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Exotic perils

IT WOULD be easy to dismiss Pacita Abad as a painter. One could attribute her ascendancy in art circles in Washington, DC, where she is based, to the sudden vogue among American intellectuals for politically meaningful art.

Abad's latest batch of works, currently on display at both the Ayala Museum and Luz Gallery, continues to explore the style she has come to be known for. She sews scraps of cloth into her canvas; she sticks buttons, mirrors, beads onto it, in a technique known as "trapunto." She paints with lush hues, in a non-"realistic" style, repeating motifs (dots, stripes, spirals and other forms) in a steady beat, an emphatically punctuated percussive rhythm.

"Exotic," "primitive," "ethnic" come readily to mind in describing her work. It obviously derives from various non-Western artistic traditions: Australian aboriginal art, Mexican and Asian folk art, Polynesian and African art.

Abad herself wears an exotic persona. She has spent most of the past 20 years traveling to exotic destinations. It might be said she was born exotic. She is Ivatan, born on the remote island of Batanes. She is lean, dark and sexy. And she piles the trophies of her travel — ethnic beads, silvercraft, embroidery — on her person.

At the opening of her show last week, she wore black high-heeled pumps, a black backless dress with a mini tutu-like skirt and a hand-painted bodice. The bodice was like a corset strapping her bare back tightly. Her legs are long and smooth: the high heels, the punishing corset bodice and the tutu tulle call to mind the insidious, icy art of Helmut Newton. The painting on the bodice, the silver deadweight on her ears cut a little tropic heat on the ice. She must strike a head-turning figure in America, you think.

She does. At the Unesco 40 Years show, where 40 artists in their 40s were asked to participate, she upstaged Sandro Chia, the meteoric art star of the Italian *Transavanguardia*. Because of the cornrow she sported at the time, her dark, attractive looks and the wild outfit she chose for the occasion, the media flocked to her. She laughs at Chia's chagrin as we sit to lunch in a Manansala-bedecked flat in chic North Syquia, a week before the opening of her Luz-Ayala show. She is wearing funky printed leggings, beads and a beautiful silver necklace. She is surprisingly earnest, open, warm — not slick. She has a slight Ivatan accent which she neither hides nor stresses.

Abad finished her college education at the Uni-



Pacita Abad with artwork

Photo: ROARK JOHNSON

versity of the Philippines, took post-graduate studies in the US, where she met her husband, Jack Garret, now an investment officer of the International Finance Corp. As a young couple they hitchhiked around the globe for 11 months. She continues to travel — ravenously, fevered by a gypsy itch.

Seven months in a year, she is abroad working in every place she sojourns. She is usually invited to these places, to give *trapunto* workshops or paint a commissioned mural. "Your name gets around," she says explaining her numerous opportunities for travel. "The art community all over the world is very small."

She has represented the Philippines not only in the Unesco show but also at the Havana Biennial and the Art Olympiad in Seoul in conjunction with the Olympic Games. The curator of the Art

Olympiad told her that when he came here asking for the best artists, her name kept cropping up.

Her works have attracted a following in Seoul. From here she leaves for Seoul enroute back to the States. The Asian edition of *Better Homes and Gardens*, which is published in Korea, is featuring her in four of its magazines. *BHG* went to Washington to photograph her in her wildly colorful, ethnic rug-swathed home.

