

Spike Island

LARGE PRINT EXHIBITION GUIDE

PACITA ABAD *LIFE IN THE MARGINS*

18 January to 5 April 2020

Life in the Margins is the first exhibition in the UK by Filipino American artist Pacita Abad (1946–2004). Curated in collaboration with London-based artist Pio Abad, the exhibition includes twenty large-scale ‘trapunto’ paintings and works on fabric made between 1983 and 2002.

Trapunto refers to a quilting technique that Abad began experimenting with in the late 1970s in which canvasses are padded and stitched before being painted and layered with a range of printed textiles and objects, including buttons, rickrack, sequins and shells. Characterised by their vibrant colour and intricate construction, these works combine a broad range of styles, subjects and techniques, from social realist tableaux incorporating indigenous textiles to richly detailed abstractions inspired by Korean ink brush painting, Indonesian batik and Papua New Guinean macramé.

This pluralist approach to image-making across cultures, histories and styles underpins Abad’s work throughout the decades. Focusing on her depictions of the experiences of immigrants and her engagement with diverse cultural traditions, the exhibition at Spike Island offers an idiosyncratic perspective on transnational art and culture.

TRAPUNTO

Born in the Philippines, Abad travelled extensively and lived in many different countries. In many ways, this itineracy defined and shaped her work. In 1973, she embarked on a year-long journey that had an enormous impact on her, travelling by land through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Taiwan and Hong Kong. Shortly after returning to the United States, Abad enrolled at

the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. and married Jack Garrity, an American development economist, whose work would take them even further afield to Papua New Guinea, Bangladesh, the Dominican Republic and South Sudan. During these travels, Abad would paint, gather local materials and research traditional techniques. Bringing these influences together in the layered surfaces of her trapunto paintings, she would create vibrant records of what she learned from the many people she encountered.

The peeling walls of downtown Manila, where Abad grew up, became the inspiration for *Sampaloc Walls* (1985), one of her earliest trapunto paintings. *Spider Web* (1985), *Freedom from Illusion* (1984) and *Grasshopper* (1985) are from a series titled *Oriental Abstractions*, which Abad produced in the mid-1980s after taking up Korean ink brush painting. From a single ink drawing of a rice stalk, she created a pattern which was then screen-printed onto each canvas, before being painted, embroidered and embellished: the saturated colours and textures of the works belying the singular nature of their origin.

IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

In the early 1980s, Abad began working on the *Immigrant Experience* series (1991–94), a body of work that combines social realist imagery with her trapunto technique, resulting in kaleidoscopic tableaux of immigrant life in the United States. Abad herself immigrated to the US in 1969, arriving in San Francisco from Manila on what was intended to be a brief stopover on her way to study law in Madrid. As it turned out, the countercultural movement spilling out from the Haight-Ashbury district, coupled with an influx of new arrivals resulting from the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, enticed her to stay. She never made the journey to Spain and it was in San Francisco that Abad would begin her life as an artist.

While Abad drew from her own experiences in creating these images, she primarily sought to foster a sense of empathy and solidarity among immigrants of colour. Each painting in the series depicts the lived experiences of the people she met: fellow émigré artists, Korean grocers, Dominican house painters, Filipino cannery workers and Cambodian refugees. These works were first shown in a solo exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. in 1994, at a time when the US was emerging from the culture wars of the Reagan-Bush era and confronting difficult questions regarding sexuality, race, nation and empire.

In *L.A. Liberty* (1992), the Statue of Liberty's iconic figure is recast as a woman of colour, her brown skin clad in bejewelled patchwork robes – a monument reimagined to welcome and better represent a new wave of immigrants. From the perspective of

our current political climate, this work's demand for inclusion seems as fragile and necessary as ever.

THE SKY IS FALLING

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Abad returned to abstraction in response to both political and personal upheavals. While living in Indonesia in 1998, she witnessed the collapse of the three-decade-long Suharto regime – an event captured in *The Sky is Falling, The Sky is Falling* (1998), which translates the crumbling currency and rubble of a post-dictatorial Jakarta into dense and frenetic abstraction.

In 2001, the dual shocks of the September 11 attacks and her lung cancer diagnosis inspired the creation of the *Endless Blues* series (2000–02). No longer able to travel, Abad immersed herself in the studio and spent many hours listening to blues music, which she had loved since her days in San Francisco. Drawing inspiration from this key African American musical form, the batik-covered surfaces of this series – represented here by *Fly Into a Rage* (2000), *Blues Train to Yogya* (2002) and *Life in the Margins* (2002) – deal with narratives of despair through an abundance of colour, texture and movement.

In contrast to her abstract works from the mid-1980s, Abad's return to abstraction remained deeply embedded in her continuing engagement with the social and political conditions that tend to categorise people as marginal, including artists, artisans and their various cultural traditions. As the artist Faith Ringgold writes: 'Widely traveled, Abad creates her work from the point of view of an international woman of color. Those of us who have also traveled extensively know that creative women of color are working all over the world and are not merely "minority" figures within the narrow confines of the Western art world.' It is in precisely this spirit of discovery and experimentation – reinforced by an enduring fascination with so many different cultures in the so-called 'margins' – that Abad worked throughout her life.

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