

Pacita Abad

Pacita Abad (1946–2004) made works spanning a range of subjects during her 32-year career—from globally inspired masks and intimate portrayals of immigrant life to patterned abstractions and dazzling underwater scenes. 20 years after her passing, *Pacita Abad* is the first-ever retrospective of the artist's work anywhere in the world.

Born in Batanes, Philippines, Abad grew up in the capital of Manila. After leading a student demonstration against the dictatorship of former President Ferdinand Marcos, she left for the United States in 1970 to escape political persecution. Abad travelled throughout her lifetime, visiting more than 60 countries and living in many of them. She incorporated materials and techniques from her travels into her expansive practice.

Her embrace of quilting and needlework—art forms historically marginalized as craft, and often associated with women's and racialized labour—dissolved distinctions between fine and functional arts. This exhibition celebrates Abad's feminist and transnational outlook, commitment to social justice, and belief in the transformative power of creativity.

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*All artworks displayed in the exhibition are by Pacita Abad.

Room 1 – Sherman Gallery

Marcos and His Cronies

1985–1995

mixed-media painting

Collection Singapore Art Museum

This work is an example of Abad's hybrid art form called *trapunto* painting (from the Italian word *trapungere*, meaning "to embroider"). The artist's technique involved hand stitching, stuffing, and embellishing her painted canvases to create dimensional, tactile surfaces. The resulting mixed-media piece is the most ambitious work from her *Masks and Spirits* series (1981–2001).

This *trapunto* is a bold statement of dissent against the Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who served as president from 1965 to 1986. Abad depicts Marcos, his generals, and other cronies as demon figures, devouring the bodies of the Philippine people (represented by plastic dolls). The composition was inspired by traditional Sinhalese masks used for *tovil* (healing rituals), which Abad encountered in Sri Lanka in 1984. During this ritual, dancers wear demon masks symbolizing various diseases to banish the cause of a person's affliction. This work captures the growing resistance movement that led to the dictator's removal in 1986.

Room 2 – Zacks Gallery

Social Realist Works

From the bustling city life in Bangladesh to a friendship she formed with a nursing mother during an artist residency in the Dominican Republic, Abad documented the world around her through painting.

When Abad moved to Thailand in 1979, the nation and its neighbouring countries were in a humanitarian crisis. The violence of the Khmer Rouge political regime during the Cambodian Genocide (1975–1979), followed by Vietnam's intervention in Cambodia, resulted in the death and displacement of millions of refugees. Her paintings from this period include portraits that capture the suffering, poverty, and displacement experienced by people held at refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodian border.

As a political refugee herself, Abad was determined to give visibility to oppressed peoples. “After the media coverage ends, I want my paintings to keep staring at you,” she once said.

Flight to Freedom

1980

acrylic, oil on canvas

Collection National Gallery Singapore

Originally conceived as a travelling mural, this 15-foot painting is among the largest and most historically significant works from Abad’s *Cambodian Refugee* series. Inspired by photographs printed in the Bangkok Post and by the work of photojournalist friends, this panoramic painting depicts uprooted families carrying their belongings across harsh terrain.

The painting shows the toll of Cold War–era proxy wars in Southeast Asia, images of which were beginning to fill the global press. With her urgent brushstrokes, and the refugees’ expressive faces, Abad hoped that the painting would convey the extraordinary struggles of displaced peoples and move witnesses from sympathy to action.

Room 3 – Zacks Gallery

Masks and Spirits

In each of the countries where she lived and worked, Abad immersed herself in the artist communities. Together, they exchanged materials and techniques as well as cultural practices. Drawn to global masking traditions used in religious, ceremonial, and artistic contexts, Abad investigated how masks could serve as vessels for both individual expression and collective storytelling. The artist found inspiration in Indonesian *wayang* shadow puppets, Sepik sculptures in Papua New Guinea, and *anito* ancestral spirits in the Philippines.

This gallery features a restaging of Abad's installation *Masks from Six Continents* (1990–1993), originally on view over 30 years ago at the Metro Center transit station in Washington, DC. The paintings on view here reference masking cultures from Oceania, South America, Africa, and Asia. In creating this series, Abad stitched together a multidimensional and interconnected vision of a more equitable world.

left to right:

Oceania Mask (Dancing Demon)

1983/1990

acrylic, cowrie shells on stitched and padded canvas
Pacita Abad Art Estate

Mayan Mask

1990

acrylic, buttons, beads, mirrors, handwoven cloth, rickrack

ribbons, sequins on stitched and padded cloth
Paulino and Hetty Que, Manila, Philippines

African Mask (Kongo)

1990
acrylic, coloured beads, shells, handwoven yarn,
padded cloth, painted canvas on stitched cloth
Pacita Abad Art Estate

Subali

1983/1990
acrylic, oil, gold cotton, batik cloth, sequins, rickrack ribbons
on stitched and padded canvas
Pacita Abad Art Estate

European Mask

1990
acrylic, silkscreen, thread on canvas
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Asia Pacific
Acquisitions Committee 2019

Abad created *Masks from Six Continents* after receiving a public commission from the Metro Center in Washington, DC, in 1990.

Abad recognized the Metro Center's role as a major transit hub, where people from different countries cross paths during their daily commutes. She created works encompassing the six

inhabitable continents of the world: *Oceania Mask (Dancing Demon)* represents Oceania, *Mayan Mask* represents South America, *African Mask (Kongo)* represents Africa, *Subali* represents Asia, and *European Mask* represents Europe. Not included in this exhibition is *Hopi Mask* (representing North America), seen at far left in the Metro Center installation image below.

