



Pacita Abad, *The Sky is Falling, The Sky is Falling*, 1998

Oil, plastic buttons and beads, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas. 270 x 300 cm

Photo: Pioneer Studios, Manila. Image courtesy of the Estate of Pacita Abad

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CONTRIBUTOR:

POLLY BARTON

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

April 2020

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THE SKY IS FALLING, THE SKY IS FALLING

As I write this, California is in lockdown. The photographs on the news show streets empty of people, empty of cars, long sweeps of charcoal tarmac sided by dark clumps of trees, reaching up to a sky that although nominally blue looks colourless, sunless. These places could be anywhere, I think as my eyes rove over their surfaces, seeking something else behind this featurelessness, this terrifying lack of detail. And as I do, my mind flits reflexively to a California that seems a world away: to San Francisco as it was when the artist Pacita Abad landed there in 1969. Except she wasn't an artist, then – not yet. Arriving from the Philippines after her involvement in anti-Marcos demonstrations made it unsafe for her to remain there any longer, Pacita Abad had been planning only a stopover in the US on her way to Madrid, where she

up her studies in immigration law and study art instead.

San Francisco in the early seventies: it is tempting to imagine it, with a tinge of that nostalgia we can only feel for times and places we've never experienced, as a haze of psychedelic Haight-Ashbury colour, a whirl of life and a web of rich connections – all of which are descriptions that could be comfortably applied to so much of Pacita's work. Yet in her early painting classes, the story has it, Pacita was upbraided by her teachers for her 'wild' use of colour. Why was this pineapple purple, this table red? Why was it only her who painted with this palette? It was clear enough to Pacita where the colours came from: they were colours with which she had grown up. She was born in 1942, in the Philippines' northernmost province of Batanes, where she said no-one ever wore black. 'Colour lives in my mind,' she said; 'I have to paint with these colours, I can't help it.' Yet to pass off this extraordinary vibrancy as 'mere' second nature is to underplay the choices Pacita made: to keep her colours, to refuse assimilation. To live with being called wild, to make a virtue of her 'wildness'. If at first blush Pacita's endless vibrancy might seem of a piece with Californian buoyancy, deeper exploration reveals it as a different beast altogether: weightier and more luminescent, her colour reveals itself as the expression and the affirmation of something lying outside of the received pictures, the stories given airtime.

Stories – Pacita Abad passed away in 2004 and this anecdote about her lavishly coloured still lives, as most of the tales of her that I know, I have come to through Pio Abad, nephew of Pacita and custodian of her estate. The word 'custodian' could feasibly mean any number of things or very little at all; in actuality Pio's role is a substantial and multifaceted one. There are weighty practical responsibilities – for one, he has co-curated the 'Life in the Margins' exhibition on at Bristol's Spike Island, Pacita's first UK show – but he is also custodian in a more holistic sense, which consists in guarding his aunt's legacy and, in his words, 'making sure [her work] is seen and presented in the right way.' Now a contemporary artist in his own right, Pio, who grew up in Manila, tells me that he created his first ever painting on canvas in Pacita's Washington D.C. studio at age ten; later, when he decided he wanted to study art, it was Pacita who suggested he apply to study in Glasgow, 'I guess because travel had benefitted her so much'. In the end, Pio ended up setting out to Scotland from Manila just as Pacita returned, in the advanced stages of terminal cancer, for her final show at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in September 2004, a piece of timing that Pio calls 'weird' and which is hard not to interpret as a passing of the baton. The pair's work differs incontrovertibly, not just in its themes but also in its mediums. Pacita's oeuvre revolves around paintings, most notably her enormous, lavishly embellished trapunto – a technique deriving from the Italian *trapungere* or 'to quilt', whereby the canvas is not stretched but stuffed with cotton filling and sewn together to another stretch of fabric – while Pio's work comprises installation, drawing, textiles and photography. Yet just seeing Pio speak about her, which he does knowledgeably, critically and lovingly, one can sense the thread that binds the two – a thread which consists, more than anything else, in the transmission of stories, and all the historicity and closeness that implies.

There is a moment that I have thought back on many times in the past weeks, as the public world empties itself of people, as apocalyptic feelings become hard to shrug off as fantasy. It's January, and I am standing with Pio in Spike Island, in front of one of the trapuntos suspended from the gallery ceilings, so high they seem to stretch up into a white celestial haze. In Pacita's trapunto works, the canvas is not only painted but embroidered and stitched with a myriad of materials – mirrors, buttons, beads, cord, ribbon, cloth, and even jewellery, plastic fruit, and paintbrushes – and this piece is no exception. Looking up at this dance of fervid, frenzied colour, I see it shimmer as the light overhead spills down across the beads that riddle its

fall of the Suharto regime in 1998.

