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Gaijin Fujita: Warriors, Ghosts and Ancient Gods of the Pacific



Installation view, Gaijin Fujita: Warriors, Ghosts and Ancient Gods of the Pacific, LA Louver Gallery

Gaijin Fujita: Warriors, Ghosts and Ancient Gods of the Pacific
LA Louver Gallery
May 27 - July 2, 2015

By **LYLE ZIMSKIND**, JUN. 2015

A few steps away from the Venice Beach boardwalk, and the Pacific Ocean it brushes up against, Gaijin Fujita's new [L.A. Louver](#) exhibition, "Warriors, Ghosts, and Ancient Gods of the Pacific," teems with figures from the warrior- and spirit-based cosmology familiar to fans of traditional Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock printmaking -- fans like Fujita himself, who has studied them extensively and speaks eloquently on the influence and appeal of their folksy surrealism. In the bold universe depicted in his paintings, the characters may seem to hail from a misty Kurosawan realm of myth and history, but their world is not the floating-world, it's the rather more hardscrabble Boyle Heights community where Fujita grew up and once ran with the "Kill2Succeed" ("K2S") tagging crew. So maybe more *Seven Samurai* than *Ikiru*. Not for nothing though, it turns out Kurosawa trained as a painter and storyboards his films as full-scale paintings.

Fujita, who became an active tagger when he was just a kid, describes graffiti as the door that opened up for him into the fine art world, and -- as always most if not all of the works pay direct tribute to this background. That's because not only does Fujita reimagine these storybook characters with what he calls "a bit of a modern-

day flair or a twist,” such as sports team assignments in place of kingdoms or territories -- but also because when all the metal-leaf, meticulous rendering of bold color and fine detail, and impossibly crisp decorative flourishes are ready, he gets his old tagger crew to come in and wreck them with spray cans, stencils, and paint-markers -- animating the compositions with marks typically left in stealth on outdoor facades. The small-scale but densely detail painting “Defer” (as in “more def”) for example, is named for a fellow K2S tagger who was invited to do his thing inside the painter’s studio.



Gajin Fujita, 2X (double) Edge Sword, 2012, spray paint, paint markers, Mean Streak, 12k white gold, 24k gold, silver and platinum leaf on wood panels, 2 panels, overall: 48 x 32 in. (121.9 x 81.3 cm), Copyright Gajin Fujita. Courtesy of L.A. Louver, Venice, CA.

The exhibition’s epic centerpiece, the mural-scale “Southland Standoff” (which now belongs to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Australia), transposes the 16th-century fighters in a 19th-century [print by the artist Kunimasa](#) onto a contemporary graffiti-tagged wall. The brave, bloody, and sword-wielding Samurai warriors doing battle are wearing the “gang colors” of the Angels and the Dodgers, their chests emblazoned with the (714) and (213) area codes respectively. Another large-scale painting, “Pacific Ghost,” dresses a samurai warrior in camouflage and Dodger-logo hand armor. In “Uncanny (Kintaro),” the bright red-complexioned folkloric character, show in Raiders garb, wards off an evil demon by throwing beans at it, recalling a traditional, if superstitious, ritual that Fujita remembers from childhood.

Perhaps the most dramatic piece in this show is “Demon Slayer,” in which [Shoki](#), a mythological figure imported into Japanese culture from Chinese mythology, rides in on a tiger to expel a threatening demon. Here,

too, the scene is surrounded by background graffiti tags, including the logo of thrash metal band Slayer, which gives the painting half its name. Intriguingly, the painting's background is constructed of a grid of platinum leaf which glitters with a clean white texture that evokes the ashy grid of a cinder block wall -- such as one might find in the kind of industrial alley where the tagging "belongs." Now in his early 40's and a dad, Fujita demurs as to whether he still hits those stealthy walls, claiming that he no longer possesses the kind fearlessness that once drove him out onto the streets to ply his early art. But it's all still there in his work. **WM**