

FACES

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The Sea and Pacita

SUMMER hasn't always been a kind season for a dark and skinny youngster who used to spend beach outings standing guard over the towels and bags of her luckier companions.

"Back in those days," first woman TOYM awardee for the arts **Pacita Abad** recalls, "We weren't encouraged to learn how to swim." To one's elders at that time, swimming bred everything from lusty stares to disease to mysterious pregnancies in coed pools and sharks in the open sea.

But even the most stoic beach custodian can only resist the water so much, and finally, a bored Pacita decided to overcome her handicap. "I enrolled at the YMCA and for three times a week even on snowy days, I would go swimming. This was during my studies in Washington. It took me two years to learn and then only in the pool. To get enough confidence to try the ocean, I decided to go diving. So five years ago in Thailand, I took my first plunge."

The rest, as they say, is pure obsession.

"My God," she gushes, "the objects you see underwater! There are so many corals in fluorescent colors, so many fish in all shapes and sizes, everything is so pretty down there. I don't think I could ever do justice to them in my paintings."

But you can't fault the lady for not trying. In her current one-woman shot titled "Assaulting the Deep Sea," Pacita's ravings about her underwater experiences find full expression. About 30 trapunto paintings, serigraphs, tie dye and soft sculptures capture her bubbling excitement everytime she talks about the sport:

"Do you know that we have the best places for diving here in our country?" exclaims this member of the Philippine Sub-Aqua Club. "Palawan's Tubataha is definitely world-class, although my favorites are Sumiloy Island and the Apo Reef in Dumaguete. From Metro Manila, the most accessible would be Anilao in Batangas. The waters are so clear! You have never seen colors as vivid as the corals around Sombrero Island nor blues so blue as in the Apo Reef."

Diving is a cinch, she assures. "If you take diving lessons twice a week in six weeks, you'd be surprised at how easy it is. You start lessons in the pool to see how confident you are in the water then go on

to endurance tests when you go in with all that gear and equipment — fins, masks, compressor tanks, etc. Don't worry; they're not that heavy in the water. Then you go to the bottom of the pool and take off the gear. You swim back to the surface and dive again and pick up everything you left at the bottom one by one. It's the equivalent of diving to 60-100 feet. It's easy and so much fun. Besides, every new skill you learn makes you feel good about yourself."

Despite that jaunty self-confidence, her exhibit's title betrays some reservations about intruding into nature's preserve. "It's such a peaceful environment down there that one feels like an infidel intruding into somewhere sacred. Everytime I dive, I feel like saying, 'Excuse me, but here I come again!'"

Pacita's Ayala Museum exhibit which runs until June 25 should prove to be a vicarious experience for the strictly earth-bound: "You'll feel like you're underwater on the deep sea," she gushes, explaining how she used shells, mirror and sand to recreate the ocean floor, dressed up the ceiling with tie-dye to represent the movement of the water, and stuffed more tie-dye cloth to stand in as soft octopus sculptures in the background.

It's one exhibit that should add more depth to one's definition of art.



Abad: Taking the big plunge.