

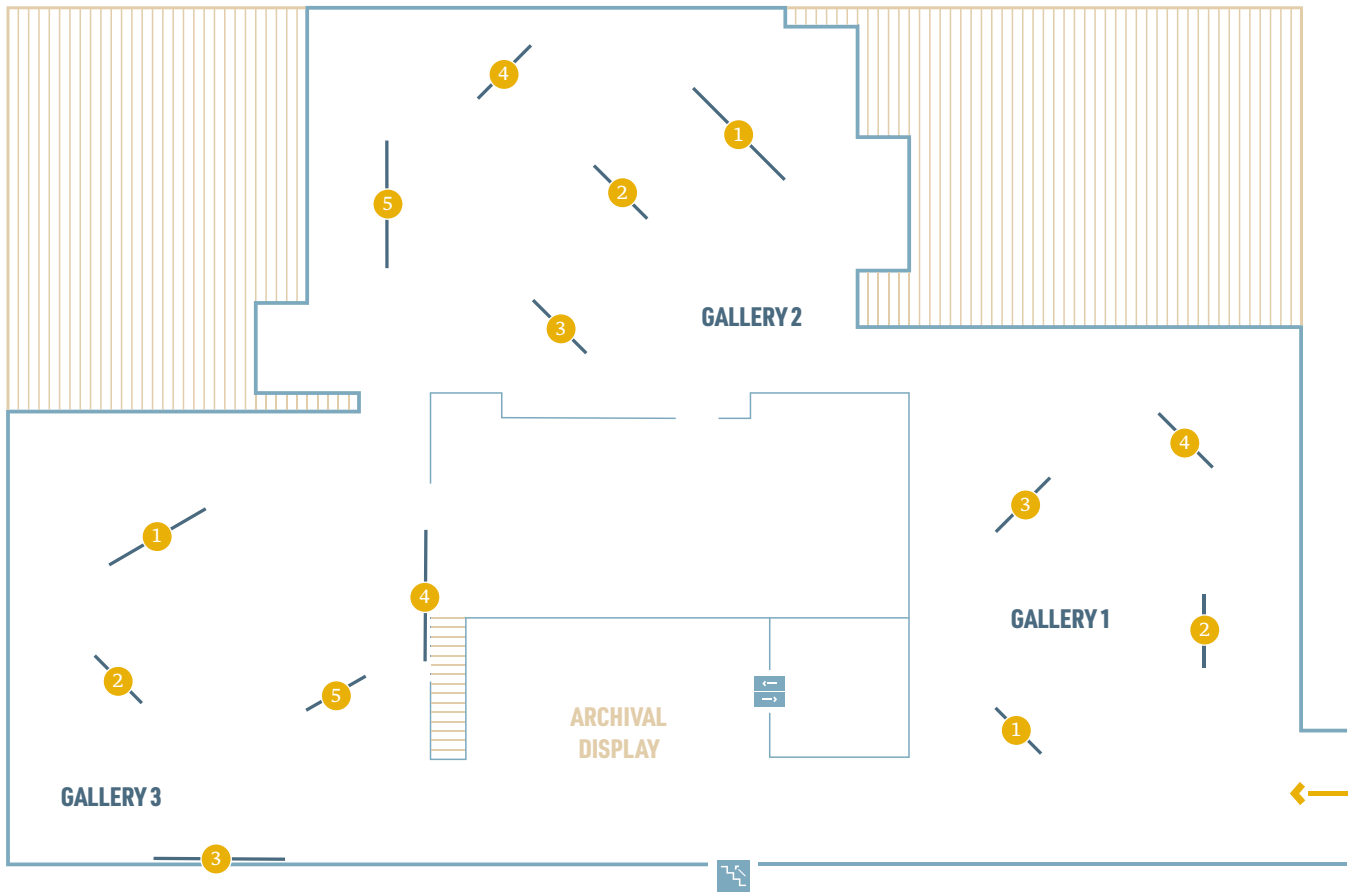
## Exhibition Guide

# باسيتا أباد

خيّل لي أن الشوارع مهددة بالذهب September 8, 2021  
to February 13, 2022

8 سبتمبر 2021  
إلى 13 فبراير 2022 I THOUGHT THE STREETS WERE PAVED WITH GOLD

# Pacita Abad



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# INTRO

'I Thought the Streets Were Paved With Gold' brings together works created between 1975 and 2004, in the artist's first solo exhibition in the region. Pacita Abad (1946–2004) was a prolific artist, often developing several bodies of work at once. Her singular practice is defined by constant experimentation and inspiration from the multiple indigenous cultures and vernacular modes of making encountered during her extensive stays in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. Her bold experimentation led her to develop a signature technique she termed '*trapunto*' – coming from the Italian word *trapuntare*, a quilting technique meaning to stuff and stitch. This exhibition presents four main bodies of work: *Masks and Spirits* (1979–1991), *Immigrant Experience* (1983–1995), *Door to Life* (1998) and a selection of abstract works from across her career as well as a display of objects and materials from her extensive personal collection and archive. The works on display reflect the diversity of subject matter and painting styles tackled across her career – from works inspired by ritual and decorative masks to paintings reflecting everyday realities of immigrants and Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and monumental abstractions.

Key to Abad's work is understanding how her peripatetic life informed her painting. Her keen curiosity and desire to learn from the people she met – whether it be sewing and stitching techniques from fellow artists in the USA or from Rabari women in Rajasthan – formed the basis for her visual language and drove her experimentation with materials and form. Far from simple appropriation – hers was a genuine engagement with people and their social and material histories, driven by an understanding of what it meant to live life at the margins, as a woman, a woman of colour and an immigrant.

