

'Pacita Abad' at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), 21 October 2023 – 28 January 2024

Frances DeVuono

'Pacita Abad', San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)
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Pacita Abad with her trapunto work *Ati-Atihan*, 1983, wearing garments and jewellery collected on her travels, courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate

Pacita Abad lived and worked in the Philippines, the United States and various parts of Asia, while travelling to Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Her work was shown in museums within her lifetime, but recognition in the United States and Europe was sporadic, and now, twenty years after her death in 2004, this is her first retrospective. The exhibition, 'Pacita

¹ 'Pacita Abad' was organised by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and was on show there 15 April – 3 September 2023

Abad', was originally generated by the Walker Center for the Arts in Minneapolis last year. Its opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 2023 is particularly welcome, as it was here in California that the young law and history student changed course and decided to become an artist.

As Abad was famously prolific, the exhibition is selective, focusing on works from key series. It outlines the salient issues that concerned Abad as a mid-twentieth-century artist – concerns that are still major issues today: war, refugees, immigration, and the vestiges of colonialism. This is seen in Abad's early social-realist paintings, up through the complex patterned and hand-worked fabric scrolls she developed later. Throughout, we see Abad's broad palette of colours and the combination of imagery and ideas gleaned from her peripatetic life. But what dominates this retrospective is how the artist links these disparate parts together.

Born into a political family in the Philippines, Abad was destined to become a lawyer or politician like her father and brother. She originally started law school in the Philippines but left in 1970 after being involved in protests against the Marcos regime. On her way to Spain to continue her studies, she visited an aunt in San Francisco and was caught up in the joyfully turbulent California of the 1970s and ended up changing her plans. The counterculture she discovered in the Bay Area was one of intersecting issues – from protests against the Vietnam War and the demolition of the 'I-Hotel' in San Francisco,² to the Black Panthers, the American Indian Movement and the United Farm Workers, to demonstrations for gay rights and women's rights – all alongside San Francisco's famously anti-establishment hippie culture. At a panel accompanying the exhibit, curator Eungie Joo reminded the audience: '[today] we often isolate racial minority groups, but at that time, San Francisco was a place where we interacted and imagined a future together'.³ Abad saw that time as a way of being free.⁴

It was in the Bay Area that she met Jack Garrity, a Harvard and Stanford graduate student, and shortly thereafter the two took off to explore the world, travelling from Asia Minor to Southeast Asia. Theirs could be a common 1970s story of youthful exploration turned establishment, as the couple returned to California a year later so Garrity could finish his MBA, after which they lived in and/or travelled to over sixty countries while he worked as an international economist. It *could* be that story – except for Abad's artmaking and what she did with it.

² 'The Asian American movement had largely taken place in the shadow of the International Hotel [I-Hotel] along Kearney Street in San Francisco's bustling Manilatown. For decades, the hotel played home to long-term low-income residents, many of whom were migrant laborers from the Philippines and China...' and was the locus of many protests from 1968 until 1977. See Lucas Iberico Lozada's book review 'In the Shadow of the I-Hotel: Karen Tei Yamashita's epic tale of San Francisco's Asian American movement', *The Nation*, 4 December 2019 www.thenation.com/article/archive/ihotel-novel-karen-tei-yamashita-review

³ Panel discussion with SFMOMA curator Eungie Joo, artist Paul Pfeiffer and poet Jessica Hagedorn at SFMOMA, 19 October 2023

⁴ In the 'Oral History' section of the catalogue, Abad describes how leaving home gave her 'freedom to do a lot of things. There were no family members around... In a way, I was free to choose what I wanted to do.' *Pacita Abad*, exhibition catalogue, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, p 158

The exhibition begins with one of her earliest paintings, *Foothill Canyon* (1976), which she made after returning from her first trip with Garrity. It is a small, naïvely rendered portrait of Garrity in bed surrounded by wildly coloured fabrics. Shortly thereafter, back in Southeast Asia, she made a series of paintings informed by the time she spent with Cambodian refugees in Thailand. Influenced by artists such as Ben Shahn, Kathe Kollwitz, Alice Neel and Zainul Abedin, she worked in a social-realist vein throughout the next decade, making it clear that she saw art as a way to document injustice. The exhibition also displays some of her notebooks filled with photographs and newspaper clippings alongside her carefully typewritten observations. But equally tangible is how rapidly her confidence as an artist grew. Four years after *Foothill Canyon*, she completed *Flight to Freedom*, an ambitious fifteen-foot-long painting of refugees from the Pol Pot regime.



