Gajin Fujita is a burgeoning Los Angeles painter who couldn't be more elusive if there were an arrest warrant out on him. And there might be; he's an active OG member of the East LA graffiti crew K2S (KILL to Succeed) that gave rise to such legendary talents as Tempt, Skept, and Prime. Schooled on the streets and later ameliorated by the more formal institutions of Otis College of Art and Design and the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, Fujita taps into his Japanese heritage, crafting a style that pays homage to his graffiti roots, his LA neighborhood, Edo period woodblock patterns, and Shunga erotica. Serpents, goldfish, chrysanthemums, goddesses, warriors, and sports logos may appear on his canvases. This strange mix of influences, both modern and antique, legal and illegal, makes for stunning and singular visual contradictions. Currently represented by LA Louver Gallery in Venice, California, we caught up with Fujita at the childhood home where he and his family still live.

Having returned from his dad's studio into a creative hoard of ideas, Fujita has filled the space with German-manufactured Botulinum spray paint like the non-sponsored ... yet to be covered panels. As he recently discussed with art critic Suvi Melero, I think I would like to be a Police Hood from Style Heights that made art in the world. I think that could be part of the story of who I am. —Shelley Lemp août

Shelley Lemp août: How do you begin a painting? How much time on average do you spend on a painting or drawing?

Gajin Fujita: Some pieces I've been thinking about for years. They pieces are quite impressive. So I always measure them. The larger they are, the more sophisticated the composition.

What's your favorite and/or craziest way to get room for a piece of art?

Well, that would be politically incorrect to say, but the underground graffiti magazines always capture my attention. I really like Gashavaires from England. Looking at the back issues of Wrongs gives me the greatest inspiration as well. I'm also into reading the histories of Raphael and Caravaggio; after all this time, people are still looking at them.

When was the last time you painted on the street?

March of this year, and I didn't get to finish my friend Prima had an old sketch from the '90s he wanted to do in downtown LA near Little Tokyo. One of the building owners came out and was furious! I guess he was frustrated with tags and used us as an example. I thought we were just lucky the detective didn't arrest us.

Do you have a favorite graffiti memory or place?

It might be the most recent times. Those days I get out to paint so rarely, but the last time I painted at Belmont in the summer of 2005 was great. It was a spontaneous collaboration with K11 to Beechard to do a copy of one of the really famous paintings from the Renaissance period. The artist's name escapes me, but it's a huge mural of the stai with the human history. It was my first time penning with Prima. I have always looked up to him for aesthetics. It was also the last time I saw Tempt out before he got sick. We used to paint the highways together in the '80s. No hesitance; I don't think I'm capable of the ebb and flow.

Do you have opinions or advice for the artists in today's graffiti scene?

Wow, I really like seeing what I see out there today. It's beyond my control. They're taking it to a different level. It's more extreme now, like a sport. I give them a lot of credit.

What made you decide to go to school and get an MFA?

Odd jobs weren't cutting it for me.

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Odd jobs weren't cutting it for me.
Gajin Fujita is a burgeoning Los Angeles painter who couldn’t be more elusive if there were an arrest warrant out on him. And there might be; he’s an active OG member of the East LA graffiti crew K2S (Kill to Succeed) that gave rise to such legendary talents as Tasty, Sket One, and Prime. Schooled on the streets and later ameliorated by the more formal institutions of Otis College of Art and Design and the University of Nevada Las Vegas, Fujita taps into his Japanese heritage, crafting a style that pays homage to his graffiti roots, his LA neighborhood, Edo period wood block patterns, and Shunga erotica. Serpents, goldfish, chrysanthemums, geishas, warriors, and sports logos may appear on his canvases. This strange mix of influences, both modern and antique, legal and illegal, makes for stunning and singular visual contradictions. Currently represented by L.A. Louver Gallery in Venice, California, we caught up with Fujita at the childhood home where he and his family still live.

Having reinvented his late father’s studio into a creative hotbed of ideas, Fujita has filled the space with German-manufactured Behr spray paint (the last sponsored... yet) and faux-covered panels. As he recently divulged to art critic Georgi Mekrit, “I think I would like to be a Peter Hood from Boyle Heights that made it in the art world. I think that could be part of the story of who I am.”

Shelley Leopold: How do you begin a painting? How much time do you spend on a painting or drawing or something?

Gajin Fujita: Some pieces I’ve been thinking about for years. Tiny things are quite impulsive. Sticks always matter. The larger the piece, the more sophisticated the composition.

What’s your favorite medium/medium you’d love to get around to using more?