Born in Batanes, the Philippines, in 1946, Pacita Abad studied painting at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, D.C. and the Arts Student League in New York. Her work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions including: *Life in the Margins*, Spike Island, Bristol (2020); *Pacita Abad: A Million Things to Say*, Museum of Contemporary Art and Design, Manila (2018); *Circles in My Mind*, Singapore Tyler Print Institute, Singapore (2003); *Exploring the Spirit*, National Gallery of Indonesia, Jakarta (1996); *The American Dream*, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C. (1994); *Masks from Six Continents*, Metro Art Center, Washington D.C. (1990).

Group exhibitions include: *Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning*, 13th Gwangju Biennale (2021); *SWEAT*, Haus der Kunst, Munich (2021); *Whose Tradition?*, Tate Liverpool (2021); *The Crack Begins Within*, 11<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art (2020); *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art*, a travelling exhibition organised by the Asia Society, New York (1996); *Beyond the Border: Art by Recent Immigrants*, Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York (1994); *La Segunda Bienal de la Habana* (1986); and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Asian Art Show, Fukuoka Art Museum (1985).

Her work can be found in the collections of Tate Modern, London; The National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington D.C.; M+ Museum, Hong Kong; Art Jameel, Dubai and the National Gallery of Singapore.

She died in Singapore in 2004.

A specially produced publication featuring newly commissioned texts, visuals and an extensive interview is available at the Art Jameel Shop, onsite and online.

Curator: Nora Razian; Curatorial Advisor: Pio Abad; Assistant Curator: Nadine El Khoury;  
Design and Production Manager: Albert Kolambel; Exhibition Graphics: Sarah Chehab (waiwai design)  
Arabic Translation: Rouya; Tagalog Translation: Christian Benitez

# MASKS AND SPIRITS

During an intense period of travel through Kenya, Sudan, Egypt, and the Congo in 1979, Abad was drawn to the traditional art and textiles of the peoples she encountered, amassing a vast collection of objects such as textiles, masks, baskets, and beads. It was also during this time that, out of a lack of conventional painting suppliers, she began painting on the hessian sacks used for transporting food relief to refugees; an experimentation born of necessity that informed her move towards the creation of her signature *trapunto* style.