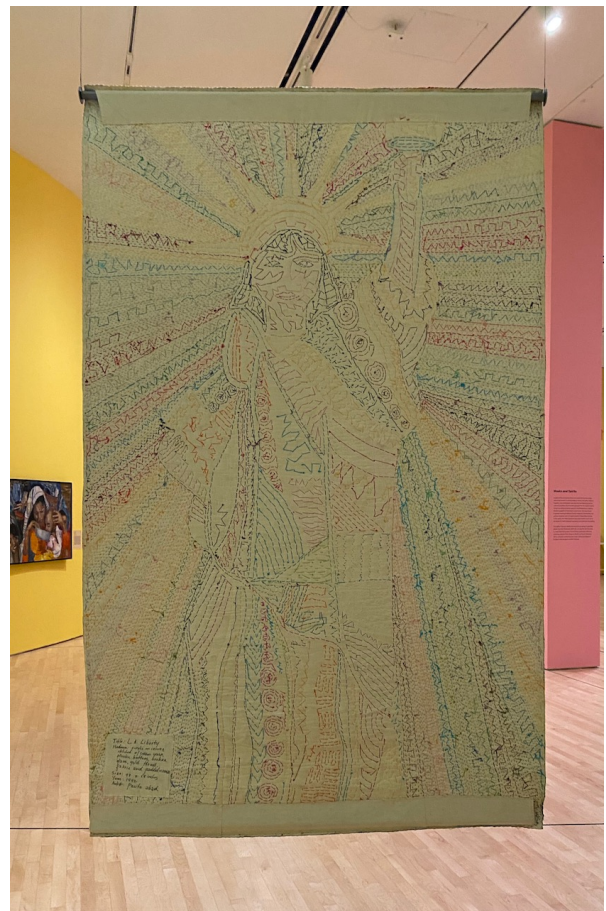
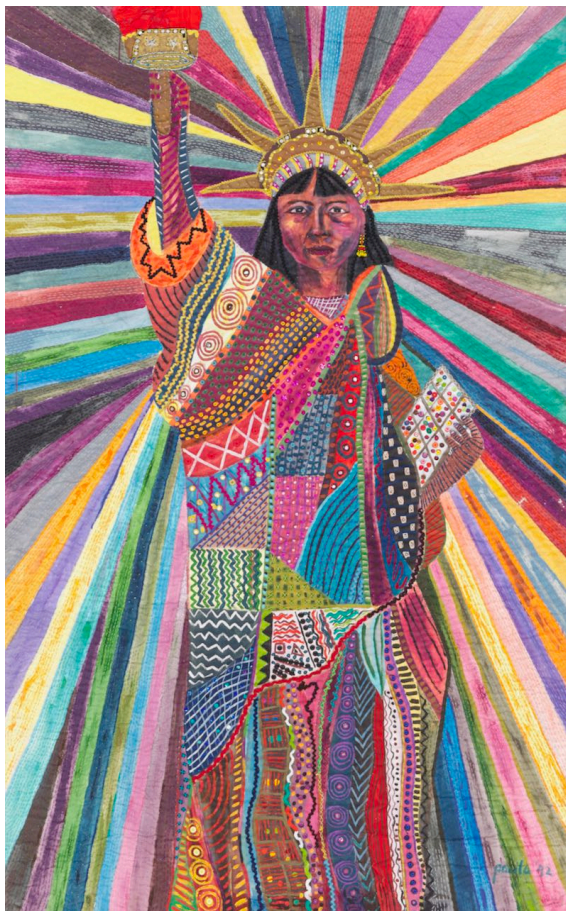
Pacita Abad, *Flight to Freedom*, 1980, acrylic and oil on canvas, 213 x 457 cm, collection of the National Gallery Singapore, courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate and National Gallery Singapore

Although Abad had little conventional art training, her career as an artist was one of continual learning and exploration. Interviews suggest that Abad was an extrovert, and that may explain how she so rapidly absorbed art and artmaking. The Corcoran School of Art and the Art Students League were the more traditional venues where she took classes, but Abad also sought out well known artists such as Alma Thomas, Faith Ringgold, Alice Neel and Alfonso Ossorio, as well as artisans wherever she went, incorporating the realism mentioned above with Hmong needlework, Rajasthani mirror embroidery, Indonesian batik, printmaking, and other techniques. When Abad resided in Boston in 1981, an artist friend introduced her to trapunto, a laborious method of quilting a canvas so that its painted surface turns into soft relief and Abad continued to use it for the rest of her life.

