



BRITISH

GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY

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‘There was
SMOKE and it
was like, “BYE.
See you. I’m
checking OUT”’

World exclusive

DANIEL CRAIG

His last Bond. His last interview

Story by **Sam Knight**

Photographed by **Lachlan Bailey**

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GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY



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GAJIN FUJITA'S

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'Demon Slayer' (2015)

LA CULTURE CLASH

Los Angeles' rich diversity, but bolster the city's booming creative scene and recent emergence as an art world capital

Story by Dylan Jones

f you were in any doubt as to the location of the centre of gravity in Los Angeles' ever-changing cultural landscape, it can be found at the corner of South Santa Fe Avenue and Bay Street, deep down in the Arts District, that vast warehouse graveyard between Downtown and the LA River. This is the site of Nick Jones' recently opened 48-room Soho Warehouse, his third private members' club in the city, following West Hollywood's Soho House in 2010 and

Little Beach House Malibu in 2016. From the daybeds in the ever-so-chi-chi seventh-floor pool bar – which sits above six industrial storeys of exposed brick, specially commissioned graffiti (including a massive mural from street artist Shepard Fairey) and 1970s-inspired furnishings – you can see all the way up to the Hollywood Hills, via the sprawling financial district, hovering on the crest of Downtown's freeway circuit board. Turn 90 degrees and you'll see the fringes of Boyle Heights, while in between you have the greatest concentration of young creatives this side of Silicon Valley.

Down here you will find the new headquarters of Warner Music, the first West Coast outpost of Dover Street Market (complete with young suburban shop assistants attempting to channel the studied nonchalance of their London counterparts), Zinc Café Market, a downtown Urth Café, as well as an ever-unfurling ribbon of independent art galleries and "alternative" spaces. Paul Smith even opens here soon. The zipcode still has the air of entry-level gentrification, as there are dozens of vacant lots and abandoned cars – until recently, Downtown was a lot like New York in the 1970s, full of empty buildings and uncollected garbage – but you just know that in 18 months' time this place is going to be humming like early-2000s Shoreditch. It really feels as though LA is the future again, as a sense of destiny seems to be infecting even the smallest, most uncelebrated artists and – to compare it to Brooklyn – if today the area feels a little like sleepy Red Hook, tomorrow it's going to look like peak Williamsburg.

"LA was the desert, and, like all deserts, there is space to breathe and expand," says legendary British artist Marc Quinn. "I don't just mean a geographical desert, I mean in the



Gajin Fujita pictured in his Los Angeles studio, 2018

city of cinema, no one much was focused on art. This gave a lot of mental as well as physical space to the artists who worked there, unlike New York or London. London had the same luxury in the early 1990s, a literary culture in which no one was much thinking about art as a mainstream cultural phenomenon. That and the ever-expanding horizons of East London gave artists the space to feel, explore and have studios. Now LA is changing and there is an art gold rush going on."

There appear to be more artists in Downtown LA than there are bristles in your average hipster's beard, and every one of them seems to be clamouring for attention. Well, maybe not all of them: some of the older ones, the ones who have been here for a while, look at the attention the area is now generating with wry, wrinkly smiles, wondering just how much this activity is going to benefit their own livelihoods. One such artist as Gajin Fujita, a 48-year-old Anglo-Japanese street-art painter whose low-key ambition dovetails nicely somehow with the Arts District's own sense of destiny.

If you think of the contemporary art market, you'll probably imagine a world where taste, style and money all cleverly commingle, orchestrated by megadealers who control the leading players as though they were sportsmen rather than professional bohemians. We might assume everything is decided by a series of conclaves whose precise syntheses are never clear, but whose motivation is always financial. Squint, though, and you'll see that all artists have to be entrepreneurs at heart, even if they're coy about admitting it and even if the Panglossian view of artistic success centres around an understanding that the "right" artists eventually become successful. Essentially, artists need to be committed, which is something Fujita has been since he was 12.