On her return to Boston, U.S.A in 1980 she began working on what would become the *Masks and Spirits* series, which includes her first ever *trapunto* painting, *African Mephisto* (1981), presented here.

This new experimentation with stuffing and stitching was influenced by techniques gleaned through her travels but also by conversations with fellow artist Barbara Newman - who produced fabric dolls as part of her practice. It allowed her to incorporate traditional textiles collected during her travels with painting techniques.

The draping and rolling of her *trapunto* works is inspired by the *thangka* - a scroll painting used for worship in Tibetan Buddhism - that she encountered in a Tibetan refugee camp in Nepal. Abad was attracted to the colours, patchwork and imagery as well as the portability of these *thangkas*, rolled up and carried to the monasteries by monks. The time she spent in refugee camps and her immersion in the international aid community - through her husband Jack Garrity's work as a development economist - influenced not only the subject matter of her work but also its material forms.

Another early *trapunto* work, *Kaunga* (1983), draws on her time spent in Papua New Guinea and incorporates Papuan shell ornamentation using over one hundred cowrie shells and is influenced by traditional Papuan masks and clothing.

In 1990, Abad moved back from Manila to Washington, D.C., where she won the regional MetroArt Award, a commission to develop a new body of work for the Metro Center subway station in Washington D.C. Through this commission, she further developed the *Masks and Spirits* series, presenting six large scale works under the title *Masks from Six Continents* including *Kongo* (1990) and *European Mask* (1990), a version of the Bacongo paintings, of which *Bacongo VIII* (1988-90) is presented here. Both these works draw on traditional techniques of ceremonial Kongo masks and dresses encountered on the Congolese-Angola border.

The titles of all works in the *Masks and Spirits* series reference the cultures that inspired them, except for *European Mask*. Here, she purposefully subsumes the variety of cultures in Europe under one banner, evoking histories of colonial erasure and the flattening of cultures within European Humanities and Art History as broadly 'African' or 'Asian'.

## GALLERY 1

### MASKS AND SPIRITS

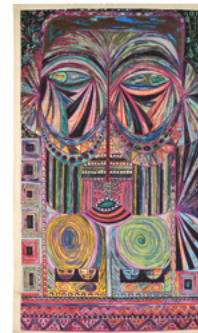
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#### Bacongo VIII

1988

Acrylic on stitched, silk screened and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate



#### Kongo

1990

Acrylic, colored beads, shells, handwoven yarn, padded cloth, painted canvas on cloth

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

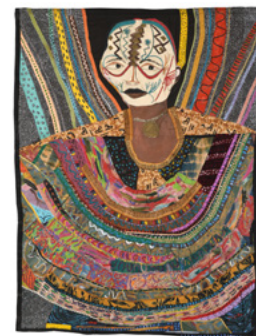


#### African Mephisto

1981

Acrylic, rick rack ribbons, tie dyed-cloth, painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate



#### Kaunga

1983

Acrylic and cowrie shells on stitched and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate



# IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Born into a family of politicians and activists, Abad's keen attunement to the social and political realities around her was honed from an early age. She first arrived in the USA in 1970 - having been urged to leave the Philippines after leading a student demonstration against the increasingly repressive administration of then President Ferdinand Marcos. This was her first experience of immigrant life, the fallacies of the so-called 'American Dream', and the particularities of race relations in the U.S.A. This initial experience would later feed into her development of the *Immigrant Experience* series, produced upon her return to the U.S.A. in the 1990s. Employing the tropes of Social Realism and drawing on experiences of friends and acquaintances, works in the *Immigrant Experience* series tackle issues of race, labour, class and identity; depicting the lives of immigrants of colour in the United States and beyond.

