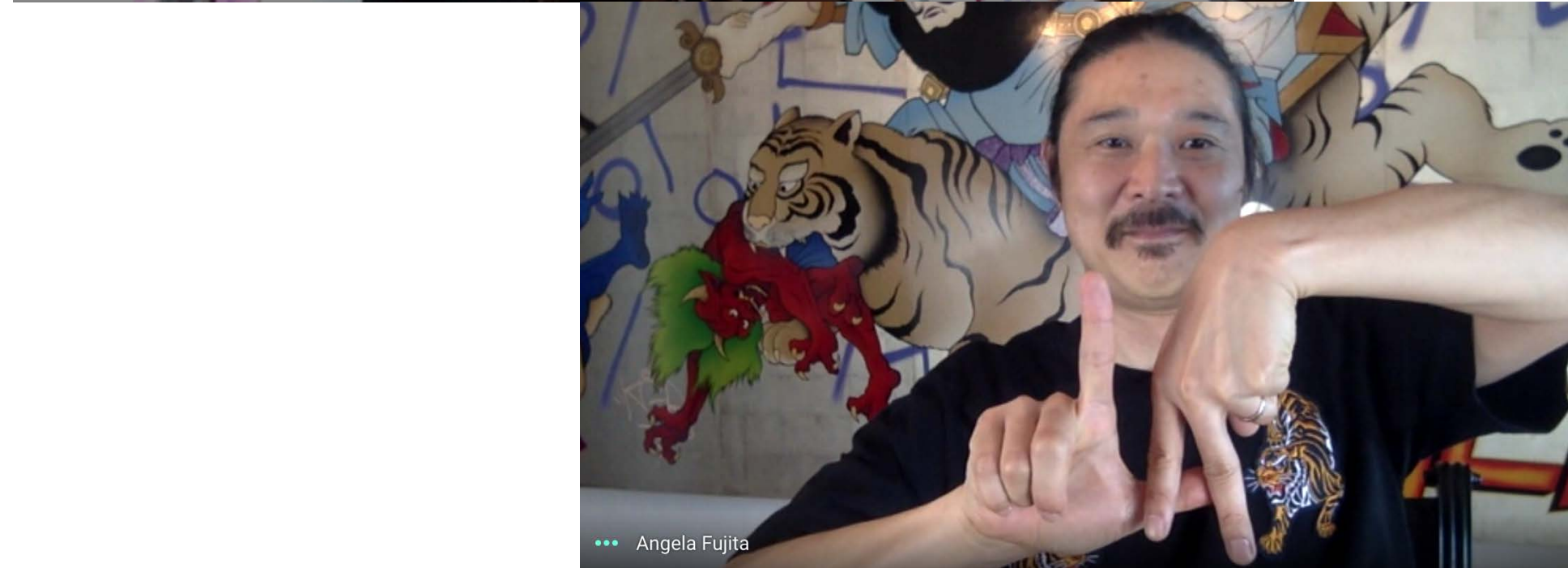


A CONVERSATION BETWEEN

# Gajin Fujita & Gabriella Sanchez

Gajin Fujita and Gabriella Sanchez are two of the most interesting artists working amid Los Angeles' vast diasporan panorama. Although separated by a generation, both of their work is a primal scream for visibility. Fujita invites his friends from his graffiti crews—K2S (Kill 2 Succeed) and KGB (Kids Gone Bad)—to tag his paintings as he infuses Edo-era woodblock imagery with contemporary symbols, like cellphones, street signs, and other characteristic markers of LA's landscape. Sanchez uses the Day-Glo visual language of commercial advertising to explore the city's fraught Latinx history. Together, they discuss their practices and their inclusion in *45 at 45*, an historic group exhibition celebrating the 45th anniversary of the landmark gallery, LA Louver.





TOP IMAGE: Gajin Fujita, *Phony Disillusion*, 2018. Spray paint, Mean Streak, paint markers, 12k white gold and 24k gold on four wood panels (48 x 64 inches / 121.9 x 162.6 cm) © Gajin Fujita, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. BOTTOM IMAGE: Gajin Fujita, *#WTF*, 2020. 12k white gold leaf, 24k gold leaf, spray paint, metal head markers and paint markers on wood panel (24 x 16 inches / 61 x 40.6 cm). © Gajin Fujita, courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA

**GABRIELLA SANCHEZ** It's really interesting meeting artists that have come from similar areas. I guess we both grew up in LA. What part did you grow up in?

