

EAST MEETS EAST L.A.

written by *Christopher Miles*

When people come here, they don't know what to make of it," grins painter **Gajin Fujita**, describing the visits from arterati that are becoming commonplace at his **Boyle Heights studio**. Just 30, Fujita is well on his way to becoming an international art sensation. He's as interested in talking about Venetian baroque painting, Japanese woodblock printing, abstract expressionism, and pop art as he is in discussing gold-leafing techniques, the best brands of spray paint, and where to find a good graffiti wall. Daring to pair images of the Virgin of Guadalupe with scenes quoted from Japanese erotica,

Fujita has developed a blend of traditional and pop Japanese aesthetics with street tagging styles and methods. Including cultural traces of Mexico, East L.A., Hollywood, Las Vegas, and postmodern Americana, he provocatively reaches out and touches a broad audience, winning accolades from the likes of übercritic Dave Hickey, who deems Fujita one of the next generation's great cosmopolitans. The work also has brought him exhibition opportunities at pioneering Chelsea gallery Kravets/Wehby in New York and mega galleries LA Louver and Rolf Ricke in Venice, California, and Cologne, Germany, respectively.

"I still don't really know what to make of it either," Fujita shakes his head. His smile is infectious, his enthusiasm for what he does is like that of a little boy talking about something he's proud of and fascinated by.

Fujita's conversation is peppered with remarks about the many times good fortune has befallen him and words of thanks and respect for those who have helped him out along the way. His gratitude extends to his parents and school teachers who encouraged him, to the cluster of critics, dealers, curators, and collectors who have supported him; from hip-hop musicians who inspired his culture-bending and fellow taggers who col-

laborate with him on his paintings, to a friend who cuts stencils for him. "It's strange to have people from New York and Europe coming to see me and to have nice cars parked outside or limousines pulling up in front."

If your chauffeur gets lost, the place isn't so hard to find. Just get to the general neighborhood and then look at the curbs. The ones across the street from Fujita's studio in Los Angeles are variously emblazoned with the artist's street tag "Hyde"—remnants of moments when Fujita needed a quick tagging fix during his years here. Most of the art Fujita has made has been done right in this place. It's his mother's house, the house where

Fujita spent most of his childhood years growing up with his brothers and his late father, who was also a painter. It's the house Fujita lived in while attending Fairfax High School's Magnet Center for Visual Arts across town and Otis College of Art and Design—fulfilling a dream of formal art education started, but due to financial constraints never finished by his father. It's the house Fujita returned to after studying in the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Recently married, Fujita has moved into an apartment not far away, but his mother, who likes to keep her son coming around, lets him continue working here. The living room, stacked with jars of acrylic paint and cases

of spray paint organized by brand and color with obvious connoisseurship, and the back patio, marked with the overspray and drips left over from paintings past, are his main work areas. He leans his panels against the curio cabinets along one wall of the living room when he wants to get a look at them. Neither the living room nor the patio measures more than 12 feet in any direction, and Fujita's paintings recently have reached lengths of up to 60 feet. The artist, who makes his paintings out of multiple panels like traditional Japanese screens, has grown accustomed to working on his paintings and showing them to visitors a few sections at a time.

"I still have the urge once in a while to go out and catch a tag," laughs Fujita devilishly, "but these days I'm preferring to work on commissions. I realize that being a studio graffiti artist has its problems in terms of street credibility, but I'm interested in the crossover, and I want to make ambitious work and lasting work, and I do my best to keep bringing the street into the studio." That intent has something to do with the reason why Fujita, for the moment, is staying put. "Staying in this house and in this neighborhood keeps me grounded," he insists, claiming he's in no hurry to transition into more posh accommodations. "This is where I got my influence.

"I'd walk around and look at the graffiti. It was mostly gang writing, but there were some good tags, and I'd catch all the styles, and when I was a kid, my dad would take my two younger brothers and I to graffiti yards and he'd paint with us. I saw some of those walls when they were virgin." You'll feel a little less a virgin yourself when you catch Fujita's styles and his ever more daring and elegant combinations of imagery. Your chance is now.

Fujita's first solo exhibition at LA Louver runs through October 19, 45 N. Venice Boulevard, Venice, CA. (310) 822-4955.