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Arts & Culture

Layering Colors and Emotions

Pacita Abad combines the art of painting and the craft of needlework.

Parvathi Nayar

Narayan explores

'Abstract Emotions' for the *Sunday Observer*.

"COLOR IS the total expression," says Filipino artist Pacita Abad. Few looking at Abad's richly colored combinations of paint and textiles would disagree.

Abad's current exhibition, *Abstract Emotions*, is part of celebrations held by the Philippine Embassy in Jakarta to commemorate 100 years of independence. Initially Abad wanted this, her third exhibition in Jakarta, to pick up a previous theme, "Crossing Borders", but then felt "it was old, not the real me today."

Personal feelings, music, color and textiles are the actual and abstract layers that have created the paintings in the current series. But actually, Abad started with the idea of abstract emotions a long time ago.

In 1991, Abad lost her mother. Her father having died much earlier, she experienced for the first time what it was like to be an orphan. She translated the desolation she felt into 10 large paintings (she still has these works but they are not part of the upcoming show). Five-to-six years later, the artist returned to abstract emotions and found it was a more personal way of expressing herself. Her way of creating these pieces is to put on music, gaze at her blank canvas and look at the materials—textiles, threads, mirrors, beads and buttons—until something jells.

I am curious about the music, and we digress to discuss what music can inspire creativity. Abad's favorites are R&B and jazz—with a bit



CLOCKWISE FROM above, Pacita Abad poses with her painting, *The sky will fall, The sky will fall*; other works by Abad include *Confused Passions* and *Touching Side by Side*.

of rap and reggae thrown in. “And my all-time favorite, the artist who used to go by the name of Prince,” she grins. Though she does listen to different kinds of music, Abad does tend—as most of us do—to return to her favorites: Van Morrison, Aretha Franklin, Mickey Dread, Shahba Ranks and Little Village.

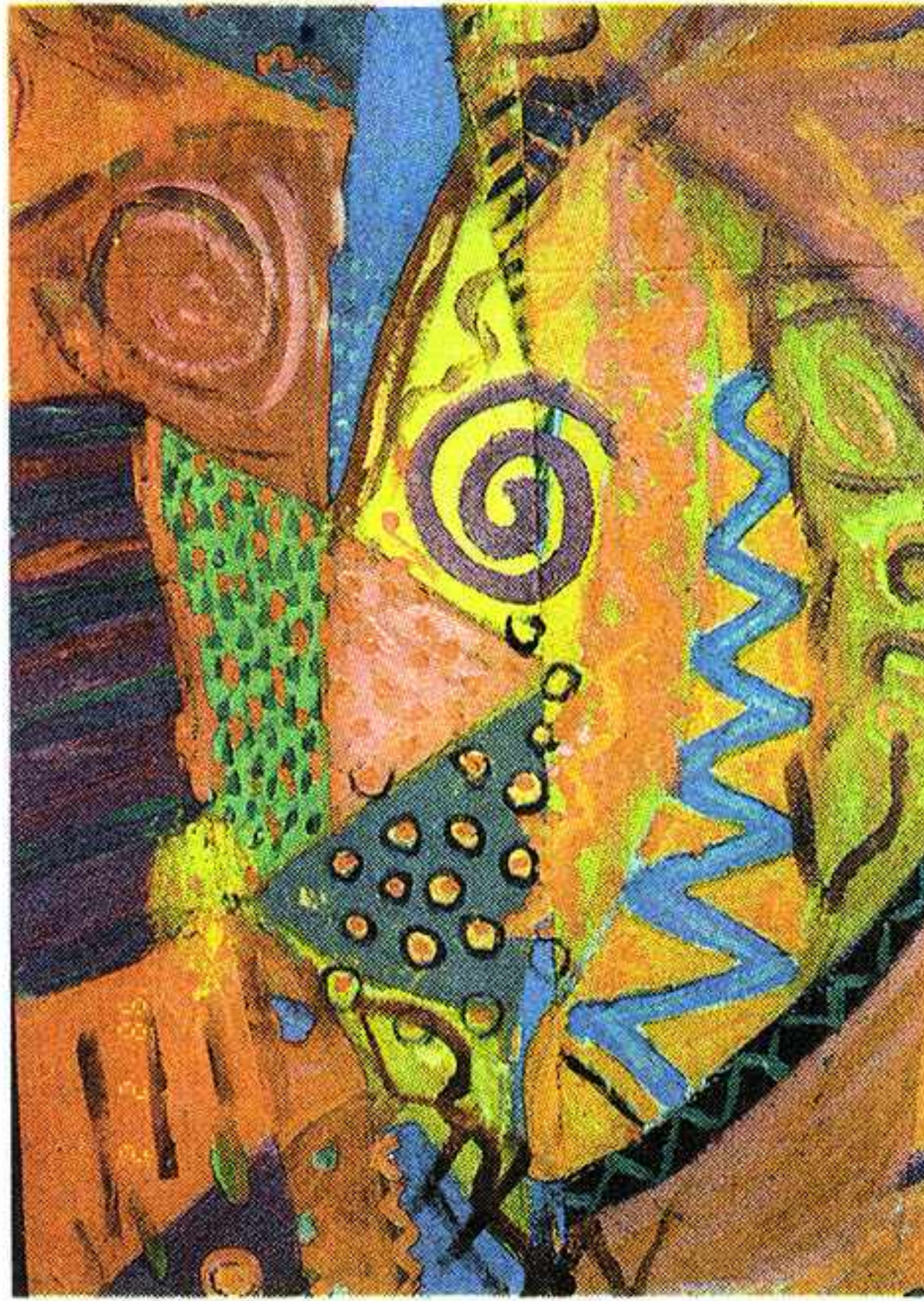
There are 80 paintings in the show, ranging in size from 30-by-40 centimeters to 5-by-1.5 meters. Most of this work is new, although 22 of the smaller works were recently shown in Manila, in an exhibition also called *Abstract Emotions*. The emotional quality of Abad’s work is best expressed in the larger format canvasses; here, color and texture have enough room to leisurely play with each other, and impact on the viewer’s overall visual field. This impact is lost in the smaller works.

