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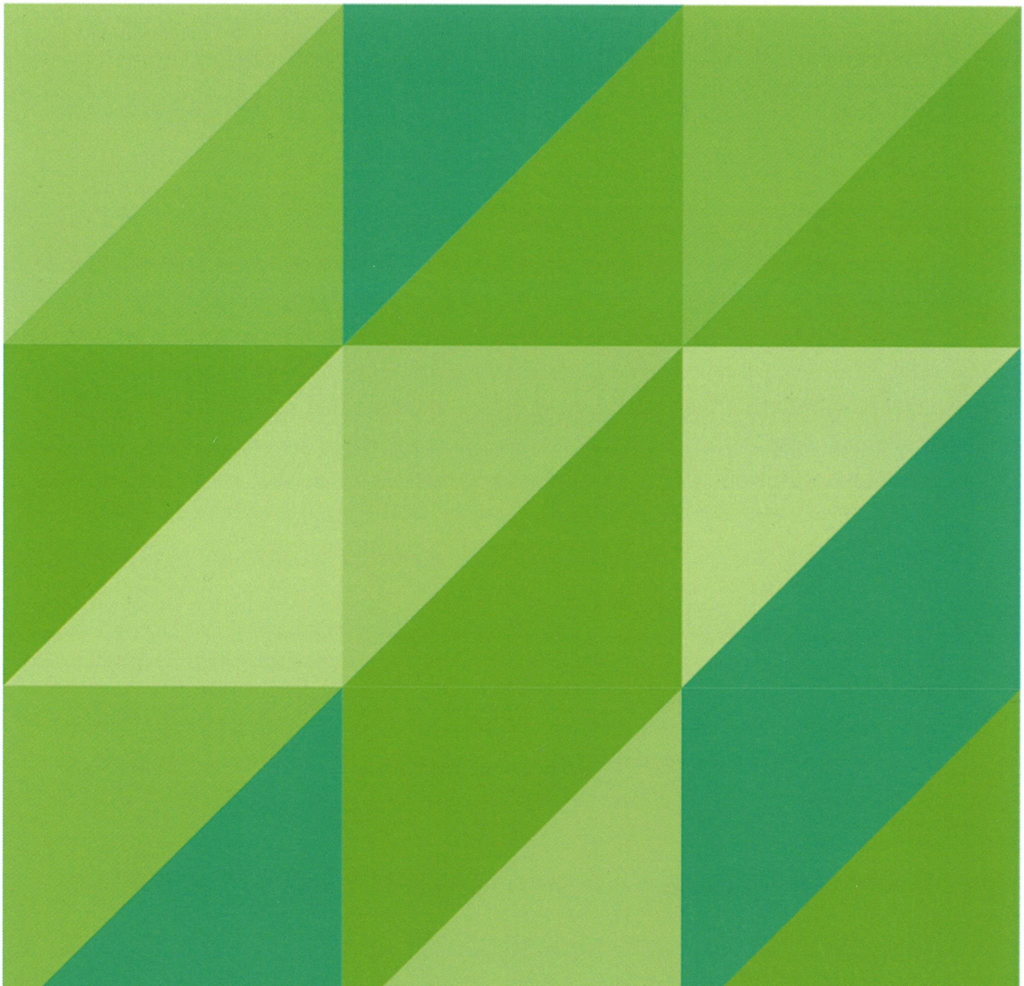
Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas

Special Issue: Challenging Hegemony within the South Asian Diaspora

Guest Editors: Jaishri Abichandani, Santhi Kavuri Bauer, and Anuradha Vikram



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BRILL

ASIAN DIASPORIC VISUAL CULTURES AND THE AMERICAS
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An Amalgamation of Power and Paint: Gajin Fujita, Los Angeles Street Art, and Images of Edo Japan

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Abstract

The paintings of Gajin Fujita (b. 1972) express the urban Asian diasporic experience in vivid images filled with historic and contemporary cultural references. Creating an amalgamation of contemporary sports figures, hip-hop culture, historic Japanese painting conventions, street art, and the visual language of Edo Japan (1600–1868), Fujita reflects his diverse experiences as a citizen of twenty-first century Los Angeles in his paintings. This article introduces the artist and provides a nuanced examination of his works vis-à-vis an understanding of the larger issues addressed in both Edo artistic practice and contemporary street art culture. By specifying the agents of power and performance in Fujita's works, a greater understanding of the hybrid world of his colourful graphic paintings can be found.

Keywords

graffiti – street art – Japan – painting – performance – cultural hybridity – gender – Los Angeles – hip hop – contemporary art – race

> 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.
> I'm just doing it with visuals.[1]

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[1] "Alumni: Gajin Fujita," Otis College of Art and Design, accessed 18 November 2016, http://www.otis.edu/alumni/outstanding_alumni/gajin_fujita.html.

The artwork of Gajin Fujita presents viewers with a cacophony of seemingly disparate imagery. Tattooed figures with gold teeth in eighteenth-century Japanese costume, Japanese warriors with marijuana leaf-patterned trousers, and appropriated historic imagery of courtesans and pornography set against contemporary graffiti or the skyline of Los Angeles comprise the fantasy world of Fujita. To the uninitiated, the imagery of Gajin Fujita may appear disjointed; a grab bag of the artist's biographical experiences and interests juxtaposed without deeper meaning. Yet, upon closer examination, the symbols and signs of Fujita's work provide rich grounds for discussion on power and performance, constructions of ethnicity and gender, issues of urban agency, artifice and amalgamation, and cultural hybridity. Featured in solo and group museum and gallery shows, Fujita's large-scale painted works, often greater than 5 by 10 feet (1.5 by 3 metres) in size, seamlessly blend the hip-hop graffiti culture of contemporary Los Angeles with the visual language of Edo-period Japan, creating visually arresting works that imagine a fantastic hybrid experience.

Born in 1972 in Los Angeles to Japanese immigrant parents, Gajin Fujita was raised in the diverse cultural climate of Southern California. His father was an artist, and his mother worked as a conservator of Japanese antiquities, providing him with exposure to the art world at a very young age. Fujita was raised in the Boyle Heights neighbourhood of East Los Angeles among a primarily Latinx community. For high school, he attended the Fairfax Magnet Center for Visual Arts on the West Side, which meant a long bus commute across the varied neighbourhoods of the city.[2] It was at this time that he developed an affinity for graffiti and started to run with the KGB (Kidz Gone Bad) and KIIS (Kill to Succeed) graffiti crews, groups of artists that he continues to collaborate with today.[3] Earning a BFA from the Otis College of Art and Design, and an MFA from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Fujita is not without exposure to and knowledge of the canon of art history from which he draws inspiration.[4] Fujita's works reflect this upbringing, with cultural signs from the world of Japanese prints, Los Angeles street culture, and US professional sports, among others, and drawing from a variety of visual sources: Japanese and American, paintings and prints, high and low culture.

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[2] Elizabeth Dunbar, "Windswept," in *Zephyr: Paintings by Gajin Fujita*, ed. Michelle Bolton King (Kansas City: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2006), 2–3.

[3] Some of these artists were featured in the exhibition *Roll Call: 11 Artists from LA*, curated by Fujita, at LA Louver gallery from 16 November 2016–14 January 2017. David Pagel, "What to See in LA Galleries," *Los Angeles Times*, 2016.

[4] "Gajin Fujita," LA Louver, accessed 18 February 2016, http://www.lalouver.com/html/gajin.html.

To date, scholarship on Gajin Fujita has been limited in quantity and scope. A few exhibition catalogues and reviews provide basic information on Fujita's work, yet no comprehensive scholarly publications on the artist are extant. Most of the literature on Fujita discusses his biography and the visual connections between his paintings and *ukiyo-e*, Japanese prints of the Edo period (1600–1868). Due to the limited quantity of writing on Fujita, the literature is shallow in its exploration of themes within the artist's oeuvre. The extant publications focus on surface connections between the contemporary city of Los Angeles and the historic city of Edo, draw parallels between the contemporary sports-clad figures as gang members and the historic warriors of Japan, and compare the courtesans of *ukiyo-e* to the aspiring actresses of Fujita's hometown. While the aforementioned comparisons are apt and interesting, they leave out many elements of Fujita's work that could be read as more layered in meaning. To gain a deeper understanding of Fujita's work, this article will focus on how power, performance, artifice, and the urban diasporic experience are expressed through Fujita's figures of actors as warriors, his representations of women, and his continued connections with hip-hop and graffiti culture. Specifically, the following pages will address how Fujita's use of hybrid, stereotyped images of Japan acts as an assertion of power that negotiates his racial invisibility as a Japanese American street artist from Boyle Heights. His use of techniques akin to DJ sampling creates a new genre of hybrid, amalgamative paintings that point out the artifice of Edo and LA, professional sports and gang culture, and street art and the gallery scene. To quote the artist in a discussion of demons in Japanese tattooing, "In our society, especially in LA, everyone is so phony, so I wanted to reiterate that, to me, these are the true kings of the natural order."[5]

In pointing out the artifice of contemporary popular culture vis-à-vis its apposition with the similarly specious visual culture of Edo Japan, Fujita is commenting on the fallacy of both power structures. His paintings expose this illusion of power through structures of juxtaposition that imitate and appropriate symbols from both LA and Edo: hip-hop stars, kabuki actors, and sports celebrities are ersatz signifiers of power—these are not the unseen corporate or political players that shape our world, nor are they the hidden shoguns that shaped Edo, but they are symbols of a secondary power structure, produced for ready mass consumption. Fujita uses the flashy, public, and "phony" celebrities of LA and Edo to represent the falsehood of power that celebrity represents.

