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Painter Gajin Fujita, 30, melds urban graffiti and Japanese woodblock styles "the way a DJ would sample all sorts of great music from the past," he says.

By SCOTT TIMBERG

Gajin Fujita could be a cheery advertisement planted by the city's boosters. A Japanese American painter influenced by Latino graffiti, informed by gangland aesthetics but with the violence removed, he mixes high culture and low, East and West, past and present. If he were a musician, he'd be signed to David Byrne's genre-bending Luaka Bop label.

Fujita has earned his eclecticism honestly; he's got too much soul to be called an arid postmodernist. He grew up in Boyle Heights, an East L.A. neighborhood known for Los Lobos, mariachi bands and florid murals. His late Japanese-born father made his living as an abstract landscape painter, and his mother restores Japanese antiques. The style of his work grew from the elements of his environment; in the last few years he's learned the knack of combining them, with traditional Japanese imagery and erotica, into a striking whole.

Some of Fujita's influences, in fact, were passed down quite literally. "These are better than Playboy," he says, eyes wide, pulling down a dog-eared

SEX AND THE STREET TAGGER

Gajin Fujita's graffiti-influenced, culturally erotic painting reflects his upbringing as a Japanese American artist in Boyle Heights

art book his father left him. The tome, compiled from a Scandinavian erotic art show from 1968, shows men and women from around the world, coupling in every possible combination—a multicultural version of the Kama Sutra.

The artist never imagined the past as a musty place. "I've always thought that there were a great deal of sexual acts and deviances played out through

history," says Fujita, his mom dusting her home, which doubles as his studio, around him. "And they probably were a bit more crazy, to my mind—inventing new moves and whatnot."

All these influences—and a turn with Las Vegas art guru Dave Hickey—have led Fujita to create the pieces that go up at his first major U.S. solo show, at

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Fujita: Graffiti-Influenced Painter Mixes Styles, Periods

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L.A. Louver gallery on Sept. 12. Their most immediately striking quality is the almost reverent mix of Japanese woodblock art of the feudal Edo period (1603-1867) with urban reality. "I kind of look at myself as a hip-hopper, the way a DJ would sample all sorts of great music from the past—sounds and beats," he says. "I'm just doing it with visuals here."

The horizontal pieces, with their fervently crafted, densely decorated surfaces, range from 20 inches across to almost wall-sized. One painting—"Gold State Warriors," a 12-paneled canvas based on traditional Japanese screens—shows samurai drawing swords against a gold leaf background covered in dense graffiti: It's as if the characters in a Kurosawa film found themselves lost in a bad part of town.

In another, appropriately titled "Libido," a nobleman and a geisha make love alongside a bowing Virgin Mary of the sort that decorates the *taquerias* and corner bars of Fujita's neighborhood. The piece is full of visual puns (most of which cannot be described here).

Instead of trying to integrate the two worlds of his pieces—the feudal with the urban—the artist leaves the incongruities unremarked upon.

Whether painting a dragon, the stylized letters that spell out his titles or background patterns inspired by Japanese textiles, Fujita never gives the sense that he's slumming. His detractors, in fact, find his work lacking in the spontaneity of real graffiti.

Fujita's a humble, polite guy in a ponytail and a goatee who's always talking about how *lucky*, how *grateful* he is. The farthest west he typically goes is the Echo Park apartment he shares with Berkeley native Lisa Ishikawa, whom he married this spring. His painting leaves him little time to travel, play basketball or surf.

Fujita's enthusiasm and constant gratitude make him seem younger than his 30 years; his manner is almost innocent. But he's no mama's boy. He's ripping through the streets now, behind the wheel of his little Toyota, passing murals and tags on bodegas and pet stores, in awe of the iconography and the low riders that pass him on Cesar Chavez Avenue. It wasn't long ago that he was painting bridges and freeway walls instead of hunching over a canvas. "The crew that I belong to," he says proudly, as if listing an academic degree, "is K2S. 'Kill to Succeed.'" His eyes are on the traffic in front of him.

Fujita's parents came to the States from Tokyo—looking for a more liberal setting and a richer market for painting—only a few years before he was born, and Fujita grew up in what he calls a traditional Japanese home. His mother made him and his two younger brothers keep diaries and paint still lifes from the fruits and vegetables she brought in from the backyard garden. "And that really kept us in tune, really kept us focused," he says. Knowing the financial struggles all too well, his artist father, who died in 1996, hoped his son would become something more practical than a painter. ("He'd probably be rolling over in his grave," Fujita says with a laugh, about his own career.)

