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Patricia Piccinini, *Metaflora (the female radical)*, 2014
Digital drawing for *ARTAND Australia*, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, and Roslyn Oxleyg Gallery, Sydney

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Patricia Piccinini, *Metaflora (labouring in the fields)*, 2014
Digital drawing for *ARTAND Australia*, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, and Roslyn Oxleyg Gallery, Sydney



GAJIN FUJITA

STREET THEATRE
JUSTIN PATON

THERE'S A HAND-WROUGHT INTENSITY TO PAINTINGS LIKE THIS, AN UNABASHED DESIRE TO IMPRESS, AND IT FLOWS, I THINK, FROM FUJITA'S BEGINNINGS AS AN ARTIST IN SPACES WELL OUTSIDE THE ART WORLD.

Drive from east Los Angeles all the way to Venice Beach in the west and you pass not through one city but many. From tough Boyle Heights with its graffiti and murals to the loan shops and tent cities of downtown, from Little Tokyo through plush West Hollywood and on out to the coast, it is a trip that can leave a newcomer feeling both elated and weirdly displaced. No matter how hard you've peered at the map, nothing quite prepares you for the city's sprawling moreness – the sense of multiple worlds arranged, not hierarchically, but in one ever-expanding grid.

In this spread-out city I've often relied on artists to supply a sense of place; Ed Ruscha, with his gnomonic signs and blank billboards, is the figure who usually comes to mind. But on a recent trip a different LA artist served as my imaginary guide: painter Gajin Fujita. A first generation Japanese American who grew up in the Latino neighbourhood Boyle Heights, Fujita got his artistic start on the streets of Los Angeles as a young graffiti writer, 'bombing' the train yards and underpasses of the city with the K2S and KGB graffiti crews. Some transformative educational encounters set Fujita on the path to painting and the gallery world; as a teenager he would bus for hours each day to reach an arts-magnet high school in west Los Angeles, and later at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas he found a remarkable mentor and 'sensei' in the maverick critic Dave Hickey. But to say that Fujita left the street for the gallery isn't entirely accurate. Rather, he brought it inside with him in a heightened and highly refined form. Sumptuously coloured, staunchly handmade, writhing with tags and 'wild style' lettering, Fujita's early paintings launch you into a city of signs and wonders, a place where different words and traditions vie like tropical plants for a place in the sun.

The most startling element in Fujita's art, however, came not from the street but from somewhere more domestic. At home in Boyle Heights traditional Japanese culture had always been part of Fujita's life; he recalls the folk tales of warriors and heroes told by his father, a painter, and the lacquer, armour and other antiquities brought home by his conservator mother. But what spun Fujita around as a young artist were the *ukiyo-e* or 'floating world' woodblock prints of Hokusai, Utamaro and Kuniyoshi, which he encountered through his mother and then at full force in the Tokyo National Museum on a family holiday in the late 1990s. Made in vast numbers for urban commoners of the prosperous and relatively peaceful Edo period (1615–1868), the prints portray the

entertainments and fantasies of Edo (now Tokyo) with never-to-be-surpassed skill and sophistication. Awed especially by the formal audacity and wild imagination of the Meiji period printmaker Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, Fujita returned to the studio and began to pose a series of time-travelling 'what ifs'. What if an artist were to slide open a door between pleasure-loving Edo and pleasure-loving Los Angeles? What if the heroes and villains of the *kabuki* theatre were unleashed in the world of hip-hop and Hollywood? What if the graffiti artists of east LA were transported back to eighteenth-century Japan?

Fujita's answers to these questions looked traditional enough in their early stages: patiently gilded, multi-panel paintings recalling domestic folding screens or *byōbu*. But those tranquil surfaces soon succumbed to a series of spirited invasions. Treating the paintings less like domestic objects than tracts of urban wall, Fujita invited his fellow graffiti-writers into his studio to creatively vandalise the gilded surface, layering each elegant panel with a kind of outlaw calligraphy. Into these word-storms Fujita then introduced further signs of the local, like smog-filtered sunsets, wave-lapped palm trees or the silhouetted skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles. And finally he released his old-but-new cast of Edo types and characters: lovers, courtesans, actors, *oni* demons, masked tricksters and fabulously armoured samurai. The art-critical impulse is to look at the paintings and wonder what Fujita *means*. Is he using the Edo past to comment on the American present, or using the present to revise our sense of the past? But the most striking thing about the paintings is their lack of an obvious moral tone, the way they throw together different times and traditions without telling us how we ought to feel. Casting the rituals and pleasures of present-day LA back into the Edo past, Fujita invites us to see our own time and place as if it were a strange and distant civilisation – a place as alluring and unfamiliar as the world of Edo prints first looked to his own western eyes. 'The east', Fujita suggests, is not an exotic elsewhere; it is within and all around us.