By this point, our tour is approaching its end. By now I know that the wonderful thing about the way these works have been freely hung in this gallery is being able to walk around and see their backsides: the long stitches on black cloth like constellations drawn in multi-colour pencil, or the rainbow scratch pictures I loved as a child, complete with stitched patches on which their titles have been handwritten. *I THOUGHT THE STREETS WERE PAVED WITH GOLD*, and, *IF MY FRIENDS COULD SEE ME NOW*, and *FROM DORO WAT TO CHICKEN WINGS AND THINGS*. In the first room, we made our way through a selection of Pacita's largely abstract works, energy seeming to fall off them in waves as colours and patterns vie for space in the huge gallery, before moving on to the passage harbouring her *IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE* series, documenting the experiences of ethnic minorities in the US in a highly figurative, detail-rich style.

Now, in this third and final section, we see the work lapse back into abstraction again – Pacita did, I discover later, produce figurative works depicting the Indonesian riots, but these are not part of the Spike exhibition – and yet, looking up at this towering stretch of fabric worked over to such an extraordinary extent, it's almost hard to believe that this work is not figurative, so embodied and tangible is the atmosphere, the emotion. It reads as a map to chaos, over which the eye dances in search of a route, jubilant and terrified and bewildered. Every square inch avows the hands that have worked over it, and aside from being buttons and beads and threads and swirls and waves it is – so viscerally and patently – also society and system. It is the world falling apart and finding itself, in that very moment, already a new world. I think of the overused phrase 'the personal is the political' and how much I often feel irrationally confused by it, but this canvas assuages my stupidity for me: how could anything be more simple, it seems to ask.

And as we're standing there with our eyes dancing, Pio says, 'It's called, *THE SKY IS FALLING*.' He repeats it again, quieter, almost as if intoning it to himself – 'The Sky is Falling.' And for some reason, I find myself desperately praying that this is not some verbal tic or self-correction on Pio's part, or a hallucination on mine – that this is the title of the piece. I don't know why it matters to me, when all that should matter is what I have felt in that moment. Still, there it is, some part of me is craving to check. And so, as the group moves on to the next painting, I sneak around to the back, and there it is, twice: *THE SKY IS FALLING*, *THE SKY IS FALLING*, 1998. And I feel – I can't help it – greatly relieved.

Of course, even as dedicated custodian Pio cannot physically give a personal tour to every visitor to Pacita Abad's exhibitions, this one included, and it is in his stead that he and co-curator Robert Leckie have set the documentary-short, *WILD AT ART* (1991), to play on loop at the gallery entrance. This too, Pio introduces in a way which makes me want to break free of the tour group and watch it immediately. His favourite bit, he tells us with a chuckle and gleam in his eye, is when Pacita is asked what she has contributed to the US art world. For a moment she falls into thought, before practically shrieking: 'Colour! I have given it colour.'

Later, I go back and watch this moment, and it's as joy inducing as reported – in fact all seven minutes of the film are. There's an incredible part where Pacita talks about holding tie-dye workshops in Mexico, and being inspired by the spools of cassette tape that the men bring in to use as thread. The bright force of her personality which she herself has described as 'bold,

on the extent to which, again to borrow Pio's phrase, 'she really was her work.'

I write these words in full awareness of how dangerous they are – of how reducing an artist's work to her life is a diminishing device used over and over again with women, and most especially women of colour. I write them consciously, because in Pacita's case, the throwing – the plunging – of herself into her world of work feels not just an eminently conscious practice, but a political decision. The work deals with the business of story-telling in an explicit sense: Pacita relates that *IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE* grew out of her time in a customs detention centre in Hawai'i, and her encounters there with Cambodians, Vietnamese and Nigerians which led her to reflect on the commonalities between experiences of marginalised minorities; in works of hers such as *KOREAN SHOPKEEPERS* (1993), which depicts an everyday scene from a Korean deli, or *GIRLS IN ERMITA* (1983) capturing women working in strip joints, or *MIXED MARRIAGE, MIKE AND JEEVA* (1993) showing Pacita's close friends, we sense the intense intimacy of these stories, simultaneously personal and universal. Yet there is a narrativity in a broader sense, too, in the flood of details, marks, appendages peppering her canvases – the narrative of the work's creation, the thought and work which goes into it, none of which is hidden by Pacita, as any kind of slickness is eschewed in favour of making labour – endlessly – visible. And both forms of bearing witness, it seems to me, are deeply and profoundly political in nature: they mark the refusal to look away, a refusal to land the eye only on the socially-endorsed narratives. 'Art is for other people,' Pacita remarks in *WILD AT HEART* to its director, Kolkata-born Kavery Kaul. 'It's not for yourself, especially for people like us.' A little later, after musing on what makes painters and filmmakers alike, Pacita comments: 'They both tell people things they don't know. [...] Stories of people like us.'

