



Gajin Fujita poses with his work in 2017

La Louver

## Gajin Fujita's New Solo Show at L.A. Louver Is Also His Pandemic Diary

**The renowned artist Gajin Fujita's show, *True Colors*, is personal, political and filled with metaphor.**

By **Michael Slenske** - March 28, 2023

"I've really been digging into my childhood memories of the California landscape," [Gajin Fujita](#) tells LAMag on a now-rare sunny March afternoon.

He was giving a tour of *True Colors*, his three-years-in-the-making show that opens Wednesday at [L.A. Louver](#), the august Venice gallery that has represented Fujita for over two decades. For anyone familiar with the artist's laborious, densely metaphorical work—which resides in the permanent collections of the Hammer, LACMA and the Metropolitan Museum of Art—a Gajin Fujita solo exhibition is a big event because they simply don't happen that often.

"It's my most personal for sure, and the most political," says Fujita.

Though the east-meets-west confrontations in Fujita's work have often grappled with mythology, art history and pop culture—from the tattoos of the Yakuza and Ukiyo-e woodblock prints to Dodgers memorabilia—Fujita turned inward for this most recent show. *True Colors* consists of work made almost exclusively during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is perhaps his most diaristic to date.

In "No Man's Land," the earliest piece in the show—made just weeks before lockdown—Fujita depicts a coyote howling at [Japanese tengu](#) that are diving towards him outside Nick's Cafe Street.



Gajin Fujita's "No Man's Land"

COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER © GAJIN FUJITA

"I always hear the birds going at it with each other. The raccoons and squirrels are constantly fighting over food, territory," says Fujita, who works in the open air at his hillside studio in Echo Park. "I was thinking about the fact that there's just conflict at every level of life on this planet."

The painting feels like a metaphor for Fujita's practice where marks and mediums—be it his Belton spray paint or palladium leaf—fight for attention on canvases that are as complex and crowded as the city he's capturing. His paintings are built upon layers of yellow and white gold leaf backgrounds over panels that he spray paints with meticulously constructed stencils depicting Japanese dragons, geisha, samurai and monsters battling contemporary foes (be they corporate, cultural or governmental). He might complete just six paintings in a given year and once finished with one, he "violates" it with tags from the graffiti crews he ran with as a teenager, KGB (Kids Gone Bad) and K2S (Kill To Succeed). The crew's members include artists like Prime, Defer and SOME1, otherwise known as David Arquette.

For a later painting in the show, "Game of Drones (GOD)," he conjured fishing trips that he took with his father to the Sierras.

"We'd drive the 395 all the way into the mountains and I would always see Mount Whitney, the tallest peak in the west," recalls Fujita. "And it was beyond an acid trip because we'd be bumping 'Echoes' from Pink Floyd."



Gajin Fujita's "Game of Drones (GOD)"

COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER © GAJIN FUJITA

He invokes the hallucinogenic trip with 24-karat peaks and a dragon emerging from a white gold portal to scare a samurai who has been playing a video game with a controller titled "GOD." The samurai and his controller rest amid a field of Chase bank logos that read "Chasin."

"We're all busy chasing money," says Fujita, who depicts the sky in "Game of Drones (GOD)" as festooned with Texaco-logo stars. "I tried to illustrate this message that human beings are getting ahead of themselves with technology."

Fujita echoes these technophobic sentiments in "#WTF," a portrait of a geisha taking a selfie on a bus bench with the Hollywood sign looming in the distance as a palm tree ignites over her head. It was a painting he made during the civil uprisings when he noticed social justice and social media movements converging in unsettling ways.



Gajin Fujita's "True Colors" at L.A. Louver

COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER

His first self-portrait, "Home Field LA" features a silhouette of the artist comprised of golden fan-like textiles standing in front of the skyline as seen from the corner of Lorena & Eagle streets in Boyle Heights where he grew up.

"I see this fan pattern as multiples of the wifi icon that we're all used to seeing almost every second of our lives now," says Fujita. "Metaphorically I see myself in the painting being free and ubiquitous."

If Fujita is taking flight in this rare selfie, he grounded himself and his practice to arguably the most intimate (and vulnerable) painting—the final one for the show—

(Chitose Fujita).” *True Colors* is an investigation into memory, practical and poetic, and this delicate portrait of his Alzheimers-afflicted mother is a meditation on its absence.

“There were times when I would feel mad emotion come on to me while working on her face,” he said of the piece.

To capture her generous spirit, Fujita built a silver and palladium leaf streetscape—the one visible from her porch, which his friends had tagged, of course—then placed her at the center of a vibrant scene holding a yellow hibiscus from his garden beside a glowing trompe l’oeil street lamp while a transparent red sun sets in the background. As a nod to her illness, Fujita painted tiny Dumbo the Elephant figures flying in and out of the scene.



Gajin Fujita's "Home Field LA"

COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER © GAJIN FUJITA

The portrait is perhaps the best example of Fujita’s transition toward a transparent spray paint that adds a greater luminosity and depth to his figures, which had long been defined by black calligraphic marks and flat woodblock print outlines. His figures are now instead more rooted into his worlds with light, space and shadow, all meant to invoke Renaissance paintings.



Gajin Fujita's  
"Forget Me Not (Chitose Fujita)"

COURTESY OF L.A. LOUVER © GAJIN FUJITA

“When I was a child my mom would make me write in Japanese and draw with these cool Japanese Sakura pastel-like crayons,” he says. “These paintings are my pictorial diary from the time of the pandemic.”

### ***Gajin Fujita: True Colors***

March 23 through May 6

Hours: Tues.-Sat. 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

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