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[5] This quotation was specifically in reference to the painting *Invincible Kings of This Mad, Mad World*. Michael Slenske, "Painter Gajin Fujita Keeps His Norm-Violating Spirit While Starring in Graffiti Shows," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 2018.

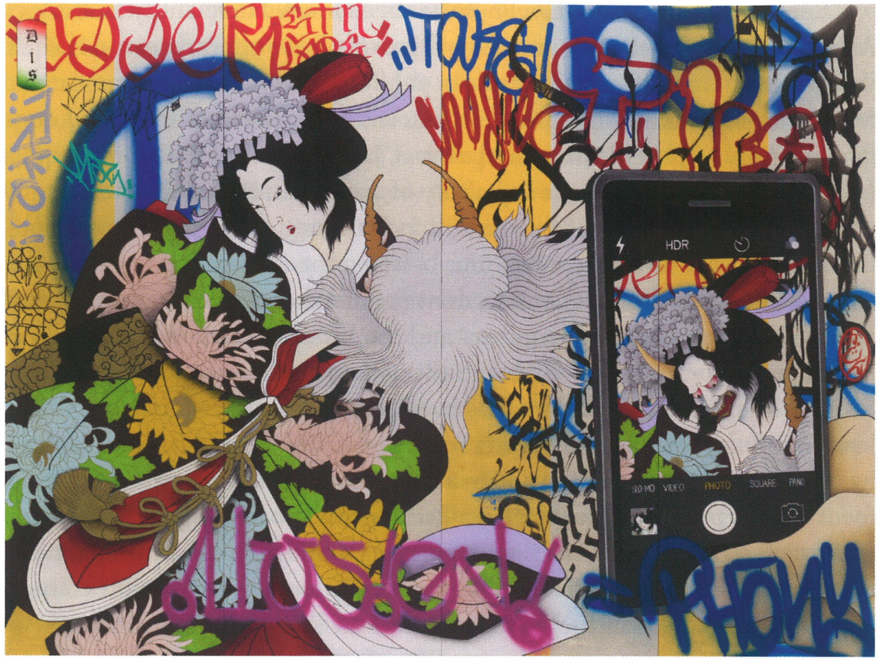

FIGURE 1 Gajin Fujita, *Phony Disillusion*, 2018, spray paint, Mean Streak paint stick, paint markers, 12k white gold and 24k gold on wood panels, 48 × 64 in (122 × 162.5 cm) (4 panels).
PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY L.A. LOUVER.

His 2018 painting, *Phony Disillusion* (fig. 1) reveals this façade: An Edo-period courtesan, a celebrity of her day, dressed in elaborate, luxurious kimono is exposed as the demon she truly is by means of a cell phone photograph, painted into the bottom right quadrant of the image. In considering his use of multiple layers of actors, artifice, flattened history, and pseudo power structures, I refer to Fujita's works by using the term performative paintings. I argue for the term performative for three reasons, which will be elaborated upon in the following pages: Fujita's works are based on the visual styles of graffiti, which can be read as a public performance; he creates visual referents to contemporary athletes and historic kabuki actors, both performers; and he points out the performative nature of gender. Furthermore, I argue that Fujita is performing power in his paintings by revealing the staged nature of the two celebrity cultures from which he appropriates, and using the symbols of this secondary power structure to advance an otherwise invisible Asian urban diasporic identity. Finally, his success in the art market shows Fujita's savvy in constructing a cultural critique that can simultaneously be read as an escapist fantasy.

To fully understand Fujita's works, we must first understand something of the cultures which he blends: that of Japanese prints and paintings, and that of graffiti. Fujita appropriates two disparate Japanese aesthetics in his paintings. *Ukiyo-e*, or pictures of the floating world, are woodblock prints that had great popularity during Japan's Edo period, and which were generally associated with the Yoshiwara, an entertainment district of the historic city of Edo (present day Tokyo).[6] *Ukiyo-e* prints were widely available to the general public at a low cost, and were mass-produced for popular consumption. Popular themes in *ukiyo-e* included landscapes, actors, *bijin* (beautiful women), and to a lesser degree *shunga* (spring pictures, or pornographic imagery). Fujita borrows from each of these categories in his work, with a particular focus on the aesthetic of prints of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[7]

Fujita also appropriates elements of Kanō school of painting in his work. The Kanō school was the dominant Japanese painting academy from the fifteenth century into the modern era. With work ranging in subject and style, the Kanō school aesthetic can generally be characterized as a Japanese adaptation of Chinese landscape, bird-and-flower, and ink-painting styles which, when created in sliding and folding screen formats, fit the character of shogunal interiors.[8] Stressing tradition over innovation, and the maintenance of house techniques over personal artistic expression, the imagery produced by the school was unified by a strict method of instruction and a hierarchical structure wherein students learned by repetitive copying of pictorial models.[9] Fujita's *Clash of the Titans* (fig. 2) shows striking parallels to historic Kanō paintings. The gold leaf, lack of defined space, use of thick outline, stylized conventions, and flat areas of colour that are common in Kanō painting are similarly used by Fujita. *Clash of the Titans* also exhibits abstracted rocks and stylized stalks of bamboo, as well as an allusion to historic painting with the

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[6] Fujita's use of *ukiyo-e* is addressed by Elizabeth Dunbar. See: Dunbar, "Windswept," *Zephyr*, 2006. It should be noted that *ukiyo-e* refers most commonly to prints but can also refer to paintings of the same subjects.

[7] Fujita speaks of the transformative experience of seeing woodblock prints on a family trip to Japan in the late 1990s, and of his admiration of the work of nineteenth-century print artist Tsukioka Yoshitoshi. Justin Paton. "Gajin Fujita: Street Theatre." *Art and Australia* 52, no. 1 (2014): 104–111.

[8] Christine Guth, *Art of Edo Japan: The Artist and the City 1615–1868* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 55–59.

[9] For an extensive examination of Kanō school training techniques and practices see, Brenda G. Jordan and Victoria Weston, *Copying the Master and Stealing His Secrets: Talent and Training in Japanese Painting* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

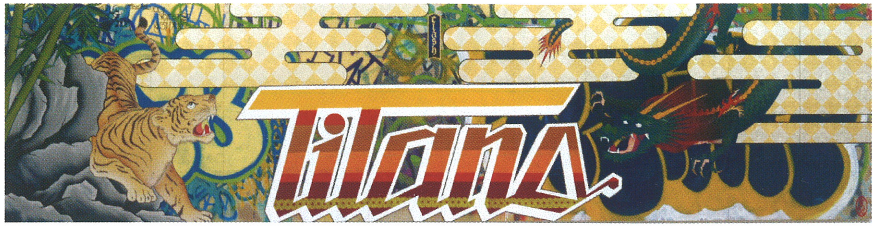

FIGURE 2 Gajin Fujita, *Clash of the Titans*, 2002–2006, spray paint, acrylic, paint marker, Mean Streak paint stick, gold and white leaf on wood panel, 48 × 192 in (1.2 × 4.9 m) (12 panels).
PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY L.A. LOUVER.

dragon at the right half of the piece. The dragon motif, representative of rain and clouds, has long been popular in Japanese painting. Its standard iconography of curvilinear whiskers, bulging eyes, and bushy eyebrows used by the artist reveals Fujita's familiarity with Kanō painting conventions.[10]

Fujita's flattening of the high/low cultures of Kanō painting and *ukiyo-e* prints is akin to his juxtapositions of LA and Edo in that he creates an illusion of similarity between these disparate styles. By using *ukiyo-e* as a familiar—if misunderstood and stereotyped—representation of Japan, Fujita creates fictional Edo origins for the Japanese diaspora. In his work on Takashi Murakami's Superflat, Thomas Looser states, "The historical turn to the Edo period (…) is a return to a mythical moment of happy coherence, prior to any moment of actual trauma or irruption of difference, and that mythical moment in turn stabilizes the conditions that make up Heisei modernity."[11] Although Looser is referring to the domestic Japanese trauma of war, a parallel can be drawn in Fujita's works to the traumatic moment of emigration, and to the use of a compressed history in the works of both artists.

