

wing, and you realise that the parrot is not a prop acquired by Vega but an actual phone booth. The sad discovery that industrial plastic has been used to resemble the glory of nature in a tropical country turns into acid sarcasm in Vega's hands. And that is where Vega's power as an artist lies, in the fact that he can turn an obvious punch line into social commentary at the same time as ensuring that his explorations remain works of art. *PV*

LOS ANGELES

'GAJIN FUJITA: WICKED BEAUTY'

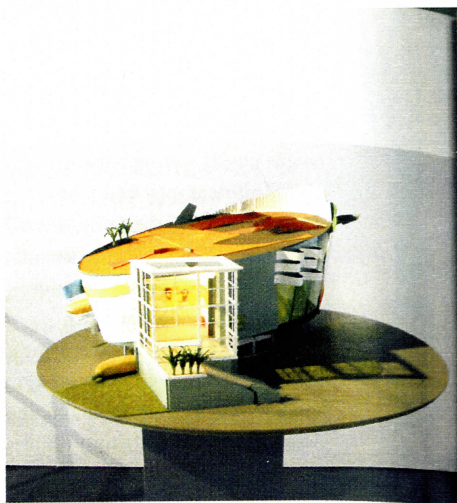
LA Louver Gallery

12 September - 12 October

AFTER WANDERING THE DUSTY, sun-dazzled streets of LA's Venice neighbourhood, the air-conditioned, white-walled LA Louver Gallery normally appears as an oasis of calm. But their exhibition of work by LA-based artist Gajin Fujita metaphorically pushes you back out of the door with a sharp shove into his gritty urban world.

Instantly you are bombarded with a riot of imagery and colour. Huge stylised sweeping words such as 'Rat Race', 'Libido' and 'Warriors' dominate the canvases. Japanese samurai warriors wearing kimonos decorated with the Los Angeles Lakers motif hack their way across burnt orange and sky blue landscapes with swords, rifles and pistols held menacingly aloft. In one painting, copulating couples in mind-boggling positions nestle among floral explosions. It's like a trippy twenty-first-century vision of old-school Japan set on the mean streets of LA.

Fujita's work has been described as graffiti art, and one of his paintings, *Dream* (2002), even pays homage to deceased West Coast graffiti artists. But with so many other influences pervading his work that definition seems far too narrow. He grew up amid the



Sergio Vega, *Banana Building*, 2002, mixed media, 139.7 x 111.76 x 111.76 cm

urban sprawl of LA and spent his teens perfecting his street style of painting. His parents had moved to America after the Second World War, and they were well-versed in traditional Japanese art, which no doubt prompted Fujita's skilful fusion of the high art of his ancestral Japan with American graffiti art.

A union of cultures within the realm of street art is nothing new in the history of West Coast graffiti - in the 30s and 40s it was rooted in Latino culture, and the Hip Hop phenomenon of the 80s provoked the boom of tagging on subways. However, Fujita's work is not simply a collision of two art forms, and he successfully mixes diverse influences to weave a personal narrative. Ben Day dots, tattoo and textile designs, characters from Shunga (traditional Japanese erotic prints), gold and silver leaf - all these disparate elements come together in his cacophonous canvases.

This is Fujita's first solo exhibition on the West Coast, but at the age of 30 he is already on the brink of international renown, a position secured by his inclusion last year in SITE Santa Fe alongside Ed Ruscha and Bridget Riley. It will be interesting to see how his work develops. Will his mish-mash of references and styles start to crowd each other out, or will he continue to produce, as he has in this show, finely balanced and idiosyncratic paintings? *LS*