

THE ELUSIVE ARTIST FROM LOS ANGELES
PAVES THE ROAD TO MUSEUM GLORY





GAJIN FUJITA

INTERVIEW BY SHELLEY LEOPOLD
PORTRAIT BY KEVIN SCANLON

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 graff 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 LA Louver Gallery in Venice, California, we caught up with Fujita at the childhood home where he and his family still live.

*Study of Ride or Die
(Horseback Samurai)*

Graphite and spray paint on paper
84" x 92"
2006

(page 86-87)
The Mack

Acrylic, spray paint, paint marker,
Mean Streak, white, and yellow
gold leaf
24" x 48"
2006

(page 88-89)
Ride or Die

Spray paint, paint marker, Mean
Streak, white, and gold leaf
83" x 126"
2005

Collection of the Kemper Museum of
Contemporary Art and Design

Having reinvented his late father's studio into a creative hotbed of ideas, Fujita has filled the racks with German-manufactured Belton spray paint (he isn't sponsored ... yet) and foil-covered panels. As he recently divulged to art critic George Melrod, "I think I would like to be a Robin 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

Shelley Leopold: 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. Tiny pieces are quite impulsive. Scale always matters. The larger the piece, the more sophisticated the composition.

What's your favorite and/or craziest way to get around a creative block?

Well, that would be politically incorrect to say, but the underground graff magazines always capture my attention. I really like *Graphotism* from England. Looking at the black books of friends gives me great inspiration as well. I'm also into reading the histories of Raphael and Caravaggio; after all these years, 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 Prime had an old sketch from the '80s 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 piece?

It might be the more recent times. These 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 invitation with Kill to Succeed 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 skull with the human history allegories. It was my first time painting with Prime. 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 '90s. No heavens; I don't think I'm capable of the climbing!

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

Wow. I really like seeing what I see out there today. It's beyond my control. They're taking 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?

Odd jobs weren't cutting it for me. I didn't want to be doing the same things 10 years later. I took myself



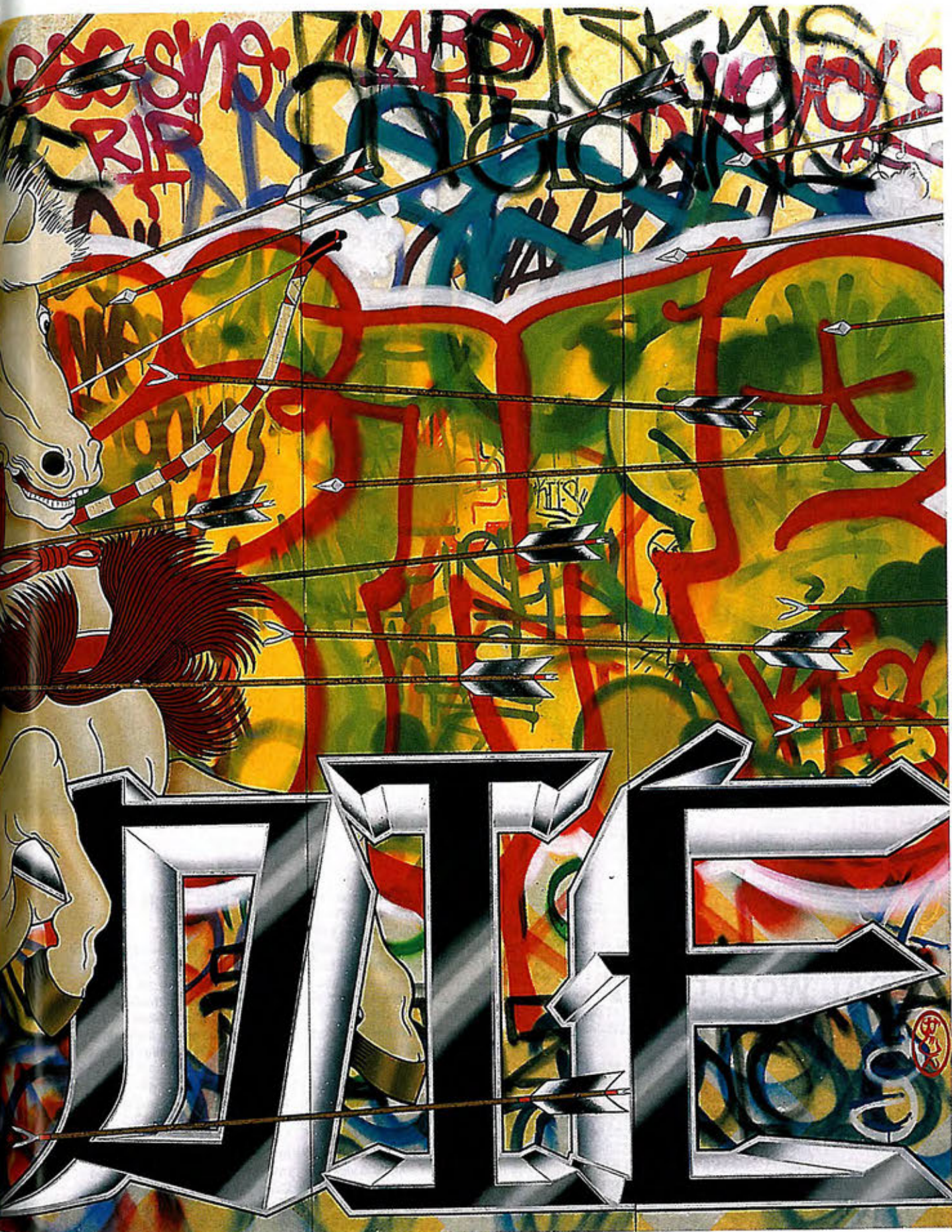
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**"I WISH ARTISTS IN
GENERAL WOULD GET
TREATED MORE LIKE
ATHLETES."**

Carp Boy
Spray paint, acrylic, white, and gold
leaf on wood panel
8" x 20"
2004

to East LA College with Skept. And then I went on to Otis. I wasn't into graduate school because it's expensive, but I got a free ride to attend UNLV. There I was able to meet art critic and educator Dave Hickey. It was fantastic.

