

PACITA ABAD'S TALK
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Good morning ladies! Thank you for giving me this opportunity to say a few words about my work, how my work has been influenced by my travels, how I had gotten inspirations from different cultures especially in Indonesia. I also would like to thank Mary, Adrienne, Karina and Inge for making this event happen. Some people in this audience may have been familiar with my art and many others may not be familiar with my art at all.

Therefore, I would like to start with a little back ground about myself.

I was born in the island of Batanes in the northernmost part of the Philippines in a politically active family. My mother who raised 13 children was a governor and a congresswoman and my father was also a congressman and a Minister of public Works and Communications. My younger brother is currently seeking his reelection in congress in next week's elections. When I was back home I was quite active in the student demonstrations against the Marcos government. As a result of this, I have to leave the country to further pursue my studies.

When I left the Philippines in 1970 my intention was to finish law degree in the United States. However, fate and fortune interceded as some where along the way I decided to give up law and pick up a paint brush. Having attained a master's degree at the University of San Francisco in 1972, I then pursued art studies at the Corcoran School of Art from 1975-77 and the Arts Students League of New York in 1978.

My thirty year sojourn has brought me to more than a hundred countries around the world. These travels have been rewarding because my exposure to different cultures and interesting people has been an important catalyst for my painting. (s1&s2: Sky is falling, sky is falling) My range of work tries to incorporate materials like fabric, tie-dye, batik, shells, beads, yarn and needlepoint to illustrate an image. My work reflects the spirits in each place I visit. Somehow I like to live in Bangladesh and New York, Bombay and Berlin, Sudan and Paris and not much in between. That is why when I am in Indonesia, I try to go out of Jakarta as often as I could. A critic once commented that my small works (s3: Singapore Fashion) represents the sophistication of the big cities and the large paintings has all the elements of a developing country with the use of local materials. (s4: You have to blend in order to stand out).

I have categorized my paintings into four series and each of these series have sub-series: 1. Social and Political works; 2. Masks around the world; 3. Nature and environment; 4. Abstract emotions.

1. Social and political works:

a) People of Bangladesh- (S5: study of Surma Bridge)

Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh and it seems like most of the country's 100 million people live here, especially in the old part of the city. The buildings are packed together and alleyways are so narrow that only rickshaws, pushcart and stray cows can squeeze through them. People are every one seems to get where they want to go. When I was in Bangladesh, I did a series of the women in Bangladesh as I noticed that most of them stay in their village while the husbands are working. (s7: Women in Bangladesh). I lived in this country from 1978-79. When I went back in 1984, I was really pleased to see that the Ford Foundation was very active in women's cottage industries. The women also have their own banks.

b) Portraits of Cambodia – I was living in Bangkok in 1970-80 and for the first three months I would go to the Chaophya River and paint the women boat vendors or the people along the river. But then the local papers were constantly printing news about the Cambodian Refugees. When the Cambodian refugees began fleeing from the Vietnamese invaders and streaming for the shelter of Thailand, I became involved. (s8: Flight To Freedom). Being an artist was difficult as the refugee camps would only welcome and made several trips to the refugee holding centers on the Cambodian border and these visits were reinforced by numerous meetings with refugees, journalists, relief workers and medical teams. These experiences and provided me with a deeper understanding of the Cambodian tragedy and (s9: Watching and Waiting) as a result my portraits depict the faces and feeling of the displaced Cambodians and tell the story of adversity, bitterness, boredom and not too often happiness. (s10: Alone) It is difficult for an artist to isolate herself from events that are happening all around. (s11: Kampuchean children). Nana and Vicky

c) People of Wau – I lived in Sudan twice, first for six months and the second time for three months. (s12: Turkana Women) Wau is a small sleepy Sudanese town in the middle of Africa along one of the tributaries of the Nile. It boasts a governor, a police station and a large market. I spent most of my stay in Wau wandering about the market where people from the different tribes come early to barter their meager goods. Their outfits are incredible! Most of the men carry three spears, and a club about the size of a baseball bat and some carry shields made out of buffalo hides. Faces scarred, bodies strong, their hair dyed red, ivory amulets and bracelets, beads in their hair, on their foreheads and around their waists. (s13: Jur Bride) Fantastic people and it is a shame that their way of life is ending as “development” encroaches and breaks down tribal traditions by forcing them into towns.

d) Philippines – In 1982 I went back to live in the Philippines after being away for 12 years although I had been back to visit. During this time, it was the height of depression and gloominess in the country. The Philippines was suffering from political and economic crisis under Marcos.

The President at the time was very ill and people wanted change. There were so many demonstrations and strike.

(s14: Globe Steel Factory Workers). When Ninoy Aquino was assassinated, (s15: Ninoy) then “people power” started. Meanwhile, I started working on this piece I call (s16: Marcos and His Cronies). This painting started in Sri Lanka and I patterned it after the Medicine Man. When I brought it to the Philippines and continued working on it.... It was during this time of Marcos when he and his wife would go on a spending spree and the rest of the country was hungry. It took me two and a half years to work on this size: 625 x 375 cm. Work portrays the President with his cabinet members and stepping on his bejewelled wife, Imelda. The President is surrounded by all the dots which are plastic buttons sewn and they represent the Filipinos: light, colorful and all over the place.

