



Shore Line Dual, 2004. Red Light District, 2005. All images courtesy: the artist and LA Louver, Venice, CA

GAJIN FUJITA

CLAYTON CAMPBELL





Triple Play, 1999

LOS Angeles, with its preponderance of art colleges, has become the epicentre of the United States for fresh talent. *The New York Times* recently devoted a full-page article to the spectacle of curators and gallerists rushing out to Los Angeles for every new graduate show, hoping to discover the next art star. Young artists get signed before the paint has dried on their student works, and just as quickly are dropped and discarded if it doesn't prove commercially viable during the first show.

Fortunately there are artists who manage to dance with such material pressure, take their time to mature a bit and develop work with staying power. Gajin Fujita is an East LA guy, schooled in the graffiti movement, who has melded a panoply of music, visual and pop sources into a multicultural painting genre. He is now becoming known for paintings that combine graffiti painting and tagging, *ukiyo-e* figures from Japanese woodblock prints and graphic design into a coherent collision of styles. It is the unique Los Angeles multicultural environment, where identities wildly overlap, that has allowed him to paint this way and, as Fujita himself said, 'It could only have happened in LA. I would not have painted this way somewhere else.'

Influenced by his father, a painter, and his mother, a conservator of Japanese antiquities, Fujita ended up running with the KGB graffiti crew (kids gone bad), realised his life made sense when he was painting, and finally arrived at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. It was there that he met his mentor, professor and arts writer Dave Hickey, who became more of a life-skills coach for Fujita's nascent career. As Fujita said, 'Hickey showed me there are two roads in art, smooth or rocky. Smooth was getting a degree, staying attached to colleges, maybe getting a job there, and having a nice life. Rocky meant to be an artist and take some real risks. So rocky was the way I went.'

At 34, Fujita is just starting to hit his stride. His work attracted attention at Site Santa Fe in 2000, and has since been picked up by LA Louver Gallery. His

paintings, carefully wrought and well crafted, take months to complete. An early painting, *Triple Play* (1999), is one of a series exploring the overt and graphic sexual themes found in *ukiyo-e*. A man with an engorged penis approaches two white-skinned geishas who wait to be penetrated. The words 'triple play', painted large graffiti style, is a visual device that creates some perspective and 'names' the painting in one fell swoop. Benday dots (shades of Lichtenstein) create a texture, and Fujita has had friends come in and tag the canvas. More than a nod to his comrades in street painting, it adds substantially to the process and the end result.

Shore Line Duel (2004) is an animated duel between two samurai warriors and exemplifies Fujita's technique. Using spray paint, acrylic, marker pens and gold leaf, he has an array of stenciling and 'resist' strategies (putting found objects on the surface and spraying over them to create negative shapes). The surfaces are often gold leafed, which creates a distinct texture and luminosity. His newest works, such as *Red Light District* (2005), go further in refining elements first seen in *Triple Play*. Fujita uses silver leaf as a highly polished surface, which his friends tag, and then builds up luscious layers of paint with the quality of Japanese lacquer.

The really interesting thing about an emerging artist with proven talent is where they may go as they develop. Fujita wants to remain transgressive, keep the graffiti element, make some changes in scale and perhaps work with other pop-cultural sources besides *ukiyo-e* figures. This blend of simple complexities fascinates him, as his work is starting to fascinate the Los Angeles and European art audiences.

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