

**Provocative, but two's a crowd**

LACMA exhibit of Gajin Fujita and Pablo Vargas Lugo is sharp but claustrophobic.

By Christopher Miles, Special to The Times

Emerging-artist "project" shows are becoming common fare at museums and can be especially interesting at an encyclopedic institution such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, with its permanent collections and temporary exhibitions spanning history and geography.

Such is the case with "Contemporary Projects 9: Gajin Fujita and Pablo Vargas Lugo," an offering of 18 works by two young artists who freely sample the cultural spectrum. With its strengths in art and its weakness in presentation, the exhibition will leave you wanting more.

In the first of three small galleries, one is surrounded by work of the sort that has garnered Gajin Fujita attention since he completed his master of fine arts degree at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in 2000. The artist, in the 1980s a member of the graffiti crew K2S (Kill to Succeed), unleashes, with a little help from his friends, a torrent of tagging on gold-leafed panels. The recent paintings achieve a density suggesting the "all-over" quality of Abstract Expressionist field painting and the layered graffiti walls Fujita knows from his youth.



Self-portrait  
Gajin Fujita's "Carp Boy" features a koi, a traditional symbol of male children. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

These fields of gold, spray-paint and marker become backdrops for human figures, animals and architectural elements inspired in character and style by Edo-period screen paintings, Ukiyo-e woodblock prints, tattoo designs and cartoons. Woven amid the figures are words and phrases (echoes of the works' titles), often delivered with illusionistic three-dimensionality, and precisely rendered in styles derived from street tags, pop graphics and gang and sports insignias.

In one of his quieter works, Fujita, the Boyle Heights-raised son of Japanese immigrants, offers "Carp Boy," a self-portrait of sorts depicting an anime-styled koi, a traditional symbol of male children. The fish is book-ended by a chrysanthemum (long associated with Japan) and the word "boy" rendered in a retro '70s American style, with a star in the middle of the "O." A silhouette of downtown Los Angeles serves as a backdrop. More intense is "Ride or Die," with a horseman in full Samurai regalia sporting a crossed "LA" insignia like that of the Dodgers, riding into a maelstrom of arrows and graffiti tags that come at him like flak.

Equally impressive as Fujita's weaving of characters and signifiers is his handling of media. He combines elaborate stencils with a tagger's tricks of the trade to obtain an impressive range of effects from the spray can, augmented with tight, hard-edged brushwork. The methods may not be traditional or academic, but there is mastery.

Fujita's methods are illuminated in the second gallery, where one encounters paper pieces — preparatory drawings for figures and other elements in the paintings. Pieced back together after having been cut up and used as stencils and patterns, they offer a window into the artist's studio, but they are more than souvenirs of process. They are distinctive and engaging on their own.

The second gallery also offers works on paper by Pablo Vargas Lugo, a more eclectic and subtle artist than Fujita, but one with a similar penchant for mixing it up culturally. These pieces are made of delicately cut and glued paper, layered so that the works achieve the effects of outline, color and shading usually found in drawings. Some depict scatterings of rocks that look as if they were plucked from wood-block-print landscapes, arranged on lined manuscript paper so as to suggest musical compositions of notes with distinct shape, size and density. Others, reminiscent of Asian brush painting and also of Roy Lichtenstein's cartoonish renderings of expressionist brushstrokes, display cascades of rocks falling in space amid ribbons of flayed skin. These are hauntingly beautiful, bizarre and brutal.

Lugo's multimedia talents become clear in the third gallery, a darkened room containing the artist's most compelling work, titled "Raid [sic]." Offering an abstract fusion of film noir, Minimalism and Luminism, the hypnotic piece consists of black-and-white footage of light and shadow, shot from a car and projected on two small, free-standing screens of slightly different sizes, suggesting the simultaneously split and tethered subjectivities of a driver and passenger motoring through urban space. Given hard edges and straight and slightly curving lines by the passing architecture and lights, the dance of shifting geometry seems almost to render the screens mutable, as if they are warping or subtly shape-shifting.

Another of Lugo's works playing on urban geometry is "Uprooted Sidewalk," a pair of half-pyramids constructed of concrete over steel framing, evocative of urban pavement, Minimalist structures and great civilizations past. Highlighted along their edges with the crisp yellow stripes common to sidewalks in the artist's home of Mexico City, they also are

laden with cracks that somehow humble their utilitarian, utopian and aesthetic purity. They are funny, smart and formally engaging, and would have been more so had they not been placed in the first gallery, where they compete with Fujita's visual barrage like untouched concrete competing with graffiti. The same circumstances hinder Lugo's subtle video work, which shares space with a less interesting but distracting display of lightboxes resembling commercial signage and based on his doodles of the moon.

Proximity and space limit the show. Although the artists have some qualities in common, their pairing is a shoehorning of two shows into one. Two separate solo shows, or a group show with more artists to establish a web of relationships or even just a little more space would have been better than this claustrophobic, compare-and-contrast pairing. All of these possibilities are of course difficult in a museum with many agendas and constituencies to juggle.

Fujita and Lugo share a youthful, smart, cynical, optimistic, culture-hopping cosmopolitanism that is all the more fascinating in an encyclopedic setting where, at the moment, one finds within a few footsteps Minimalist sculpture, Mayan artifacts and Japanese traditional arts and pop culture. Artist's such as Fujita and Lugo can help set off the dynamism of such a setting — an opportunity the museum should grab. With LACMA beginning a renovation, it would do well in the future to devote more square footage and calendar space not just to established contemporary art, but to emerging artists like these.

'Contemporary Projects 9: Gajin Fujita and Pablo Vargas Lugo'

**Where:** Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles

**When:** Noon to 8 p.m. Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays; noon to 9 p.m. Fridays; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturdays, Sundays; closed Wednesdays.

**Ends:** Feb. 12

**Price:** \$5 to \$9

**Contact:** (323) 857-6000; [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)