Artist Pacita Abad Celebrated in First Retrospective

Pacita Abad’s Vibrant Artwork Advocates for Connections and Community Across the Globe

Pacita Abad
October 21, 2023–January 28, 2024

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (July 25, 2023)— The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) announces the first retrospective of Pacita Abad, on view October 21, 2023–January 28, 2024. Featuring over 40 major works, including many never before seen by the public, this exhibition is the most significant U.S. presentation of the artist’s multifaceted and mesmerizing art practice. Throughout her 32-year career from the 1970s to the early 2000s, Abad centered the triumphs and adversities of people on the periphery of power, as seen in her series Social Realist, Immigrant Experience and Masks and Spirits. This exhibition celebrates an artist whose vibrant and inventive work encompassed thousands of dazzling artworks—from intricately constructed underwater scenes to abstract compositions—and whose themes are as urgent today as they were three decades ago.

Though Pacita Abad (born 1946, Batanes, Philippines; died 2004, Singapore) became a U.S. citizen in 1994, the artist lived for several years in other countries, including Bangladesh, Papua New Guinea, the Dominican Republic, Kenya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sudan and Yemen. In particular, San Francisco was a place of creative origin for Abad, as she lived in the city at the start of her artistic career in the early 1970s.

Abad interacted with myriad communities through her travels, incorporating a diversity of artistic traditions—from Korean ink brush painting to Indonesian batik—into her expansive practice. Her global, peripatetic existence is reflected in the portability of her works and in her use of textiles, a medium often associated with female labor and historically marginalized as craft. The retrospective showcases the artist’s experiments in different mediums, including painting, sculpture, textiles and works on paper. Abad’s work embraced color, vibrancy and texture, integrating unconventional materials such as shells, sequins, ribbons, jewelry, glass and bones. The exhibition is anchored by Abad’s large-scale “trapuntos,” a form of quilted painting made by stitching and stuffing canvases, as opposed to stretching them over a wood frame.

“Building on SFMOMA’s recent acquisition of Abad’s trapunto If My Friends Could See Me Now (1993), we look forward to foregrounding her singular artistry and spirit with this long-overdue retrospective,” commented Christopher Bedford, the Helen and Charles Schwab Director at SFMOMA. “Abad’s exuberant work, informed by a sense of humanity and social responsibility, gives visibility to communities and timely issues around the world.”
“When curator Nancy Lim and I learned that this exhibition was being planned, we knew that it had to come to San Francisco—the city that inspired Pacita Abad to commit her life to artistic expression,” said Eungie Joo, curator and head of contemporary art at SFMOMA. “While some of the works gathered here were shown locally during Abad’s lifetime, this is the first exhibition to reveal the profundity of her prolific practice.”

About the Artist

“I have always believed that an artist has a special obligation to remind society of its social responsibility.” – Pacita Abad

Born in the Philippines to a family of politicians, Abad was greatly influenced by her family’s public service. In 1970, after leading a student demonstration against the Marcos regime, Abad left the Philippines to escape political persecution. She intended to move to Madrid to finish a degree in law, but a stop in San Francisco to visit relatives became a long-term stay that would change the trajectory of her life.

1970s San Francisco was the hub of counterculture and social movements and, for Abad, a formative place of creative origin. Here, she met Asian and Latin American immigrants who had left their home countries for economic or sociopolitical reasons. Their stories initially inspired her to pursue studies in immigration law so that she could advocate for their causes. At the same time, Abad immersed herself in the local art scene and fell in love with art as a master’s student in history at Lone Mountain College (now the University of San Francisco) after working as the school’s Coordinator of Cultural Affairs. Though Abad received a scholarship to attend law school at UC Berkeley following her master’s degree, the artist chose to forgo her acceptance for travel and research. Art soon became the conduit and catalyst through which she advocated for marginalized people.

Abad became a prolific artist, and her choice of unstretched canvases as her primary medium gave her mobility as she traveled to and lived in over 60 countries with her husband, Jack Garrity, who worked as a development economist for international organizations. “This had an enormous impact on her practice as far as forms, materials, motivations and visual traditions she’d learned about,” says Nancy Lim, associate curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA, “whether sewing and stitching techniques from Rabari women in Rajasthan, mirror embroidering in India or embroidery in Burma.”