**GAJIN FUJITA** It was a trip because I grew up in the '80s in Boyle Heights, and we were the only Japanese-American family. So I went to school with a lot of Mexican-American kids.

**SANCHEZ** I grew up in Pasadena, but my dad was from East LA. Most of the family has moved out to Montebello or Whittier.

**FUJITA** What was it like to grow up in Pasadena?

**SANCHEZ** It was hard in a weird way. The reason why we moved there is because my dad didn't want to go back to East LA. He was harassed by the police all the time. But it's a really split dynamic there too. Anyone with a little bit of money sends their kids to private school, so the public schools end up being economically and racially segregated.

**FUJITA** My parents were Japanese immigrants from Hokkaido and Tokyo. My dad came to study painting at Otis in 1970, so I was raised with oil paints in the house. My dad couldn't afford a studio outside the house, and I took on his same customs. I like having my studio at my house. But art is something that I was raised with—I was surrounded by art. I also had to learn Japanese customs because my parents were first-generation immigrants. It was unique, but when I was a child, I had no idea it was unique.

**SANCHEZ** Isn't that interesting? My family grew up, essentially poor, but we didn't realize it—my family community didn't realize that it was such a countrywide, systemic thing until a lot later. We didn't realize that we could bring a voice to the table.

**FUJITA** Even though my dad was a struggling artist and my mom was just taking care of the children, I don't think we felt poor. My parents did their best to make us feel like we had everything and anything in the world. My mom was the one that really pushed the visual practice. We would do visual diaries every day during the summers. We hated doing them, because we just wanted to go outside and play. I think that helped form a lot of my drawing and coloring skills. I played a lot of sports in high school, but I was doing a lot of graffiti back then. It was so fresh and new. It was the beginning of being able to make something out of nothing, and I think that's what I try to bring to my paintings, but I didn't really get serious until 1992. I

decided to check out East LA College and take some art classes. A few semesters in, a professor noticed my passion for painting and told me I should apply to some of the art schools in Southern California. I applied to Otis and got in.

**SANCHEZ** How did you like it in art school?

**FUJITA** Sophomore year was when I really, really got serious, because I had a great professor named Scott Grieger. He asked what I wanted to do after Otis, so I started to think about graduate school. But my dad had just died, and I didn't want to leave my mom alone. But she said I should keep going, so with her permission, I did. That's when I met a mentor of mine: Dave Hickey. He said, "Don't look at me like a professor. Look at me like an art coach." I took a few things away from his lectures. One of them was that art should violate people's expectations. I try to use that in all my paintings.

**SANCHEZ** My mom paints. She has always been a creative person, but never professionally. Fine art wasn't really part of my life in a very direct way. I saw a lot of art in churches. Then, I went to college and took an art history class and learned a lot about contemporary art. That really blew my mind open, but I studied graphic design. After college, I decided to get a job as an au pair in Paris. The mom of the kid I was teaching English to ended up being the art director for a French business magazine. She gave me a spot in an article to do illustration. When I moved back to LA, I got a studio space, and the work that I was making as a graphic designer ended up being the art that I started to make. I didn't intend to do painting, but when I got the studio, that's sort of what came out. I just bought thick ass paper and huge sheets, because I didn't know how to stretch canvas, and I started to make these big paintings. Then another artist named Ramiro Gomez showed my work to his gallery, Charlie James—who I'm repped by now. I didn't know who Charlie was at first. I thought it was a DIY gallery because why would they be reaching out to me? I almost said, "Yeah, hey, come by tomorrow." But then I googled the gallery and emailed him to say, "Come by in a month." In that month, I worked really hard to have a new collection of work. When he came by, things sort of went from there.

