

"Sharing is simply fantastic" she exclaims. "Which is why it's important to show your work. There just might be one painting there from which others can get inspiration for their work."

Of "trapunto" painting, or the art of stuffing and embellishing a painting to create a three-dimensional relief, Abad is credited with bringing back to life this lost fourteenth-century Italian art. For practical purposes of explaining her work to initially baffled audiences, she has coined *trapunto*—Italian for "stuffing or padding" to achieve a quilted look. Abad's works, however, are more than just large colorful quilts one hangs for the sake of hanging.

Her *trapunto* murals are usually two huge layers of muslin stitched together to delineate designs where stuffing, with cotton, paper,

yarn, foam rubber and soft feathers are used. She then paints, silkscreens, cuts, glues and sews an assortment of buttons, rhinestones, beads, shells, mirrors and fabrics on the top layer, to create the desired effect for a certain shape or form.

"Now when I say *trapunto* painting, they say, 'Ah, is that the one where you add a lot of stuff in it?' and I'd say 'Yes, that's the one!' Now almost everybody from Cuba to Mexico to Africa to Paris knows *trapunto* painting," she says happily.

Abad usually takes from four weeks to three months to finish a painting. Concentration, she claims, makes small works almost like big works, since it challenges her to make it small or make it big. At her studio in Washington, where all the walls are covered with *trapuntos* and the floor with acrylic, she usually works on five pieces simultaneously.

She is based in Washington, because "my husband is based in Washington, and you always follow your family, right?" And being a "very cosmopolitan place with multinational artists and international people," Washington is actually a better place for a Filipina artist to be in, than say, the infamous melting pot that's New York.

"New York is so concentrated, there're just thousands of artists whom you don't really get to know much, because you're drowning with them. But Washington is a beautiful place with lots of museums and galleries and a better chance for you to meet other artists."

Washington enables Abad to get a grasp of other artists' works through interaction and collaborative work. She takes pride in her active involvement in the Washington art community as a board member of two prominent art organizations, where she represents not only Filipino but Asian artists, and as one of five original founders of a Filipino group called Philippine Arts, Letters and Media.

About this group, which she formed with artists, writers and journalists Jimmy Yambao, Alice Caballones, Miriam Escalante and Nory Briscoe, Abad narrates: "At first we just wanted to read Filipino books, talk about them, then invite the Filipino community to participate. But then we asked ourselves, why not expand it to arts and the media, besides the letters? So that's what we did, we sponsored Filipino shows, movies, lectures."

The group also sponsors forums for visiting Asian artists and writers, listening to what they have to say about their chosen fields. They don't really have much money, she says, but they maximize manpower and initiative to look for sponsors, venues and food organizers for receptions of whatever show or lecture it is they are always organizing, among other things. Through the years they have become even more visible, with their own annual show called "Asian Art" featuring the best of Asian artists.

But what really are the chances of Asian artists making it internationally?

"Big," she proclaims without hesitation. "Number one is quality, number two is experience. We are

always confident because there are so many good Asian artists, from the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia." She cites as example her experience as a panelist for an Atlanta Arts Foundation grant.

Who specifically among the Filipino locals?

"There's BenCab, Orlina, R.M. de León, Bobby Feleo, Arturo Villoria, Popo de Asis. I've been looking around and we definitely have a lot of very good artists whose works are on a par with others already established," she says.

"The problem lies in the marketing. You have to understand that exposure is what's needed." Abad also cites among her choices the works of Impy Pilapil, Paz Abad-Santos, a few students in U.P. and Manny Baldemor, who, she thinks, "is already international in his own way."

"It's not really hard to penetrate the international scene," she advises, "but you have to fight for what you are, and remain true to yourself. When I first came to the States, I just kept working and sending out slides of my work."

In any case, the hard work has paid off. In recent years she received a visiting artists' grant from the New York State Council of the Arts, a Foundation Fellowship from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and the most coveted prize of all: a visual artists' fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts.

Yet she doesn't stop there. Middle of last year, she bested 150 entries to lead six other winners in the Metro Art Competition in the Virginia and Maryland area in Washington sponsored by the First American Bank, the District of Washington, the Commission on the Arts and the town counties. (Metro refers to the Washington public transit system, much like our own Light-Rail Transit.)

Abad's grand prize involves the installation of her huge *Masks From Six Continents* at the Metro's most strategic area—the station where all the lines meet. Better than any museum or gallery in terms of exposure, the Metro station will allow her *trapunto* of masks depicting the nationalities of six continents to assault millions of Metro commuters every day for the next two years.

"Did you ever do public art here?" she suddenly asks. Talking about the MetroArt has given her similar ideas. "You could get the major banks and companies to sponsor it. You could even ask the towns of Parañaque, Quezon City and Makati, of course! Or get the Jaycees, the Rotary. Now that's an idea!" she excitedly suggests.

Told about the almost nonexistent priority on the arts in this Third World country, she says, "But you can, really!" Of course it would be great, if only someone, with her spirit can initiate it here.

Apparently, someone else would have to take up the cudgels, since Abad's stay is temporary. She is supposed to have started work on another large-scale series on social immigration, but ever peripatetic, her next schedule calls for a Korean tour for a four-part feature on her art, her progressive views and her home in a Korean magazine, before going back to Washington to start working again.