

ARTS & CULTURE

Gajin Fujita's 'True Colors' Closes Saturday at L.A. Louver

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Renowned East L.A. graffiti artist Gajin Fujita (seated) was on hand at the L.A. Louver art gallery on May 9 to sign limited-edition Los Angeles Public Library cards featuring his artwork. The library cards embody Fujita's signature style, with gold leaf and spray paint on wood panels, fusing traditional Japanese imagery with contemporary street art. For more information about card availability, visit www.lapl.org. (Photo by Krystal Ruiz/Los Angeles Public Library)

L.A. Louver, 45 N. Venice Blvd. in Venice, presents "True Colors," a new, transformational body of work by Gajin Fujita, through Saturday, May 13.

Created between 2020 and 2023, the paintings and drawings demonstrate radical technical and thematic developments in Fujita's oeuvre as the artist explores experimenting with shadow and line, the realm of social critique, and the incorporation of portraiture into his practice. This is the artist's sixth solo exhibition at L.A. Louver.

In this exhibition, Fujita's distinctive combinations – Eastern and Western imagery and iconography; textual markings and graphic narrative; spray paint and gold leaf – persist and evolve. This evolution is most clearly seen in Fujita's stylistic shift, which employs shading as a means of delineation.

Although still inspired by the forms and subjects of ukiyo-e woodblock prints, Fujita moves from classic black outlines to layers of transparent spray paint to give his figures greater dimensionality – a technical development that reinforces the thematic emphasis on

the interior life of the artist.

Inspired by photography, memory, and the visual diaries his mother prompted him and his brothers to create while growing up, "True Colors" is a diaristic account that records the thoughts and emotions experienced by Fujita over the last three years.

"Burning Down the House" (2020) metaphorically chronicles the tumultuous energy of 2020 through the Star Wars Death Star, a fire-breathing Godzilla, and planet Earth set ablaze.

Layered symbolism endures more surreptitiously in "No Man's Land" (2020), a tribute to the Tongva tribe, the indigenous people native to what is now Los Angeles, and the local fauna Fujita encounters daily in his outdoor studio space. "No Man's Land" plays a crucial role as it introduces the themes of location and identity, political injustice, and nature versus humans, which are further developed throughout this body of work.

In "#WTF" (2020), Fujita depicts a geisha seated on a graffitied bench snapping a selfie with her be-sparkled iPhone while a palm tree burns in the background. Struck by the image of young Angelenos taking selfies with burning cop cars during the protests that followed the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, Fujita in this work raises questions about social and political conditions in the U.S.



“Forget Me Not (Chitose Fujita)” (2023) is a portrait of the artist’s mother.

A similar sentiment of critique is expressed in “Game of Drones (GOD)” (2022) and “Mere Mortal” (2022) as samurai, previously depicted by Fujita as powerful and skilled fighters, are shown at the mercy of powers beyond their control. These forces are represented not only by the dragon and demon in their respective compositions, but also by the appropriation and parody of the corporate icons of Chase Bank, Texaco, Shell, and Phillip Morris.

A counterbalance to this despair is found in the ascendant phoenixes in “We Shall Rise” (2020) and “Ether” (2021). In “We Shall Rise,” red and blue phoenixes dance together in celebration of unity and complementary difference. “Ether” presents a similarly

triumphant image as a phoenix rises above the clouds, transcending the earthly realm and the conflicts below.

Transcendence of a different kind is central in “Home Field LA” (2020). In Fujita’s first and only self-portrait, the artist depicts himself silhouetted at the corner of Lorena Street and Eagle Street in Boyle Heights, observing the cityscape of Downtown L.A. as it appears from the house where he grew up. Within his silhouette, Fujita has recreated an undulating pattern in white and yellow gold leaf, metaphoric of water rippling, used for thousands of years in Eastern textiles. This pattern is an acknowledgement of heritage, an acceptance of current realities, and a belief in the future. Fujita’s self-gilding signifies an inner contradiction between the desire to solidify an artistic legacy and avoid being fully seen and consumed.

The next portrait Fujita created was “Tommy Lasorda Tribute” (2021), an homage to the Los Angeles legend Tommy Lasorda (1927-2021), who managed the Dodgers from 1976 to 1996. Created after the Dodgers won their seventh World Series in 2020 (their first World Series victory since 1988), the painting also commemorates the pride and triumph of Los Angeles after a year of unprecedented challenges.

The process of creating “Tommy Lasorda Tribute” informed the next portrait Fujita would create – that of his mother, Chitose Fujita. That these are the only two portraits Fujita has painted imbues each work, and indeed every subsequent portrait the artist may paint, with an undeniable emotional weight. Perhaps the most poignant painting in the exhibition, “Forget Me Not (Chitose Fujita)” (2023) depicts the artist’s mother in the foreground, holding a beautiful yellow hibiscus flower, her favorite, with the setting sun dramatically illuminating the skyline of Downtown L.A. The graphic sunset, flying elephants, and green ribbon on Chitose Fujita’s shirt allude to her current fight against Alzheimer’s disease.



In addition to his exhibition at L.A. Louver (pictured), Gajin Fujita’s works were concurrently on view in traveling exhibitions at Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Baltimore Museum of Art.

A fully illustrated catalogue, “Gajin Fujita: True Colors,” has been published on the occasion of this exhibition and includes an introduction by L.A. Louver Founding Director Peter Goulds and an essay by art critic David Pagel.

Fujita has been included in museum exhibitions worldwide, including “Conversations Through Asian Collections,” Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (2015); “Gajin Fujita,” Hunter Museum of America Art, Chattanooga, Tenn. (2015); “Gajin Fujita: Ukiyo-e in Contemporary Paintings,” USC Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena (2012); “Gold,” Museum of Belvedere, Vienna, Austria (2012); “Edo Pop: The Graphic Impact of Japanese Woodblock Prints,” The Minneapolis Art Institute, Minneapolis, Minn. (2011); “Zephyr: Paintings by Gajin Fujita,” Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Mo. (2006); “Contemporary Projects 9: Gajin Fujita and Pablo Vargas Lugo,” curated by Ilona Katzew, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (2005).

In addition to being exhibited extensively, Fujita’s work can be found in the permanent collections of the Getty Research Institute, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Hammer Museum, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Toledo Museum of Art, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), among many others.

The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Validated parking is available in the lot directly across the street from the gallery. For more information, call (310) 822-4955, email info@lalouver.com or visit <http://lalouver.com>.