Indian critic Geeta Kapur once pointed out that ‘[t]he immigrant questions imperialism and the national culture simultaneously’.⁵ It is just those questions that Abad, an immigrant, and modern nomad, addressed in her series on immigration. *LA Liberty* (1992), with its portrait of a

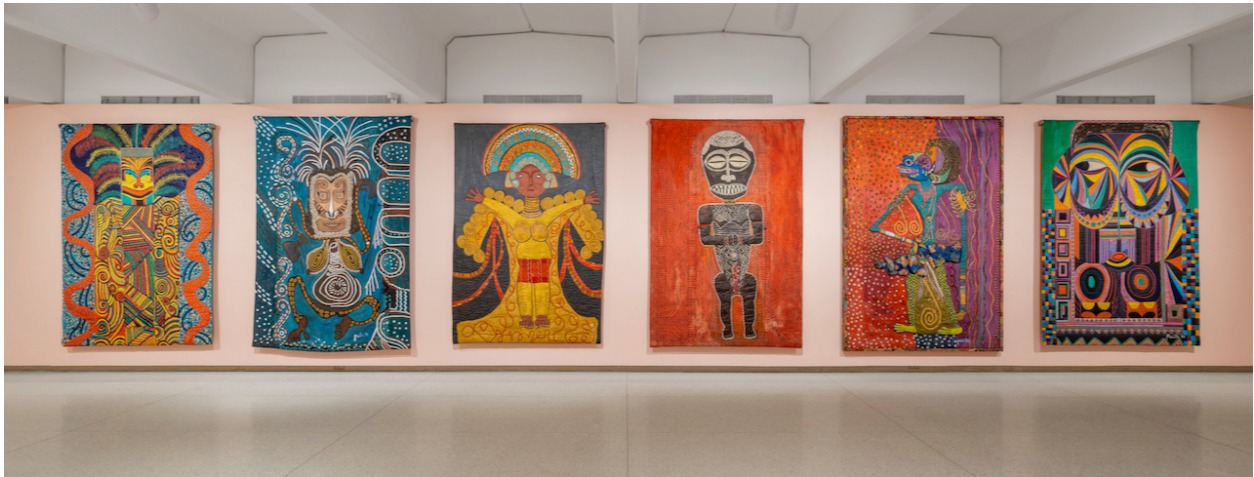
⁵ Geeta Kapur, ‘Dismantling the Norm’, in *Contemporary Art in Asia: Traditions / Tensions*, exhibition catalogue, Asia Society, New York, 1996, pp 65–66

brown-skinned woman crowned and hoisting a torch, is wisely hung free-floating from the ceiling so viewers can see its intricate stitching from the back. Paintings from this period incorporate the figurative styles of earlier works but with the inclusion of collaged elements and trapunto. Next to *Lady Liberty*, in a kind of visual foreshadowing, is one wholly non-figurative work done earlier: *Masai Man* (1982). It appears to be one of the first trapunto works Abad attempted, and its abstract patterns signal a distinct, material shift in the artist's approach. By the middle of the 1980s, almost all Abad's painted works incorporate batik'd fabric, prints, embroidered mirrors, buttons and baubles, basted and bulging on their trapunto surfaces. It is a change, and while small figurative elements occasionally show up, the exhibit demonstrates the wild syncretism that dominates Abad's work, both formally and conceptually, from that point onwards.