In this he is not entirely alone. As Los Angeles has become glossier and more homogenised in everything from architecture and retail to city planning and the cultural equity of the city, many local artists – or at least those >>



'Xing The River Styx' (2018)



‘People call me a **GRAFFITI** artist –
I want to be known as a **PAINTER**’

>> who have decided to make LA their home, many of whom have upped brushes from New York and Brooklyn – have taken it upon themselves to delve deeper into the city’s subcultures, often focusing on the historical anomalies of cross-generational immigrants. As the *New York Times* said recently, “As much as anything, activity and leisure, artistic creatives and artistic consumption bleed into one another here.” Nowadays, the city is as rich in Latino, Asian and Afro-American culture as it is in the White American bedrock, worlds that still feel a lot less familiar to those who still look at LA through a prism derived from David Hockney, Mike Davis and Ed Ruscha.

These days, Los Angeles is becoming as well known for its artistic cultural diversity as it once was for its plastic palm trees, its brazen neon and its neologisms. It’s a city that has finally “caught up” with New York, a dream factory where artists are beginning to develop as much creative capital as people in the movies. “Beginning to”, of course, because the art scene here is still fragmented and marginal, almost as if it is predetermined to build a parallel artistic ecosystem. And while the collector base remains small relative to the city’s wealth – which has been pointed out by just about every art critic in California – there is an increasing understanding that LA is no longer the art world’s underperforming cousin. As well as a clutch of new public and private museums, there are now also significant art events, the kind designed to break the internet, namely Frieze Los Angeles and Desert X, the biennial “scavenger hunt” that distributes artworks across Coachella Valley (a pop-up that is probably most famous for showing Doug Aitken’s “Mirage”, a mirrored suburban house). The art world here is not about to rival the Hollywood industrial complex any time soon, but it’s on its way. And even the naysayers admit that LA is hitting its stride.

“Fine arts activities in LA have experienced an explosion of activity in the last ten to 15 years, recently fuelled by wildly successful inaugural fairs, Frieze and Felix, and a burgeoning gallery scene coupled with artists flocking to bigger and cheaper spaces than on the East Coast,” says the journalist and collector Kenny Schachter. “This seems only the beginning, but when it comes to bulk buying, the New York art world, the daddy of them all, has little in its rear-view mirror to fear.”

The kicker here is edge. As the writer Janelle Zara says, “LA’s art scene, like any good ecosystem, thrives on diversity. Art operates on a range of scales, from small, artist-run spaces to global stalwarts such as Hauser & Wirth and Sprueth Magers. Artists in search of solitude

don’t have to look far to find it, but for those seeking a sense of community, there’s conviviality rather than competition. Forget the more formal affairs with white wine and polite conversation, over on the West Coast it’s casual and warm – think tacos and beer and, of course, those palm trees and skateboards.”

Los Angeles is now the city where the interface of race and culture is most heightened; having traditionally been the most siloed of all US conurbations – where the citizens of Bel Air and South Central are unlikely ever to meet – LA is now being celebrated for genuine cultural and racial interaction. Unsurprisingly, there has recently been even more focus on black artists, both established and emerging. The LA figurative painter Henry Taylor has seen his prices multiply, while leading US figures such as Glenn Ligon and Kehinde Wiley have seen their cultural and political engagement become more pronounced. In Art Basel Miami Beach a few months ago, the heat was centred on artists such as Elias Sime, Gerald Lovell and Kara Walker, whose profiles have never been higher.

Fujita’s work has evolved into manic tableaux of new and ancient iconography, crazy juxtapositions of street art and traditional Japanese symbolism. In the process of juxtaposition, his paintings become transmogrified, creating new virtual realities – full of “words with minds of their own”, as one critic put it. His studio, and home, sits on a hill in suburban Elysian Heights in Echo Park, not far from the perennially fashionable Silver Lake, an area which itself seems to oscillate on the fringes of the Arts

Fujita holds a **FUNFAIR MIRROR** up to the outside world, juxtaposing the **OLD AND NEW**

District. Previously the home of progressives and radicals, over the years Elysian Heights has become steadily more gentrified and is now the kind of place where you’ll see vintage VW camper vans parked bumper to bumper with brand-new G-Wagons. Fujita’s house – which he shares with his supremely glamorous wife, Angela, who acts as his bulwark against the art establishment – is a charming, ramshackle affair and looks as though it wouldn’t have been out of place nestling in the streets behind San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury in the 1960s. The views of Downtown LA are stunning and his picture window looks like a drive-in movie screen – with a panorama that stretches from Koreatown to the Griffith Park Observatory – but his studio is a proper working studio, looking more like a garage than a gallery, a riotous jumble of canvases, spray cans and found objects. Walk around for a while and you’ll see there is no flat surface that hasn’t been the victim of a spray can. It’s like an explosion in a graffiti factory.

