

Posted on Sun, Aug. 27, 2006

FALL ARTS | At the Kemper

L.A. Artist's GROWN-UP GRAFFITI

Gajin Fujita's paintings draw on his upbringing in East Los Angeles.

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star



KEN KWOK | SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Artist Gajin Fujita's exuberant work fuses traditional Japanese imagery with contemporary graffiti, creating a powerful and bold juxtaposition.



KEMPER MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

"LA Basin," (2004) reflects Fujita's love of all things Los Angeles. It will be on display at his Kemper Museum exhibit.

Gajin Fujita's father opposed his decision to go to art school.

"He had his own struggles being an artist," the 34-year old Fujita said by phone from his studio in Los Angeles. "He didn't want his son going through that struggle."

Fujita, who headlines Kansas City's fall art season with a show of his vibrant, graffiti-based paintings at the Kemper Museum, faces a different struggle than what his late father perhaps envisioned.

"He has established an international following, and so there is greater demand than there are works available," said Kimberly Davis, director of the Los Angeles gallery LA Louver, where Fujita has been showing since 2000.

The demand is easy to understand.

These are explosive works in which age-old themes of sex, violence, heroism and conflict get a contemporary urban remake.

The big paintings, executed on multiple panels, can be as wide as 15 feet across. Working on metallic painted backgrounds, Fujita fills them with colorful collisions of spray-painted graffiti tags and streetwise updates of traditional Japanese woodblock prints, including the popular erotic prints known as *shunga*.

Joining the samurais, courtesans, birds and mythical beasts that inhabit these graffiti-infested scenes are sports team emblems and other symbols that reflect the artist's abiding attachment to the city of L.A.

"I was born here, raised here. I feel like a Southern California guy," Fujita said. "Anytime I travel, I start feeling homesick."

The son of Japanese parents who immigrated to the U.S. after WWII, Fujita grew up in the mostly Latino neighborhood of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles.

Gang culture was a part of daily life.

"I didn't get affiliated with that," Fujita said. "They were more violent. That wasn't my cup of tea. Right after my junior year I participated in the graffiti aspect, which was more hip-hop-oriented. My younger brother and I were really getting into the tagging and bombing in the streets. We thought it was pretty sophisticated and met a bunch of artists who did graffiti around L.A.

"Being a graffiti artist doesn't mean that you belong to a gang," he said. "You're an affiliate of what we call crews."

After high school Fujita worked various 9-to-5 jobs.

"The graffiti part was always in me and stayed with me while I was experiencing society," he said.

Despite having an artist father and a mother who was a conservator of classical Japanese prints, "The fine art part took awhile to develop," Fujita said. "I had to educate myself and learn about art history."

Taking painting and drawing classes at East Los Angeles College solidified Fujita's decision to become an artist. He enrolled at the Otis Art Institute in Westchester, Calif., where he developed the panel-based format that marked his shift from street artist to fine artist. In grad school he came up with the idea of painting on gold leaf.

"When I traveled to Japan and saw some of these panels painted with gold leaf, I thought, 'Who would be ballsy enough to tag on something like that?'"

The earliest works in the Kemper show date from 1999, a year before Fujita completed his master's of fine arts from the University of Nevada. One of his teachers was influential art critic and theorist Dave Hickey.

The young artist's career skyrocketed when Hickey included him in the landmark 2001 Site Santa Fe biennial. Fujita's contribution included a huge graffiti mural on the outside of the Site Santa Fe building, where it received major play as one of the emblematic works of the exhibit.

The Kemper showing marks only Fujita's second one-person show at a museum, following a 2005 exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

In her essay for the exhibit catalog, curator Elizabeth Dunbar describes Fujita as "a zephyr, gaining strength and velocity by assimilating all the elements in his path — from Tokyo to California to Las Vegas."

Ideas, attitudes and images from all of these places animate the 29 works at the Kemper, which include the recent acquisition "Ride or Die" (2005), a 9-foot-long painting of a samurai warrior on horseback charging through a swarm of flying arrows in a graffiti-ridden landscape.

Its mix of high and low, beautiful and grotesque, past and present, East and West is typical Fujita.

And check out the guy's helmet — he's a Dodger fan.

On exhibit

The show: "Zephyr: Paintings by Gajin Fujita"

Where: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 4420 Warwick Blvd.

When: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Friday-Saturday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. Closed Mondays. The exhibit continues through Nov. 5.

How much: Free

For more information: (816) 753-5784 or kemperart.org

Opening reception: 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Sept. 8, with an artist talk at 6:30 p.m.