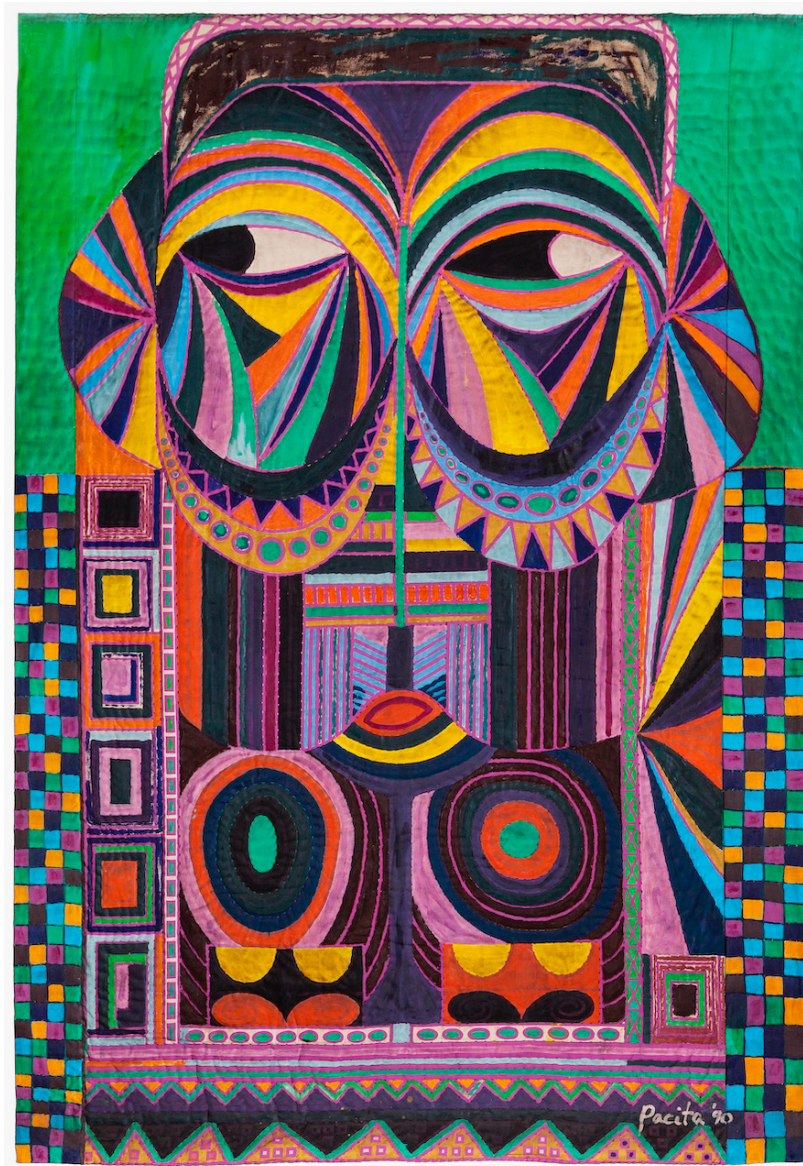


Pacita Abad, *L A Liberty*, 1992, acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons, mirrors, gold thread, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 239 x 147 cm, collection of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate, photo by Max McClure, with a back view by Frances DeVuono

Ten large pieces, *Marcos and His Cronies* (1985–1995), *Baongo VIII, VI and III* (1996–1998) and the series *Masks from Six Continents* (1990–1993), command the large room, not only because of their scale, but also because Abad has successfully combined her singular love of fabric, pattern, colour and abstraction with subtle, sometimes humorous critique. In *Marcos and His Cronies*, Abad depicts the Marcos regime in the guise of a Singhalese tradition she encountered years earlier in which dancers wear demon masks to symbolise maladies as a way to free themselves from



Installation view of Pacita Abad's *Masks from Six Continents* (1990–1993) in at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2023, courtesy of the Walker Art Center, photo by Eric Mueller



Pacita Abad, *European Mask*, 1990, acrylic, thread and silkscreen on canvas, 260.7 x 182.7 cm, collection of Tate Modern, courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tate, photo by At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios

disease. Begun before Marcos was deposed, the scroll is over sixteen feet tall, symmetrical, and lush in colour, collaged with cowrie shells, buttons, and is densely quilted every centimetre or so. Detailed painted demon head masks surround a central monster whose open mouth holds little plastic babies between its teeth. The trapunto stitching alone explains why it was four years in the making. The pieces in *Masks from Six Continents* are similarly abstract in their imagery and are titled *Oceania*, *European*, *Mayan*, *Kongo*, *Subali* and *Hopi*. The series was commissioned for a Washington DC Metro station and offers a view of the world that is idiosyncratic, anticolonial and delightfully wry. The totemic figure in the *European Mask* is the simplest and least specific. Wall text describes this piece as ‘referencing Europe’s colonial gaze on other cultures’. All the other masks highlight single cultural elements as Abad’s poetic way of visualising the continents, and their painted marks, printed fabric and stitching are far more detailed than the *European*. The *Mayan Mask* (Latin America) consists of a relatively small, outlined female figure encased in an enormous gold dress. *Subali* (Oceania) has a Javanese Wayang Kulit character, Africa is represented by *Kongo*, a beautifully rendered icon against a field of blood-red, handprinted fabric. The whole of North America is titled *Hopi*, a Kachina figure.

