

PRESENTATION TO SINGAPORE EUROPEAN WOMEN'S GROUP

Good Afternoon Ladies, and thank you for inviting me to speak to you today about my paintings and my concern for the women from Asia, Africa and Latin America. I believe that it certainly is a very appropriate topic for today's audience of international women. I would like to let you know that this will not be your typical art lecture, as I will attempt to discuss my background and the role of women in Asia, based on both my personal experience and a number of my paintings.

I would like to start off by telling you about the most influential woman in my life, my mother, Aurora Barsana Abad, who bore and raised 14 children, on our beautiful, windswept island, Batanes. Batanes consists of 3 poor islands located between the Philippines and Taiwan, where the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea meet and 10,000 people make a living from farming and fishing. Because of its strategic location, Batanes has been occupied at various times by Chinese, Spanish, Japanese and American forces over the past 500 years. In fact, the Japanese invaded Batanes just a few days after they attacked Pearl Harbor.

I was born soon after the Japanese were defeated, in our house, which also doubled as the island's post office. Obviously, they must have put me in the international pouch, because ever since then I have been constantly traveling to the far-flung corners of the world. But before I left Batanes, my mother taught me a number of valuable lessons about life and what I needed to do to become a strong, independent woman. You see, my mother was not just raising and caring for 14 kids, she also helped manage my father's political campaigns and later she herself became Congresswoman and Governor.

But she never forgot the basics, and whenever my father lost an election, my mother would immediately start bringing in boarders and neighborhood laundry in order to make ends meet. Although she never finished the 8th grade, because of her worldly wisdom she always stressed to me that, not only must I get a university education, but I must also learn how to cook, sew and type, so that I would always be able to get a job and support myself. Little did I know then, how handy that advice would be for me in the future.

My father and fellow party member Ninoy Aquino were political opponents of strongman Ferdinand Marcos and that led to trouble, as his goons terrorized our province and stuffed ballot boxes so that my father lost an election. I was then in the first year of law school and was so outraged that, while the Supreme Court was reviewing the election results, I organized student demonstrations to protest at the Presidential Palace. In the midst of all this uproar, late one night Marcos thugs machine-gunned our house, but fortunately no one in our family was seriously injured. The Supreme Court finally overturned the election results, but my parents, fearing for my security, urged me to leave the Philippines to continue my graduate studies abroad.

A number of years later Ninoy Aquino was assassinated by Marcos gunmen as he got off the plane in Manila, and the next day I started this painting. ('Death of Ninoy')

To show how ironic the world is, the Manila airport is now named after Ninoy Aquino, and his wife became president of the Philippines, while Marcos died in disgrace in Hawaii sitting on his stolen billions. I did this huge painting to commemorate the dictator's death, called "Marcos and his cronies", which is now in the collection of the Singapore Art Museum. (" Marcos and his cronies')

When I arrived in San Francisco, I was just like thousands of other immigrants as I slept on the couch in a distant relative's one bedroom apartment, and immediately looked for a job as a secretary, and started taking in sewing for nights and weekends. My mother's advice was right on, and I made enough money to get by and pay my share of the rent. This early work in the US later formed the basis for my Immigrant Experience Series, which I exhibited at the National Museum for Women in the Arts in 1995. You will notice that all of these large pieces are hand sewn. Thanks again, Mother. ("If my friends could see me now")

One thing my mother didn't realize though, is that I was living in the midst of Haight-Asbury and while getting a masters degree in Asian History, I was also becoming a bit of a "Flower Child". During my "summer of love" I moved in with a group of artists, and a short while later impulsively married one of them when my parents unexpectedly came to visit. Mother and Father were certainly not happy with their Americanized daughter. They were even less pleased when I turned down a full scholarship to Boalt Law School at Berkeley, and while still being married, then took off for a year with a guy I just met, to hitch hike across the "Hippy Highway" to Asia. That guy was Jack Garrity, who I have now been traveling with for the past 29 years. (" Self Portrait")

The road trip across Asia had an enormous impact on me, and most importantly, led me to decide to become a painter instead of an immigration lawyer. As we traveled along the road through numerous Asian countries, I was completely overwhelmed by the colors, scents, fabrics and cultural and religious richness that I encountered along the way.

I also found out that the Catholic Church is certainly not on the side of Philippine women, as birth control is suppressed, abortions are illegal and divorce is not even allowed. As a result, a woman has few legal rights and little control over her own body. Recently, I met up with a former classmate from college whose husband had just left her and their three kids for a much younger woman. My friend was crying, as she told me how she had to move back with her parents and now at age 55 was out looking for her first job. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon story, not only in the Philippines, but in many other Asian countries as well. ('Love on the rocks")

One particular scene is etched in my mind, which happened when I went to a local weekly market outside of Mount Hagen in the Central Highlands. I was the only foreigner there and was a bit nervous surrounded by all the local tribesmen. Just then, out of the corner of my eye I saw a woman being beaten. Shockingly, no one even paid any attention to either the beating, or the woman, and when I started over towards her she caught my eye and gave me a quick, sad look, before three men jumped in front and motioned for me to go away. As I left, I could

still hear her sobbing. I will never forget it and as soon as I could, I started working on this painting I called("Weeping woman").

Violence against women is a despicable, but unfortunately a common practice around the world. In many countries, the authorities turn a blind eye, or even worse, actively participate in this process. This has happened in Indonesia, when I was living in Jakarta during the fall of Suharto in 1998, as local "preman" or thugs, sought out Indonesian Chinese girls to systematically rape them. But it also happens in places like Darfur Sudan, Eastern Congo, Bosnia, Afghanistan and far too many other places that I have been..

Fortunately, a growing number of local and international NGO's are now actively working to combat this severe problem, so please, if you have the chance, support them as best you can, because this is a major issue for women all over the globe, even surprisingly, in the US and Europe.

One of the most notorious domestic worker abuse case occurred right here in Singapore in 1995 with the execution by hanging of Flor Contemplacion, a Filipina domestic worker convicted of strangling another Filipina maid and drowning a epileptic Singaporean baby. The evidence was very flimsy, but the powerless Flor was quickly convicted and executed by the Singapore authorities, despite the last minute pleas of the Philippine President and the cries of outrage by the Philippine people. (Flor Contemplacion")

Given the difficult experiences of many women across countries in the developing world, is it any surprise that so many want to come to live in America and Europe, and are willing to take big risks, make many sacrifices and jump at any jobs available, in order that their children may have a chance for a better life.("How Mali lost her accent")

I hope that I have not completely depressed you with my women's art presentation today, but I wanted you to understand the stories that lie behind many of my paintings of women from Asia, Africa and Latin America.. I guarantee you that the women I talked to you about this afternoon, would be very happy to hear that their stories are being retold today. As Hillary Clinton once said, "Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights."

You will also note from my talk, that most of the countries I mentioned that deny girls and women basic legal rights, equal education and economic opportunities are among the poorest and least developed countries in the world. It all goes to show that you cannot have economic development without the strong participation of women.

Thank you.

Pacita Abad, March 2002