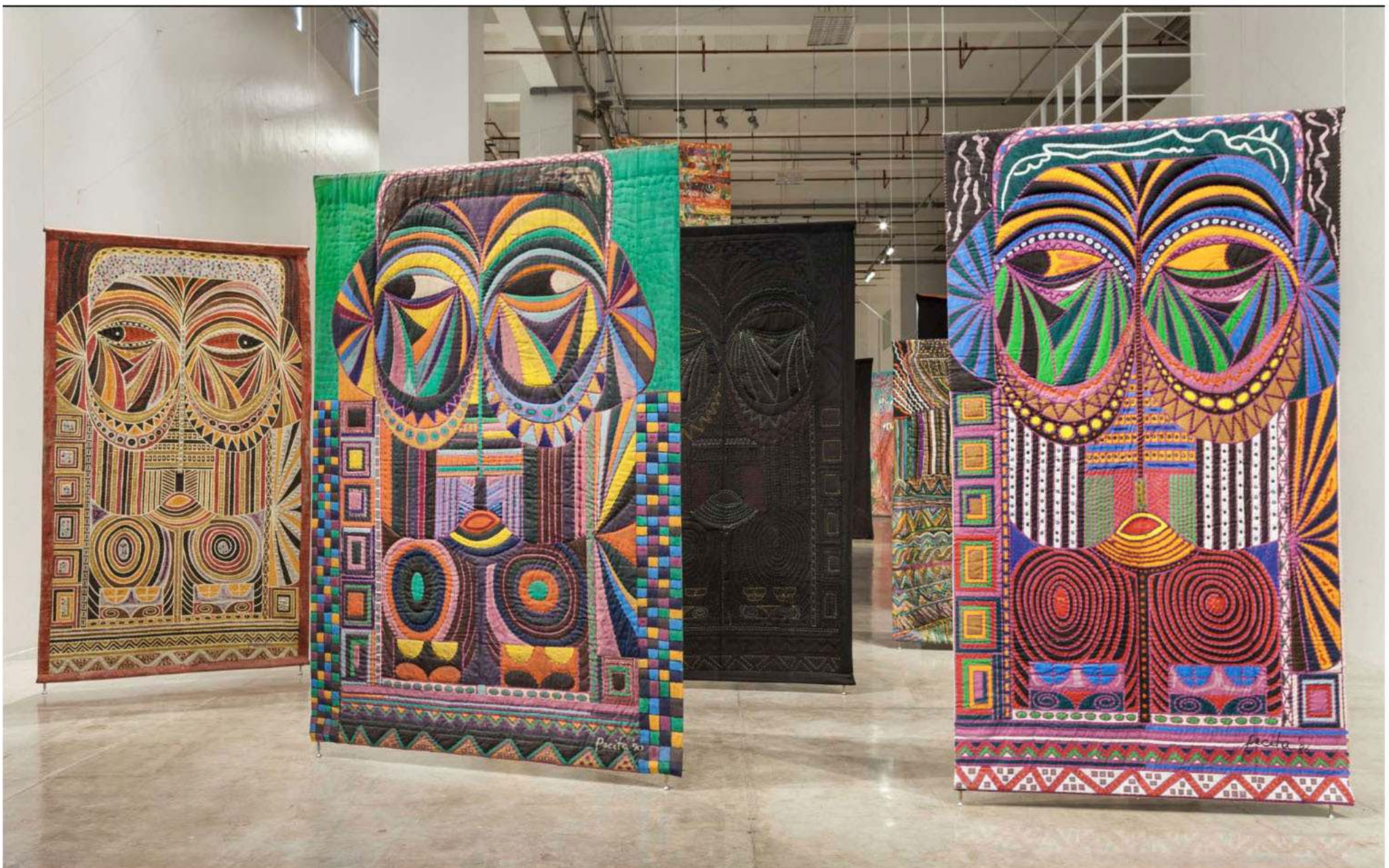


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ART & EXHIBITS

Filipino artist Pacita Abad's 'vibrant spirit of rebellion' lives on at SFMOMA

Jessica Zack | November 14, 2023 Updated: November 14, 2023, 12:02 pm



Filipina American artist Pacita Abad's exhibition called 'A Million Things to Say.'

Photo: Pacita Abad/SFMOMA

Color is everywhere in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's exuberant Pacita Abad exhibition, the first major career retrospective of the peripatetic Filipino artist.

