

Portrait of Kampuchea

KANJANA
SPINDLER
talks to
Filipina artist
Pacita Abad



A JOURNALIST writes about refugees. A painter paints. While wandering through the refugee camps, a journalist captures the here and now of the atmosphere. A painter records its timelessness. It's the sweep of history versus a slice of time.

"Portrait of Kampuchea" by Filipina artist Pacita Abad, captures the faces of the Kampuchians she saw during her several trips to refugee holding centres in Aranyaprathet.

They are faces which

tell a story — adversity, boredom, bitterness, and not too often, gaiety — all the now familiar scenes at the camps which, admits the 34-year-old painter, forced "me to feel that I must be involved."

And through Pacita's painter's eyes:

"To my mind, the refugees are temporary. The state of shock is when they've just crossed the border. After that it seems to be natural living. The mothers cooking, the children playing and the men talking in one corner. So I said to myself maybe I didn't penetrate through. The initial shock I didn't observe. But I'm an impressionist.

wonder about the refugees' real predicament.

"What I expected was misery. But I was impressed. In Khao I Dang camp, you hardly see military. It's like an ordinary Thai village with a lot of volunteers working — incredibly organised.

"But I see more misery in the men and children. I don't know why. I've never seen so many children and there're a lot of pregnant women.

"The men are the ones I worry for. If they can have something to do — maybe a television. That could help them take their worries away? I think that's what bothers me — they've nothing to do. Apart from lining up daily for food they just sit around.

"It's amazing, they're also very disciplined. You see thousands of people lining up each day for rice distribution. Incredible. But I guess if they've to eat, they've got to be disciplined, haven't they?"

"One day while watching the UNICEF people distributing the water I learned how expensive the water is. Half a million US dollars is being spent monthly on water alone. It makes me wonder how long those refugees are going to last because of lack of money.

OBSERVE

"I just wanted to observe. There were many things I didn't know before. Like I didn't know there is barbed wire, that the camp was in the middle of nowhere and it's sizzling hot. I didn't know that some of them came by ox-carts, that the shoes were made of rubber tyres. The way they wear the turban with the hat inside...

"I wanted very much to find out about the colours. Yes, the colour of everything there because the pictures I saw were all in black and white."

Like the artist herself, Pacita's 28 impressions which make up "Portrait of Kampuchea" display great exuberance. Colours are bright and vibrating, making one

"That's why I feel there's a need for people to be constantly aware. Because otherwise if you don't keep reminding them, nothing will happen and soon people will forget."

NEED



Pacita's "Portrait of Kampuchea" is there as a reminder, a conscience nagging to keep people on the move.

"It's nice to be a painter when you have a message to tell the people. When you see a painting, the memory is always there because you remember how it was interpreted."

INNOCENT

"I like the Kampuchians because I sympathise with them. They were so innocent and they were bothered. Why Kampuchea? How many years have they been at war?"

"I want them to go back and start it all over again and lead a normal life. But not like the group I saw at the airport waiting to go on the plane with their luggage marked Miami, Florida. I really felt sad when I saw that. Gosh, these people are going to be separated and who cares whether it's America or not."

But "Portrait of Kampuchea" will be America bound in a few months time when Pacita and her American economist husband, Jack Garrity, leave Bangkok to settle down in Boston.

Pacita sometimes calls herself a "painter of an issue," or a "political painter" due to her background in politics. With her father who passed away a few years ago having been a former Minister of Public Works and Communications of the Philippines and her mother, a congresswoman, and herself a former law student before shifting to art, Pacita feels a certain amount of justification and looks at her background as a gratifying source that makes her "conscious and aware of people, particularly the less fortunate ones."

POLITICS

"But I wish there was less politics involved in the Kampuchean issue," says Pacita. "But that's impossible," she adds, sadly.

PACITA ABAD'S EXHIBITION, "PORTRAIT OF KAMPUCHEA" WILL BE ON VIEW FROM FRIDAY, APRIL 4TH-THURSDAY, APRIL 10TH, AT THE BHIRASRI INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART, SOI ATTAKARN PRASIT, OFF SATHORN TAI ROAD.

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