Another aspect of historic Japanese painting styles that is reflected in Fujita's works is that of practice and production. Both graffiti and the historical Japanese painting schools, such as the Kanō school, share a tradition of apprenticeship in training. Elizabeth Dunbar's 2006 essay on Fujita draws a comparison between the collaborative effort of *ukiyo-e* production and that of graffiti writers, stating that "it is in their production that ukiyo-e and graffiti are most closely related: ukiyo-e were created through a collaboration of a number of specialized craftsmen, including the designer (who is usually credited as

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[10] An apt comparison for *Clash of the Titans* is Kanō Sanraku's seventeenth-century painting *Dragon and Tiger*, housed at Myōshinji in Kyoto.

[11] Thomas Looser, "Superflat and the Layers of Image and History in 1990s Japan," *Mechademia* 1 (2006): 107.

the "artist" in current scholarship), woodblock carver, printer, and publisher, all of whom were credited as integral contributors in the final product."[12] Yet Dunbar's conception of *ukiyo-e* production circles is not completely accurate. The various actors involved in producing *ukiyo-e* were not on equal footing; the publisher and artist held a higher status than the printers and carvers. Carvers belonged to professional associations and were frequently sought out by publishers and designers for their skills, however neither carvers nor printers were named on prints until very late in the Edo period.[13] This level of inequality is not seen in graffiti, where the writers understand their place relative to seniority and notoriety, but do not have a hierarchy of positions. Graffiti writers either sign their work as individuals, or they sign as a crew, always using a pseudonym to avoid confrontations with the authorities.

A more apt comparison may be with the painting apprenticeship method used by the various schools of Japanese painting and sculpture. Both graffiti and traditional Japanese artistic training methods require aspiring artists to work with a seasoned artist, and both use a system that is akin to a family. In the historic Japanese apprenticeship system artists took the name of the school as their family name, for even if they were not blood relations, they were adopted into the house. In graffiti circles artists run with a "crew" with whom they work together on security, safety, and artistic collaborations. Additionally, graffiti artists often associate themselves with or use the name of their crew in pieces; in Fujita's work the KIIS (or K2S) name is frequently seen, as he collaborates with his crew to create the backgrounds of his paintings.

When working with his graffiti crew, Fujita is participating in the contemporary graffiti scene as well as in a form of street performance. This performance is an act of subversion against the dominant social and political power system, which is at the heart of graffiti culture.[14] The phenomenon of contemporary graffiti, while now seen globally, first developed in the subways and streets of New York City in the 1970s. Graffiti artists would try to "get up," or to tag their name on surfaces all over the city, by "writing" or "tagging" their trademark alias on trains, busses, buildings, and billboards.[15] Typically, graffiti styles range by purpose. For example, a simple single-colour line-based tag done in marker is generally used for quick application and can easily cover a neighbourhood or train car with a low risk of being caught by authorities, as can a simple single-colour stencil. The large-scale multi-colour graphic tags that are seen frequently on cross-country freight trains require a much higher time commitment and level of skill, and present a higher risk. These large-scale pieces are typically done with a "crew" or group of "taggers" for both expediency and safety, and are carefully planned in advance. The move to cross-country freight trains coincided with the crackdowns conducted by city transportation departments in the mid-1980s; freight trains are easier to access, and are often parked in open areas, unlike subway cars, which have tighter security. Fujita's KIIS crew is known for innovating hybrid lettering that combined LA-rooted Chicano and Cholo writing with East Coast Wild Style into a distinctive Los Angeles aesthetic, as well as for their very early use of shading and dimensionality.[16]

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[12] Dunbar, "Windswept," 8.

[13] Ellis Tinios, *Japanese Prints: Ukiyo-e in Edo, 1700–1900* (London: The British Museum Press, 2010), 29–33.

[14] For the purposes of this paper, I use the terms graffiti and hip-hop to signify the same culture. Graffiti, turntablism, rap, and breakdancing are generally accepted as the various creative pursuits within hip-hop culture, however occasionally the term hip-hop will refer to the music of hip-hop culture.

[15] "Culturally Situated Design Tools, Graffiti Grapher, Culture," Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, accessed 22 February 2017, http://csdt.rpi.edu/subcult/graffiti/culture/index.html.

With the spread of the Internet and digital photography, graffiti writers the world over can document and share their creations on websites such as Artcrimes and Bombing Science, spreading the evidence of their actions to a wider audience than ever before.[17] These websites, and many others, provide advice on how to start tagging, links to websites where paint, spray paint can tips, markers, gloves, and other supplies can be purchased, as well as downloads of various font alphabets that aspiring taggers can use to learn the styles of writing. This method of repetitive copying of standardized forms is an additional parallel to traditional methods of art instruction in Japan, wherein apprentices would copy the work of the master until they learned the standardized visual vocabulary of their trade. Today, the process of learning to tag is dramatically different than in the 1980s when Fujita came onto the scene. In addition to the aforementioned websites, the acceptance of graffiti styles into the gallery system has led to street art becoming commodified and marketable.[18] For example, a range of supplies, such as paint can tips made specifically for the production of street art, are now readily available, and mainstream exhibitions and museums feature graffiti and street art. The seemingly contradictory values of illegal, seditious graffiti and a gallery system which primarily serves the interests of capitalism and wealth are brought together in Fujita's paintings. I will return to the complex relationship of hip-hop as commodity and counter-culture later in this article.

The conceptualization of graffiti artists as performers whose actions assert urban agency allows for comparison to the theatre, which leads us to Fujita's images of warriors. In examining Fujita's conceptualization of power as constructed by means of performance, his images of warriors exemplify how he defines masculinity and hybridizes the performative aspects of historic Japanese actor and warrior prints with contemporary US professional sports heroes. Each of these figures depends on the convincing portrayal of a hyper-masculine persona, and each is enacting a larger-than-life role on their respective stages.

In paintings such as *Gold State Warriors* (2002) (fig. 3), it is easy to forget that Fujita's characters are not true warriors; rather they are appropriations of Edo period characters. In the prints referenced by Fujita, such as those of Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861), there are two types of warrior figures: actors who performed the persona of the samurai, and references to historic tales of warriors.[19] In *Gold State Warriors*, Fujita presents viewers with a larger-than-life image featuring four warrior figures. Three of the fighters brandish swords while one holds a shotgun, and three are dressed in blue while the fourth wears light purple. The two figures at the centre show hints of the colourful tattoos that hide beneath their clothing, and the two figures at the outer edges are depicted with light blue patches atop their heads, a convention of kabuki actors

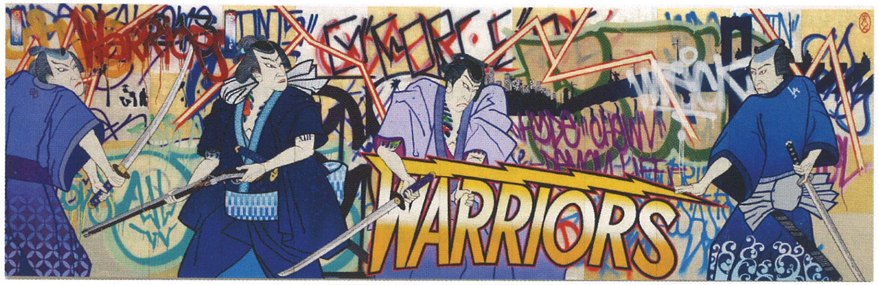

FIGURE 3 Gajin Fujita, *Gold State Warriors*, 2002, spray paint, acrylic, gold and white gold leaf on wood panel, 60 × 192 in (1.5 × 4.9 m) (12 panels).
PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY L.A. LOUVER.

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[16] "Interview with LA Taco," LA Taco, 26 October 2016, https://www.lataco.com/interview-gajin-fujita/.

[17] Artcrimes can be accessed at: www.graffiti.org and Bombing Science at: www.bombingscience.com. Regional and specialized websites also exist for artists to collaborate and share information.

[18] Generally, graffiti refers to illegal tagging and street art can refer to graffiti style writing in either illegal or legal venues. Because Fujita is associated with both graffiti and gallery-based street art, I use the terms interchangeably in this article.