Exhibition Overview

“After the media coverage ends, my paintings keep staring at you.” – Pacita Abad

Pacita Abad is organized in a loose chronological order that emphasizes overlapping themes and material engagements. Abad’s Social Realist works from the 1970s include powerful portraits of individuals escaping political persecution and economic injustice. Her first significant body of work, these drawings and paintings emerged from on-the-ground visits to refugee camps along the Cambodia–Thailand border, during which Abad resolved to increase awareness of global issues through her artwork. Her Immigrant Experience works from the 1990s capture the contemporaneous experiences of diasporic communities from Asia, Africa and Latin America.
Also featured in the exhibition are works that are inspired by Indigenous mask traditions Abad encountered in Africa, Oceania and the Americas, including *Masks from Six Continents* (1990–93), a 50-foot-long fabric mural originally commissioned for the Washington, D.C., Metro Center and installed for the first time in over 30 years for the exhibition.

The artist’s decades-long engagement with patterned abstraction was in part inspired by late nights listening to jazz and blues, with numerous works capturing the idiosyncratic spontaneity and syncretic sensibility of those musical genres. Other abstractions embedded references to social and political contexts. The intense, chaotic environment in Indonesia following the 1997 Asian financial crisis inspired *The Sky is Falling, The Sky is Falling* (1998), a trapunto with a carefully orchestrated tangle of painted patterns, beads and stitching. In the monumental work *100 Years of Freedom: From Batanes to Jolo* (1998), Abad gathered samples of patterned fabrics from every province of the Philippines, sewing them together in a celebration of Philippine identity, independence and resilience.

Also included are works from Abad’s *Underwater Wilderness* series inspired by the electric colors of marine wildlife. The trapunto paintings *My Fear of Night Diving: Assaulting the Deep Sea* (1985), *Anilao at its Best* (1986) and *Dumaguete’s Underwater Garden* create a subaquatic world teeming with tropical sea life through a combination of oil and acrylic paints, plastic buttons, rhinestones and iridescent fringe on stitched and padded canvas, highlighting Abad’s sensitivity to the beauty and precarity of the Earth’s ecosystems.

“Today, it seems obvious that we should celebrate an artist like Pacita, but it was a huge uphill battle for her to be taken seriously by the art world,” says Victoria Sung, former curator of visual arts at the Walker Art Center and organizer of this retrospective. “While it’s important to acknowledge her various forms of privilege, it’s also important to recognize that her ease in moving through distant geographies and connecting with different peoples afforded her a uniquely transnational perspective. She would find community and build relationships with artists, exchanging ways of making and incorporating new materials and methods into her art.”

Together, the featured works showcase the energetic interplay between abstraction and figuration in Abad’s practice and illuminate her engagement with people, places and critical issues of her time. When asked what she had contributed to American art in 1991, Abad answered “Color! I have given it color!” Pacita Abad invites viewers to immerse themselves in the artist’s vibrant practice and the mesmerizing worlds she created.

**Community Opening and Public Programs**

To introduce audiences to the extraordinary range and depth of Pacita Abad’s creative work, SFMOMA will host a Community Opening on Saturday, October 21, 2023, in partnership with SOMA Pilipinas and KULARTS. The Community Opening celebrates the start of the exhibition with free admission to *Pacita Abad* and the entire museum, and a full day of programs including performances, hands-on workshops and talks.
On Thursday, October 19, 2023, at 6 p.m., SFMOMA will host an opening talk with curators and special guest speakers discussing Abad’s influence.

Catalogue

_Pacita Abad_ is accompanied by a 352-page catalogue edited by Victoria Sung, Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), with texts by Sung as well as Matthew Villar Miranda, curatorial associate at BAMPFA; Julia Bryan-Wilson, professor of LGBTQ art history at Columbia University; Ruba Katrib, curator and director of curatorial affairs at MoMA PS1; Nancy Lim, associate curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA; and Xiaoyu Weng, curator of modern and contemporary art at the Art Gallery of Ontario. It also features an expansive oral history edited by Sung and Pio Abad, the artist’s nephew and curator of her estate, with 20 contributors, including artists, curators, family members and friends.

Tour Venues

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis: April 15–September 3, 2023
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: October 21, 2023 –January 28, 2024
MoMA PS1, New York: April 4–September 2, 2024
Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto: October 12, 2024–January 19, 2025

Credits

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Exhibition curated by Victoria Sung, Phyllis C. Wattis Senior Curator at Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA), and former associate curator, Visual Arts, Walker Art Center; with Matthew Villar Miranda, curatorial associate at BAMPFA, and former curatorial fellow, Visual Arts, Walker Art Center. SFMOMA’s presentation is organized by Eungie Joo, curator and head of contemporary art, and Nancy Lim, associate curator, painting and sculpture.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
151 Third Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

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Media Contacts
Clara Hatcher Baruth, chatcher@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4177
Rebecca Herman, rherman@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4174
Alex Gill, agill@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4170

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Pacita Abad, European Mask, 1990; collection Tate Modern, purchased with funds provided by the Asia Pacific Acquisitions Committee, 2019; courtesy the Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tate; photo: At Maculangan/Pioneer Studios.