A riposte to the American Dream's promise of affluence and material comfort, *I Thought the Streets Were Paved With Gold* (1991) portrays an 'American Reality' of low-wage labor carried out by people of colour. The work draws its title from a quote by an Italian immigrant at the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration in New York, U.S.A.: "I came to America because I heard the streets were paved with gold. When I got there, I found out three things: first, the streets were not paved with gold; second, they were not paved at all; and third, I was expected to pave them."

*You Have to Blend in Before You Stand Out* (1995) reflects on the conflict of identities experienced by many immigrants and depicts a young woman Abad encountered coming out of a store in the Adams Morgan district of Washington D.C., wearing a sarong skirt, a Chicago Bulls basketball jersey and a New York Yankees baseball Cap.

Women of colour often take centre stage in this body of work. Herself identifying as someone who lived life at the margins, Abad's large scale trapuntos create a patchwork of solidarity, connection and empowerment; making visible the lived experiences of women of colour.

Abad's friend Hadiatou is the subject of *From Doro Wat to Sushi and Chicken Wings and Tings* (1991). An undocumented immigrant from West Africa, Hadiatou opened a small eatery together with friends to make ends meet. Here she occupies the centre of the canvas, surrounded by scenes from various points in her life, as well as signage for food and restaurants in Washington D.C. The work's title evokes the residue of waves of migration on the North American palate and hints at the entrepreneurial spirit and cosmopolitanism necessary to survive and thrive as a newcomer.

At once a comment on the lack of inclusive public space in Hong Kong and a stark critique of the Philippines' labour export policy instigated under Ferdinand Marcos's administration, *Filipinas in Hong Kong* (1995) portrays Filipina workers on their single day off, gathering in the city's streets, subway passages and shopping centres while the city skyline offers up the allure of international consumer brands and experiences often out of reach for many of these women.

## GALLERY 2

### IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

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#### Filipinas in Hong Kong

1995

Acrylic on stitched and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

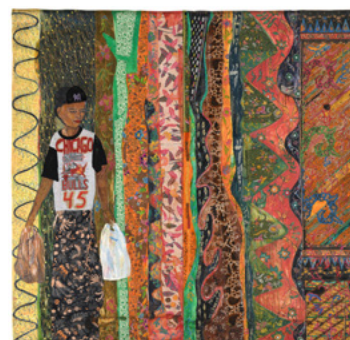


#### You Have to Blend In Before You Stand Out

1995

Oil, painted batik cloth, cotton, sequins, buttons on stitched and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate





## GALLERY 2

### IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

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#### **I Thought the Streets Were Paved With Gold**

1991

Acrylic, oil, wood bristle, painted canvas,  
painted cloth on stitched and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

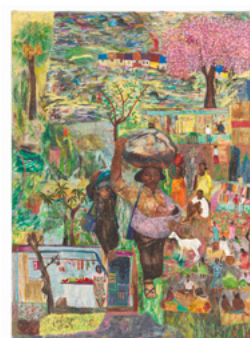


#### **The Village Where I Came From**

1991

Acrylic, oil, painted cloth on stitched  
and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate



#### **From Doro Wat to Sushi and Chicken Wings and Tings**

1991

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

Art Jameel Collection





# ABSTRACTIONS

Throughout her practice, Abad also produced a large body of vivid abstract works, shaped by her itineracy and her immersion in indigenous traditions and cosmologies. Working on them alongside her masks and social realist *trapuntos*, Abad's abstract works are equally rich in cultural allusions, questioning the boundaries between abstraction and representation constructed by Western modes of art making, and celebrating pattern and decoration as central elements of daily life.

*Liquid Experience* (1985), one of her earliest abstract works, takes its inspiration from the peeling walls of downtown Manila. *Spider's Web* (1985) incorporates traditional ink brush techniques gleaned on a visit to Seoul, South Korea, which she saturates with bright colors and embellishes with stitched mirrors and textiles from local markets.