[19] For more on Kuniyoshi see: Timothy Clark, *Kuniyoshi: From the Arthur R. Miller Collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2009). For warrior prints see: James King and Yuriko Iwakiri, *Japanese Warrior Prints, 1646–1905* (Leiden: Hotei, 2007).

in *ukiyo-e* prints.[20] The background includes the skyline of Los Angeles with warrior figures standing atop a bridge, swords drawn. The various graffiti tags of the background are in the single-line style with legible text at the centre right stating "HYDE," Gajin Fujita's graffiti tag name, and "Warriors" at the upper left, mirroring the more polished and painted text that dominates the bottom right of the composition.

The title *Gold State Warriors* is a reference to the Oakland, California-based National Basketball Association (NBA) team The Golden State Warriors and may also be a reference to a specific street gang. The small "LA" logo visible on the back of the figure at the far right, combined with the bright blue clothing on three of the figures, is a reference to the Los Angeles Dodgers Major League Baseball (MLB) team. The colour blue has long been associated with the gangs of Southern California, and the Los Angeles Dodgers logo and gear is one of the most gang-affiliated professional sports logos, adopted by the Crips of Los Angeles, the Gangster Disciples of Chicago, and the Latin Aspects, found in a variety of cities.[21] This association of street culture with sports teams is also visible in Fujita's painting *KIIS Crew* (2002). Its central figure wears the Oakland Raiders National Football League (NFL) logo on his proper left arm, combined with the word "ronins." The Raiders logo, like that of the Dodgers, has long been associated with various gangs, and with hip-hop culture. The Raiders logo was aligned in the late 1980s with the gangsta-rap group NWA when they coopted the logo by wearing Raiders gear on album covers and in music videos, boosting sales of Raiders gear and making the Raiders team logo a national symbol of hip-hop culture.[22] Furthermore, in the Japanese context, Fujita's incorporation of tattoos is a reference to the *yakuza*, or Japanese gangsters, and to Japan's complex history of tattooing. Today, tattoos remain highly taboo in Japan. Historically related to groups of firefighters and labourers, tattoos were banned due to their ties to criminal activity. Anti-tattoo laws were cemented in the Meiji period when Japanese officials grew concerned with how Europeans and Americans perceived their nation, at a time when tattooing was outside of Euro-American cultural norms.[23] Fujita has discussed his interest in *yakuza* tattoos in interviews, and within the context of the artifice they represent.[24] By incorporating tattoo imagery into his paintings, Fujita is aligning himself with the underbelly of the *yakuza,* while simultaneously questioning Euro-American hegemony over Japanese culture.

This painting, as well as others from Fujita's oeuvre, such as *KIIS Crew* (2002), blend elements of fantasy from kabuki theatre, costuming, and performance, as well as visual cues drawn from nineteenth-century prints of historic warriors. One of the most popular plays from the Edo period was—and continues to be—the *Chūshingura*. Written in 1748 during a period of extended peace, the *Chūshingura* is a play in eleven acts that demonstrates the samurai values of loyalty and honour. As was common in kabuki theatre, the play was loosely based on historic events, in this case, events that occurred in 1703, when forty-seven *ronin*, or masterless samurai, risked their own lives to avenge the death of their master. In its original incarnation, the play was written for the puppet theatre, but was quickly adapted to the kabuki stage and has been modified for film as well. The samurai values espoused by the play created a sense of nostalgia and a desire for heroic figures that many felt were lacking in contemporary society.[25] The prints of the kabuki theatre were collected as souvenirs by theatre-goers, but were also used as a means to keep up with the theatre for those who could not attend. As David Bell states of the *Chūshingura* prints, "the greatest actors enjoyed the adulation of the public from almost every social level; the position of the most popular was similar to the 'star' status allocated in their film and television equivalents today. Ukiyo-e images played a key role in generating and maintaining that stardom."[26] As such, these imagined fighters were promoted to Edo society in the same fashion as the warriors of contemporary professional sports are promoted to the American public, and on a small scale, the way that graffiti groups promote themselves to their surrounding community. Each of the actors (kabuki, sports, and graffiti) desire their market share of power, and each uses a performed persona to do so. Further connections can be made in the conceptualizations of loyalty and sacrifice; the warriors of the *Chūshingura* plotted and fought to avenge their master's honour, eventually committing *seppuku*, or ritual suicide, after their task was completed. Professional athletes sacrifice their bodies to their sport, risking injury and even death to win the game, series, or championship for their represented city, and members of a graffiti crew act on ideals of loyalty to their group, risking imprisonment and injury to carry out the mission of their crew. Yet in the end, all three of these groups are connected by artifice.

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[20] For further discussion on the development of kabuki conventions of gender see: Maki Isaka Morinaga, "The Gender of Onnagata as the Imitating Imitated: It's Historicity, Performativity, and Involvement in the Circulation of Femininity," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 245–284.

[21] David Chang, "Rep Yo Set: The 10 Most Gang-Affiliated Hats in Sports," complex.com, 20 July 2010, http://www.complex.com/sports/2010/07/rep-yo-set-the-10-most-gang-affiliated-hats-in-sports-1/.

[22] Michael D. Ayers, "Ice Cube on His Documentary about How NWA Gave the Oakland Raiders a New Image, Whether They Wanted It or Not," vulture.com, 27 April 2010, http://www.vulture.com/2010/04/ice_cube_on_his_documentary_st.html.

[23] Christine Guth, *Longfellow's Tattoos: Tourism, Collecting, and Japan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

[24] Michael Slenske, "Painter Gajin Fujita Keeps His Norm-Violating Spirit while Starring in Graffiti Shows," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 2018.

[25] In referring to warrior values, here I am referring to the term *bushidō*. This term literally translates to "the way of the warrior," and generally refers to the value system of the warrior class. The literature surrounding bushidō in Japanese culture includes discussion on the problematic nature of the term, and issues of historical revisionism under the Imperial Japanese state in the modern period. Bushidō, inaccurate as it may be, refers to values of loyalty, honour, and sacrifice.

[26] David Bell, *Chushingura and the Floating World: The Representation of Kanadehon Chushingura in Ukiyo-e Prints* (Richmond, Surrey, UK: Japan Library, 2001), 31.

An additional comparison that can be made between the theatrical *Chūsingura* and the contemporary culture of professional athletics is the concern of violence and militarism. During the US occupation of Japan after WWII, the play was banned from performance for fear that it might incite militant behaviour, and a belief that the script glorified what was then considered to be the aggressive character of the Japanese people.[27] The inciting of violence and militant behaviour has long been a critique of contemporary American sports.[28] From Ron Artest jumping into the stands to brawl with unruly fans at a Detroit basketball game in 2004 to overly competitive Little League parents swearing at teams of six-year-olds, from Baltimore Ravens player Ray Rice hitting his wife on video in 2014 to rioting events that occur with regularity after teams win or lose, the US news media is filled with examples of sports-related violence.[29] Also, as recent media reports on traumatic head injuries and the 2011 strike by NFL football players exemplify, sports in the US are indeed dangerous for the physical well-being of the players. Yet, these sports heroes and fans can be read as performing the role of the warrior in a similar fashion as the kabuki actors of the *Chūshingura*. When two teams meet for an NFL football match, there is no actual battle to be fought, no political strife between the two cities. Rather, these games are a way for fans to experience cathartic release; supporters feel triumphant when the team that they associate with is victorious, and they bond with fellow fans in defeat. Much like with theatre, sports fans escape for a while and pin their hopes to their chosen team for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon. Furthermore, the concept of sports celebrities as figures to be glorified, emulated, and idolized as consumable commodities is similar to the kabuki actors represented in Edo-period *ukiyo-e*.[30] Contemporary sports celebrities are "a consequential force within late capitalist Western liberal economies, celebrities are significant public entities responsible for structuring meaning, crystallizing ideologies, and offering contextually grounded maps for private individuals as they navigate contemporary conditions of existence."[31] Yet notably, very few pro-sports stars are Asian American. By blending the *Chūsingura* kabuki warriors with American professional sports, Fujita points out his racial invisibility and forces his viewers to question stereotypes of physical prowess and strength. Additionally, for many economically disadvantaged children who have few educational and career opportunities, sports offers a means of escape and a path to success, something that is paralleled in hip-hop culture's glorification of music as a means to gain monetary success, yet both paths are additional places of Asian invisibility. Through these varied juxtapositions, Fujita is creating a space of diasporic insertion into the US mass culture, taking a share of cultural power by utilizing the symbols of sports and hip-hop.

