

**GAJIN FUJITA**

Through December 30, 2006 at L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice

by Diane Calder

Jaws drop as viewers stand transfixed by Gajin Fujita's paintings. The rush of figures, intent on conquest or coitus, catapulting through a dazzling spectacle of color and pattern, is mesmerizing. Fujita's disparate mix of L. A. street iconography with Japanese characters and swatches of textiles snatched from "the floating world" is as dizzying as the current acceleration of the art market.

It's not likely that the chromatic tangle of gritty tags, stenciled lettering, chops and titles that thread their way over the gilded surfaces of Fujita's compositions have ever featured the words "Know Yourself." That aphorism, inscribed in stone over the entrance to the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, has resurfaced of late in "how to" publications urging adherents to stick to what they know and respect their roots. The truism is so akin to Fujita's personal history, and the path he chose to make his mark in the art world, that he could brandish it as a tattoo.

The son of Japanese parents who emigrated to California after World War II, Fujita was raised in the mostly Latino neighborhood of Boyle Heights. He and his younger brother tagged in the streets of East L.A. while his late father pursued a career in abstract landscape painting and worked alongside his mother conserving Japanese antiques. As a teen member of hip-hop graffiti tagging crews including K2S (Kill to Succeed), Fujita's need to rebel and assert his identity found its creative outlet. He honed skills there that very much inform the art we see here.

Fujita credits Fairfax High Magnet Center for Visual Arts for saving him from gang life. From there he moved on to East Los Angeles College, Otis College, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he earned his MFA. Faculty member Dave Hickey rewarded the "wicked beauty" in Fujita's work by offering the "spray paint warrior" a chance to leave his mark on the Site Santa Fe show, curated by Hickey in 2001. Gallery and museum shows followed, solidifying Fujita's validation as an art world player.

As Fujita's skills and reputation grew, the process he employs to seduce light into his paintings fell into place. While visiting Kyoto's Golden Temple, Kinkaku-ji, the graffiti artist asked himself, "Who would be ballsy enough to tag on something like that?" Transferring that vision of transgression back to his studio, Fujita began applying gold leaf and other metallic foils directly over the prepared wood panels that support his paintings. He then invited members of his crew to leave their marks on the gilded surfaces before working them over with the stencils, painted patterns, text, and figures lifted from ukiyo-e woodblock prints and the bits of L.A. landscape that enliven his work.

Kinkaku-ji was set on fire in 1950. The copy of the temple that rose like a phoenix out of the ashes actually contains more square feet of gilded surface than the shogun Yoshimitsu when it was originally built for his retirement villa in 1397. Like Fujita's paintings and studies on paper, Kinkaku-ji was itself an eclectic amalgamation of styles taken from various time periods. Fujita's shimmering "Burn" more likely references events in Los Angeles (the Watts riots) than the fire at the Golden Temple. However, "Burn's" decorative phoenix, a favorite image on Japanese tattoos, kimonos, and Imari porcelain, would make an apt homage for Kinkaku-ji. The lines, colors and patterns of its wings initiate a fascinating dialogue in space between the pink "Mickey Mouse" blobs that bubble up nearby and the wonderfully realized font of the tag that supports its title.

Fujita often plays off the figure against highly individualized logos that appear three-dimensional or do double duty as architectural elements. The "L" in the horizontally positioned word in the title of the riveting "Fatal Match" crawls snake-like towards arches that mimic those of the Los Angeles Coliseum. Meanwhile Fujita's warriors hold their poses like Kabuki actors, responding to calls of acknowledgment from their audience. But the era of shogun warriors did not last forever. When it ended, many former samurai took up lives of crime. Some committed suicide, while a few moved on to careers in the arts.

The long, lower formats of "Lust" and "The Mack" call up the configuration of ancient Noh stage settings, in which a bridge concurrently joins and separates the world of the living from that of the dead. The pink kimono worn by the geisha anchoring the left hand side of "The Mack" pools over her feet in a gorgeous pattern. It is suggestive of the flow of raked sand bordering rocks in a Zen garden.

This geisha warrants her own study on paper. Like most of the characters in drawings that accompany the dense, multi-layered paintings in this exhibition, she is delicately transparent. Adeptly drawn pencil lines and empty triangles left by fishing weights once used by Fujita's father leave their mark against achingly beautiful eye candy associated with costumes and textile patterns.

One can only imagine an updated Noh production in which Fujita's predecessors, including Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, who introduced imagery from the streets into works of art, look on from their ghostly side of the bridge. Meanwhile, contemporaries Masami Teraoka, Iona Rozeal Brown, Asuka Ohsawa and Yasumasa Morimura might engage Gajin Fujita in a lively discussion of issues tangential to his concerns.



Fatal Match



TEEN SPIRIT



Mack



Slow & Easy



Burn