Previously a graffiti artist by trade, for the past ten years Fujita has been at the forefront of LA’s ever-burgeoning Downtown art scene and in the past five years has become something of a major local star. His paintings are really a collection of symbols, both contemporary and ancient, as he holds a funfair mirror up to the outside world, juxtaposing the old and the new, the traditional and the modern, the West and the East. “People still call me a graffiti artist, but I’m not any more,” he says, with a slight edge to his tone. “I’m not doing stuff on the streets, I’m painting in my studio, and that cannot be graffiti. I just want to be known as a painter, an artist.” He likens this mix-and-match approach to hip-hop, sampling the past in order to build the future, forcing the traditional to bend to the unconventional.

Fujita was born in Boyle Heights, the blue-collar, mainly Latino district in East Los Angeles, in 1972, to Japanese immigrants who moved to LA in 1970. His father wanted to go to art school, but after he’d been studying for a year, Gajin was born, forcing his father into full-time employment.

“We were the minorities among the minorities,” says Gajin, in his soft but firm Angelino accent. “My parents were sort of oblivious to it, but Boyle Heights is a funny city in that there were waves of different ethnic Americans that occupied the area. Russian Jews followed by Latinos and Mexicans, then Japanese. When I was growing up, it was all Mexican and the local elementary school was, like, 96, 97 per

cent Latino. My brother and I were the only Japanese-American kids there. We got hazed a lot. Gradually it got easier for us to sort of acclimatise. The Mexican people are very loving and caring and once they accepted us, the kids among the friends that were on the block, during Christmas, they would always invite us over to go eat tamales at their house.”

At school, he initially had no interest in art. Instead, he played a lot of basketball with the “troubled” kids. He played baseball, too, and American football. Then, as he progressed through the school system and started being bussed out to specialist schools, he discovered painting, at the same time as he was experimenting with graffiti in his local neighbourhood. When he went out at night with his spray can, his father even came with him, eager to help. After all, he was still only 12 years old.

“It was the crude aesthetics I liked, because it was mostly gang graffiti I was looking at, and as I went from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, I’d see all these different styles, from all >>



Additions to Downtown Los Angeles' booming creative scene have included concept store Dover Street Market (left and above), vegetarian restaurant Zinc Café Market (top left and bottom right) and the new Warner Bros offices (above centre); (below) Boyle Heights-born artist Gajin Fujita in his Los Angeles studio in 2017



Soho Warehouse (above), a private members' club recently opened by Nick Jones in the Arts District of Los Angeles, features specially commissioned graffiti, including artwork by street artist Shepard Fairey (right)



‘My **ART** was going to be **DIFFERENT...**



'Shore Line Duel' (2004)

I wanted to be **PROVOCATIVE**

>> these different gangs. It was just a fascinating view into our city. It wasn't just hip-hop related, it was mainly done by the gangs, so it was slightly cruder, but still basically tagging. Big block lettering with colour and shadowing.

"There was a gang, the Playboys, whom I would see crossing into the West Side. There would be a neighbourhood off of Pico Boulevard and St Andrews, near Vermont, and there'd be whole sides of buildings tagged with this block-letter style that signified 'you are coming into our territory'. I would see similar stuff everywhere. And it really opened up my eyes, not only to see the streets in the city, but, to me, all kinds of other kids besides Latinos. There were African-Americans, there were Jewish kids, kids from the Palisades, kids from West Hollywood, kids from South Central, Mid City. Everywhere. And the graffiti was insane."