In combining the imagined warriors of Edo and various signs of contemporary American professional sports, Fujita creates a poignant commentary on cultural aggression wherein viewers are presented with an image of artifice and performance. The hyper-masculine figures of his paintings are referencing kabuki actors, gangbangers, sports celebrities, fans of both sport and the theatre, the ruse of the warrior, and the KIIS graffiti crew, all in one visual moment. An additional example of this layering of violence and fabrication, performance and fandom is in the painting *The Saints* (2009) (fig. 4). In this painting the

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[27] Donald Keene, translator, *Chūshingura* (*The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971).

[28] Recent news reports have furthered the connection between the military and the NFL with allegations of millions of dollars being paid to select teams by the Department of Defense to stage patriotic military displays at games. See: Austin Knoblauch "NFL Teams Reportedly Received Tax Dollars to Hold Military Tributes," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 May 2015, http://www.latimes.com/sports/sportsnow/la-sp-sn-nfl-teams-money-military-tributes-20150511-story.html.

[29] Of further interest in connecting the varied elements of Fujita's work are issues with violence at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, including a violent beating of a San Francisco Giant's fan at the Dodger's home opener in 2011. Security regarding gang violence was a major issue surrounding Dodger Stadium in 2011, but has since improved, with some issues recurring in 2015. See: Joel Rubin and Bill Shaiken, "LAPD Bringing Anti-Gang Skills to Dodger Stadium," *Los Angeles Times*, 9 April 2011, http://articles.latimes.com/2011/apr/09/local/la-me-0409-dodger-security-20110409.

[30] The sports hero as consumable commodity is seen in Michael Jordan, who had lines of clothing, footwear, and sports gear, as well as endorsement contracts for various food products during the height of his popularity.

[31] David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson, "Introduction," in *Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity* David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson, eds. (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

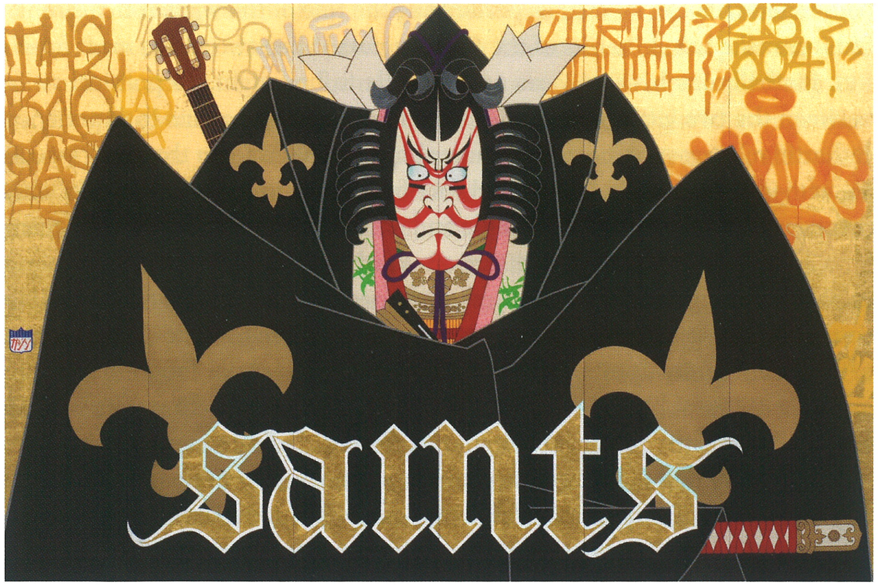

FIGURE 4 Gajin Fujita, *The Saints*, 2009, gold leaf, acrylic, spray paint, paint marker on wood panel, 72 × 108 in (1.8 × 2.7 m) (six panels).
PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY L.A. LOUVER.

central figure is represented in the highly stylized makeup of the kabuki theatre, and wears kabuki costume, but with the logo of the New Orleans Saints NFL team adorning the black fabric of the actor's robe. In the background we see the numbers 213 and 504, the respective area codes for East Los Angeles and New Orleans, and at the centre left Fujita abandons his signature spray paint *hanko* for a seal that mimics the National Football League logo.[32] In this work he synthesizes many of the aforementioned aspects of hyper-masculine sports fans, seen in the outlandish, warrior-like costuming of Saint's fans, the violence that occurred at the New Orleans Superdome after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, as well as the Saints as a symbol that the residents of New Orleans rallied around in the wake of the destruction from Katrina. Once again, this work evidences the performative nature of sports fans and sports heroes, as New Orleans won their first Super Bowl during the 2009–2010 season, signifying the comeback of the city after Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, the Super Bowl victory represented the city taking back a share of power after what many viewed as the virtual abandonment of the city by the US federal government during the natural disaster.

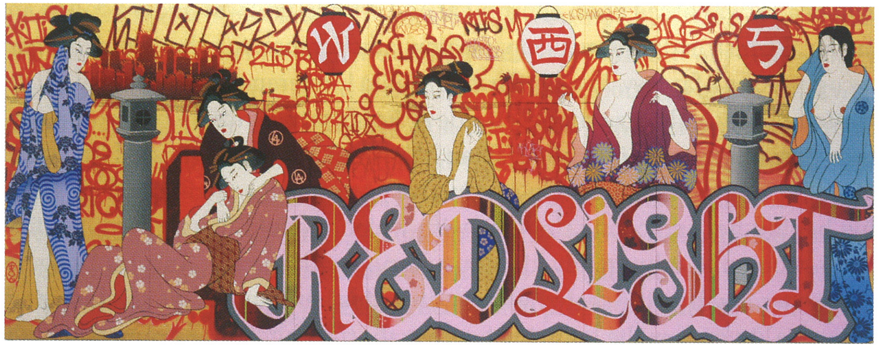

FIGURE 5 Gajin Fujita, *Red Light District*, 2005, spray paint, acrylic, paint marker, Mean Streak paint stick, gold and white gold leaf on wood panel, 72 × 192 in (1.8 × 4.9 m) (12 panels).
PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY L.A. LOUVER.

In stark contrast to these masculine images, and at the opposite end of the gender spectrum, are Fujita's images of women. Nearly all of the women in the paintings of Gajin Fujita are represented as either sexually available courtesans, or in the midst of performing sexual acts. *Red Light District* (2005) (fig. 5) is a representative image of women in Fujita's oeuvre. In this large-scale painting, six sexually available women stand or sit, three of them exposing their naked breasts to the viewer. The image is saturated with red paint, from the burning skyline of the city of Los Angeles at the upper left corner to the lanterns that dot the top of the gold-covered panels, to the use of red spray paint to create the single-line graffiti text that saturates the background of the image. The use of the burning skyline is reminiscent of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, wherein the media reported extensively on conflicts between African Americans and Korean Americans. The women of *Red Light District*, with their subverted gazes, are alluding to the courtesans of Edo period *ukiyo-e*, imagined as *bijin*, or beautiful women. The female beauty of *ukiyo-e* was fabricated in nature. Prior to the modern era, "the ideal of the beautiful figure in Japanese painting was expressed in the description of the costume, maquillage and performance."[33]

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[32] A *hanko* is a small seal, usually carved of stone, which bears the holder's family name. Such seals are used for a variety of official tasks in daily Japanese life, generally in lieu of a signature. Historically artists, censors, and collectors in East Asia used a *hanko* to make their mark on works of art. Fujita typically uses his first name, written in hiragana and surrounded with an oval, all in red spray paint. In this instance he uses katakana, which in contemporary Japanese is an alternate writing of the standard syllabary, typically reserved for foreign terms or foreign names. As such, I believe that he is commenting on his role as a "foreigner" to New Orleans, where he created this painting as a visiting artist.

[33] Kobayashi Tadashi, "The Kanbun *Bijin*: Setting the Stage for Ukiyo-e *Bijinga*," translated by Julie Nelson Davis, in the *Hotei Encyclopedia of Japanese Woodblock Prints*, ed. Amy Reigle Newland (Amsterdam: Hotei Publishing, 2005), 83.

