

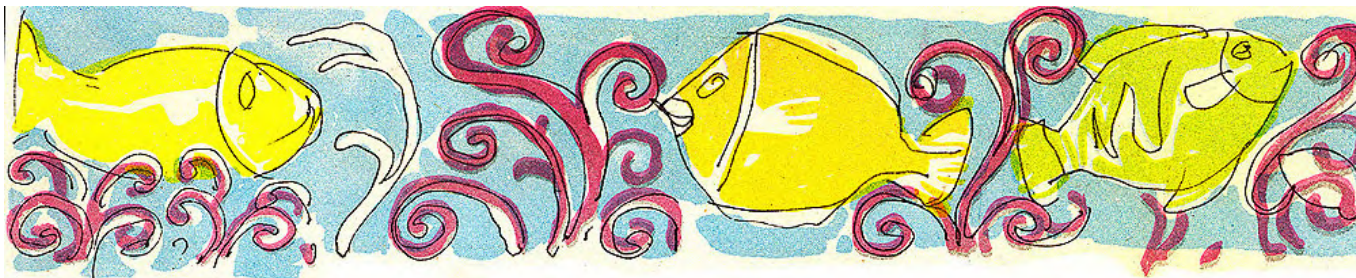


Photo by WIG T. SMITH

A portrait of Pacita Abad

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EARLY VISITORS TO THE Ayala Museum got a treat one day viewing Pacita Abad's new show entitled "Assaulting the Deep Blue Sea." Their feet sank into the sand placed at the entrance of the gallery to simulate a beach. As soon as they entered the glass doors they were submerged into a sea of art: the floor was covered with cheap colored nylon fishnets which held mirrors, sea shells and other ocean objects; the walls from floor to ceiling were lined with paintings, trapuntos and serigraphs depicting the denizens of the sea; while weird music came from somewhere within the depths of the room. One bumped into giant sea urchins made of *kamiseta* scrap. From the ceiling one avoided the tentacles of cloth squids, and gazed at meters and meters of swaying tie-dyed cloth which simulated the waves.

In this dry "underwater" experience in the heart of Makati was a woman in a black bathing suit complete with scuba gear! Some of the visitors thought her mad with her orange lipstick and fluorescent nail polish, this small, dark and skinny woman who simply exclaimed "Move over Alma Moreno, here I come!" as the flashbulbs started popping. This "madwoman" described by photographer Wig Tysmans as a "walking piece of art" happened to be the artist herself — Pacita Abad.

Manila's cultural scene was quiet, except for the Revolution and succeeding CCP pickets by groups of visual artists, since Pacita moved to Washington early this year with her husband Jack Garrity. She used the past few months for "creative hibernation." Pacita purposely avoided calling friends in the US and in the height of winter she was busy painting tropical depths! Social life in Manila had drastically reduced her quality time and being in the US gave her the opportunity to concentrate on her work and think out her Ayala Museum exhibit.

Pacita's sister helps her with the sewing of the trapuntos and she doesn't hide the fact that she buys most of the things for her exhibit readymade because she feels that converting ordinary objects into something new and exciting is in itself part of art. She says that the Ayala show was planned and scheduled at least a year in advance and: "...in the States there was one store

which sold nothing but starfish. I was so excited I bought a lot *tapos* I went home and opened the packages to find 'Made in the Philippines' at the back! The shells were the same. (laughs)" Pacita brought home the bulk of the materials for her exhibit and was stopped by a zealous customs examiner who envisioned a smuggling attempt because of her bulging duffel bags. Customs didn't believe the "no declaration" on her arrival form and asked her to open the bags. The conversation went as follows:

Pacita Abad: "Ayaw ninyong makita iyan?"

Customs: "Bakit ang dami mong dala?"

PA: "Paintings ho, eh."

C: "Buksan ninyo ang isa."

PA: "Bakit pa eh puro mga trapo eh"

C: "Sige lang, I just want to see it."

Pacita continues "...first thing that came out were my stockings. Then all the cheesecloth all the aargh! All the junk. *Mahirap sa artist ang dala mo mga dahon, papel, junk talaga!*" Despite the jetlag she rushed to Divisoria and went wild over fish nets, *kamiseta* scraps, cloth. She said that one could never find another place like Divisoria, not even in the States.