Fifty of her vibrant works, on view through early next year, are collectively a riot of vivid tones and textures, but they are also an affecting testament to Abad's adventurous, transnational life. She traveled and lived in more than 60 countries

across six continents over the course of her 32-year career, which began in San Francisco in the early 1970s.

When she died of lung cancer in 2004, at age 58, Abad had created more than 5,000 paintings, textiles, collages and multimedia works.



A portrait of Filipina American artist Pacita Abad with her 1983 trapunto painting, 'Ati-Atihan.'

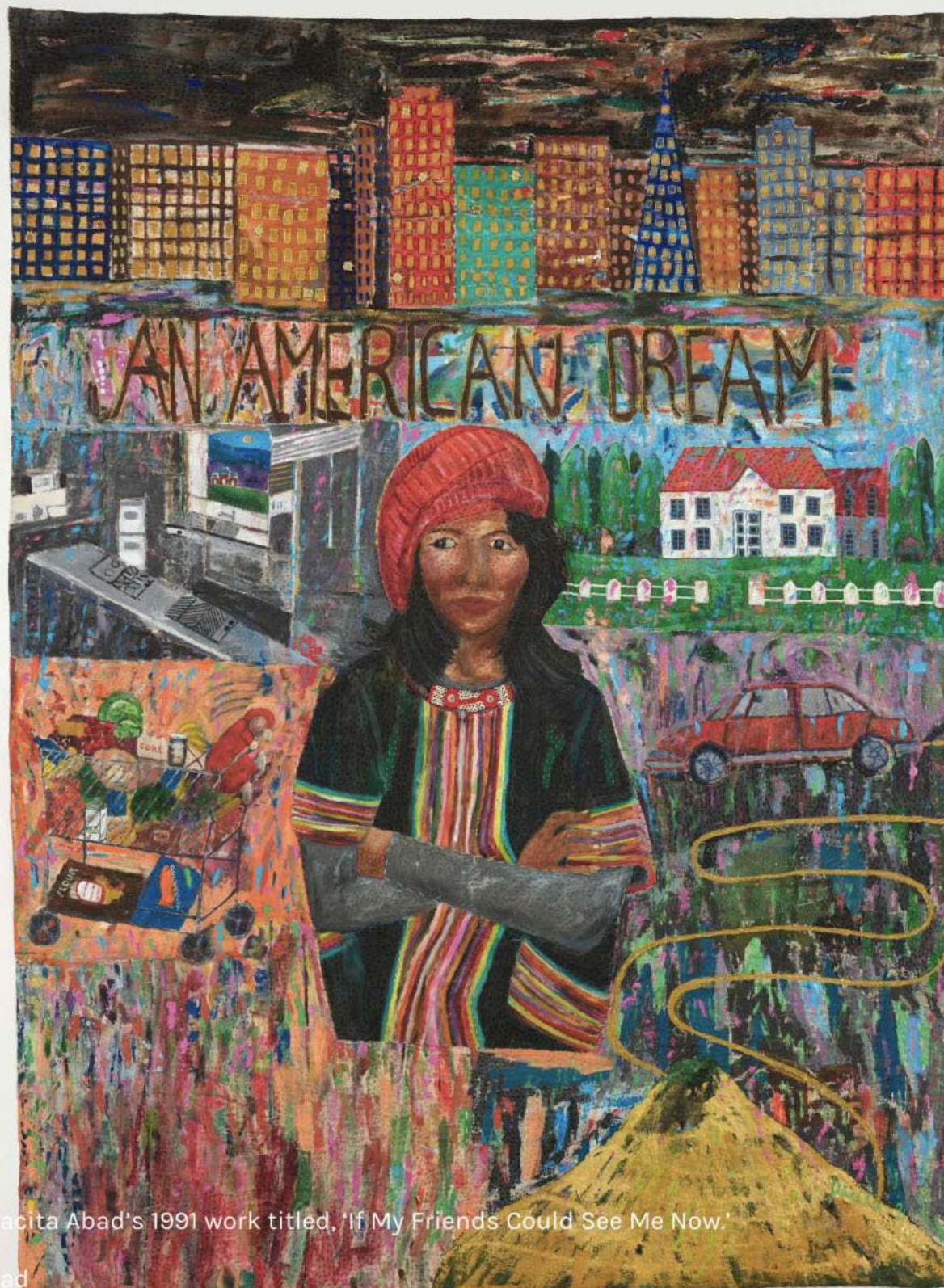
Photo: Pacita Abad/SFMOMA

The walls of SFMOMA's fourth-floor galleries have been painted yellow, light green and sugary pink to coordinate with the palette Abad favored through her career, from her early social realist canvases inspired by visits to Cuba and the Thai-Cambodian border, to her bold attempts to bust the myths surrounding immigration and the American Dream, and even her later underwater abstractions.

