

# East/West: The Art of Gajin Fujita

interview AHF Photos courtesy of La Louvre



Detail, Dream 2002





**How did you get into graffiti?**

It was just something that I got into naturally as a youngster growing up in my neighborhood. East LA is synonymous with a lot of territorial gang graffiti. It's still being written on my moms house to this day. It's mostly territorial stuff but now days you see a lot of hip-hop influenced graffiti too. I initially got into it in the early 80s by a friend who writes Defer in K2S. I was also fond of looking at tags by Gio one (rip), Sine stn (rip)- just a bunch of old school graffiti writers from LA like Shandew, Crime, and Skept. I looked up to these guys. They all did a lot of nice tags, throw ups and pieces on the streets from the Eastside all the way to the Westside. These guys were some of the first people to paint Belmont. A large influence was also just riding the buses from the east side to the west and just destroying the insides with tags and scribes with my brother. I was probably about 13 or 14 around that time.

**Were you making fine art at that time or just interested in graffiti?**

I was mostly interested in graffiti at that time. I must have had some fine art influences because my father was a painter. It started early, viewing color and compositions. But my dad never thought me what to do or how to do it. I just picked it up on my own and related it out on the streets with graffiti.

**When did you start to think about going to art school?**

That must have been like the early 90's. The late 80's was a climactic height in graffiti with the entire Hex and Slick battles and all the Westside and Eastside crews meeting up at Belmont or Motor. The 90's is when I graduated from Fairfax and I didn't know what to do. I enjoyed doing art and working with colors and paint so I thought I would try out oil painting



Trance 2002





Detail: Gold State Warriors 2002

and started practicing in the studio. That was in 1991. I went and enrolled at a local Junior College with a friend who wrote Skept. The teachers told us that we were too talented to just stay at a Junior college and they pushed us to go to a real art school. That's when I enrolled at Otis. I picked Otis because at that time it was a metropolitan school. Now it's in the Westside near the marina.

**When did you begin to use some of your current themes of mixing Ukiyoe woodblock print imagery with hip-hop culture?**

It was the tale end of my stay at Otis. Maybe 96-97? I really started getting interested in Japanese art history and the imageries that they would print and the characters that they would portray like the samurais. In graduate school I began to formulate it even further and mixed the ingredients a little bit more and tried to get the right flavoring with the visuals and this is what I've come to work with today.

A mixture of contemporary hip-hop graffiti and traditional Japanese woodblock print imagery.

**Do you see a relationship or connection between hip-hop imagery and traditional Japanese imagery or is it a matter of blending different cultural aspects and creating hybrids between the two?**

I like to make an analogy of my work to hip-hop. It relates to it very closely. Hip-hop musicians sampled beats and rhythms and past music that our previous generation might have listened to. Dj's use older music that they like and they create new sounds, beats and add their own voices. I try to make an analogy of my paintings to that. It just happens that Japanese imagery is part of my culture and is something that I've always been fond of and grew up around because of my parents. I don't know if it really blends well in my work but I'm trying to do my best to make them work together.



Bliss-2003



**Do you plan all your works in advance as far as composition, theme and colors go or is it more process oriented?**

I think that it's process oriented. Some of it is very spontaneous. The graffiti part is always spontaneous. Sometimes I don't know what I would hit up with a spray can. But those are the primary stages of my pieces. At the end I'll conclude these pieces with a fine tuned graffiti-lettering piece in the foreground. It usually consists of a statement or a word that I like to put out there that I want people to look at and listen.

**Does the main word come before or after the imagery?**

Sometimes the word comes at the beginning or sometimes it will come and click while working on the imagery, or I'll change up the main word in the middle of painting it because it might fit the painting better.

**Do you appropriate your woodcut designs or make your own version?**

Sometimes I make my own but most of the time I borrow from the original and appropriate it into my work. When the scale has changed they naturally are appropriated and your own hand, style, and technique come into play.

**Why do you choose to paint rather than use other mediums in your work? Do you think that it's because of your graffiti background?**

I think that graffiti is one of the key elements but I also think that my father was a big influence. A lot of people compare my application of paint to my fathers work. He paints very slick smooth surfaces and all of my work is similar to that. I know a lot of other



painters who glob on the paint and use a lot of texture on their surfaces. But I like my work to be slick and smooth. Almost like a graffiti wall. They all tend to be pretty slick. I love the finish as well as that graphic glossy look. It all captures my attention. When I was young I loved ceramics and sculpture but I didn't really get into them as an undergrad. I love painting and that's probably why I keep returning to it.

**How long do you see yourself working with cultural elements and hybrids? Do you think that you will eventually move to new subject matter or do you think that you will keep manipulating your current content?**

That's quite a hard question to answer, I would love to think that I could keep working with my current subject matter. I most likely will be working in this vein in the future. I think that there is so much room for growth and expansion, its endless. I was lucky that I could jump into these elements where the ideas are infinite and they keep going on and on and become originals as long as I keep adding my own flavor and hand. There are just so many different ways that you can keep appropriating a certain image.