Edo beauty was based upon adornment and artifice, and was understood as an artificial construction of makeup, fashion, and posture; in other words, it was recognized as a fantasy. In a similar vein, Fujita is referencing the fantasy of the contemporary male gaze; at the left side of *Red Light District* are two women on the verge of engaging in erotic lesbian behaviour. A woman dressed in a pink loose-fitting kimono lounges in a seductive pose, her *obi*, or kimono belt, trailing behind her, indicating the ease with which it could be removed. Behind her, a woman in a burgundy kimono adorned with the Los Angeles Dodgers logo gazes down at the seated woman and slips her hand inside the lounging woman's kimono, as the lounging figure grabs the hand of the woman behind her. The other women in the painting look toward the sexual scene, playing out a heteromasculine fantasy of lesbian sexuality and voyeurism, one that is common in contemporary popular culture and pornography, as it was in Edo Japan.[34]

Under the government of the Edo period and the prevailing Neo-Confucian value system of the era, women were not afforded the opportunity to participate in life outside the home, and women's education was generally limited to Confucian literature and information about childbirth, both of which confirmed her low social status as a "borrowed womb."[35] The women of the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters may not have been expected to bear children, but the majority of the women working in the Edo sex trade also had dismally low social status. Frequently, women in hip-hop culture are similarly afforded a submissive role, and are relegated to being represented as hyper-sexualized creatures performing in the background for the male rapper who takes centre stage.[36] Very few powerful women have gained success in hip-hop music; those who have obtained a degree of commercial success, such as Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliott, and Queen Latifah, are few and far between, and their success has not been as widespread as that of their male counterparts, although this may be changing with the recent emergence of female superstars such as Beyoncé, Rhianna, and Jennifer Lopez. Many popular female hip-hop stars also submit themselves to representation as sexualized creatures. Performers such as Nicki Minaj, Iggy Azalea, and Cardi B swing between images of power and submission, conveying a message of uncertainty in their public image. Even the wildly

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[34] Joshua Mostow and Asato Ikeda, *A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Edo-Period Prints and Paintings* (Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 2016).

[35] Sharon Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 4.

[36] T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Pimps Up, Ho's Down: Hip Hop's Hold on Young Black Women* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

successful and self-proclaimed feminist artist Beyoncé performs in costumes which accentuate her sexuality. Certainly differences in the way that women performers garner power exist, for example, Janelle Monáe, a queer artist who manipulates gender and sexuality as a means of power, shows that female sexuality does not have to be equated with submission. Additionally, none of these figures are Asian American; the stereotype of Asian Americans as a model minority runs contrary to concepts of hip-hop as a subversive counter culture. Thus again, Fujita's racial invisibility is brought into view.

The twenty-first century has seen occasional protests of videos such as Nelly's *Tip Drill*, wherein a credit card is swiped through a woman's buttocks, yet people continue to purchase misogynistic hip-hop albums, and these types of videos continue to get airplay.[37] Why did women of the Edo period comply with degrading stereotypes and imagery, and why do the women of hip-hop continue to submit to such oppressive male fantasies today?[38] Certainly the foundation myths and other legitimizers of these two disparate cultures work/ed to keep certain groups in a position of dominance and others in a position of servitude; some individuals, due to their psychological and cultural backgrounds, have a greater propensity toward dominance or passivity, and in group situations these positions are legitimized through a variety of social cues.[39] Furthermore, there is a parallel between these two groups of women; both are told that their only option for success is through sexuality and as objects of sexual desire. In the Edo period women played the role of either a "borrowed womb" or *bijin,* and in contemporary society hip-hop women are given few role models beyond dancers in misogynist videos.[40] Yet viewers are left wondering if Fujita is taking a position of social critique or one of reinforcement. Is he asking us to see contemporary society through a critical historic lens, or is he validating the present position by drawing historical comparisons? In either case, Fujita exposes the power structure and performative nature of the two cultures from which he borrows.

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[37] *Tip Drill* was too controversial and graphic for prime-time television, but it was shown on the late-night BET cable network show *Uncut*. For further information on the *Tip Drill* controversy see: Jill Nelson, "Raw Rap Videos Fuel Disrespect of Women," *USA Today*, 6 May 2004, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/editorials/2004-05-06-forum-nelson_x.htm.

[38] Of course, not all hip-hop is oppressive or misogynist, and there are many contradictory elements and figures in hip-hop, however a large amount of hip-hop contains depictions of violence, stereotyping, and sexualization of women. See: Layli Philips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Patricia Stevens, "Oppositional Consciousness within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976–2004," *The Journal of African American History* 90, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 253–277.

[39] For a complete discussion of social dominance theory in its myriad forms see: Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Hierarchy and Oppression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[40] There are a variety of hip-hop feminist movements that are attempting to broaden the roles for women in hip-hop culture, but they are still relatively small in number. For

Exceptions to Fujita's hyper-sexual woman exist in two works: *Chinita* (2005) (fig. 6); and *Loca* (2008) (fig. 7). Both of these images depict dangerous female figures; women brandishing weapons and without overtly sexual bodies. *Chinita,* which is a Spanish slang term referring to Asian women, presents the viewer with a large and somewhat gender-neutral body covered in billowing robes.[41] The awkward skeletal structure and low-riding *obi* present the viewer with an ambiguous figure; only the hairstyle, floral patterned kimono, and the title indicate that this is a woman. When positioned next to the single-panel painting *WS Outlaw* (2005), which depicts a male subject, we see a very similar portrayal of the human figure; both stand with their feet askance, sword drawn, gaze fixed and focused with a serious facial expression. Additionally, both *Chinita* and *Outlaw* stand atop their title, dominating the word that describes them.

Loca also gives us an indication of Fujita's idea of the femme fatale, and also contains an interesting play on Spanish vocabulary. In *Loca,* a single-panel bust portrait presents us with a menacing figure who gazes seriously to the left, knife drawn and ready for action. *Loca* wears a pink floral and spiderweb-patterned kimono with white and red robes beneath, possibly symbolizing her role as a courtesan, or her dangerous nature.[42] In Japanese culture, the pink cherry blossom pattern refers to the ephemeral nature of beauty, as the cherry blossoms bloom only for a week in spring before falling from the trees. Cherry blossoms are a common motif in courtesan imagery of the Yoshiwara, as they are a metaphor for the fleeting nature of female beauty and sexual attractiveness. The background is more simplified than many of Fujita's other works, with only the A of the LA logo painted in green and the title banner "Loca" at the upper right. In addition to her formal hairstyle and hair combs, *Loca* also wears a small burgundy hairpiece just above her forehead, indicating that she is an *onnagata. Onnagata,* or males who played female roles on the kabuki stage, were common in Edo-period *ukiyo-e,* and were viewed as respected actors. Regarded as the highest model of female deportment, *onnagata* were

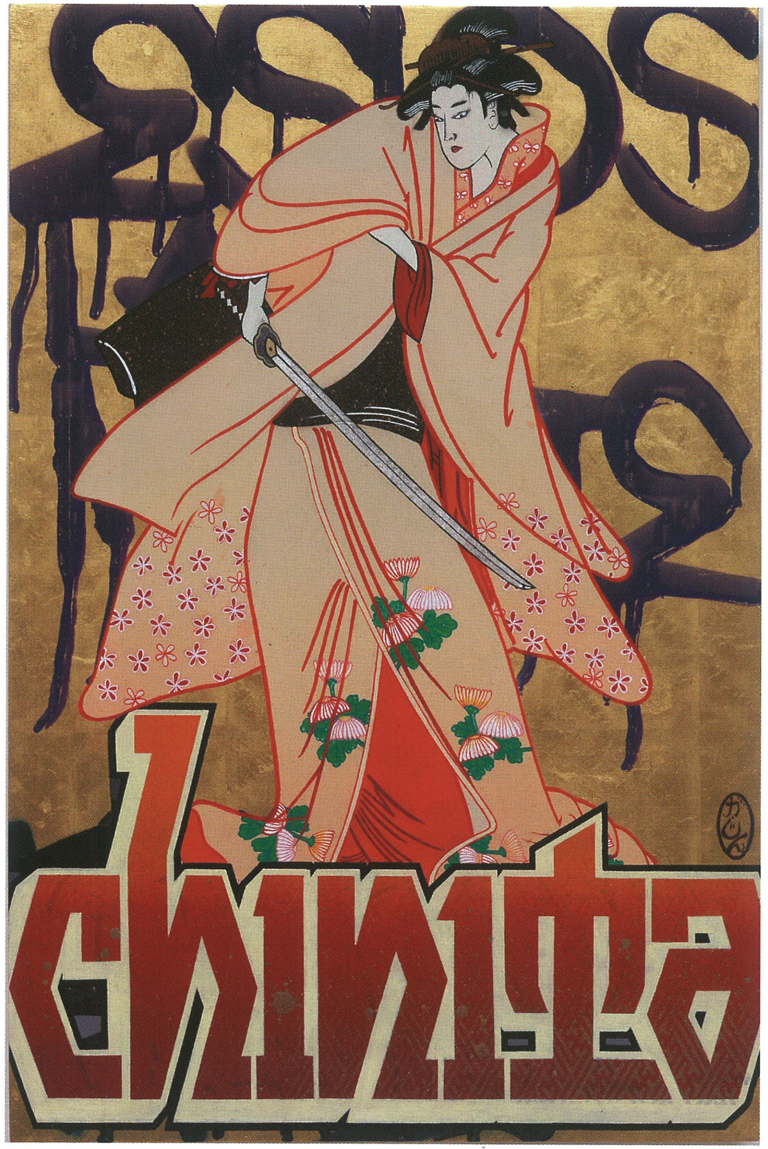

FIGURE 6 Gajin Fujita, *Chinita,* 2005, spray paint, acrylic, paint marker, Mean Streak paint stick, gold leaf on wood panel, 24 × 16 in (61 × 41 cm).
PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY L.A. LOUVER.