Most of Abad's unusual textile creations were done in her signature *trapunto* style – padded and intricately stitched, painted, collaged and embroidered canvases that resemble both paintings and quilts. They are dense with cross-

cultural imagery and reflect the diverse sources of inspiration she drew upon while living a largely nomadic existence.

“It’s an extraordinary body of work that might surprise people unfamiliar with Abad’s work,” SFMOMA associate curator Nancy Lim told the Chronicle during a recent walk-through of the exhibition. “When you get up close to these works and physically encounter them, you really sense her exuberance in making them but also a vibrant spirit of rebellion.”



Filipina American artist Pacita Abad's 1991 work titled, 'If My Friends Could See Me Now.'

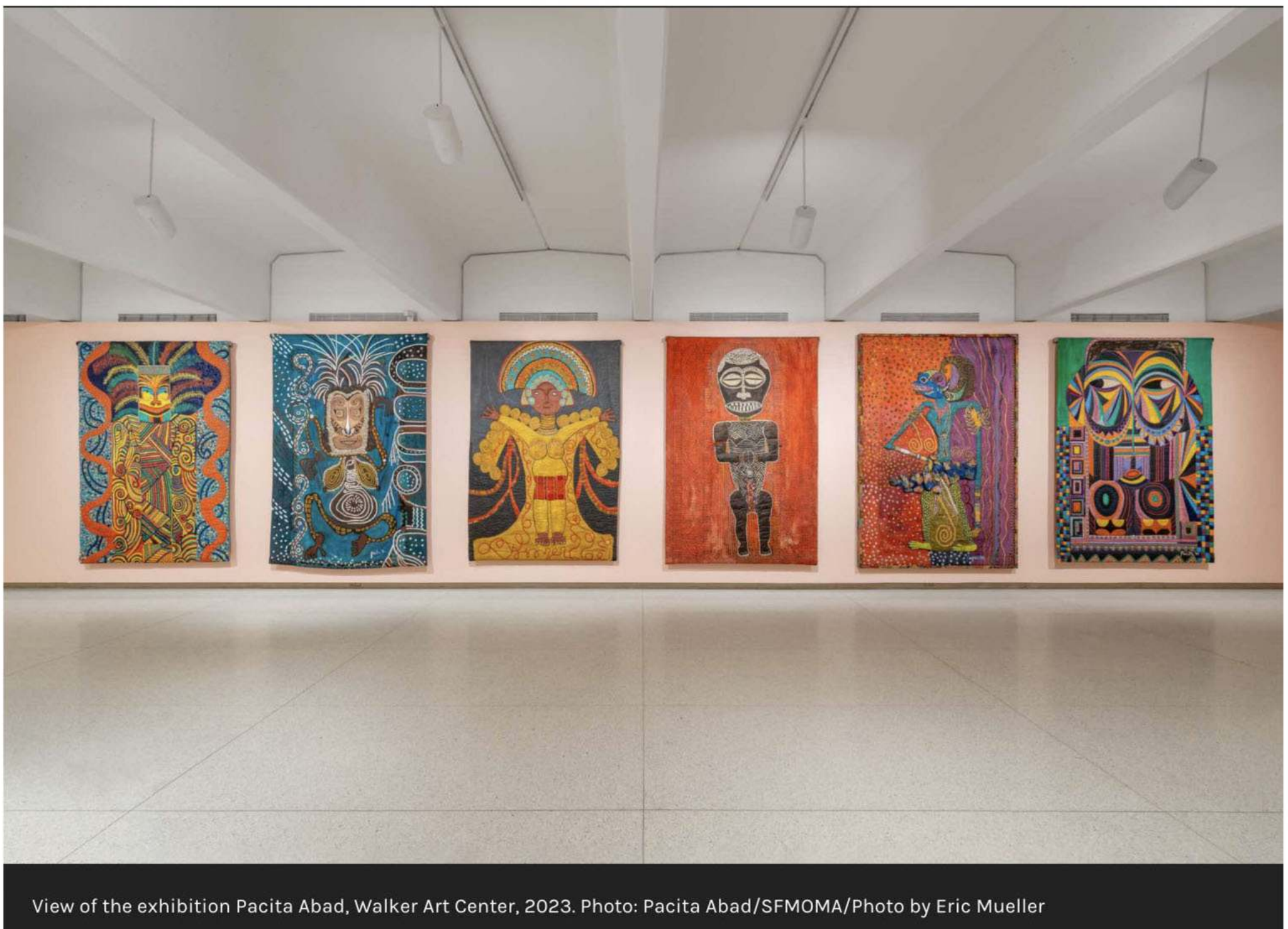
Photo: Courtesy Pacita Abad

Abad celebrated the virtues of Indigenous craft when it was still sidelined in the art world, and was committed to topics – including forced migration and colonialism – she felt deserved her technicolor attention.

Cyan, indigo and warm mango infuse the background of Abad’s politically charged “Haitians Waiting at Guantanamo Bay” (1994). A monumental Mayan headdress

draped in bands of aqua and gold is at the center of her 8-foot-tall “Masks from Six Continents” series (1990-93). These six works were originally installed as a 50-foot-long fabric mural in Washington, D.C.’s Metro Center and are now a highlight of the San Francisco exhibition, which originated at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