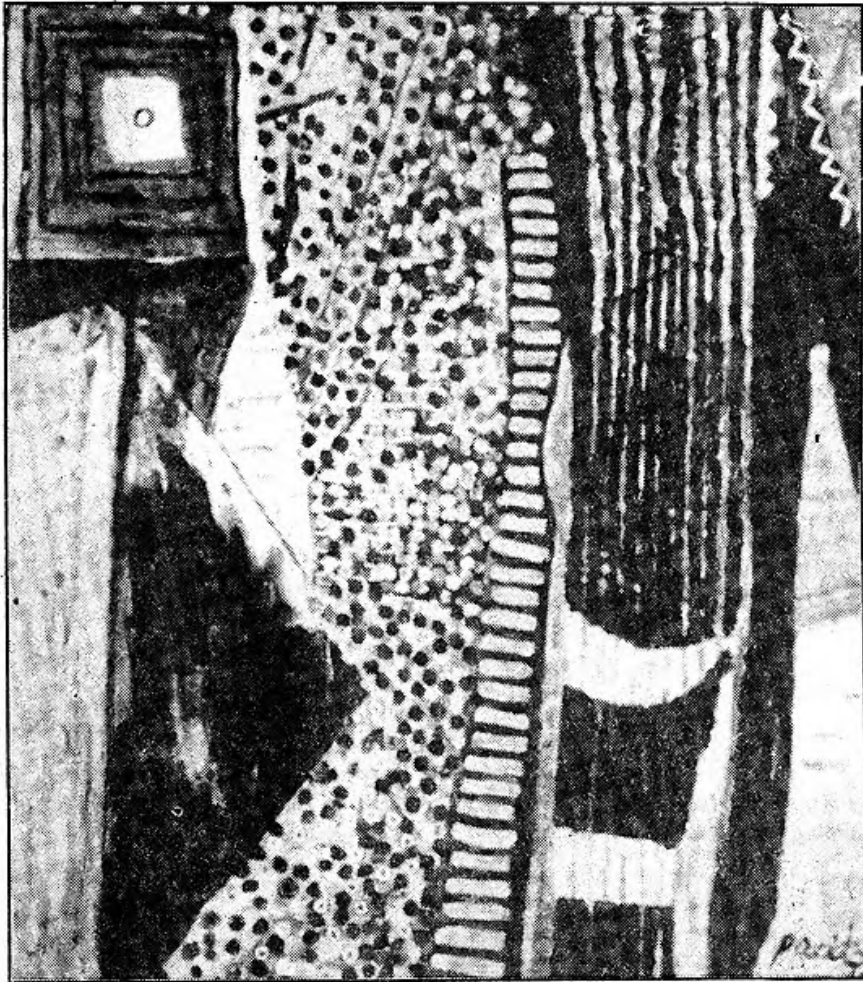
Abad's paintings fetch from \$2,000 for a small painting to up to \$30,000 for a mural. She has soloed in established galleries in Washington. Last year, she won three important grants, the most important being an artist fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. "It was like a grand slam," she recalls. She sits on the governing board of an umbrella organization for over 350 art organizations in the Washington area, and revels in her active involvement in the Washington art scene.

Now it is she, Ivatan emigrée, who is helping to select grantees. She and other board members view thousands of slides of artwork and from these select the artists whose careers will be boosted, whose work will come to public attention.

PACITA Abad's work might easily be called Western and its exoticism merely a veneer.

Abad is hardly a Philippine counterpart of an aboriginal artist. The Batanes of her birth was remote from the rest of the world only in a purely geographic sense. She was born to well-educated parents. Her father was the island's congressman, her mother the governor. Presumably, the family came to Manila often, even before Abad transferred to Manila to go to UP. Butch Abad, the transient Agrarian Reform Secretary, is her brother.

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Abad's 'Midnight Stroll'

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She did not take up fine arts in college and only embarked on an art career after she did her MA. While she was still in San Francisco, she took on a part-time job as assistant director of the art department in her school. Looking at the artwork that she handled, she decided, "Hey, I can do this!" Though she avers, she has always been interested in art.

She took up art at the Art Student League in New York and the Corcoran School of Art in Washington. In the beginning, she says, she was a social realist.

But her marathon globetrotting and the deluge of new stimuli she sailed through shaped a new course for her art.

Her exotica might strike one as trite. To begin with, it could be seen as having been shaped by tastes of an outmoded era — the bohemian wanderlust era, the era when everyone was going off to Morocco or trekking in Nepal or at least Sagada, when being a Peace Corps volunteer was still vogue for Americans, Bruce Chatwin's formative years. Then one might reason that it is precisely because her work makes a subject of the exotic that it is not exotic, not really ethnic, not indigenous to any tradition but that of the White Tourist.

Thus, in promoting her work, the American cultural milieu promotes what it is all of a sudden so desperately trying to

eschew.

The past 10 years have witnessed a radical shift in the perspective of many Western intellectuals. Just when the public was thought to have finally accepted the Formalist idea that an artwork should be read entirely independent of its author and the social milieu which he/she inhabited, the socio-historical context of a work (suddenly) came to be regarded as inseparable from the artwork, indispensable to its reading.

Though Western mass (emphasis on "mass") media has declared Marxism a proven failure, Marxist criticism increasingly finds favor among members of the academe in the humanities. Feminism has blossomed into a complex ideology which afforded a new perspective of the world; it too has come to be used as a tool for looking at art. (Now all of us Third World pseudo-intellectuals are lost again. Drats!)

Feminism and Marxism might be said to have converged, to produce the new consciousness. It is a consciousness which sees Reality as the product of the history of gender, race and class conflict.

