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Review of exhibition by Pacita Abad

Powerful portraits

JUST when you think you've become inured by a surfeit of newspaper photographs to the sufferings of Kampuchean refugees you encounter Pacita Abad's "Portraits of Kampuchea" and are shaken to your bootstraps. For what she has shown is suffering with a human face; no emaciated children or swarming hordes but people scarred and scared by their experiences with no promise that the suffering is over.

She does it through the eyes. The eyes, large and white, stare out of backgrounds of bright colours and swirling movement. They reflect horrors beyond comprehension and the sense of futility in trying to return some semblance of normality to their lives.

The eyes are walls; the

viewer struggles to see beyond them and understand what their numbed owners are feeling. But in vain; what they hold are fragments of shattered lives the viewer, cocooned in the security of familiar daily routine, is unable to fathom.

Miss Abad further portrays this uncertainty through vague lines which barely sketch the figures. Each solid area is a patchwork of similar colours which suggest the hue of the garment or object but never really specify it.

The overall effect is powerful. One sees real people but rendered in a manner which conveys the transient nature of their lives; caught in an unending limbo between the lives they have known and an uncertain future.

What lends the exhibi-

tion its impact is its multi-dimensional nature. In addition to pictures of children staring out of barbed-wire enclosures, a man holding his baby both bloodied by battles for control of the camps, and of two sorrowing girls beside the body of their dead mother, there are scenes of children laughing while holding younger brothers and sisters, of a woman giving her baby water and a girl holding a rooster — the only thing she owns in the world.

These scenes of quiet desperation, of introspection and withdrawal are more unsettling than those of obvious suffering. Miss Abad has understood this and in the process has created an unsettled feeling in the viewer. The memory of the vacant eyes — not accusing, not vengeful but full of confusion, terrible memories and shattered hopes — remain with the viewer long after he has left the hall.

It is unfortunate that the exhibition at the Bhirasri lasted only six days. But Miss Abad is presently at work on a new, giant mural which will incorporate many of the ideas and figures of the already completed paintings. It is hoped this canvas will be finished and exhibited before she leaves the country in June.

— Steve Van
Beek