

PERSONALITIES

Bolder than life

Lynn Yau

PACITA Abad believes that life should be fun. But she does take her painting seriously, even if she often employs off-beat methods, once even holding an exhibition underwater using a spray gun.

Her *Self Portrait* collograph is a work that shows the imaginative and humorous sides of her character, but there is also a political side to her work.

"It's the Philippine blood in me," she says. "We fight to live and I represented some of that will to live in a series of social and political paintings a few years ago."

That force is evident in all of Abad's works. Called trapunto, the style is her very own, but the term originated in Italy. "It's basically art on huge canvases," she explains. "What I do is use charcoal to outline the canvas, then paint it over with oil or acrylic or even fabric colouring, apply a cotton and foam backing to the piece and sew the whole thing together."

Abad's works must be seen to be felt. Those currently on show at the Arts Centre underline the potentially limiting boundaries of that type of art work, but Abad's works still make an impact on the viewer.

The bare, white walls complement the powerful colours used by Abad. At first sight, they can be quite blinding and appear gaudy.

"People always tell me that when they walk into a room full of my paintings, the first impact is so overwhelming they step back and gasp in amazement," she says. But, and this is what separates good art from bad, closer and patient examination reveals the skill of the artist.

Abad's trapuntos are not only an oasis of colour — she can throw every colour of the rainbow in and still get away with it — there is a myriad of painstaking detail. Yet, surprisingly, even a large painting (about the size of a large carpet), takes less than three months to finish.

"I like using a lot of buttons and bits and pieces of glass," she says. To be sure, there are buttons of all colours, shapes and sizes in nearly every single one of her paintings. They number in the hundreds, each one of them sewed on securely by Abad herself.

"Art can sometimes be such an expensive business. I think artists should really be creative and use

whatever material there is at hand," she explains. "In *Trapo*, for example, which means rags in Tagalog, I gave the cloths that cleaned my brushes new life by applying them on to the canvas. If you look carefully, other bits and pieces come from dresses I used to wear."

She never wastes anything, and even her past craze for rhinestones has resulted in a contribution to her trapuntos. But the most precious of all her commodities is time.



Pacita Abad and her work: off-beat but serious.

Abad began a career in art in Washington D.C. only 12 years ago. Prior to that, she was a law student first in the Philippines and then on a scholarship to the University of California at Berkeley. With no artists among her 11 siblings, but with a minister father and a mother who is a congresswoman and now a governor in the Philippines, politics run strong in the Abad household.

"My parents wanted a lawyer among their brood and since I didn't make it, one of the others did," Abad says. "Not that I ever regretted giving up law, I just found something else I wanted to do."

Her artistic calling came when she was a curator for a women's college in the United States. Since then, Abad has

been through art school and has held numerous individual and group exhibitions all over the world.

"Aside from painting, I like to travel," she explains. "I get inspiration from the places I visit." That, clearly, is the case. One series of her trapuntos was inspired by boredom. "I was waiting interminably for a bus and was staring absent-mindedly at the cracks on the wall when I thought 'That's it, the next painting I do will feature those cracks.'"

Some of these "cracks" are on display at the Arts Centre. Others, according to one gallery visitor I overheard, are "very African". Abad, in fact, did live in Sudan for two years and that country

inspired some of her paintings. "Papua New Guinea, Haiti and Indonesia have been some of my favourite places," she says. "The local culture and art form have often been sources of great ideas."

One of her proudest creations is a portrait of assassinated politician Benigno Aquino reaching up towards the Philippine flag. Abad is evidently anti-Marcos and fiercely loyal to Cory Aquino.

The only other major commitment in her life is a happy marriage to an American economist. The secret of a successful marriage, she says, is simple: "We both travel seven months of the year." Another touch of Abad humour. ■