Did your work change substantially when you returned to LA?

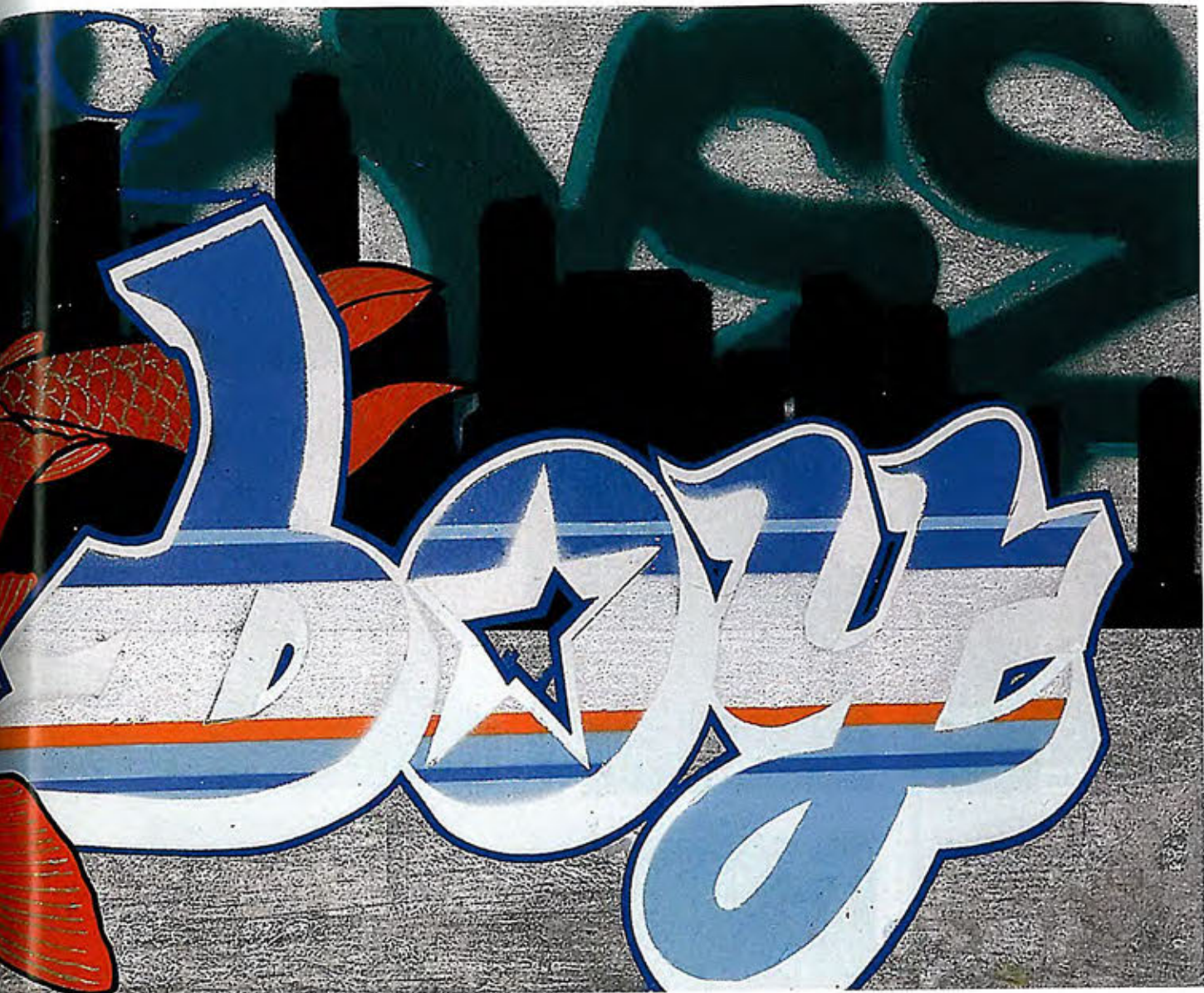
It always has to change, even in miniscule degrees. My materials are still the same. Style-wise it became more detailed and sharper. Hickey taught us all the time that art needs to turn people's heads and violate their expectations. That's how the Shunga with gilded backgrounds started.

Did you always have gallery ambitions?

No, not at all. I'd be doing this stuff even if I weren'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 museum would you most like to see your work in?

My gallery, LA Louver, has helped me 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.

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 err on the side of humor and comedy.

How often do you visit Japan?

The last time was 2000. I like going to the book district in Tokyo to look for antique books. I don't know what the Japanese people think of my work. They probably see it as mundane, while Westerners think it's exotic. The young Japanese like the graffiti element, but the elders are most likely offended. Once in a while I'll even get an eyebrow raise from my mom. She's attracted to my more subtle pieces and mystical creatures.

Was it strange growing up Japanese in Boyle Heights?

I didn't know 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 fight.

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

It's half conscious. I'm already bombarded on my family's phone. I hate spending time on a computer. What a waste! People kid me all the time about not having email, and I do feel lame.

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 2008; that is something I'm looking forward to. And a break! I'd like to visit Japan again and rekindle my references. My next LA show will be sometime after the London show, and then there's a New York show in the works.

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For more information about Gajin Fujita, contact Lalouver.com.