

ARTS

WORLDS APART IN THINKING Big

BY JEANNIE E. JAVELOSA

WORKING IN LARGE SCALE HAS always excited and challenged artists. Why so? Firstly, big works require a certain discipline to be able to sustain an idea or technique. Secondly, they must have a compositional coherence that should create an impact not only at close range, but more importantly, from a distance of more than at least two meters. Some artists have successfully achieved working "big": There comes to mind painter Carlos "Botong" Francisco with murals of such width and breadth of beauty in his colors and compositions; or sculptor Eduardo Castrillo's large sculptural creations like "People's Power"; or Roberto Villanueva's humongous 1991 installation at the CCP Grounds called "Cordilleran Labyrinth".

Now ongoing at the Metropolitan Museum is an exhibit called "Thinking Big" which brings together works by women artists Pacita Abad and Paz "Ching" Abad Santos. The Met's thematic curatorship of this exhibit brings both artists up for comparison, even if one doesn't mean to. The similarity of their names and the "size" they work on seems to be their only commonality—save for their curious work techniques.

Both artists have an itch to gather materials and incorporate these into their works. Both are also into the stitching-in of materials on a ground surface. Pacita calls her works *trapunto*, taking stock of the 14th century decorative technique of joining two layers of materials with running stitches. The work is later padded from the underside to create high relief. This technique also includes collage, silkscreen, tie-dye and embroidery. Pacita also adds colorful embellishments of buttons, sequins, mirrors, gold thread, T-shirts and whatever else she finds interesting and relevant to the compositions. Pacita's embellishments are of the commercial world—found in any department store should one want them. Ching on the other hand, stitches, binds cords, knots abaca strands and pastes natural objects such as pea pods, leaves, gugo, shells, banana tree barks etc. to create a rich diversity of encrusted textural expressions. Both artists add color using acrylic paint for better effects. Beyond that, they are as different as opposites come.

Morena Pacita, exuberantly outgoing, is the constant traveler who has used the world and her experiences as her inspiration for the *trapunto* paintings. *Mestiza* Ching, is the quiet and moody artist whose introspection has allowed her inner states to be reflected in her tapestries and canvases made of indigenous materials. Where Pacita's highly strung energy explodes in expressive

strokes that dot, smear and punctuate the surface through fauvist and expressive colors that reverberate in pure intensity, Ching smears and blends her minimal hues to achieve subtle color fields that suggests different states. With Pacita, we are transferred to the concrete city jungle, overpopulated with people, smog and traffic. We become one with this discordant electrifying energy field that leaves us exhausted. With Ching, we are brought to a dreamy state of hidden rain forests or the sea shores, breezy fields and the blue sky.

Pacita's *trapunto* paintings (both abstract and figurative) are mostly recent works dating back to perhaps three years. Her abstract forms rely on decorative devices and color for their direct and raw appeal. Painted almost with the same ferocity as *brut* art or the fauves, Pacita allows her images to form unhampered by dictates of style or proper formats. Intuitive and direct, she attacks her canvas surfaces with uncontrolled energy that seeks the most relevant image. More importantly, it reflects her personal search. Identity, racial dislocations and alienation struggles are what feed the very gut of her artistic expression. Pacita works by series, often coming back to a subject matter to pursue it in another direction. Her diverse subjects have included immigration, masks, puppets, flowers, wall series, abstract series and socio-political commentaries on the themes of the days. In them, hopeful dreams are reached. In them too, deceptions are abundant discovered beneath glittering facades.

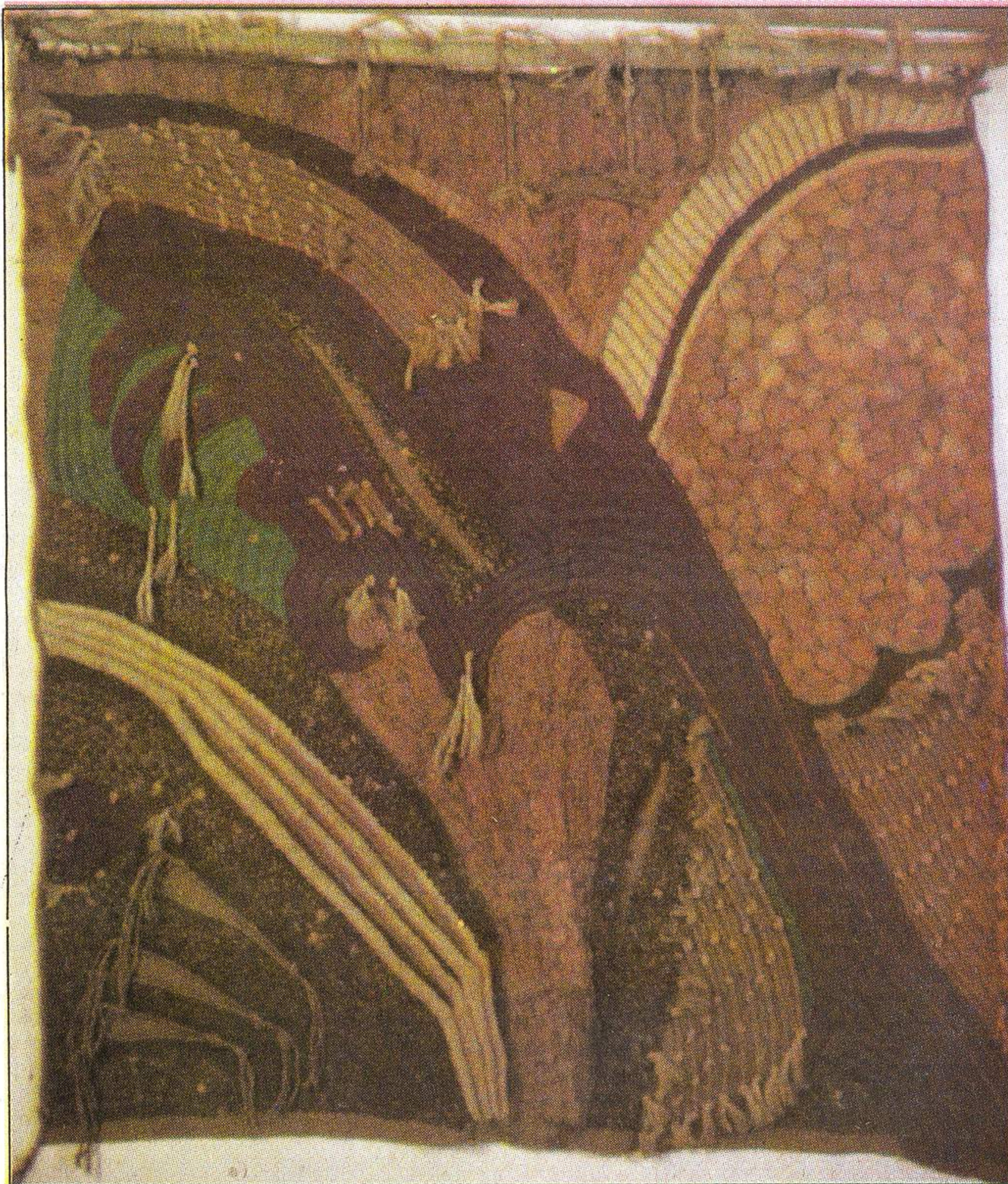
Pacita's works are housed in major international museums and she is a recipient of a number of awards. Into the international art scene, Pacita has brought the spirit of adventure, travel and exotic color alive—and more importantly, the statement of how it is like to be Filipina, Asian, and a citizen of the world in these trying times.