And from all these narratives, this determination not to consider any detail too small for her attention, radiates an extraordinary vitality, as by all accounts it radiated from the artist herself. There are some incredible photos taken of Pacita. One, by the Filipino photographer Wig Tysmans, shows Pacita jumping in the air in front of her work, feet a good few inches off the ground. In his studio Pio shows me another: Pacita turning up to the 1985 exhibition of her underwater series, *ASSAULTING THE DEEP SEA*, in full scuba diving kit ('she had proper abs and everything', murmurs Pio). The enormous trapuntos making up this series grew out of the artist's love of scuba diving, which she tried for the first time in Thailand and, in Pacita's words, 'the rest was pure obsession'. These are magnificent pieces: the aquatic landscape is a perfect match for Pacita's jewel-like colours and dense spiralling patterns, and her distinctive daring is in evidence too, as in *MY FEAR OF NIGHT DIVING* (1987): 'this is a four-and-a-half by five metre painting of a shark fighting an octopus,' says Pio as he shows me an image. And then he flicks back to Tysmans's portrait where, with her flippered feet and her cherry-red mask on her forehead, one hand to her hip and one resting on the scuba cylinder on the floor beside her, Pacita stands with shoals of tropical fish on the canvas behind crowded around her head and nosing towards her pelvis. 'She just gave really good photos,' he says, as he and I sit basking in the high-saturation radiance of this moment. And then, more mournfully: 'And you know, that's the bittersweet aspect of taking care of her estate. Things would have been way more interesting if she was around.'

Pio and I talk about other bittersweetnesses, also. There's something about taking in the *IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE* works in 2020 – the man gazing out from behind the bars in *CAUGHT AT THE BORDER* (1991), or the painting for which Pacita is perhaps best known, her *L.A. LIBERTY* (1992): an image of the Statue of Liberty as a woman of colour surrounded by an explosion of rainbow rays, which again induces a feeling of conflict. As

moved on from those issues – the way the work seems to ‘point to a circularity in history’, says Pio.

And while the first Pacita Abad show in the UK is a cause for celebration, even this celebration comes with a sadness that she is not better known already. There are perhaps circumstantial reasons why that might have been the case. Pacita’s itineracy for one – her life married to developmental economist Jack Garrity took her all over the globe, in a way that profoundly affected and developed her work both thematically and in terms of the techniques and materials she reached for, but which likely detracted from her visibility – not to mention a prejudice towards her particular style of art, so profoundly personal and obsessive that it has invited comparisons to outsider art, and strayed close to the delicate border with craft (a closeness which Pacita herself embraced, and refused to view in a negative light). But mostly, and overwhelmingly, this is because Pacita was a woman of colour, at a time when women of colour were mostly not permitted to be celebrated artists. The very name of an important prize in the Philippines of which Pacita became the first ever female recipient in 1984 seems to say it all: the Ten Outstanding Young Men Award. Needless to say, the Award’s presentation to Pacita caused uproar (‘and this was in the eighties!’ says Pio).

Words don’t do Pacita’s work justice. Writing this essay, thinking about writing this essay, I am struck again and again by how redundant words feel as a way of evoking Pacita’s oeuvre – not because they fail to capture the scale, the colours, the texture, the intimacy, the fervency, although of course there is all that, but rather because in analysing what she does and how within her work all kind of apparent contradictions cohere seamlessly together, that coherence and holism inevitably breaks down. Concepts snap off, become pathetic wisps of nothing in your hands. Pio speaks about his aunt’s work with such insight that so many times during the tour and our later studio visit I find myself clinging to little things, thinking: that’s it, that’s the nub of it! But really there aren’t any nubs – there is just Pacita and her world of such dazzling generosity, the way that everything there seems to make perfect, albeit chaotic, sense.

Just like how it seems to me to make preternatural sense that *The Sky is Falling* not once but twice. Weeks later, I still don’t know what to make of it, why it feels like it contains the heart of everything I want to write about, but it does. No: Weeks later, as the world is transforming into something I barely recognise, it feels if anything more urgent. And then, just as my studio visit with Pio is wrapping up, and we’re talking about repetition, he comes out with something ever so casually: ‘It’s about showing empathy through the process of making. I think with her it’s the excessive embellishment of every aspect of these people’s lives become her of showing that empathy.’

‘Excess,’ I repeat, nodding slowly like an idiot. As I do, I think about the felt experience of otherness: of feeling and being made to feel de trop in the world, as others have defined it. The sense of yourself as being that excess. And then I think about how Pacita’s work takes that too-muchness in hand and uses it as an explosive device: as a way of making the sky fall. This is not an impulse of violence. We could in fact see it as an impulse of love, or of energy, but most importantly it is an impulse towards acknowledgment: recognising that for some people, it is always falling. It is falling right now. In Pacita’s world, every stitch, every stroke, every button, every plastic strawberry is not only a part making up her yawning, glorious excess – it is also a commemoration of, and a very bodily *being-there-for*, the diversity of life itself.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

POLLY BARTON is a translator of Japanese literature and non-fiction, currently based in Bristol. She has translated short stories for *WORDS WITHOUT BORDERS*, *THE WHITE REVIEW* and *GRANTA*. Her full-length translations include *FRIENDSHIP FOR GROWN-UPS* by Naocola Yamaaki and *MIKUMARI* by Misumi Kubo (both Strangers Press) and *SPRING GARDEN* by Tomoka Shibasaki (Pushkin Press). After being awarded the 2019 Fitcarraldo Editions Essa Prize, she is currently working on a non-fiction book entitled *FIFTY SOUNDS*.

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NATASHA SOOBAMANIAN

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