**FUJITA** I was lucky, because first I was at graduate school minding my own business. I was in the studio almost 24/7, but I was determined. I knew I had to have something to show. I was trying to create something really over the top, violating and provocative. In 1998, I came up with

a painting called "Motel." I used the erotic woodblock print imagery, and then in the background I painted some graffiti. In the foreground, I overlaid the imagery with text that read Motel, sort of in a calligraphic paintbrush font. I had a really good feeling about this painting. One of my friends saw it and told me that there was a gallery out in Chelsea that she's friends with. I got her some slides, and she sent them out. They called like a week after they got them, and they had already sold the piece. That gallery gave me my first real-world show before I even graduated school.

**SANCHEZ** I see some through lines with your story and mine, because it was the art community that you had around you that helped. For me, it was the art community online, which really helped jump-start things for me. First, with Ramiro Gomez discovering my work online. Then, almost at the same time, Nina Chanel Abney curated my work in a show at Jeffrey Deitch after discovering me on social media.

**FUJITA** It's all about diligence, painting; it's not as easy as some people seem to think. It's a lot of hard work and, for me, it's like an old Japanese saying about improving yourself every day. To me, that's what it boils down to: self-improvement. And I've been fortunate to mind my own business all these years and try to improve myself.

**SANCHEZ** I would say that too. I love to see myself grow all the time and really continue exploring and expand or go deeper just by the regularity of going to the canvas and doing it over and over again, things shift slightly or majorly over time. I think it's diligence, but unfortunately, there's a huge economic barrier in the art world too where, with painting especially, it's super expensive. Or at least it can be. When I started, I was using house paints from Home Depot and pen and pencil on paper.

**FUJITA** How do you feel about your show with Charlie James at the Frieze Art Fair this year? What was that like?

**SANCHEZ** That was amazing. I'm so glad I was able to have that experience, especially right before we went into quarantine. How has it been working during the pandemic for you?

**FUJITA** It's no different from what I've been doing before. I guess a lot of artists practice in isolation, so if anything, I've been able to hone in on being more detailed in my painting, taking my time, and I feel like, in the last three paintings I've done during the pandemic, the ante has been upped. One is a painting called *#WTF*, 'cause of all the unrest we've been

seeing. I've seen riots happen in LA, but I haven't seen riots happen simultaneously throughout the nation and the world. I never thought I'd see a cop car burnt down in the middle of Third and Fairfax, and young people taking selfies in front of it. I painted a geisha girl sitting at a bus bench that was tagged up with "FTP," and a palm tree in the background that was on fire, and also the hills of Hollywood, and you can see fragments of the Hollywood sign. On the foreground, I tagged over on the bottom, "#WTF," and the geisha girl is taking a selfie on the bus bench. Our country is pretty fucking crazy right now.

**SANCHEZ** I love that painting. I also feel like a picture of LA is always so layered, and even more so in these times. Like when people put out scenic views of LA where it's very Santa Monica-esque. If you're looking, you can see past the veil.

**FUJITA** But unfortunately there is the veil, and there are many, many issues that have been ongoing and will still keep going.

**SANCHEZ** During the beginning of quarantine, I wasn't really working that much. I was just tired from running the rat race, honestly. So when quarantine hit, I was like, okay, I'm going to take a break for a little bit, 'cause I need to recharge. The audience wasn't there anymore because no one could go to shows, so I'm like, what am I doing? Do I want to be doing paintings right now? Do I want to be doing paintings that will be shown only privately for a certain group or class of people? But then, when the uprisings started happening, it kind of reinvigorated the reason why I was making art. And so the painting that I'll have in the show for Louver is a painting that collages photos from historic events in LA, a lot in East LA from the Chicano Moratorium (1970), and the Zoot Suit Riots (1943) where you see a lot of imagery that's somewhat similar to what we're seeing now with police cars on fire, police in riot gear, and people of color unarmed being arrested, stuff like that. They're all archival images from the LA library. And while you can tell that they're not current through the style of dress, the events feel very current. I'm collaging those into a painting.

**FUJITA** That sounds cool. I can't wait to see it in person, and I'm glad that I got to see your work at Frieze. That was my first introduction to your work. Congratulations on that show.

**SANCHEZ** Since you have such a background in tagging and graffiti and street art, and in this time in closed spaces, where that isn't

really feasible, have you been thinking about how your experience has changed?