The other thing that influenced Fujita hugely at the time was a picture book published by Thames & Hudson called *Subway Art*. "We all loved that book. I still have my copy, and it's so tattered, because we went through looking at every page all the time. We copied everything." This was the early 1980s and he embraced hip-hop culture in general, even learning to break dance and adopting the fashion for Kangol hats and gazelle glasses.

Fujita's graffiti developed from bubble-letter initials of his tag name, HD (short for Hyde), which he sprayed onto walls, buses, fences, bridges, brickwork, roads, tunnels, trains, anything he could reach. Then he fell in with a bunch of Hollywood kids called the KGB – the "Kingz of Graffiti Bombing", or "Kids Gone Bad" – before joining another gang, an older Latino graffiti crew called K2S ("Kill 2 Succeed").

It was the competitiveness more than anything that he enjoyed, because it was like a sport, a young man's sport. "It was about being noticed, being recognised, being ubiquitous throughout the inner city. If you could tag on anything you could get your hands on, you were winning." He soon started breaking away by himself, though, spraying more complex images, coming back to the same image, day after day, gradually improving it until he had something he was proud of. "You would leave something in the morning and then come back at night and make it even better. People didn't know what was happening."

By now the gnomic Fujita was at Fairfax High, but as soon as he graduated in 1990 he realised he didn't want to either mooch off his parents or end up in a dead-end job. He started working the weekend shift at a newsstand off Melrose Avenue, but didn't fancy spending the

rest of his days selling magazines and newspapers, so he started taking part-time art classes as East Los Angeles College. After two semesters, the professors there were encouraging him to start taking it seriously and so he enrolled at Otis College Of Art And Design.

"I graduated in 1997, but as my father had passed away a year earlier, I knew I had to get a job, as I needed to provide for my mother." Luckily one of his professors managed to get him a place on a graduate scheme in Las Vegas and – bingo-bango – this is where he learned to discipline himself, to develop styles and, saliently, transgression. One of his lecturers told him art "should violate people's expectations".

'It was about being **NOTICED**, being **RECOGNISED**, being **UBIQUITOUS** throughout the inner city'

"That was a slap in my face. That night, I went back to my studio – my little hole! – and I started thinking and making the wheels turn in my head. And that was ultimately what made me come up with these paintings, I think. So, I started going through my work. I knew I had one violating element, which was the graffiti. But it's not so violating when you're painting in the studio. It's not 'graffiti' graffiti, like genuine graffiti. It's more like a practice. Because I believe graffiti should be done out in the streets and it should be legal. So I started replicating graffiti, as it was out of context, decontextualising it until it became something else, until it became something I could own."

His mother had become a conservator of Japanese antiques, and she would bring home Edo-period woodblock prints, which fascinated Gajin, both as a boy and as a student. He couldn't believe someone had actually cut out blocks of wood, or carved and sculpted blocks

of wood to make these extraordinary multi-coloured prints. It was baffling to him, and it became more baffling, but no less exotic, the older he became. He was also becoming something of an aficionado of samurai culture, samurai drama and, increasingly, old Japan. His father had regaled him with legends of warriors and demons and they were as appealing to him as the fantastical characters in *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*. He believed they had a spiritual energy that echoed the amplification of contemporary street culture.

"Those stories always intrigued me, but it wasn't until I was in my studio in Vegas that I reconnected with these ideas and tried to incorporate these art forms into my work. I

had an old family photo album of a trip my family had taken to Japan in 1987. We went to Kyoto and I had a photo of the Golden Pavilion. And I thought, 'Dang. What if someone had the audacity to tag on the pavilion? Now that would be super fucking violating!' That was the epiphany, of using the gold leaf. Some Japanese artist in the 1970s had actually beaten me to it, a super-right-wing imperialist who was banned by the government. But my art was going to be different – the old and the new, the traditional with the modern, the sacrosanct with the transgressive. *Ukiyo-e* woodblock prints with spray-can art.

"Then I started looking at Japanese aesthetics again, at furniture, partitions and folding screens, at traditional art, woodwork, woodblock prints, noh, kabuki, and the way in which it was so formalised, even the *shunga*, the erotic prints," he explains. "There's a strong sexual element to lots of my work because I wanted to be provocative."



