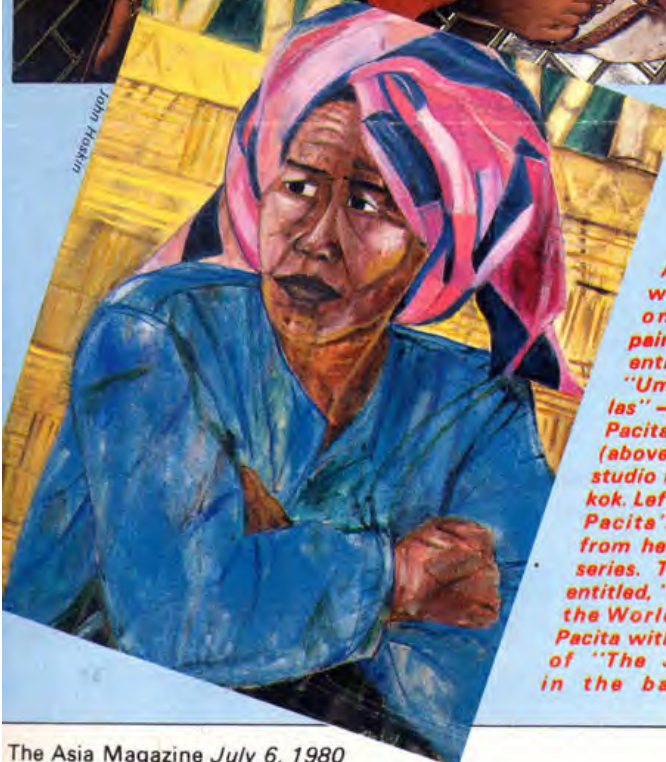


Sometimes shocking colours



John Haskin

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At work on a painting entitled, "Umbrellas" - that's Pacita Abad (above) in her studio in Bangkok. Left: One of Pacita's works from her refugees series. This one's entitled, "Women of the World." Right: Pacita with a painting of "The Jur Tribe" in the background.

Life through an artist's eye

PILIPINA painter, Pacita Abad, could be described as something of an itinerant ambassador. Having painted and exhibited separate collections of work from the USA, Bangladesh, Manila and Sudan, she earlier this year was completing a series of paintings on Thailand. Her pictures are marked by an exuberant quality which brings out the positive aspects of her subjects, yielding an individual interpretation of the beauty of the countries she chooses to present to the world at large.

Whether a remote tribal village in Africa or a Dacca street spilling over with people, Pacita delights in painting life as and where she sees it and aims to communicate something of the essence of that experience. "I want to be informative, to give an insight," she says, "that is really what I want my audience to gain from my art."

The validity of such an attitude was confirmed for Pacita before she visited Bangladesh. Friends and relatives then expressed complete amazement at her decision to go to a country which they associated with famine, floods, cyclones and refugees.

Immediately she became committed to change those ideas and, through paint, to present the life-affirmative qualities that belie the negative image.

With vibrant, sometimes shocking colours, and bold lines, city and countryside alike were brought to life in her paintings. Pacita even managed to capture the allure of Bangladesh women — no small achievement in a Muslim country where the female is traditionally kept in the background.

Today, Pacita enjoys a fair degree of recognition. Her works find a ready market and, in addition to several group shows, she has held one-woman exhibitions in Washington, Dacca, Manila, Khartoum and two in Bangkok. These will be followed later this year with shows in San Francisco and New York.

Pacita embarked on a painting career almost by accident and has been painting professionally for only six years.

by JOHN HOSKIN

Born and brought up on the small Philippine Island of Batanes in the North China Sea, she graduated in political studies from the University of the Philippines and followed up with a two year stint in local politics. She seemed destined for a career in the public sector; something which seemed hardly surprising considering both her parents have been members of the Congress of the Philippines.

The tide turned, however, in 1970 when Pacita left for California to complete a masters degree in history at the University of San Francisco. Courses in the history of art gave her an interest in painting and she was later to take a job as art coordinator at the university.

'I don't want my painting to be like a photograph'

Planning and organising exhibitions increased the interest but, she says, "only in paintings, not to paint myself." Nevertheless, the encouragement of friends, no doubt aided by the atmosphere of California in the early 70's, prevailed and Pacita made her first tentative efforts at painting.

Aided by such encouragement, she applied herself seriously to studying techniques although it was not until after a year spent travelling through Southeast Asia and the Mideast plus a spell painting in Central France, that she embarked on a course of formal art training.

First, there was two years at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington D.C. which was followed by a further twelve months at the Art Students' League in New York. During this period, her work began to blossom under the tutelage of painters John Heliker, Berthold

Schmutzart and Blaine Larson.