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further discussion see: Gwendolyn D. Pough, Elaine Richardson, Aisha Durham, and Rachel Ramist, eds. *Home Girls Make Some Noise: Hip Hop Feminism Anthology* (Mira Loma, California: Parker Publishing, 2007).

[41] The slang term *chinita* derives from *Chino,* or Chinese (referring to a person of Chinese descent, or the Chinese language), with the addition of the suffix "–ita," generally used for things small in size, or as a term of affection. In common speech, *chinita* is used not just for women of Chinese descent, but for all Asian women. This blurring of ethnic boundaries, lack of individuation, and denial of the diversity of the Asian American experience is something that I will return to.

[42] Red undergarments were an indicator of a courtesan in Edo-period *ukiyo-e.*

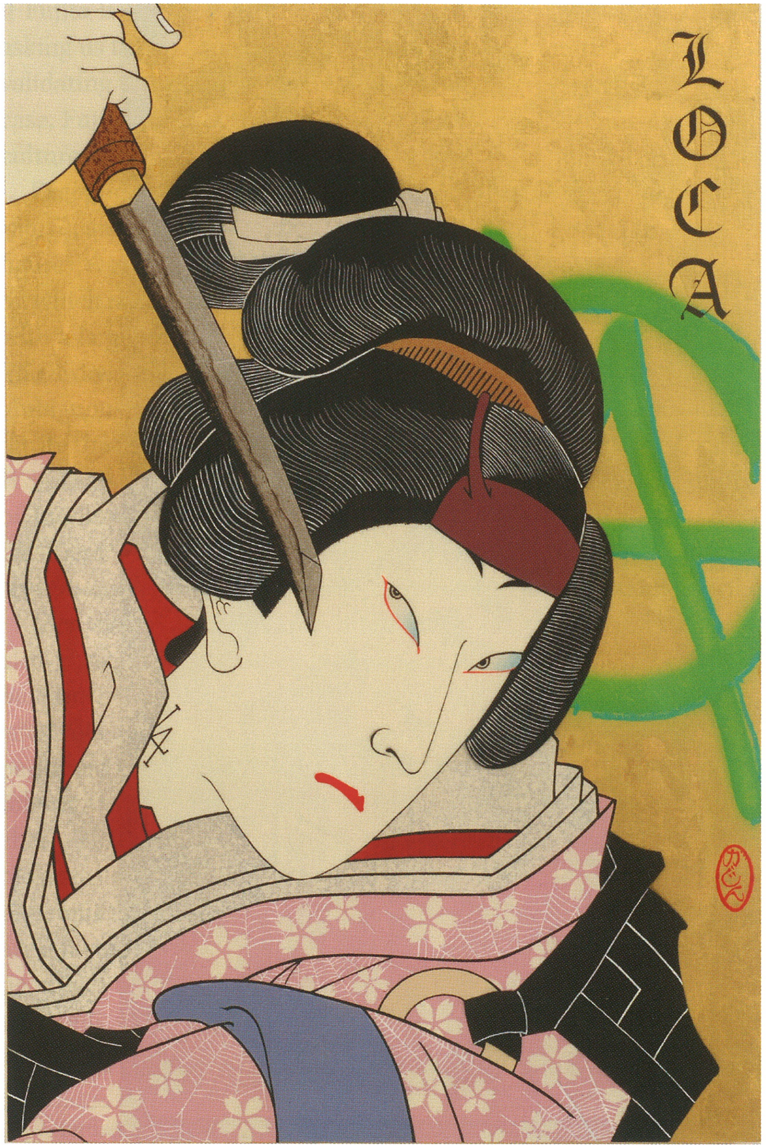

FIGURE 7 Gajin Fujita, *Loca*, 2008, gold leaf, acrylic, paint marker, spray paint, Mean Streak paint stick on panel, 24 × 16 in (61 × 41 cm).
PHOTOGRAPH PROVIDED BY L.A. LOUVER.

heterosexual, expected to maintain families (although in private), and accepted throughout society.[43] In this painting, the angular lines and neck tattoo

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[43] The role of the *onnagata* developed after the 1629 ban on women from the kabuki stage, and their position continues in the theatre to the present day. Morinaga, 2002, 250.

indicate masculinity, the feminine coming only from the floral print and hair style. The term "loca" can be read as the feminine version of "loco," or crazy, but in Spanish slang it can also mean homosexual or queer, usually indicating a homosexual male with an extravagant and effeminate nature. The term can also indicate a prostitute. When read with this definition, viewers are forced to question the gender and sexual identity of *Loca*: Is she female? Male? What subtle connotations are we to understand from the use of the derogatory term *Loca*? And, how does a homosexual identity fit into the power structure of Los Angeles street culture?

Feminist critics have read the *onnagata* as the masculine takeover of the feminine; a power play that gives males the right to define, through performance, what the perfect female should be. In using the *onnagata* in the painting *Loca*, viewers are confronted with hip-hop stereotypes. Homosexuality and gender ambiguity are not widely accepted in hip-hop culture, and in this single instance where Fujita refers to a homosexual figure, it is with a derogatory term and juxtaposed with the historic figure of the *onnagata*, again leaving the viewer to question if he is providing an alternative model to the hyper-sexualized women of his other works, or if through the titles he is perhaps commenting on the lack of acceptance of homosexuality or gender ambiguity in hip-hop culture.

Similar to the problematic duality of male and female gender roles, in examining hip-hop and identity an issue with the scholarship on hip-hop culture is that there is a problematic black-white racial binary.[44] The black-white paradigm is discussed by Linda Martin Alcoff, who argues that dividing the nation into black and white when discussing race is harmful to Latinx and Asian American communities in forming strategies to combat racism.[45] Alcoff draws a comparison between Latinx and Asian American history, in that both communities were brought to the US to provide manual labour, and both have been classified on either side of the black-white racial divide at different points in history.[46] Latinx and Asian minorities are not just ignored in the legal realm, but are also given low visibility in hip-hop culture. The literature on hip-hop tends to focus on the African American experience in hip-hop, especially in regards to feminist approaches to the culture. These studies address issues that are pertinent to the African American community and to African American women, such as absent fathers and high imprisonment rates. These issues of racial difference, however, are not the same as those in the Latinx and Asian American communities, which struggle with problems of nativism, and particularly in the case of Asian American communities, a lack of resources for dealing with racism and racial difference.[47] This absence is not only in scholarship, but is found in hip-hop music and videos as well; African American hip-hop stars are more numerous, are better known, and have wider media exposure than those of Latinx descent, and Asian Americans are virtually absent from the hip-hop music scene. Simultaneously, hip-hop borrows frequently from Asian culture, often times blending diverse Asian cultures both visually and sonically into a marginally recognizable amalgamation.[48] For Fujita's biographical experiences, his upbringing in Boyle Heights as an Asian American amongst a Latinx community made him a dually invisible minority, which may be an important reason for his affiliation with graffiti culture.[49] The Chinese American Museum's 2018 exhibition *Don't Believe the Hype: LA Asian Americans in Hip Hop* addressed the commonality of experience between Latinx, African American, and Asian American communities as expressed in hip-hop. As astutely noted by a review in *LA Weekly*, the works in the exhibition, which include Fujita's, "communicate how unique factors come together to tell a similar story of resistance, refuge and reinvention in the face of popular misidentification."[50] The experience of relating to hip-hop while simultaneously being invisible to or outside of it is indicative of the Asian American experience, and is a contradiction that Fujita astutely includes in his works.

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[44] The black-white binary has also been theorized by Manthia Diawara as unproblematic because "blackness" becomes a commodity that has mobility across colour, class, and cultural barriers. See: Sylvia Kolbowski, "Homeboy Cosmopolitan: Manthia Diawara Interviewed by Sylvia Kolbowski," *October* 83 (Winter 1998): 51–70. As such, it might be interesting to compare the works of Gajin Fujita to those of Nikki S. Lee's *Hip Hop Project* in a future study.

[45] Linda Martin Alcoff, "Latino/as, Asian Americans, and the Black-White Binary," *The Journal of Ethics* 7, no. 1 (2003): 5–27.

[46] Alcoff, 13–14.

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[47] One example from popular culture of Asian American youth behaving poorly is the 2002 film *Better Luck Tomorrow*, wherein the characters, members of a wide variety of Asian ethnic groups, and stereotypically high-achieving high school students delve into illegal activities in their free time. See, *Better Luck Tomorrow*, IMDB, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0280477/.

