

GAJIN FUJITA

Native-san

BY SHELLEY LEOPOLD

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(Photo by Kevin Scanlon)

You could say that Gajin Fujita found his calling at Kyoto's "Golden Temple," Kinkaku-ji. But it wasn't a religious calling. The street kid in Fujita, a Boyle Heights native, wondered what it would look like if someone threw up a mural on the beloved Japanese landmark. Instead of defacing the temple, he began building his own panels, and the process began.

Fujita's art has everything to do with hip-hop, butoh dance and the Dodgers. It is the embodiment of the L.A. experience if it were processed by an Old World shunga painter who doubled as a member of the K2S graf crew. His style is a dizzyingly beautiful visual collision of East and West, old and new, legal and illegal. Serpents, goldfish, chrysanthemums, geishas, warriors and sports logos — painstakingly applied by hand — all come together on backgrounds of gold leaf and foil, tangled with layers of graffiti, supplied by Fujita's crew.

Fujita's approach, also influenced by the Asian antiquities that his mother restored and the landscapes his late father painted, is well practiced and unmistakably his own. It's his early experience with the K2S crew that gives Fujita's paintings, informed by the colors of aerosol paint, the forcefulness and movement that set them apart from both traditional ukiyo-e printmaking and common graffiti callouts.

Fujita is currently working on a painting and works on paper that his gallery, L.A. Louver, will exhibit at the Basel art fair in June. He is also commencing a new body of work for his first solo show in London at Haunch of Venison Gallery in April 2008.

Still, after all his success, he keeps his studio in the living room of his childhood home, where his family still lives. Despite its now accommodating racks of German-manufactured spray paint, the studio hasn't changed much since his father used it as his artmaking space.

"I think I would like to be a Robin Hood from Boyle Heights that made it in the art world," he recently divulged to art critic George Melrod. "I think that could be part of the story of who I am."