Fujita's wayward traditionalism comes into sharpest focus in his paintings of battles. *Southland standoff*, 2013, for example, is based on a nineteenth-century woodblock print of the historic Battle of Okehazama (1560), and it bristles with details that bring the battle into twenty-first century Los Angeles, from the area codes on the warriors' armour (714 for northern Orange County and 213 for downtown LA) to the Los Angeles Police Department









helicopters or so-called 'ghetto birds' in the sky behind them – sinister stand-ins for the falcons and cranes that adorn traditional Japanese screens. But these details and codes, though fun to find and crack, are not what make the painting compelling. What holds you, rather, is the stand-off between different kinds and orders of imagery: between hard lines and sprayed ones, action and stillness, elegance and aggression. The painting sweeps the eye along with flourishes of martial detail: swaying tassels, flashing eyes, splashes of blood, the thrust and clatter of weaponry. Yet this action lives within a decorative scheme of remarkable calm and intricacy, from the furls and featherings of the warriors' plated armour to the floral details (wild pinks, bush clover) patiently stencilled within. The frozen motion of the poses suggests, moreover, that these warriors are not warriors at all, but, rather like the warriors in many ukiyo-e prints, popular kabuki actors; blood may fly in this painting, but look closer and you see that no-one is bleeding. Battle, in the end, is not the right word: call it a choreographed collision.

There's a hand-wrought intensity to paintings like this, an unabashed desire to impress, and it flows, I think, from Fujita's beginnings as an artist in spaces well outside the art world. Artists certain of a home in the white cube might pursue strategies of reduction and silence, testing painting's perceptual and conceptual limits by paring it back to nearly nothing. Indeed the most fashionable painting of our moment is of a non-figurative and highly reduced kind, namely the art-fair friendly brand of abstract painting that has been called (and here I rely on a highly entertaining recent takedown by critic Jerry Saltz) 'drop-cloth abstraction' and 'zombie formalism'. But for Fujita and his fellow graffitists, such strategies were never an option. In a setting where your painting was always under threat of obliteration by rival graffitists or civic authorities, the aim was to make the maximum impact immediately – to stand out and be heard. Flamboyance, experiment, audacity, daring: these were the qualities desired. And that competitive exuberance fires up everything Fujita makes. Though he is now an LA stalwart with a roster of exhibitions and museum showings to his name, he still approaches each new painting as if he has something to prove, as if every square inch of the surface has to be earned and energised: fought for.

It's tempting to describe the resulting works as declarations of identity, with Fujita as a cross-cultural researcher patiently synthesising his eastern and western heritage. But that sober description doesn't do much justice to the unstable beauty of his best paintings, where every pattern and form seems to be on the brink of climbing over or turning into another: sinuous dragons, shapeshifting clouds, words with minds of their own. Fujita belongs to what is now a distinguished Los Angeles tradition – the tradition of those who, having no 'authentic' tradition to draw on, pull one together from whatever is at hand and modify that mix on the move. With its gold leaf and graffiti, its palm trees and Hokusai waves, its hip-hop samurai and Hollywood geishas, Fujita's Los Angeles is a landscape where *everything* is displaced and thus equally at home: an impure, faultline-riven, polyglot paradise. Drive 'back east' across Los Angeles with Fujita in your eyes and the city won't look the same.

Warriors, Ghosts and Ancient Gods of the Pacific, LA Louver, Los Angeles, 19 March – 18 April 2015; **Conversations through the Asian Collections**, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, opens November 2015.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP

Fatal match, 2006

Gold and silver leaf, acrylic, paint marker, spray paint and Mean Streak on wood panel, six panels, 210.8 x 320 cm overall
Courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles
© Gajin Fujita

Burn, 2006

Acrylic, 24k and 12k gold leaf, spray paint and Mean Streak on wood panel, 121.9 x 243.8 cm
Courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles
© Gajin Fujita

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Southland standoff, 2013, detail

12k and 24k gold leaf, spray paint, paint markers and Mean Streak, eight panels, 213.4 x 447 cm overall
Courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles
© Gajin Fujita

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Study for Southland standoff (Blue Warrior), 2014

Pencil, spray paint on archival paper, 177.5 x 163.2 cm
Courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles
© Gajin Fujita

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Southland standoff, 2013

Courtesy LA Louver, Los Angeles
© Gajin Fujita