Fujita's first exposure to graffiti came early; he had only to look out the window or step outside to see the marks on bridges, his garage and even the walls of his house. By elementary school, he was meeting gang kids and talking to them about tagging and territory. "I don't know if any fear was instilled in me, because I never tried to do any wrong to these people," he says. "I admired their mark-making." When he talks about these years—tagging bridges from skateboards, running laps in neighborhood cemeteries for exercise—he sounds almost wistful.

One of Fujita's most important early discoveries came by chance. While he'd been aware of the tags around him, it was later, while traveling from East L.A. to Fairfax High School, a visual arts magnet, that he learned the form's true beauty. "It wasn't just gang writing," recalls Fujita. "It was more stylized and taken from the New York subway art culture." The thing that struck him the most were *placas*, letter designs, used to claim turf, which can take up the entire side of a building.

Thanks to traffic and the frequent stops of the MTA bus he rode every day, Fujita had two hours in the morning and another two in the afternoon to get to know the urban landscape. "Buses are just the *worst*, but that was the roots, the beginning, of my graffiti," he says. He also discovered that the kids making the *placas* were on the bus too. The long ride allowed him to learn the finer points of tagging and the more sophisticated and colorful "bombing": He met crews with names like Hollywood agencies: WCA (rich Westsiders who call themselves West Coast Artists), and KSN (Hollywood's Kings Stop at Nothing), KGB (Kids Gone Bad, Hollywood and midtown).

But for all the strata re-



ROBERT WEDEMEYER

Gajin Fujita's 12-paneled painting "Gold State Warriors" (2002): It's almost as if the characters from a Kurosawa film found themselves lost in a bad part of town.

presented, the scene Fujita saw was not racially segregated. "It was truly about the art," he recalls.

Fairfax High was fragmented into the usual teenage cliques and social layers, with jocks on one side, beautiful people on another, artsy types on another. "As soon as we got to school," Fujita says, "the experience would kind of end."

During this period, other kids from the neighborhood fell into drugs and violence, and some of his friends from K2S were killed as teenagers, stabbed or shot. Gajin dodged the violence, heading to college to study art. He credits his parents with keeping him "from falling into these trap doors."

Scott Grieger, a professor who later became the artist's unofficial advisor, remembers Fujita's 1993 arrival at Otis College of Art and Design. "He was a rough-edged urban kid when he first came to the school," Grieger says. "A funny, streetwise young guy. The rough edges were hiding a real sweet person."

From the beginning, Fujita had an unusual, almost obsessive attention to detail. "His face was always in his paintings," recalls Grieger, who figures the attentiveness came from the artist's parents. "He was looking at the details of the pigment, at the way the surfaces were building up, the way the paint was drying. It tells a teacher: *There's a real painter.*"

Otis offered some good teaching and time to concentrate on artwork. Still, Fujita recalls Otis mostly as a "teeth-pulling experience." He spent more time than he liked theorizing about art instead of sharpening his ability to produce it. He compares the process of painting with surfing or skateboarding. "It's like a sport—you're not really gonna get it unless you experience it hands-on," he says. "In order to make it, you've got to get your hands and feet dirty; you can't just talk about it."

It was later, as a graduate student at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, that Fujita learned to love art history—especially the Renaissance, which he calls a "transgressive period" starring "Caravaggio, the evil genius" and "Raphael, this little punk kid in Florence, who was bringing about new styles."

What he most admires about the Renaissance artists, Fujita says, is their discipline and work ethic.

By graduate school, Fujita was selling and exhibiting work as rapidly as possible. A classmate helped him land a New York gallery, Kravets/Wehby in Manhattan's Chelsea district, when he was only 28; he sold nearly two dozen paintings. At about the time he graduated with a master's in fine art in 2000, a series of well-reviewed appearances in small group shows, from Austin, Texas, to Bologna, Italy, helped spread his reputation, culminating in "Rogue Wave: Eleven Artists from L.A.," held at L.A. Louver in the summer of 2001. The gallery—associated with California icons such as the late minimalist John McCracken, installation artist Ed Kienholz and painter David Hockney—signed him late last year, bringing him some financial security and giving him an important stamp of approval. "It allowed me to survive on what I liked to do."

Fujita's breakout as an artist has a lot to do with an eccentric mentor, art critic Dave Hickey, author of "Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy" and a writer whose style is equal parts Jack Kerouac, rock scribe Greil Marcus and Wild West braggadocio. His ideas—especially his emphasis on Beauty and his call for a raw Americanism—have made him an underground hero and a force in the art world. For a decade, he has taught at UNLV, where Fujita became one of his graduate students. Last year,

Hickey chose him as the youngest artist in the Santa Fe Biennial, a show he curated that many critics considered among 2001's most important.