"Assaulting the Deep Blue Sea" was an expression of all underwater experiences Pacita has had diving in the Philippines and Thailand. It is interesting to note that when Pacita left the Philippines she didn't know how to swim and this despite the fact that she grew up in the island of Batanes. She was scared of water, scared of the sea. She continues: "...when I was in the States we would go to the beach with our friends and you know what I'd do? I'd stay on the beach and watch their things and their towels! I said to myself, *dyahi naman ito* so I said I better do something about this so when I was in Washington I went to the YMCA (laughs) and I started swimming, three times a week, MWF, from 5 to 7 at night in winter! I was swimming religiously because I didn't want to be embarrassed the next summer as *tagabantay ng mga bags*. Two years later we went to Thailand but I stayed in the swimming pool. Swimming pool mentality *na hindi pa kaya ang beach* so I said I have to overcome this because I had a phobia for water and I was learning this at 24 years old! I started scuba diving in Thailand. How will

you cope with this phobia unless you go underneath? So, I learned to scuba dive." The same was true for tennis. She asked ball boys in Bangladesh to teach her for three months. Learning to drive a car, she almost run over the family driver thinking the accelerator was the brakes!

IT IS THIS CONSCIOUS AND deliberate drive which made the political science major, who was then a freshman law student at UP, shift to art. Pacita had never had any formal art training in her youth. A product of the public school system, access to art education was next to zero. Nonetheless the aspiration to become a painter was there. After a stint as curator for a small women's college in San Francisco arranging exhibits and concerts, she wondered what she would do with her history and political science background.

"I always had the inclination to paint. So, one day I said I'll do it and I painted!" (laughs). She took courses at the Art Students League in New York and started painting. When her husband went overseas she would explore different cities and encounter different cultures "...my usual procedure is to go around first during the first few days in a new country. I go around and see what there is to paint and where to start, then I set up myself even if the hotel room is small. I remove all the drapes, I put up my canvas, bring out my sketchbooks and paint. *Kawawa ang mga hotel!*" This explains the diverse quality and subject matter of each of her exhibits. Many critics complain that Pacita's work is incoherent and that she doesn't really know how to paint. "...Its always important to experiment and then if you fail *sige* try again. I'm not a perfectionist but I like the idea of trying many things. Why would you limit yourself to one medium? Or why should you limit yourself to one subject matter when you are capable of doing many things? You can challenge yourself to do many things...I got a masters in history, I was a law student then I was going to Berkeley for a five-year scholarship, but now I like to be more involved with people, *tao*. I always believe that if you have soul you can paint. It is important to have soul and then you can paint because you can react to the different people you encounter. I remember I was in India one time and in Calcutta there was a show of Rabindranath

Tagore. Show? What show? Tagore is a poet and a writer and I said he's a painter too? I went to the museum and saw the work *naku! nakakakilabot!* His paintings are better than his poems. Unbelievable!"

In Manila, she impressed almost everyone as the prototype of "the" bohemian artist. She loved tight — fitting red pants with leopard skin patterns. She had a cornrow hairdo complete with multicolored beads on the strands of hair. She had wild make-up, glitter on her cheeks and fluorescent green nail polish! Somehow she always felt uncomfortable wearing the conventional "together" look.

This shocked her conservative Boston-bred-in-laws, but not her husband who got nervous as soon as she painted her fingernails the conventional red.

Expensive clothes gathered dust in her closets because they didn't suit her personality. It is probably this spunk plus her large paintings and trapuntos which impressed then Museum of Philippine Art head Arturo Luz into giving her the entire MOPA for an exhibit. The rest followed easily, media hype, more exhibits, and to top it all she was the first woman to become one of the Ten Outstanding Young MEN of the Philippines!

Pacita explains that she is more visual now, "I'm more color-oriented now. I'm no longer interested in form nor shape." So as one enters Pacita's "deep blue sea" at the Ayala museum one will be overwhelmed by the strength and multitude of colors creating an entire experience. Words simply describe but cannot capture the essence of the exhibit. One simply has to be in the gallery to experience it. Pacita's installation is not just visual but audible and tactile. So the conservative critics will rant and rave but Pacita over a lunch of fish belly, *jaleyang ube*, and coffee at Bisro Remedios will remain cool and unruffled as she prepares to leave for Hong Kong to open yet another exhibit entitled "Oriental Abstractions" and sends UNICEF cards with her painting on the cover to friends in Manila.

Artist or not, Pacita Abad's work is part and parcel of her vibrant personality. One may not agree with her artistic principles but Pacita Abad is one whole interesting or should we say absorbing lifestyle. Perhaps she really is a walking piece of art. ☼