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Pacita Abad in Bristol: where art, craft and politics intersect

The first UK show of the artist's work revels in her wide-ranging techniques and influences



Pacita Abad's 'L.A. Liberty' (1992) at Spike Island, Bristol © Max McClure

Rachel Spence

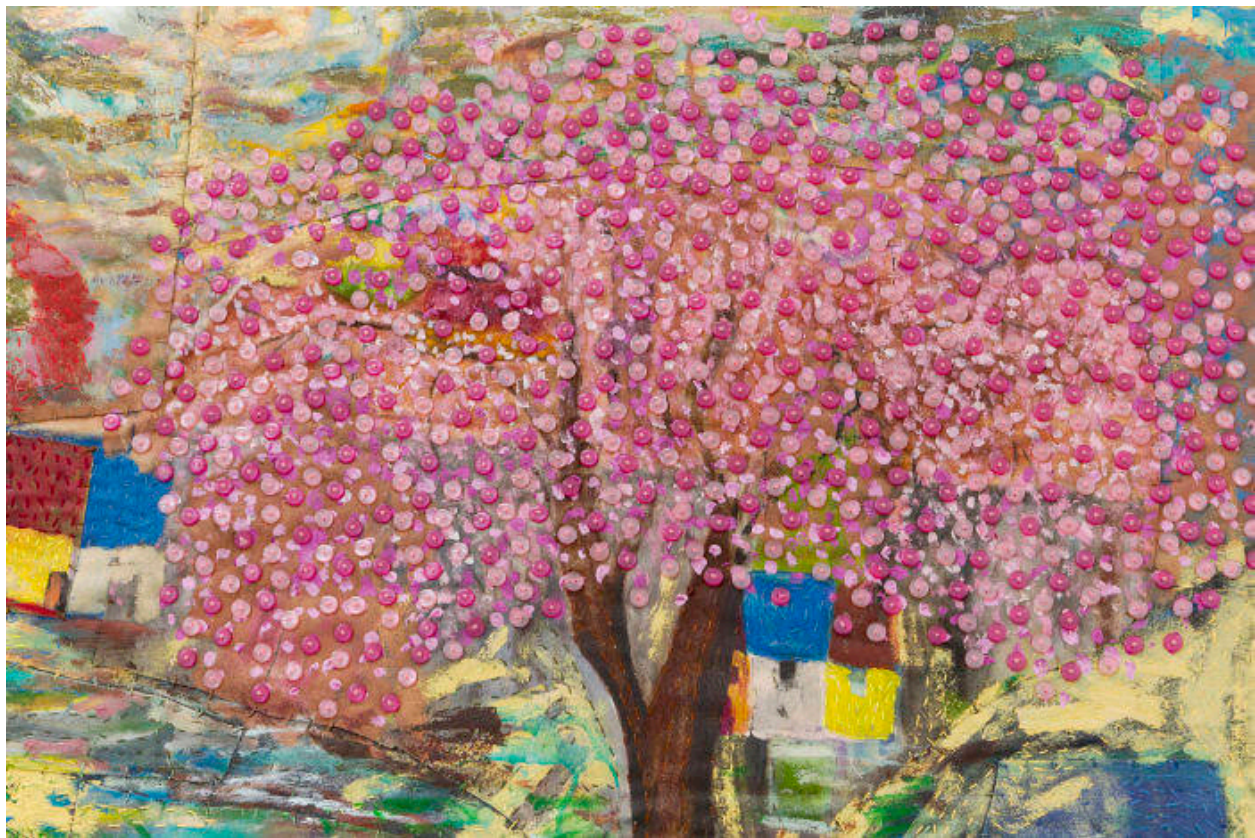
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Had Pacita Abad been Italian, she would have been described as a *forza di natura*. In truth, she was born in Batanes, an archipelago in the northern Philippines. By the time she passed away in 2004, she had painted more than 1,000 canvases and travelled through more than 80 countries, from many of which she borrowed local artistic techniques.

As a result, her art is a captivating, provocative broth that encompasses painting, sewing, embroidery, batik, macramé, Korean ink brush and a myriad other practices. Yet it always maintains both formal discipline and political intent.

Congratulations to Spike Island in Bristol for giving Abad her first public showing in the UK. The exhibition's title, *Life in the Margins*, is not quite accurate. Abad's work was shown widely during her lifetime, in countries as diverse as Singapore, Cuba, Bangladesh, the US and her land of birth. But the fact that her activity unfolded mostly across a south-eastern axis — when she did show in the US, it was usually in the context of her ethnic or gender identity — reveals neglect by north-western institutions which so often define themselves as the epicentre of global culture.

The exuberant majesty of Abad's canvases underlines the foolishness of such gatekeeping. *Life in the Margins* opens with a suite of works from the 1980s. By now, Abad was married to a US economist, Jack Garrity, whose job entailed frequent travel. In part thanks to Garrity's career and in part through her own volition, she had already voyaged through countries including Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Thailand, Taiwan, China, Papua New Guinea and India.



