

Gajin Fujita at LA Louver

A magical, dangerous landscape.

By David Pagel, Special to The Times

Gajin Fujita's new paintings feature the same cast of characters as his old ones: fierce samurai, sexy geisha, fabulous animals and otherworldly spirits. The settings are also similar: 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 customized low-riders.

What's new is the compositional complexity. Fujita fractures his figures and forms, then weaves them back together. His six mixed-media paintings at LA Louver Gallery (only his second solo show in Los Angeles) are visual dynamos.

In the past, Fujita built his paintings from the ground up. He first covered prepared wood panels with gold, silver and platinum leaf. Then he and his crew tagged, bombed and otherwise violated the naked expanses of precious metals.

Next, he painted backgrounds, inserted figures and used stencils to add pattern, detail and local color. He completed the works by superimposing super-size words, each letter of which was a landscape or abstract painting unto itself.

Creation and destruction went hand in hand. Everything Fujita added to a painting obliterated what was underneath it — just like real graffiti. In his do-or-die dramatics, every element had to outdo the others or be swallowed up by them.

Fujita's new paintings are far more sophisticated. Their elements do not compete against one another so much as complement one another's strengths, creating a more subtle orchestration of emotions and experiences.

Fujita still begins with gold-, silver- and platinum-leafed panels. But rather than follow the step-by-step process of his earlier works, he jumps back and forth between steps, mixing elements more aggressively — and pleurably.

In the 6-by-8-foot "Slow & Easy," graffiti sits atop stenciled patterns. In the 7-by-10-foot "Fatal Match," figures disintegrate into Cubist-inspired riots of angled planes and fragmented patterns, their armored garments and flowered robes overlapping and entangling to form abstract shapes.

In the intimately scaled "Lust," the limbs of lovers wind around each other like a writhing nest of snakes. "Burn" is a big window onto a night sky in which the heart-festooned plumage of a fantastic phoenix becomes a sumptuous garden of sensual delight and a pyrotechnic display of compositional virtuosity.

Five similarly large drawings, each collaged together from the hand-cut, homemade stencils Fujita uses to make his paintings, reveal one step of his low-tech, labor-intensive process. More important, they suggest that he has looked long and hard at the scraps on his studio floor and learned a lot from the ways they play positive and negative space off each other, turning 3-D bodies into ghostly silhouettes and atmospheric sprays of paint into abstract patterns with substance and punch.

The clashing planes and dizzying figure-ground reversals in Fujita's paintings flesh out these visual shifts to capture the polyglot poetry of life in the big city. Signaling an increasing command of pictorial space, they give form to a magical world loaded with romance, danger and adventure — and fueled by the renegade ingenuity of a dyed-in-the-wool do-it-yourselfer.



BOLD: "Fatal Match" by Gajin Fujita includes Cubist-inspired riots of angled planes and fragmented patterns. His latest paintings, at LA Louver Gallery, show an increasing sophistication at play. (L.A. Louver Gallery)