Influenced by blues music, *batik* and *ikat* fabrics, as well as an encounter with Aboriginal art in Australia, *Life in the Margins* (2002) incorporates textiles from Yogyakarta and Sumba in a composition reminiscent of Lyrical Abstraction. This work is part of *Endless Blues* (1998–2002), her final series of canvas collages that Abad produced in response to political and personal upheaval: the September 11 attacks in New York City and the ensuing war in Afghanistan, two places that were very important to her as an artist, and a lung cancer diagnosis that left her unable to travel. Confined to her studio in Singapore, Abad transformed these narratives of despair into rich and exuberant abstractions.

Over the span of her career, Pacita formulated a rich formal vocabulary. The vibrancy of her abstract works can be read as a kind of synesthesia; an intermingling of senses reflected in the energy and vibration of colour, textures and music.

## GALLERY 3

### ABSTRACTIONS

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#### Spider's Web

1985

Acrylic, cotton yarn, plastic buttons  
on stitched and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

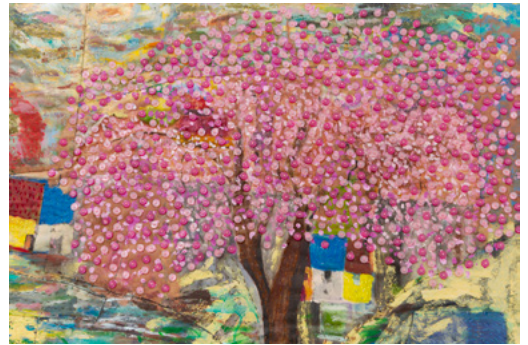


#### Life in the Margins

2002

Oil, painted cloth stitched on canvas.

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate



#### Liquid experience

1985

Oil, mirrors on stitched and padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate



# DOOR TO LIFE

In 1988 Pacita spent three weeks in Yemen, touring the country extensively. She was fascinated by decorated doors she encountered, drawn to their colourfully painted yet worn patina. These doors and passageways also held her interest as thresholds, both between the public and private and symbolically between the spiritual and the corporeal. She feverishly documented a vast number of doors on 30 x 30 cm sheets of paper, later using these small sketches as the basis for oil paintings in the same size, in addition to five large scale *trapunto* paintings. Even though Pacita visited multiple countries in the Arabian Peninsula, her series dedicated to Yemen is her most extensive body of work inspired by the vernacular architecture and folklore of the region, with its rich and complex cultural influences.

**GALLERY 3**  
**DOOR TO LIFE**

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**Door Connects Me to the Greatest  
Happiness I Have Known**

1999

Oil, painted cloth, buttons stitched  
on padded canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate



### **Baby Step**

2001

Oil, painted cloth collaged on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Blue Moon**

2003

Oil, acrylic, painted cloth stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Do Not Go**

1998

Oil, painted canvas stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Fabulous Fizz**

2004

Acrylic, embroidered cloth painted cardboard collaged on canvas board

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Honey and Saffron**

2000

Oil, mirrors stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Long Ago and Far Away**

1998

Oil, beads, painted dyed cloth stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Looking Through a Lightly Fogged Window**

2004

Oil, painted cloth stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Purple Figs**

2004

Acrylic, oil, painted cloth, stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Scream It**

2002

Oil, Mirrors stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Silent Screams**

2000

Oil, mirrors stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Sometime around February**

2001

Oil, painted cloth, sequins, painted tin stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Would You Love Me Forever?**

2001

Oil on canvas

Courtesy of Pacita Abad Estate

### **Shifting Daylight**

1998

Oil, painted batik cloth stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Peter Meyer

### **Encounter**

1998

Oil, painted dye canvas stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Peter Meyer

### **Blue and Evasive**

1998

Oil, painted cloth stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Cesare Calari

### **Entrance to Al-Haima**

1998

Oil, painted canvas stitched on canvas

Courtesy of Cesare Calari