'The Village Where I Came From' (1991) (detail) © Max McClure

Her experience of the different arts and crafts of these regions inspired Abad to develop a practice she called "trapunto", a quilting technique that involved painting and collaging on top of canvas which she then backed, stuffed and stitched. The results are scintillating, tactile cornucopias of painting and textile which are then decorated further with beads, shells, buttons, macramé and found objects.

Abad's passion for social justice injected skills often dismissed as decorative with a deeper, darker sensibility

In "Grasshopper" (1985), the abstract pattern of swooping arabesque forms in fern green, indigo and turquoise evokes from a distance the insect's smooth, quicksilver leaps in a tropical jungle. On closer inspection, however, the surface abounds with a rainforest of ingredients including buttons sewn on by Abad and then painted, a gesture that tells us how much the artist loved to push her more-is-more style to her utmost.

Abad's passion for social justice injected skills often dismissed as decorative with a deeper, darker sensibility. Made in 1983, one of the most striking works in Bristol is "Girls in Ermita", which shows sex workers in the red light district of downtown Manila. Painted on stitched and padded fabric, its fiery palette — deep reds, citrus yellow and orange, warm sky-blues — intensifies the melancholy aura of half-naked female figures who float either side of a central strip of tacky signs with legends such as "Have a Peep Disco" and "Old Vienna". The presence of those brown bodies, which Abad renders both vulnerable and defiant, throws into relief the objectification of women of colour in the global south by painters such as Gauguin, who romanticise their subjects' lack of power rather than question it.

Sharp critical faculties were in Abad's DNA. Born into a family of politicians, she was expected to follow in the footsteps of her congressman father, Jorge Abad. But after she led a student demonstration against President Marcos's corrupt elections, her family home was attacked by gunmen. In fear for her life, Abad left the Philippines in 1969 and moved to the US, where she would base herself for the next 30 years.

By the 1990s, Abad had embarked on a body of work entitled *Immigrant Experience*, in which she illuminated the experience of migrant communities transplanted to the land of opportunity. In "Korean Shopkeepers" (1993), for example, she paints in her signature vibrant shades on textile to show grocers standing at a counter laden with appetising fruits including strawberries she has fashioned from papier-mâché, and a pineapple whose translucent glow comes from yellow glass beads. By making such painstaking efforts to construct the scene, Abad manifests empathy and respect for those she is depicting. Those bold digressions into three dimensions reflect her determination to transcend a purely surface representation of her subject.



'Sampaloc Walls' (1985) © Max McClure

Abad had no illusions about the ambiguity of the welcome offered by her adopted country. The gulf between expectation and reality is expressed through paintings such as “The Village Where I Come From” (1991) and “If My Friends Could See Me Now” (1991). In the former, Abad brings to life a busy rural community in the Philippines, complete with nursing mother, cooks, fruit-pickers, stallholders and goats. Overseeing their activity is a glorious tree whose froth of blossom has been assembled from rose-pink buttons.

The second painting is a sadder, tenser affair. There is just one figure, perhaps Abad herself, who stands in the centre of a storyboard-style arrangement of images. Frowning, arms folded across her chest, she is clearly disappointed with the American dream — that weary cliché is painted in big black letters above her head — of skyscrapers, picket fences and automobiles.

By 1998, Abad was living in Indonesia, where she witnessed the downfall of the Suharto regime. To capture the sense of chaos — from collapsing currency to devastated architecture — she returned to abstraction when she paints “The Sky Is Falling, The Sky Is Falling” (1998).

Two years later, she embarked on a series entitled *Endless Blues*, which she paints while listening to the blues music she loved. The turbulence of this late series — here embodied by “Life in the Margins” (2002), “Blues Train to Yogya” (2002) and the towering five-metre-high “Fly into a Rage” (2000), which is suspended in the centre of the gallery — is intensified both by the trauma of the Twin Towers attack and Abad’s own diagnosis of lung cancer.

Using the batik technique she learnt in Indonesia, Abad created canvases whose jewel-bright colours and compressed, kaleidoscopic patterns express a grief that is extraordinarily fecund in its intensity, as if the canvases are both celebration and elegy.

Abad died in Singapore in December 2004. After she had accepted a commission to paint that country’s Alkaff Bridge, her last months see her undergoing radiotherapy in the morning and working furiously in the afternoon. Her legacy was eloquently evoked by the black American painter Faith Ringgold, who said: “Abad creates her work from the point of a view of an international woman of colour. Those of us who have travelled intensively know that creative women of colour are working all over the world and are not merely ‘minority’ figures within the narrow confines of the western art world.”

Thanks to Abad’s wide horizons — both as a woman and an artist — we leave this show with our own borders enriched and expanded.

To April 5, spikeisland.org.uk