This consciousness is defining the art of America, meaning, it is this consciousness which is selecting the artists who will be shown in the more important galleries, who will be promoted by the chic progressive magazines. Abad, Ivatan emigrée, is

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part of that selective process.

Abad was particularly thankful to have left the States when she did because she wasn't too keen on having to face the Philistine furor over the show which she had just helped organize. Entitled "Gender", the show evolved around explorations of sexuality and identity. (Abad enthuses over the courage of one artist who chose to depict her sexually abused childhood. This artist had paintings of her father tying her shoe lace, of him patting the small of her back.)

The organizers were scared of the same nationwide furor that hit the late avant-garde photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit show. But Abad would hear none of their qualms. She told them the show should stand as they had originally conceptualized it. To all their fears, she said, "F--- it," and came here. "Still, I'm glad I'm here instead of there right now," she giggles.

Abad's next show in the States, another grant, will portray immigrants. She welcomes the chance to exhibit what she says "all of us go through" — the humiliation, the alienation, the fear.

Abad is booked solid up to 1992. It would be easy to dismiss Abad's works on these grounds: to say her distinction is characteristic American tokenism — since her work represents White consciousness to begin with, since, by making non-Western art exotic, she necessarily makes Western consciousness the ground, the center around which

her exoticism, her ethnicism, her primitivism is the figure and thus the periphery; only in so doing can she define, see, feel what is exotic.

That is, until one views the work in depth. The issue seems to be her authenticity, her genuineness as a representative of non-Western art. Because her work looks primitive, ethnic, and (to be irritatingly redundant) exotic, her work is seen in the context of her being a non-White, a Filipino, an Ivatan. And yet, here, in the Philippines, clearly, we see her art as not being what we call Filipino. So there is the tendency to see her work as another aberration produced by colonial mentality.

But she never made the claim of being a Filipino artist to begin with. She declares: "I consider myself an international artist more than a Filipino artist."

Looking at the work, the issue dissolves. The work possesses a vitality which disproves the hypothesis that it is cultivated or artificial, that its spirit is not native to the artist. The paintings display an exuberance which is seductive and disarming.

It is an exuberance which flows naturally from Pacita the person. Her enthusiasm for life and art is unabashed and sincere. "Oh, it's the best," she likes to exclaim or sigh.

Her work has matured. The draughtsmanship is tighter and more assured, the pictorial plane richer and more painterly. According to her, these paintings, numbering 67 in all, produced over the past three years, are new because they're small (around 30" x 40" each, "that's small for me"), non-figurative, and wild, even more wild than before (that's pretty wild). She calls the show "Wild at Art".

By painting the frames in patterns and colors similar to the canvas, she succeeds in "giving it a total look," as she says, and in dissolving the pom-

posity of the frame. Ironically, the painted frames stress that the painting is a commodity. By obliterating the frame, the idea of the painting as a picture, a window to the artists' souls, as it were, is also obliterated. Thus the sense that it is an object, something to be handled, sold, given, bartered, is also underscored. It "cheapens" the painting. But in so doing, it elevates it. The implicit humility highlights the painting's value beyond its materiality. I haven't yet come across paintings which were extended over the frame. Painted frames are nothing new but usually the painted frames retain their identity as frames, they remain separate from the paintings because they're painted in a different design and sometimes carved.

The triptych entitled "Havana Biennial" resembles early Jasper Johns in the slow, contained gestural strokes of the brushwork. It is a lush work. Bits of collage peer through the paint. "Midnight Stroll" is a narrative work. Executed to the Blues songs of Black German singer Robert Craig, it resembles the dark harlequin paintings of Picasso: geometric, virile, flat and yet deep, sharp and yet mysterious.

There are some lapses. The more graphic, less painterly, presumably more deliberate works, the ones with the beads, tend to be flat in terms of expressiveness. It is looseness and spontaneity which animate Abad's work.

And which save her from the perils of her exoticism, her fascination for what is defined as exotic. The spontaneity of these works is unmistakable. They do not set out to be anything, not to be ethnic, or representative of Third World, non-Western, politically correct art. They are paintings of what Abad finds fascinating, whatever it was that produced that fascination. Perhaps it is precisely because it makes no apologies for what produced it that it comes alive.

By not questioning this fascination, Abad frees herself. Involuntarily, her roots come to surface. Perhaps, in the end, what turns out exotic in her work is the expression of a native, congenial feeling. For a wild, untamed, rugged Ivatan beat resounds through her work. Pacita Abad, Ivatan gypsy, went around the world and found home.