'Play Mate' (2007)

The strategy worked and acclaim came. “Fujita’s art has everything to do with hip-hop, butoh dance and the Dodgers,” wrote *LA Weekly* in 2007. “It is the embodiment of the LA experience if it were processed by an Old World *shunga* painter who doubled as a member of the [graffiti gang] 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.” The *Los Angeles Times* was equally euphoric, describing his paintings as, “The mean streets of an anonymous metropolis, where silhouetted palm trees, tropical foliage and shimmering moonlight provide the theatrical backdrop for dazzling explosions of spray-painted tags and single words dolled up like customised low-riders.”

Corny juxtaposition isn’t just a trope in contemporary art, it’s almost a genre. In a way, it’s even been encouraged as a legitimate way to tamper with history by the way in which exhibitions are now often curated; if the Museum Of Modern Art says it’s OK to appreciate Matisse’s “The Piano Lesson” on a wall that also contains a black-and-white photograph of Charlie Parker in his pomp, then so be it. Who are we to dispute authoritarian contextualisation? Yet, at a more base level, the use of juxtaposition in modern art has become so widespread it’s almost a cliché. Give Mr Brainwash a dollar sign and a paparazzi snap of Kim Kardashian West, say, and he’d probably knock off a flip lament about commercial bankruptcy; walk into one of the fashionable upmarket knick-knack stores in and around LA’s Melrose Avenue and you’ll see dozens of artworks appropriating seemingly random pop-cultural figures in among the rows of mid-century modern sideboards and brass floor lamps. So what makes Fujita’s work so powerful? The answer is twofold: its simplicity and its rendering.

British art advisor Fru Tholstrup worked with Fujita on his first UK solo show, *Pacific Tsunami*, in 2008 at London’s Haunch Of Venison, which

presented a series of panel paintings and works on paper. “What’s interesting about Fujita’s work is that it stems from his own cultural heritage,” she says, “thus engaging the past, present and future and making his work timeless and brazenly present.”

Tom Wolfe would have had a field day with Fujita, with the smash of cultures, the collision of class, race and pop, where creation and destruction seem to exist in a single space. Initially, Fujita built his paintings by layering, spraying boards and canvasses with anarchic colour, but, as the process became more sophisticated, so did his imagery, until he was building enormous triptychs and multiscreen boards, juxtaposing labour-intensive artworks

hustle and bustle going on here now, and the art world is becoming a bit more established here, and there are a lot of new galleries, but obviously not everyone gets picked up. One of the good things about Frieze coming to LA is that it brought out the collectors. The big players came out, and the Hollywood celebs came out too. When something like that happens, it’s going to cause a shift or some kind of momentum swing. It’s growing, and I can see why some artists would want to move from Brooklyn to LA, because we’ve got nice weather here. People don’t have to work in dreary, cold conditions during the winter. Struggling artists, they can’t afford big spaces, and spaces in New York are very limited. This is an ideal place.



‘The Saints’ (2008)

with a spray-can sense of juvenalia. It was this playfulness that encouraged him to explore the sexual boundaries of Japanese art, occupying the middle ground between Nobuyoshi Araki and ancient Japanese erotica. In fact, maybe not even Tom Wolfe would have been able to conjure up the DNA of Fujita’s work.

There could be a sense that all this playfulness looks a little too try-hard and that all the zeitgeist wants is more unpredictability. This might be so, as the artists who look like they’re about to conquer their world will always outnumber those who actually do. Does Fujita really have what it takes to fulfil everyone’s expectations? If any city can break a heart, it’s Los Angeles.

As for the city that is making him famous, Fujita remains ambivalent. “There’s a lot more

“I’m different, though, because I was a stranger before the strangers moved in. I’m not Japanese, I’m American, and even though I don’t really know what’s going on back in Japan, I have an affinity for the Japanese culture, for the history. How could I not?”

Up on the seventh floor of Nick Jones’ Soho Warehouse, LA’s creative community sips its Moon Juice and nods. **GQ**

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