[48] Thien-bao Phi, "Yellow Lines: Asian Americans and Hip Hop," in *Afro-Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections Between African Americans and Asian Americans*, ed. Fred Ho and Bill V. Mullen (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 301.

[49] Fujita struggled to fit in to the Latinx community, and he and his brother were frequently teased for their Asian ethnicity throughout childhood. See: Pernilla Holmes, "True Blue Dragon," in *Gajin Fujita: Pacific Tsunami* (London: Haunch of Venison, 2008), 5–8.

[50] Trina Calderón, "Exhibit Explores How Hip-Hop Ideals Parallel the Asian-American Experience," *LA Weekly*, 22 June 2018.

The lack of visibility and agency in their communities was an important motivation for the graffiti artists of the early 1980s, and continues to motivate many graffiti artists today, both domestically and internationally. Identity and the claiming of territory have long been understood as a motivation for graffiti artists. Creating their own space within the dominant urban cultures that often marginalize those who participate in graffiti, breakdancing, and hip-hop was one driving motivation for the original New York graffiti artists. In many ways, the practice was a simple delineation of boundaries, a taking back of their own personal space in the face of the deteriorating urban core and the blurring of the boundaries of older ethnic neighbourhoods. By going "all city" with their tag name, graffiti artists created notoriety for themselves and grabbed a share of power; if a tagger's name was on every train line, every bus, on a billboard in every neighbourhood, they gained the respect of their fellow taggers and the attention of the authorities whose power they were attempting to subvert.[51] Fujita's work does just this, creating space, combining stereotypes, and juxtaposing cultures to expose their artifice.

Fujita's work came into art world acclaim at a point when various subcultures were being featured in major museum exhibitions. Shows featuring hip-hop, motorcycles, or guitars were popular in the early 2000s, and the blending of subculture with mainstream museums was praised by some and critiqued by others.[52] Additionally, websites such as the Wooster Collective have attempted to document and elevate what they term "ephemeral art placed on streets in cities," and to bring this street art into the mainstream.[53] Fujita's career has paralleled these exhibitions and developments, bringing a sometimes subversive underground subculture from the streets into the gallery, and in Fujita's case, combining it with a historic form of artistic expression. Throughout this article, we have seen how Fujita utilizes performance and power in his subject matter, but it is important to recall that the very act of creating graffiti on canvas and exhibiting it in a mainstream gallery or museum is an evocative statement on who controls the definition of art.[54] Furthermore, while Fujita appropriates the occasional sports logo, his integration of subculture into the gallery is not part of a corporate sponsorship or corporate appropriation of street culture styles, as is often the case. As Tom Looser states in his work, there is a struggle between privatization and the corporatization of public spaces, and the integration of street art into the contemporary global art system, "rather than an opposition of local and global, the real stakes seem to be in an opposition between capital flows versus alternative flows of value—in a way, a struggle for the global image."[55] Fujita's works challenge the privatization and corporatization of the "global image" of the twenty-first century by independently bringing street culture into the system of capital without a corporate partner, and with the elements of critique discussed here. Furthermore, as Fujita's paintings are taking increasingly higher prices in the art market, his commodification of street culture is a means of taking his share of cultural and art-world power.[56]

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[51] The 1984 documentary film *Style Wars* records the words and actions of many of the early New York graffiti artists. See: Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant, *Style Wars*, DVD (Los Angeles: Public Art Films, 2003).

[52] For an example in the form of a review of the exhibition *Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes & Rage*, shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in the fall of 2000, see: Murray Forman, "No Sleep 'Til Brooklyn," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2002): 101–127. For a more recent example, see the catalogue for the 2011 exhibition *Art in the Streets* at LAMoCA: Jeffery Deitch, *Art in the Streets* (Los Angeles: MoCA, 2011).

[53] "About Wooster Collective," Wooster Collective, accessed 13 March 2019, http://www.woostercollective.com/more-about-wooster.

As evidenced by Fujita's participation in the art market and museum exhibitions, and in a similar vein to the musical aspect of hip-hop culture, graffiti is not in opposition to mainstream culture; rather, many artists desire to make their way into the mainstream. As Tricia Rose writes of hip-hop music, "hip hop's moment(s) of incorporation are a shift in the already existing relationship hip hop has always had to the commodity system (…) the contexts for creation in hip hop were never fully outside or in opposition to commodities; they involved struggles over public space and access to commoditized materials, equipment, and products of economic viability."[57] In this respect, that Fujita chose to remain in his Boyle Heights neighbourhood for many years, and continues to use signs of East Los Angeles in his work, is evidence that he is not looking for escape, but rather desires incorporation of his experience as an Asian American graffiti artist into the mainstream. His economic success has allowed him access to the commodity culture, and his hybridity is not one of assimilation or change, but acts as a means to create visibility for the urban

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[54] For a discussion of graffiti in the gallery as art, also defined as aerosol art, see: Melissa Riviere, "The Dynamics of a Canvas: Graffiti and Aerosol Art," *Public Art Review* 17 (2005): 24–27.

[55] Tom Looser, "The Global Image: Art, Urbanism, and Gathering Politics in Korea, Japan, and the World," in *Spaces of Possibility: In, Between, and Beyond Korea and Japan*, ed. Clark W. Sorensen and Andrea Gevurtz Arai (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), 92.

[56] An example of Fujita's auction prices is from the May 2010 Phillips de Pury auction, wherein *Gold State Warriors* sold for $104,500. Artnet, 2016.

[57] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 40.

Asian diasporic experience. Fujita's works are among the many examples from hip-hop culture that subvert the dominant urban powers to take a share of the commodity system, and to gain mainstream visibility for the minority communities where many hip-hop artists, musicians, and dancers reside.[58]

As we have seen, the works of Gajin Fujita borrow from myriad cultural sources. In assembling his colourful, bold, and graphic paintings, Fujita notes the parallels between the historic culture of the urban environment of Edo and the contemporary street culture of Los Angeles. Fujita weaves these two disparate cultures into a harmonious whole, commenting on the construction and performance of hyper-masculine warriors in sports, gangs, hip-hop culture, and kabuki theatre, as well as the sexualized figures of Edo-period courtesans and hip-hop women. Fujita appropriates the opposing styles of *ukiyo-e* and the Kanō school of painting, wherein we find parallels to his contemporary art practice. Further, Fujita conceptualizes identity in relation to minority groups and their power struggles, a lens through which we can gain a fuller understanding of the culture of East Los Angeles that Fujita represents.

The concepts that Fujita presents can all be tied back to issues of agency, power, and performance. By pointing out the similarities between the historic urban culture of Edo Japan and the contemporary culture of Los Angeles, Fujita reminds viewers of the elements of artifice present in both. In creating the comparison of Edo and Los Angeles, Fujita consciously selects the cultural features that are emphasized and those that are ignored. In focusing on the hyper-masculine elements of sports culture and kabuki, as well as the women of both Los Angeles and Edo Japan, Fujita chooses to lessen his emphasis on *onnagata* and homosexual elements of both cultures, an indication of hip-hop culture's value system.

As argued by Nitasha Tamar Sharma, "in a global marketplace 'difference' is viewed paradoxically as threatening and desirable."[59] Fujita navigates this difference, capitalizes on it, and uses it to point out racial invisibility, the artifice of celebrity, and gender stereotypes. He effectively utilizes the symbols of secondary power structures such as kabuki actors and sports stars to critique the mythologies of mass culture, yet this critique is subtle enough to maintain art market desirability, a mode of power in and of itself. Although Fujita's paintings may create a seemingly seamless parallel between the two cultures, we must remember that Edo and Los Angeles are more different than they are the same. The amalgam of cultures available to citizens of contemporary California would be inconceivable to the residents of Edo, who lived in a highly structured and isolated society.[60] Herein lies Fujita's true power, that his performative paintings can create the illusion of similarity in two vastly different cultures, allowing the viewer, buyer, or critic to forget for a minute that these works are constructions of gender, power, and identity, and instead to live for a moment in the phantasmagoric hybrid world of Gajin Fujita.

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[58] Of course, the idea of hip-hop as revolutionary or subversive is gradually breaking down as the genre takes a larger share of market power. See: Derek Conrad Murray, "Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle," *Art Journal* 63, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 4–19.

[59] Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 236–237.

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[60] The Tokugawa Shogunate instigated the National Isolation Policy in 1639, and until 1853, the nation of Japan was free of international trade, with the exception of the island of Dejima at the port of Nagasaki, where less than thirty Dutch traders were allowed to reside at any given time.

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