In 1986 I left the Philippines again and moved to Washington. During this time the issue of Immigration was felt all over the country. I personally can identify with the immigrants because I was one of them. When I first came to America in 1970 I was alone and this was my first time outside the Philippines. When I landed in San Francisco, I had very little money and like others before me I took the first jobs that were available. I became a seamstress and part time typist. During that time I met many other immigrants particularly from Asia and Latin America. A number of Filipinos at that time left the country because of government persecution. Similar incidents happened to Nicaraguan and El Salvador friends of mine. My Cambodian friends had to sneak through the jungle to escape the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese took rickety boats across the sea. All along in all these travels to Bangladesh, Sudan, the Dominican Republic, and many other countries, my immigration experience

began to build. It did not initially start as a series but as individual portraits of people I met in the last twenty years. These include:

(slide 17: If My Friends Could See Me Now)

(slide 18: I thought the streets were paved with gold)

(slide 19: How mali Lost her accent)

(slide 20: Cross cultural dressing)

2. Nature and Environment: I would like to talk briefly about this series. When I was growing up, my brother almost drowned me while I was trying to learn how to swim in my island. As a result of this, I got a phobia in water. I never learned to swim until I reached America. To overcome this fear, I enrolled in night swimming classes at the local YMCA in Washington for three years and then eventually braved the ocean again on trips to Thailand and the Philippines (slide 21: Anilao) I started scuba diving and after I took the first plunge, the rest was pure obsession. It is such a peaceful environment down there that one feels like an infidel intruding into a sacred place. (slide 22: Puerto Galera). One has to scuba dive to see the massive destruction the dynamites have done to the corals especially along the Philippines seas.

For this talk, I would like to concentrate on my two ongoing projects which are the masks and abstract emotions.

The Paintings I show portray this unusual technique I had develop in the last sixteen years I call Trapunto Painting. The earliest known example of Trapunto was created in the 14th C in Sicily. What exactly is trapunto? It is a high relief worked through two layers of cloth. The top layer which carries the image is laid over another layer, and the two are joined by running stitches. These stitches are use to define areas and to delineate the designs. (slide 23: back of Fuschia Mask) This is an example of the back of the painting where you see all the different colors of thread and yarn. Stuffing is then used between the two layers and on the surface to give the work a puffed out or three dimensional effect, (slide 24: I Have Desires). Trapunto Painting is a form of canvas collage incorporating sewing, embroidering, (Slide 25: Ati-Atihan), tie-dyeing, assembling, painting acrylic or oil on the padded canvas.

Masks play a major role in my art, such as the trapunto paintings I painted from here as early as 1983 when I first visited Indonesia. (S26: Pacita Sailing)

When I first visited Indonesia in 1983, I spent six weeks in the country. I was wondering what I would paint that would reflect a sense of Indonesian culture and tradition. I did not have to wonder very long, as the first week I was in Jakarta I was invited to a Wayang performance, close to the hotel where I was staying. (S27: Baladewa), s28 Subali, s29 Kumbakarna)

I was fascinated, captivated by the Wayang. I could not help but be moved by the elaborate costumes, the theater props and the different interpretations of the Ramayana. I was taken by the dalang who was so good at telling the story, how he kept the audience very interested in spite of the very long hours, all night long and the way the gamelan added music to the performance. Although I did not understand the language, the visual impact and the range of emotions was enough to keep me captivated and stayed throughout the performance. (S30: Panakawan Lima). I went back the following week and the following week and watched another performance. Then I went to the Wayang Museum to look at more of the Wayang kulit and golek and read all I can about the Ramayana and Mahabhrata. After that I started painting the characters I enjoyed the most, the Pandawa brothers and their allies. (S31: Bisma, Santanu and Dewi Gangga), (S32: Pandu Dewanata); (S33: Gareng);

Somehow when I was working on the Wayang paintings, I could not help but add the batik to my painting like these Topengs (S34: Topeng Dancer) and (S35: Wayang Topeng). I even further to tell myself that it is not complete unless I wrapped the framers with batik (S36: Kresna).

Everywhere I painted and lived, I would work on these series of mask like:

1. Papua New Guinea mask: (S37: Sing-sing in port Moresby); S38: Weeping Woman
2. African masks (S39: African Mephisto; S34 Masai Man)
3. Carribean Mask (S40: Latin American mask)
4. Philippine mask (S41: Dancing Couple)

My other ongoing project is a series I call "Abstract Emotions" which are compositions of colors, textiles and music. This series initially started with the death of my mother in 1991, which had a strong emotional impact not only on my life, but also on my art. (S42: Upset); (S43: Trapo) When my mother died in 1991 all of a sudden I realized I was an orphan. It made me understand how close I was to my mother who was a very practical and accomplished person (S44: shouts and Murmurs)

Although I have done a tremendous amount of figurative, naturalistic and social commentary paintings, all along I have been working on abstract works incorporating different influences, experimenting with techniques, colors, textures and surfaces. (S45. Cirebon)

Color plays an important role in my life. It is not only on my palette but also in my clothes, my jewelry, my home (S46 and 47: Pacita at her 16th street house) and even in the food that I eat. Throughout my career the passion for color has remained strong and that is why I have always been attracted to colorful countries like India, Mexico, Turkey and Mali. I have observed that over the past twenty five years, climate and cultural surroundings have has a major impact on my outlook and my painting. (S48: Liquid Experience).(S49. Typhoon)(S50: Confused Passions). When I was living in Washington, D.C., a friend told me that my colors were losing intensity. Right then and there, I knew it was time for me to get back to my tropical roots. Now I live in Indonesia and, I am most attracted to the richness of the cultural traditions, vibrancy and vitality of the people here. Being back in Asia has also given me more time to focus and concentrate on my painting. I am continuously experimenting and accepting new ideas and skills to further develop my life as a painter. I am constantly looking for ways to expand my skills whether it is batik-making, tie dyeing, papermaking to further develop may art. Everyday is a struggle but I am open to surrounding cultures and issues and experimentation and making mistakes. I invite you all to see more of these Abstract Emotions at my current exhibit at the National Museum with the same title and will be there until May 17th.