**FUJITA** One of the first processes of my painting is asking some of my crew mates to come out to my studio and tag it up. It's been kind of hard. Most of them are always down to do it, even in this time, and they have come over, but I just have to be more mindful now, and more respectful. My wife is super on top of me, sanitizing and providing face masks, and this and that. I understand and I respect that, but at the same time it just feels so different. It just feels so distant.

**SANCHEZ** I feel like, in this time, street art, graffiti art, it almost makes more sense, because it's outside where people can interact with it and where it's naturally community-centered. Graffiti is uniquely positioned in this time of Corona and these uprisings.

**FUJITA** It is the voice of the streets. You saw it during the riots and stuff like that, the FTP tags, the ACAB tags. It's the voice of the people, and being spoken loudly. That was real graffiti, when I saw Trump in front of that graffiti wall, that was real graffiti. That's the definition and the epitome of graffiti. And you're not gonna get that feeling 100% in a gallery or in a painting. Graffiti is always gonna have to be raw. It's gonna have to be someone vandalizing something. I'm full of joy for the graffiti world and how it's expanded, and how it's gotten a great deal of attention, and it's been accepted, so to speak. All these people are still paving for more to come.

**SANCHEZ** I agree. There's room for a lot more people and a lot more artists of color.

**FUJITA** I wanted to ask you about typography, and one thing that stands out in my mind about your work when I saw it was the use of Old English fonts, and I know you like to make a play of the words as well, but how did you come to using Old English fonts?

**SANCHEZ** Yeah, it was directly influenced from my dad, from his experience growing up in East LA, and my dad and uncle's tattoos. He had been to prison a few times and he would send those birthday cards, you know, that he and his friends would make while he was in there, and they were all beautiful. When I got my first bike, he got me a little license plate that had my name in a gothic script.

**FUJITA** I've always been attracted to Old English, gothic fonts because they're so unique and so calligraphic. I also grew up seeing Asian fonts, and learning an Asian

language as well, it's very different, but so stylized. Of course, I grew up seeing it on the streets where the gangs would try to redo it on my mom's walls and stuff.

**SANCHEZ** Not that I was ever a graffiti artist, but I kind of feel a little thrill when I can make a painting that is successful in the art world because I know I'm kind of getting away with something. Something that maybe not everyone sees, which is all these layers that pulse behind the veil, the photos I collage. A lot of people maybe wouldn't know why I use the gothic font, really, other than like, *oh, she's Mexican, okay*. Or a lot of these photos with my uncle and his friend doing the homeboy handshake—they wouldn't really understand the significance of putting that in a painting.

**FUJITA** Speaking of the Moratorium, do you think that your father or your parents were at that march?

**SANCHEZ** Yeah, my mom told me that my dad said that he was there, but then my mom, on the flip side, she had a cousin that was part of the Brown Berets and was trying to get her to come to the Moratorium, but she wouldn't go 'cause she was scared and she didn't want to get in trouble, basically. But I never read about it in school.

**FUJITA** Of course, they're not going to have it in the history books. I just hope things get taken care of a little bit more. It's affecting us all, especially people of color. I just feel we gotta give it more effort to try to live with each other. We have been, but it's just how we humans are naturally. It's a primal way of thinking. We need food, we need air, we need to reproduce. We also, unfortunately, fight or become tribal.

**SANCHEZ** I wonder, though, if that is the way we're made, or if colonialism and capitalist thought have been so ingrained in us that it feels like biology. It's seeped in so much, but it makes you wonder about indigenous cultures who have more of a commonwealth system where the land isn't owned by any specific person—it's communal. Maybe this doesn't have to be how we're wired biologically. Maybe we've been stuck in this loop for so long that it feels that way.

**FUJITA** I'm sure we've been conditioned through many, many generations. It's an awful thought. But I think as well, we humans are intelligent enough to break these cycles. I just hope we are intelligent enough to think of another way, and I think we are. Our minds are very powerful.

end



Gabriella Sanchez, *Good and Bad Omens (This Side Up)*, 2020. Acrylic, oil stick, oil pastel, archival pigment prints on canvas (60 1/4 x 48 inches / 153 x 121.9 cm) courtesy of Charlie James Gallery