Ching's name has been synonymous with the finest in Philippine contemporary tapestry works. This exhibit brings together the best of her large tapestries—expansive and masterful in size, eloquent in their intricate articulations and emotive of the artist's soul and understanding of the indigenous materials she favors. This exhibition allows the public a glimpse of the uniqueness of her artistry seen in the development of her style and the continuously evolving manner in which she brings together the humble materials of the earth into startling expressions of depth and sensitivity. The works on exhibit cover close to two decades of her works.

Delirious Spin which won the 1980 Art Association of the Philippines Annual Exhibition is installed on the floor as representative of the early fiber and yarn period. A foray into Oriental philosophy resulted in works that sought the endless breathe of space punctuated by stitches on the humble burlap. Austere and sophisticated in their minimalism, works like *Infinity*, *Celebration at Dusk*, *Briah*, *Namaskar* and *Path* won for her the 1982 Mobile Art Awards. Fired by an artistry that sought the new and untravelled path, she embarked to restructure her art away from the western inspired idioms and



Pacita Abad's From Doro Wat to Chicken Wings and Tings, 1991, acrylic, oil, fabric, plastic buttons on stitched and padded canvas



Paz Abad Santos' Sarimanok, 1987, burlap, gugo, coconut shells, 182.8cmx182.8cm

expressions that prevailed in works of majority of artists then. Instead, she visited market places and her own backyard, to see nature in a new manner—as supplier for her art materials.

Ching's study of traditional forms and motifs are represented by a series focusing on rich tribal cultures in the region of Mindanao. Five grand and monumental tapestries: The *Bathala* Series allow us a glimpse of the artist's personal understanding of the tribal culture of the T'boli. The striking *T'nalak Evolution* series is made up of 16 canvases and is installed as one large work. The drama of red hues burning against earth tones is made doubly exciting by her use of multi-layers of space—cut burlap spaces that allow access into receding passages and crannies of woven mats, protected by spider-like ropes and strands above. The Maranaos are known for the colors of green, purple and orange or yellow and the curvilinear vine-leaf tendril motif called *okiras* as well as the *sarimanok*, a legendary bird. Later, works such as *Kultintang*, *Tree of Life*, *Desu* and *Bagobo* celebrated tribal practices, expressions or identity of other tribes within Mindanao.

Ching's more formal attempts at studying composition and form have resulted in tapestries that study polarities—

such as her *Yin-Yang* — ideas which she constantly grapples. This polarity is also seen in her complimentary two panelled *Easter* and *Ad Infinitum* (Lent) church tapestries. *Ad Infinitum* is a haunting, moody reflection on death that maximizes the color of purple composed as diagonal streaks of presence. The lower section of these panels glow like smouldering fires with red, gold and yellow hues. The *Easter* panels in contrast brings the surprise of morning's first radiant light. The exuberant burst of color echoes the artist's sentiments of freedom and rebirth. Joyous and regal in the diagonal upward compositional movement, the colors of green and gold dominate the undulating and curvilinear forms. Dried leaves painted with gold assume the likeness of sheaves of wheat and palm branches. White and silver enhance the resplendency of this work.

In between doing all these indigenous motifs, Ching has, thru the years, constantly gone back to nature-inspired compositions. Nature is transformed into ethereal misty realms with color hues that envelop viewers for their suggestive healing qualities.

In Ching and Pacita's joint exhibit, we see the two polarities of Art Consciousness stand in direct opposition in the high energy of simple and naive childhood play against the wisdom and maturity of the age.*