In her Bay Area-inspired self portrait, “If My Friends Could See Me Now” (1991), Abad, wearing a red beret with arms crossed, hovers in front of urban vignettes such as Lombard Street’s serpentine curves, which she recreated in shimmering gold yarn. Scarlet and violet buildings dot the San Francisco skyline, with a royal blue Transamerica Pyramid pointing into the red-flecked night sky.



View of the exhibition Pacita Abad, Walker Art Center, 2023. Photo: Pacita Abad/SFMOMA/Photo by Eric Mueller

This explosion of color wasn’t just an aesthetic choice for Abad, who was constantly absorbing diverse influences and materials into her artistic practice, from Indonesian batik and Nigerian tie-dye to Korean ink brush painting. Walking through the exhibition, it becomes evident that color itself was Abad’s lifeline to her heritage. It was her way of asserting that art needn’t be subdued to be taken seriously, but instead should strive to be as spirited and unrestrained, even

confrontational, as the messy global world it depicts.

“She was so used to effusive color growing up in the Philippines, and when she came to the United States, the muted, monochromatic forms of minimalism and modernism she encountered were anathema to her,” explained Lim. “It felt so right to her to go in the opposite direction, and it was all set in motion by her time in San Francisco.”



View of the exhibition Pacita Abad, Walker Art Center, 2023. Photo: Pacita Abad/SFMOMA/Photo by Eric Mueller