"I was calculatingly choosing impure styles," Hickey says. "And Gajin has a kind of classic impure style. Hispano-Nipponese—it's a little weird." He laughs. "But it's in the deepest tradition of Western art," at least since Renaissance Italy. "You wouldn't have Degas without Japanese prints."

Hickey asked Fujita to design a graffiti-style logo to wrap around the former beer warehouse that housed the biennial, as a way of cutting against the show's "elitist" title: "Beau Monde: Toward a Redeemed Cosmopolitanism."

Says Hickey: "Art practice at the moment is an extremely upper-middle-class endeavor, full of mildness and diffidence. But Gajin's got a little street in him. He's willing to put it out there and compete. His work doesn't ask to be forgiven or understood." Fujita's work, he says, is about *props*: "It's about respect, about commanding and demanding. It's a lot more confrontational" than art from the liberal-academic mainstream.

Some of Fujita's paintings borrow mythic and historic figures—dragons, a scowling demon, a phoenix—from Japanese prints. Graphic, sexualized figures from the same source fill about half of his pieces. He's hardly the only fine artist using the erotic: A recent essay in the Times of London argued that sexual imagery is running rampant in high art, in the same way it's conquered advertising and escorted porn toward the mainstream. "In the Seventies and Eighties, however, art that had sex as its theme had a slightly prudish undertow," wrote Sebastian Snee. "It came loaded with implied critiques, some from a feminist perspective, others from a gay or class perspective or from various other

kinds of disapproving, sex-is-the-seat-of-all-power mentality."

But with recent artists—Snee named photographers Nobuyoshi Araki, Richard Kern and shooter David LaChapelle—there's no distance from the sex. "The new kind of sex-focused art is neither critical nor ironic about the implications of our sex-saturated society. It is happy just to give it to us."

Fujita doesn't sweat over the sexuality in his work. He talks about how he wants to "violate people's expectations," but the critique ends there. In Las Vegas, he says, he was surrounded by so much naked flesh, on billboards and elsewhere, that it was hard to avoid bringing it into his art. (When asked to describe the city, he cites "so many distractions—there were women, there was money—a hard place to live without any loot.") He uses erotic imagery, he says, to provoke excitement. "Figures have always been a leading icon to us humans. And when you do nudes and people doing it, it's like, whoa!"

Hickey contends that despite the culture's saturation with sexual imagery, Fujita's work stands out. "It's a way of tapping a deep cultural resource—the deep tradition of Japanese art," he says. "I know almost no [other] high-style eroticism. There's not much genuinely sexy art out there."

You might assume that every emerging artist with a Japanese name, especially those who use groovy contemporary references, is a member of the Superflat gang—the young, trendy Tokyo artists collected in a Museum of Contemporary Art show of 2001. Fujita finds these paintings, with their flat surfaces and reliance on crisp, machine-made processes, mostly just hip graphic design. One of his peers in Santa Fe was Superflat artist Takashi Murakami, a painter and sculptor. Fujita

praises the artist's skill with his usual discretion, then adds: "His work is definitely of a time, a time that's taken place already. I'd like to keep working where I can out-last time, which is hard to do."

Asked what makes art last for the ages, he doesn't hesitate. "I think it's the human touch. The turnoff for me for Murakami's work is that some of it is prefabricated."

In one way, Fujita concedes, he's deeply conventional: "I like to rely on my own techniques and skills, with my own hands. That's why I like looking at the masters of ancient times—it was all their hands, or their direction if they used assistants." His goals for his work are simple. "I just want for my finished product to be the most pristine, evoking the most beauty, of all the works out there."

For all his perfectionism, Fujita is not far from the street: He still gets a charge out of spotting a patch of wet cement, where he learned at an early age that he could make a truly permanent mark.

The wild contrasts in his work seem to reflect his temperament: When asked about his solo show, he turns into Miss America accepting a bouquet.

"Oh, gosh! I think it means a lot," he says, nearly blushing. "Not just for myself, but I think, in perspective, for the graffiti world of L.A., California, the West Coast. And I'd like to think that I'm breaking ground, and pioneering something, and giving an ultimatum, another segue, or a path for other graffiti artists to pursue fine arts." □

"Gajin Fujita: *Wicked Beauty*," L.A. Lower, 45 N. Venice Blvd., Venice, Sept. 12-Oct. 12. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Free. (310) 822-4955.

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