Notably, Abad repurposed one of her earlier *Bacongo* works (also on view in this gallery) to make *European Mask*. In doing so, she created a poignant critique of Western art history—an intentional nod to the appropriation of African art forms in modern art.

Room 4 – Zacks Gallery

About Pacita Abad

This exhibition celebrates Abad’s boldly feminist and transnational outlook, commitment to social justice, and belief in the transformational power of creativity. In this room, you are invited to learn more about Abad’s lived experience and inspirations. She embodied the Philippine concept of *borlology*, a Tagalog word that loosely translates to “excess ornamentation.” Abad joyfully lived a lifestyle reflective of her art practice, adorning her paintings, clothing, and surroundings with buttons, beads, mirrors, and cowrie shells.

Museum of Philippine Art

1984

oil on board

Pacita Abad Art Estate

In 1984, Abad hand-painted a poster to announce the opening of her solo exhibition at the Museum of Philippine Art (*Pacita Abad: A Philippine Painter Looks at the World*, curated by artist Arturo Luz).

Here, she rendered herself as a masked figure, embracing the way that masks allow their wearers to inhabit multiple identities. Going forward, Abad would print this self-portrait on business cards, letterhead, and even on her clothes.

Room 5 – Zacks Gallery

Immigrant Experience

In 1983, Abad began a series of paintings illuminating the everyday realities of fellow immigrants in the United States. The social climate in the 1990s was intense and politically divided, particularly with respect to increasing diversity and high immigration rates. Abad first exhibited these works as a group in 1994, the same year she became a US citizen.

Some works focus on the triumphs and sufferings of people on the periphery of power, while others refer to specific events such

as the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising, the 1991–1994 Haitian Refugee Crisis, and the detention of Mexican and Central American migrant workers at the US border throughout the 1990s. In portraying working-class immigrants of colour at larger-than-life scale, Abad made space for those whose stories are often untold due to racist attitudes.

L.A. Liberty

1992

acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons, mirrors, gold thread, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas

Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2022

Courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Spike Island, Bristol. Photo: Max Clure

In 1991, after a visit to Ellis Island in New York City, Abad took note of the national landmark’s exclusionary history. “I was surprised to see that...there was very little about the immigration story of Asians, Latin Americans, and Africans,” she said. While she acknowledged that many people from these places did not arrive at Ellis Island, she set out to correct the larger historical omission.

In *L.A. Liberty*, Abad renders the Statue of Liberty in a kaleidoscopic explosion of colour. In addition to the brightly coloured robes, Abad replaced the iconic figure with a beaming, brown-skinned woman. The “L.A.” of the work’s title alludes to both “Latin American” and “Los Angeles,” and the painting thereby

serves as a monument to those whose images and stories are missing from official narratives.

Room 6 – Zacks Gallery

Abstractions

When asked in a 1991 interview what she felt she had contributed to American art, Abad exclaimed, “Colour! I have given it colour!” The artist determinedly refused to leave white space in her paintings, her clothing, and her home, filling every surface with pattern and pigment.

One can also interpret Abad’s love of colour as a strategy of joyful resistance to the muted tones and clean lines of Western modernism. She recalled: “[A friend] said that my colours were losing intensity, and right then and there I knew it was time to get back to my Asian roots.”

The Sky Is Falling, the Sky Is Falling

1998

oil, plastic buttons, plastic beads, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas

Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2022

Abad drew from her lived experience through periods of political turmoil. She made this work while living in Indonesia in 1998. A

frenzy of rainbow-coloured paint, beads, and buttons mirrors the downward spiral of the country's economy and the mass protests that followed. For Abad, colour was political.

Room 7 – Zacks Gallery

Underwater Wilderness

In the mid-1980s, Abad learned to scuba dive. The rich flora and fauna of worlds she witnessed beneath the sea provided new inspiration for her use of colour, texture, and pattern. “I have seen today so many exciting corals and multi-coloured elegant fishes,” she wrote in her journal. “You cannot beat nature—[it is] fantastic when it comes to colours and quite unusual when it comes to shape and texture.”

Abad created a group of large-scale *trapunto* paintings that depict brilliantly coloured scenes of marine life. The series underscores the artist's sensitivity to the precarious nature of Earth's ecosystems. “It is such a peaceful environment down there that one feels like an infidel intruding into somewhere sacred,” she said. “Every time I dive, I feel like saying, ‘Excuse me, but here I come again!’”

Additional information about *Underwater Wilderness* series:

In 1986, when Abad first debuted these underwater-themed works, she created an immersive underwater experience.

Covering the gallery walls with her *trapunto* paintings, she also suspended soft sculptures of squid and other creatures from the ceiling. Strewn across the gallery floor were materials such as fishing nets, sand, and shells. With goggles atop her head and flippers on her feet, Abad arrived at the opening in scuba gear, ready to dive into her imagined world.

Room 8 – exhibition exit corridor

Alkaff Bridge Project

In 2003, Abad was battling cancer. Despite her daily treatments, she wanted to live life to the fullest and took on an ambitious project to paint the 55-metre pedestrian Alkaff Bridge over the Singapore River. Working alongside a team of rope access specialists for seven weeks, she painted the bridge with thousands of multicoloured circles, the shapes of which relate to the works on paper in the previous gallery [Room 6]. The bridge was inaugurated in January 2004.

In the spirit of her lifelong belief that art should be for everyone, she said: “While it has been nice to receive congratulations from government officials, businessmen, and other artists, it has been much more rewarding to hear the ‘Painted Bridge’ praised by taxi drivers, hospital workers, shopkeepers, and especially children.”