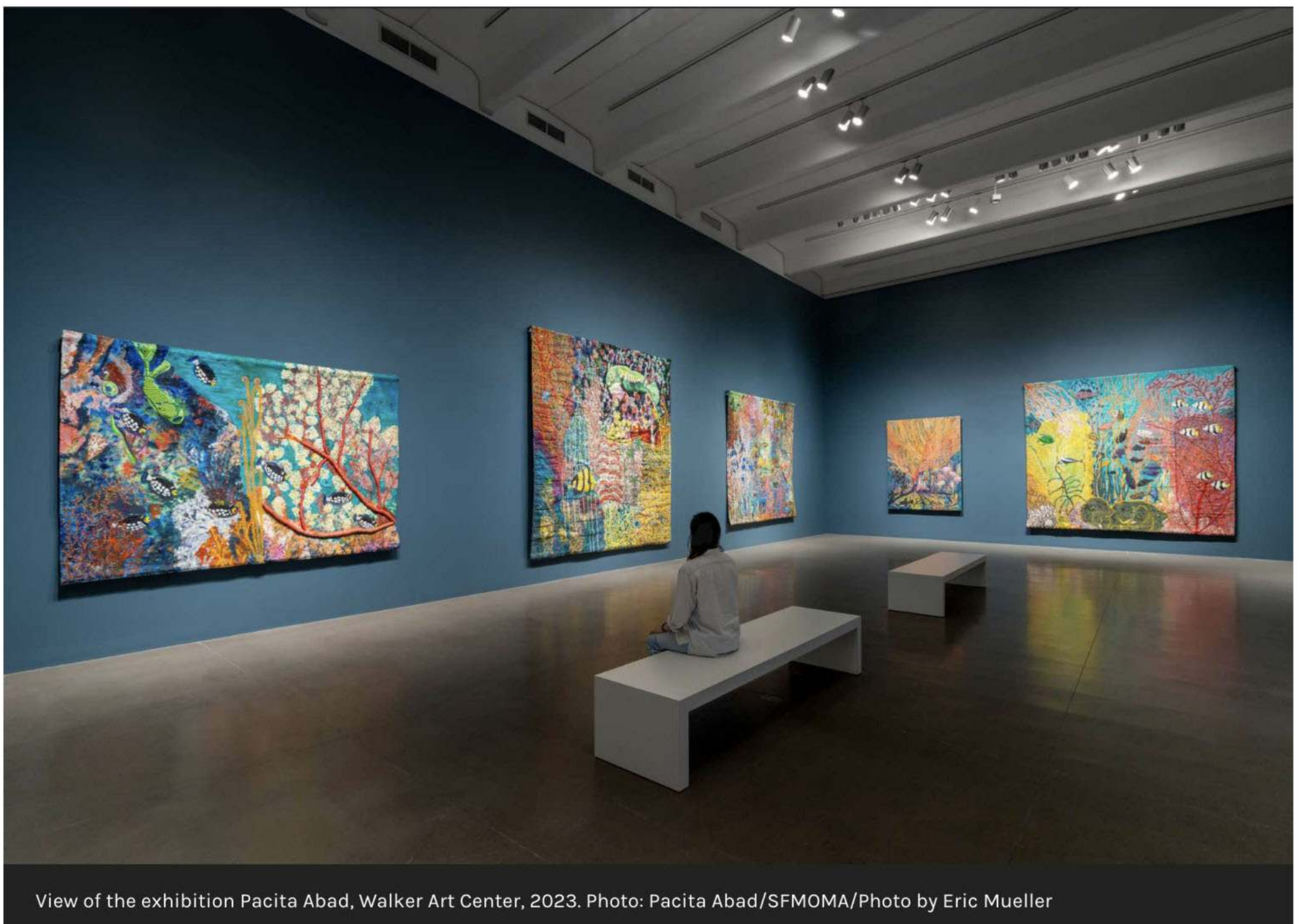
Abad, whose politically active parents both served in the Philippines National Congress, arrived in San Francisco from Manila in 1970 to visit her aunt for what she thought would be a short stopover on her way to finish her law studies in Madrid.

She had law school recommendations from local A-listers including former San Francisco mayors Diane Feinstein and Willie Brown as well as Rev. Cecil Williams, yet within a few years her life moved in a new direction after being exposed to the city's counterculture.

In 1973, following a brief marriage to San Francisco artist George Kleiman, she attended a World Affairs Conference in Monterey where she met Jack Garrity, a future World Bank economist. They decided to road trip together across Asia for a year, a trip that would become an epic lifelong adventure and partnership. Garrity now runs the Abad estate and has urged museums for years to give her underrecognized work its due.

At the show's opening in October, Garrity recalled that first trip with Abad that in hindsight was the first step on a journey leading to this exhibition.

“We flew to Istanbul and hitchhiked that first year overland,” he said, “and everything she saw – the textiles, the shadow puppets, all the cloth and materials she collected – that’s what triggered her to become an artist.”



View of the exhibition Pacita Abad, Walker Art Center, 2023. Photo: Pacita Abad/SFMOMA/Photo by Eric Mueller

Garrity was standing in front of one of Abad's earliest works, a 1976 painting, “Foothill Cabin,” on loan from Stanford's Cantor Arts Center. It depicts twentysomething Garrity in bed under a technicolor patchwork quilt. He smiled,

remembering an anecdote about Abad's early and abiding affinity for color. They were living in New York for a spell in 1977, and she was studying art at New York's Art Students League.

"She still had no real concept of drawing, and her first figures were stick figures," said Garrity, 77 (the same age Abad would have been if she had lived). "Pacita was embarrassed about that, but in art class, the professor took her painting up to the front of the room and said, 'Class, obviously we can teach this woman a lot about perspective and figuration. But I'd die to have these colors!'

Jessica Zack is a freelance writer.