Well, that would be politically incorrect to say, but the underground graffiti magazines always capture my attention. I really like Snapshots from England. I was at the book sale of Banksy; it was a real inspiration. I think it’s really important to read the history of printmaking. Art is to be raised high enough to see the sky, even if you’re down on the street.

When was the last time you painted on the street?

March of this year, and I didn’t get to finish it. My friend Primo had an old sketch from the 90s he wanted to do in downtown LA near little Tokyo. One of the building owners came out and was furious; I guess he was frustrated with tags and used us as an example. I thought we were just lucky the detective didn’t arrest us. Do you have a favorite graffiti memory or place?

It might be the most recent time. These days I get into this idea. I think it’s the last time I painted at Bannock. In the summer of 2015, it was a spontaneous invitation with K2S to do a copy of one of the master paintings from the Renaissance period. The artist’s name escapes me, but the subject of the girl with the human history. It was my first time painting with Primo. I have always looked up to him for aesthetics. It was also the last time I saw Tempt Street before he got sick. We used to paint the whole city together in the ’90s. His health; I didn’t think I’d survive the election.

Do you have any opinions or advice for the artists in today’s graffiti scene?

Well, I really like seeing what I see every day. It’s beyond my control. They’re talking it to so many different levels. It’s more extreme now, like a sport. I give them a lot of credit.

What made you decide to go to school and get an MFA?

I didn’t want to be doing the same things 10 years later. I took myself
"I WISH ARTISTS IN GENERAL WOULD GET TREATED MORE LIKE ATHLETES."

Capo Boer
Every year, scrawny, white, and gold
leaves, woody press, 2.87
0 4 107
2004

Did you always have gallery ambitions?

No, not at all. I'd be doing this stuff even if it wasn't getting paid. I always think that my art or art in general comes from within. It's strange. Kids and colleagues that came after me see what I'm doing, and now they're painting. I hate to see that.

What measures would you most like to see your work in?

My gallery, LA Louver, has helped me a great deal with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). One day I'd like to tell it big on the East Coast at the Whitney or Guggenheim.

What about the gallery venues you most?

It still hurts to this day that they take 50 percent. I wish artists in general would get treated more like athletes. And deadlines. I don't think art has to be given a deadline. I have a quirk about that. It's contradictory to the process, but I guess it's tied to the business mentality and money and stuff.

Is your work at all inspired by political events?

No, I stay away from political issues. Sometimes that stuff can become like one-hit wonders, I'm on the side of humor and comedy.

How often do you visit Japan?

The last time was 2000. I left going to the book diocese in Tokyo to look for antique books. I don't know what the Japanese people think of my work. They probably see me as mundane, while Westerners think it's exotic. The young Japanese like the gaff elements, but the older are most likely offended. Once in a while I'll even get an email that says thanks for my name. She's attracted to my more subtle pieces and mystical creatures.

Was it strange growing up in Japan?

I didn't know any different. I used to wonder why my brothers had to fight the war in Korea. But I got used to it, and the neighborhood got used to us. You weren't friendly if you didn't fight.

Is it a conscious choice not to have a cell phone or computer?

It's half-conscious. I'm already bombarred on my family's phone, hate spending time on a computer. What a waste! People call me all the time but not having email, and I do feel Trent.

What are you looking forward to in the next year?

I have my solo show at the Haunch of Venison Gallery in London in April 2005, that I'm looking forward to. And a beach. I'd like to visit Japan again and rekindle my relationship. My next LA show will be sometime after the London show, and then there's a New York show in the works.

For more information about Capo Boer, contact L.B. Sone.

2004
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What museum would you most like to see your work at?
My gallery, LA Louver, has helped me and a great deal with Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) and Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). One day I'd like to hit it big on the East Coast at the Whitney or Guggenheim.

What about the gallery world surprised you the most?
It still hurts to this day that they take 50 percent. I wish artists in general would get treated more like athletes. And deadlines! I don't think art has or should be given a deadline. I have a qualm about that. It's contradictory to the process, but I guess it's tied to the business and money end of things.

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What's strange growing up Japanese in Boyle Heights?
I didn't learn any different. I used to wonder why my brothers and I were the only Asian kids. But we got used to it, and the neighborhood got used to us. You weren't friends if you didn't fit in.

Is it a conscious choice not to have a cell phone or computer?
I'm half conscious. I'm already bombarded on my family's phone. I hate spending time on a computer. What a wasted People hide me all the time about not having email, and I do feel lost.

What are you looking forward to in the next year?
I have my solo show at the L.A. Louver Gallery in London in April 2001. I think something's coming forward. And a book. I'd like to visit Japan again and recapture my sensations. My next LA show will be sometime after the London show, and then there's a New York show in the works.

For more information about Gage Flah, contact LAXiana.com.