

# Forbes

## Art To See Now In LA: Russell, Nevelson, Fujita

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Contributor

*I'm a culture maven and arts enthusiast.*

Over the last two months, I saw some great art exhibitions in LA that you should know about:

**Robert Russell**, Anat Ebgi Wilshire Gallery, Robert Russell: *Porzellan Manufaktur Allach* (on view through April 22, 2023).



Kleiner Schaeferhun by Robert Russell, 2022 PHOTO BY MATTHEW KROENING, COURTESY OF ROBERT RUSSELL AND ANAT EBGI

Robert Russell's hyper-realistic large-scale paintings of German porcelain figurines stand out from work by his contemporaries as representational but not figurative. What's also striking is that Russell's paintings are not so much about painting itself as about the dissonance between image and subject.

*Porzellan Manufaktur Allach* depicts porcelain ceramic objects such as birds, a rabbit, a floppy-eared puppy, a standing bear, and German Shepherds sitting regally, or depicted happily in profile, tongue hanging out.

Although a painterly investigation of the figurines, their surfaces, and how they refract light, Russell's work is conceptual in nature, in that his works achieve greater meaning when we learn their context.

As described in the exhibition text, these figurines have a sordid history: "*The Allach Porcelain Manufacturing company was established in 1935 just outside of Munich. The factory was funded by Henrich Himmler of the German Reich in order to produce the finest porcelain objects celebrating purity, Aryanism, the occult, and Germanic culture to give as gifts to the SS Soldiers. As the war progressed, the factory lost its labor source and moved production to the Dachau concentration camp where Jewish prisoners, amongst other slaves, were forced to continue their production. Until they were liberated in 1945, these prisoners, living in unimaginable circumstances created figurines of such things as puppies, sheep, rabbits, and perfect Aryan children.*"

Knowing this, it is impossible to see the paintings the same way. The very seeming docility or happiness of the animal figurines, suffused as they are with an aura of domestic bliss, become charged with evil once seen in context of the Nazi regime. Suddenly those nice German shepherds are understood to be the same vicious dogs used by the Nazis against Jews and others in the ghettos, concentration camps and extermination camps. Set against vacant, horizonless backgrounds, the figurines present as sanitized belying the fictional narratives of the Nazi regime and their desire to create a "pure" "Aryan" race, free of what they called "filth and vermin" (i.e. the Jews, the Roma, the disabled, homosexuals) – making Russell's paintings all the more powerful.

Finally, it is also worth noting that at a time when a good deal of contemporary art, curation, and art criticism is focused on issues of identity, particularly among persons of color, ethnic minorities, and endangered communities, Russell is one of the few contemporary American artists whose work grapples with being a Jewish artist. In creating work that confronts Nazi

lies while reminding us of how such evil fictions was manufactured, literally and figuratively in collectible art objects, Russell expands how we think of "Jewish Art" in contemporary work, giving the show a lasting haunting resonance.

**Louise Nevelson** – at Pace LA through April 29.

American women artists of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s are belatedly getting their due, whether it is Agnes Martin, Joan Mitchell, or the others profiled in *Ninth Street Women*, such as Elaine De Kooning, Helen Frankenthaler, Lee Krasner, and Grace Hartigan among others. Many years ago, the Guerrilla Girls manifesto noted, sarcastically, that it was good to be a women artist because you didn't have to worry about receiving any recognition until you were at least in your 80s.



Louise Nevelson, *Sky City I*, 1957-1959, wood painted black, SCULPTURE, No. 04252 ©  
ESTATE OF LOUISE NEVELSON/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS) COURTESY OF PACE LA

One American woman artist, famous in her lifetime, Louise Nevelson, is overdue for a comeback and reappraisal. The current PACE LA Nevelson show is a wonderful and striking reminder of her powerful and mysterious work.

Nevelson was born in what is today Ukraine and came to the US as a child in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She studied at New York's Art Student League under Hans Hoffman and Chaim Gross and worked as an assistant to Diego Rivera. Nevelson's early conceptual work involved found objects, and she soon moved on to explorations of Cubism before arriving at her large-scale monochromatic wall sculptures, which seemed like puzzle palaces constructions.

The PACE LA Nevelson show is beautifully installed in a manner that makes the work feel contemporary and important. Although other artists may have made assemblages, such as Joseph Cornell, or Robert Rauschenberg's combines, Kienholz or Betye Saar, Nevelson's work remains distinctive. Nevelson works command attention, and although often incorporating found elements, her work nevertheless recalls the purity of works by Brancusi or Giacometti.

Nevelson's large monochromatic works in white and black at PACE LA, pose questions of positive and negative space and are solid in way that often defies interpretation. There is a work certain poetry, even a musicality to Nevelson's sculptures that produces an intellectual and even emotional response. making the whole greater than its parts.

The PACE LA show feels like the start of a new reconsideration of Nevelson, her life and her works.

**Gajin Fujita** at LA Louver, March 29-May 6, 2023.

In his sixth show at LA Louver Gajin Fujita's work from 2020-2023 remixes classical Japanese art with contemporary settings and even graffiti-like markings in juxtapositions that are often humorous but also insightful as to LA during the pandemic.



Home Field LA by Gajin Fujita PHOTO BY JEFF MCLANE COPYRIGHT GAJIN FUJITA COURTESY OF LA LOUVER

Fujita grew up in Boyle Heights and went from being part of LA graffiti crews to Otis Art college to studying under Dave Hickey at UNLV in Las Vegas.

Fujita's work has always had a street art element to it, walking a fine line between commercial and painterly. In his best work, Fujita remixes high/low culture along with iconic Asian symbols such as Chinese dragons and Geishas as well as tropes surrounding Asian representation.

Fujita's new work at LA Louver is far more personal - part pandemic diary and social commentary, adding portraits for the first time, including one of his mother, and one of iconic Los Angeleno Tommy Lasorda. In Fujita's new

works, we are on the streets of LA in these works as the city comes under attack from imagined dragons, diseases, and the decay of cities.

My favorite work in the current show has a geisha sitting at a bus stop in LA taking a selfie with the Hollywood sign in the background. It is one of those images that says it all about past and present, Asian and mainstream culture in LA.

LA Louver has produced a beautiful Art catalogue for the exhibit that is also available in a signed artists special edition, along with a limited edition Fujita inkjet print that has Godzilla attacking the iconic US Bank Tower in downtown LA. Both are signed by the artist and they are sure to become collector's items.

It's a wonderful image that speaks to how Gajin Fujita has now conquered Los Angeles. For more information see: [LA Louver](#)

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomteicholz/2023/04/12/art-to-see-now-in-la-russell-nevelson-fujita/?sh=2a1578e22ac2>