In her early work, Pacita was very much influenced by the paintings of Chagall and Matisse. But while traces of these influences still remain, an original style is gradually emerging. Academic training has its limitations and ultimately needs to be channelled through individual experience.

Travel has again become an important part of the painter's life, and of her art. Through her husband, whose work as a consultant economist leads to lengthy sojourns in varied countries, Pacita is brought into contact with many different people and cultures. This she has found essential to the development of her art. "Travel gives imagination," she says, "you are free of academic constraints; you just paint what you see."

But seeing with the artist's eye. While the intention is to be informative, the effect must be one of rapport with the subject, not mere surface reporting. "I don't want my painting to be like a photograph," explains Pacita. "There are fifty ways of seeing and depicting a subject — so why not be different?"

The important thing is to get across the response and if this means portraying a policeman with six arms like Shiva, or painting a brick house blue, then that is how it must be. This is particularly noticeable in her landscapes where the play on colour and the movement of the subjects is more vital than a realistic portrayal of green grass and brown earth.

Style-wise, Pacita is still very much on a road of self-discovery. Different subjects seem to dictate different treatment — "it just happens," she says. Her styles vary from the hard line and strong colours reminiscent of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings — used to advantage in the pictures of Bangladesh women — to complete child-like naivety with matchstick figures and a disregard for perspective, as seen in some of the African village paintings.

Dominant in virtually all her paintings, however, is the confident use of colour. "I am a colourist more than anything else, and an expressionist." Bright, vibrant colours tend

Pacita Abad . . . travelling painter

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to be juxtaposed rather than blended and it is often the colour rather than the line which expresses the artist's intention.

For example, in the painting entitled, "After the Northwester," which shows trees devastated by fierce gales, the apparent destruction is negated by the blue, green and scarlet hues which have the effect of assuring that life will go on.

And it is optimism which is at the heart of Pacita's art and gives it its distinctive style. It is not that she chooses to ignore the sadder aspect of the countries she visits it is rather her basic belief in life, interpreted through her painting, which accentuates the positive.

In the scenes of Bangladesh cities, for example, the poverty and suffering are there but there also is life and a joy in colour and movement. Essentially, it is a matter of finding a rapport that transcends the material concern.

A prolific painter — more than 100 canvases completed last year — Pacita's favourite

medium is oils. Although she occasionally also works in pastels and charcoal, she finds oils more rich and varied and more easily controlled. This seems especially important as she prefers large canvases which more readily bring out the effect of juxtaposed colours while also giving scope for the mass of detail that characterises much of her work.

As she puts it, "I prefer simple subjects but presented in a complicated way."

With a formal training in the U.S.A., most of her work stems from European styles and Pacita says she has little interest in the traditional Oriental schools which she finds too rigid and formalised. On the other hand, she has nothing in common

with modern abstract painting which for her is too vague and negative and unsure of its direction.

Rather, Pacita seems to be developing an individual style which, based on Western traditions, is nevertheless blended with her Asian background.

There is certainly an Oriental flavour in her use of bright vibrant colours but it is her formative years in the Philippines which gives her work its distinctive style, its optimism and life-affirmative quality.

"I think," she says, "the two most important things in my work are my love of nature and my interest in

isolate myself and not help being involved." She became impelled to paint the refugees and managed to gain permission to visit the major camps.

From this experience has resulted perhaps Pacita's best work to date. The paintings show traces of a more individual style; still a strong emphasis on vibrant colours but with a greater depth and strength. There is again the representation of life as it is at a certain place and time but also a much stronger affirmative quality than before and, perhaps paradoxically in the context of the subject matter, a deeper optimism.

The horror of the situation of the refugees is not ignored — two or three of the paintings depict fearful and apprehensive faces peering through the barbed wire fences. But, as she says, the "shock, misery and fear is only really apparent when the refugees first arrive from the war zones but once settled in the camp, life goes on much as before." Many of the pictures in the refugees' series are of mother and child, the face of the child may

'I prefer simple subjects . . . but presented in a complicated way . . .'

be often depicted as anxious and questioning but the expression of the mother is one of happiness, happiness that life goes on. It might not be the best life but there is a future, a continuum.

From the Kampuchean experience, Pacita seems to have found greater artistic maturity. The same basic aims are there, the reportive, the emphasis on colour but the strength of her optimism and the life-affirmative role of art are communicated through her paintings with a far greater impact.

In her latest temporary home, Thailand, Pacita spent the first three months capturing in painting the beauty and diversity of the Thai countryside, "portraying a romantic interpretation of rural life." Then came the political upheaval in Kampuchea and the rush of refugees into Thailand. Flooded with news of this from friends, journalists and voluntary workers, she felt she "could not

Yes, an ambassador in paint communicating a heightened awareness of the people of the world and their essential unity, whatever the difference in material circumstances may be. ■