Abad is an artist who has traveled widely. She has studied both in the Philippines and the US. It was in San Francisco, in 1975, that Abad came into contact with other artists and began an exploration of her own artistic sensibilities. She attended the Corcoran School of Art in Washington D.C., and since then has been painting, holding workshops and exhibiting her work in a variety of venues.

Through the Looking Glass, in the current series, is very long and very abstract and—like *The Sky is Falling*, *The Sky is Falling*—is meant to be hung like tapestry, not framed. *Batik* is present as the basis in this and many other works. The surface is then strongly painted over in the artist’s trademark geometric designs—stripes and dots—so that the *batik* often ends up as just a hint, a suggestion underneath.

In a fairly significant move from different sized, yet essentially rectangular formats, Abad presents *Celebration*. The basis of this piece is a Muslim wedding tent that she recently unearthed in Manila. She decided to use this as a showcase of textiles from all over the Philippines, her way of presenting 100 years of Philippine independence.

Abad stitched on further triangular panels to the tent, using textiles from her home country. She started with fabric from Batanes, the island where she comes from, and went on to collage cloth made of beautiful natural fibers such as pineapple, banana, hemp; flowery cotton from the northern part; sequined Chinese-influenced and lacy Spanish-influenced fabrics; hand woven textiles from the Mindanao area. The result is a rich tapestry of colors and ideas.



Abstract Emotions is one of the most abstract collections put forward by Abad. Within the overall format there are several sub-series, most notably, works inspired by textiles from Yogyakarta and Sumba, by the Montreaux Jazz Festival recently held in Switzerland, as well as the Aboriginal lands and artistic styles in Australia’s Northern Territory. The Australian-inspired works show strong links with Aboriginal art. There is a strange parallelism between the pointillist-style marks used in Aboriginal painting and the dots and stripes used by Abad—in paintings like *Touching Side By Side*. She also uses Tiwi designed cloth and mirrors from India.

Abad is an artist who immensely enjoys painting, but she is also astute enough to realize that in today’s world, art needs to be promoted. In 1996 she brought out the book, *Pacita Abad, Exploring the Spirit*, and has recently created *Wild at Art*, a CD Rom on her work. She is currently working on an animal series, also inspired by Australia, which will probably be the focus of her next exhibition.

Abad, of course, is best known for her *trapunto* work—a style of artwork that combines needlework and painting. By stuffing certain parts of the work and working over the fabrics with stitches, a quilted effect is created; to this, paint is applied.

Some of Abad’s most interesting Indonesian works—showcased in her previous show—are in the *trapunto* style, based on *wayang* puppets. Having an easy reference and clear focal point from which to start exploring, these pictures are easy to relate to. By contrast, the newer *Abstract Emotion* does not work from a single focal point. It is more like a color field, an area of optical experience so large, the viewer is left with an impression of a vivid, busy passage through color.

There are some *trapunto* works in the current repertoire, but the artist seems to be moving more towards layering and abstraction. “I like this way of working, it is more spontaneous,” she says. After all, change and movement are as important a tool in the progress of an artist’s creativity as color and composition.

Abstract Emotions by Pacita Abad can be viewed at the National Museum Jakarta from April 29 to May 17.

