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## TALK

### ART TALK



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### Culture Clash, Spirit Unbroken and Attitude Galore

TUE NOV 1, 2011

Host: Edward Goldman

Rudyard Kipling in one of his poems, more than a hundred years ago, famously said, "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." Hmm, I wonder what he would say if he had the chance to see the exhibition by Los Angeles artist Gajin Fujita at **L.A. Louver Gallery**. You want to see clash of civilizations? Here's your chance.



In the last decade, **Gajin Fujita**, a Los Angeles artist of Japanese descent, developed a highly idiosyncratic, immediately recognizable style that earned to his paintings a strong following. Using spray paint over wood panels covered with gold and platinum leaf, the artist paints images of samurais, geishas and demons in the tradition of 18th-19th Century Japanese prints. And then comes the clash, culture clash. Take a look at his most ambitious painting in the show, which is also the largest he has ever made. Measuring 7' x 22' and appropriately titled *East vs. West*, it depicts two monumental figures of horsemen charging toward each other.

The scene is both fierce and, intentionally, slightly comical. There is something cartoonish in the way the artist likes to present his characters, which is totally appropriate considering the bursts of graffiti splashed across the panels. Fujita not only tags his own paintings, he also asks members of his long-time graffiti crew, **K2S** ("Kill to Succeed"), to tag his works. And lo and behold, this seemingly disrespectful action infuses his artwork with an operatic energy and baroque grandeur. One wonders why the curators at MOCA decided not to include paintings by Gajin Fujita in the museum's recent exhibition of street art.

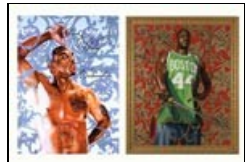
Now, let's change the pace and go to another exhibition, which offers us a chance to switch from full speed action to a slow, meditation-like stillness in front of new portraits by **Chuck Close**, one of the most esteemed American artists. A few days ago, I had the good luck to stop at **Blum & Poe Gallery** during the installation of his paintings, drawings and tapestries.



The artist was there, and I had a chance to speak to him briefly.

It's impossible not to be in awe of his amazing spirit. For many years, due to serious illness, he has been bound to a wheelchair. He has only limited control over the movement of his hands but, in spite of all this, he not just continues to work hard, he simply triumphs in his art.

One wants to ask how anyone in his condition can paint on such a monumental scale? And then, carefully studying the portraits of well-known people who posed for him — Roy Lichtenstein, Laurie Anderson, Kara Walker, one becomes aware that Chuck Close not only brilliantly captures their likeness; he captures their very essence of them as human beings. He knows them, he likes them and, as a result, he allows us the privilege of having an intimate encounter with these fascinating people whose creative spirits inspired his art.



It's interesting to compare these psychologically complex portraits with the flashy *tour de force* paintings by highly acclaimed young artist, **Kehinde Wiley**, who portrays mostly young black men in the grand style of Old Masters of European art. The major difference is that while Chuck Close wants you to forget about him and, instead, to concentrate completely on the person he portrays, Kehinde Wiley goes the other way around. The young men in his portraits, strangely and rather disconcertingly look alike, because the artist refuses, or is simply unable, to surrender his huge ego and bigger-than-life personality for the sake of his art.

Gajin Fujita: Made in L.A.  
L.A. Louver  
October 13 – November 12, 2011

Chuck Close  
Blum & Poe Gallery  
October 29 – December 22, 2011

Banner image: Gajin Fujita, *East vs. West*, 2010; spray paint, paint marker, Mean Streak paint stick, gold, white gold and platinum leaf on wood panel. Courtesy of L.A. Louver

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