The exhibit continues in a U-shape into a space dedicated to abstraction, mostly completed in the early noughties, before she died, except for one scroll from 1984, *Freedom From Illusion*. This piece indicates that even when Abad was first teaching herself to be an artist, she intuitively knew that patterning would be her strength. Yet Abad’s abstraction did not obliterate her social concerns. *The Sky is Falling*, *The Sky is Falling* (1998) was done in response to what was called the ‘Asian Financial Crisis’. Abad was living in Indonesia at the time and the scale of *The Sky is Falling*, with its wild visual rhythms and lack of a singular focus, mirrors the chaotic impact of the massively high inflation and job losses in Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea that followed the sanctions imposed by the IMF in 1997.⁶

The museum dispenses with chronology in creating a separate room, ‘Underwater Wilderness’, for Abad’s paintings of water. As an adult, she was introduced to scuba diving and it is easy to imagine that Abad, who was so passionately interested in people, cultures and politics, would want to express the wonder she discovered underwater. Created during the mid-1990s, roughly the same period as *Marcos and his Cronies* and the *Masks*, these water pieces are visually linked to those works but the subject matter of the ocean lends itself to a looser use of paint and a much more circular sense of design. Typical of Abad’s performative style, a photograph in the catalogue shows that when these works were originally shown at the Ayala

⁶ Even a site as conservative and pro-IMF as *The Balance* acknowledges the draconian IMF restrictions. In talking about the crisis, Justin Kuepper states ‘By late 1997, the IMF alone had pledged more than \$110 billion in short-term loans to Thailand, Indonesia, and South Korea to help stabilize their economies... In exchange for the funding, the IMF set strict conditions and the countries had to adhere. These included higher taxes, reduced public spending, privatized state-owned businesses, and higher interest rates to cool the overheated economies. The countries also had to close illiquid financial institutions with no concern for jobs lost.’ See Justin Kuepper, ‘The Asia Financial Crisis: Causes, Solutions, and Lessons Learned’, *The Balance*, 29 December 2021, www.thebalancemoney.com/what-was-the-asian-financial-crisis-1978997, accessed 18 November 2023



Pacita Abad, *The Sky is Falling, The Sky is Falling*, 1998, oil, plastic buttons and beads, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas, 270 x 300 cm, collection of the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, courtesy of the Pacita Abad Art Estate and Spike Island, Bristol, photo by Max McClure

Museum in Makati, in the metropolitan Manila area, the artist appeared at the opening in her bathing suit and with scuba gear, surrounded by nets and diving equipment.

That example is not singular. Curator Victoria Sung suggests that Abad often used her dress and body as a performative extension of her work. She describes another image, in which Abad is standing in front of *Bacongo I* at the 2nd Havana Biennial in 1986 ‘wearing a dress from Palestine, ivory bracelets from Sudan, tin earrings from Kenya and a necklace from Afghanistan’. While Sung lodges Abad’s presentation of herself and her work in the layered ethnicities within the Philippines itself, she points out how specifically ‘the colours in Abad’s dress, the way her hair is braided, the beads she is wearing, connect to the *Bacongo* paintings being shown’.⁷ Just as a generation earlier, Frida Kahlo’s chosen dress insistently confirmed her Mexican nationalism, Abad’s personal style seems deliberate – she saw herself and her work as hybrid. Abad, coming of age in the 1970s, represented a new kind of global cosmopolitanism.

Abad’s polyglot approach to cultures and her sense of belonging in the world are undercurrents throughout the retrospective. Reminiscent of bell hook’s ideas about margins

⁷ Victoria Sung, ‘A Deep Entanglement’, in *Pacita Abad*, op cit, p 18

and centres, Abad passed easily between the two. She both taught and was taught by artisans around the world, and her work rejects the inherent hegemony of centres themselves. In the catalogue Sung tells us that Abad saw herself as ‘a woman of the world’,⁸ while curator Xiayo Weng reminds us that Abad was from the Indigenous Ivantan people in the Philippines’ far north Batanes archipelago.⁹ Abad, through all her travels and with her avid curiosity and sense of justice, was clear about her role as an artist. In a short documentary film, *Pacita Abad: Wild at Art* by filmmaker Kavery Kaul, Abad states, ‘art is for other people, not just for yourself, especially for people like us. You’re an Indian and I’m Filipino... we don’t have any choice, we’ve got to go out and tell them.’¹⁰

Frances DeVuono is an art writer, artist and former Associate Professor of Art at the University of Colorado Denver. She was a Contributing Editor for *Artweek*, and her reviews and articles have appeared in magazines such as *Art in America*, *Arts*, *Art Papers*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *New Art Examiner*, among others, as well as in *Third Text Online*. She currently lives in Berkeley, California.

⁸ Ibid, p 20

⁹ See Xiayo Weng, ‘Vessels for Multitudes: The Masks of Pacita Abad’, in *Pacita Abad*, op cit, p 100

¹⁰ Quoted from *Pacita Abad: Wild at Art*, 1991, a documentary film produced and directed by Kavery Kaul of Riverfilms Productions, 4:52–5:04