

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

Friday, October 21, 2011

D14

Around The Galleries

Layers of visual energy

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Andy Warhol is far better known for what he painted — soup cans and celebrities — than for how he did so — merging the hands-off cool of silk-screened prints with the hands-on heat of freely brushed paint.

For the last 10 years, it's been the same for Gajin Fujita. Most folks have tended to see his dizzying collisions of 17th century ukiyo-e imagery and 20th century graffiti in terms of what they depict: dragons and maidens and tigers and ninja and goldfish, all caught up in whirlwinds that capture the anxiety of our times while staying true to Fujita's roots as a first-generation Japanese American raised in Boyle Heights.



Gajin Fujita, *High Voltage*, 2011
white gold and gold leaf, spray paint and paint marker on five wood panels
48 x 80 in. (121.9 x 203.2 cm)

At L.A. Louver, “Gajin Fujita: Made in L.A.” looks back to Warhol by pushing his marriage of printmaking and painting further than ever. To treat Warhol as a formalist is pretty kinky, but that’s exactly what Fujita does in his powerfully democratic fusions of hand-painted passages, spray-painted tags and stencil-assisted patterns.

All of his paintings begin with a layer of gold, silver or platinum leaf, usually in a checkerboard pattern. All but the smallest wood panels then get tagged by guys from Fujita’s old crews, who use paint sticks and spray cans to leave marks in various styles and with various sentiments. Only then does Fujita go at it, using sketches and stencils to build his compositions, which evolve as each painting comes alive.

Different parts receive different treatments, touches, types of painterly application. Conflict does not disappear so much as it fuels the riotous visual energy. A Warholian sort of camouflaging takes shape: The faces and limbs of figures disappear in their garments and armor, which in turn get lost in the graffiti behind them.

In Fujita’s works, the stillness of icons meets the drama of face-to-face confrontation. Nearly all of his images feature two figures in some kind of struggle, hunt or battle. But the story told by the paint (and its diverse applications) is more complex, cosmopolitan, civilizing — a sort of stealth poetry that is nothing if not visual.