IN PREPARATION FOR THE EXHIBITION, CURATOR BRIDGET BRAY INTERVIEWED GAJIN FUJITA ABOUT HIS WORK AND CONNECTIONS TO UKIYO-E. THE FOLLOWING ARE EXCERPTS FROM THAT CONVERSATION.

BB: Apprenticeships and mentoring were central to artistic training in pre-modern Japan. As an example, Yoshitoshi was apprenticed under the renowned artist Kuniyoshi. What role can, or does, the mentoring relationship play in contemporary practice?

GF: More than apprenticeships, mentoring has been a key factor in my development as an artist. This goes back to Otis, and even before then. My teacher from elementary school, Helen Stringos, singled me out for an advanced class, which led to magnet programs. This experience opened up a whole new world to me. I saw such diversity, way beyond the local population I had known before.

My professors at East Los Angeles College were keen on us having the skills to further ourselves; June Smith pushed me and promoted me at that time. At Otis, I caught the attention of Scott Grieger [artist and professor] who became a significant mentor. His class syllabus was very much career-oriented because he asked for five paintings, followed by a crit at the end of the semester. The experience of taking this class and being put in this “professional” scenario was priceless to me, because it so closely follows the reality of what it’s like to be a working artist, having shows, and of functioning within the gallery structure. It gave us a sense of what was to come, and what would be expected.

Scott is also responsible for setting me on the path toward Dave Hickey, who taught at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV), and it’s there where many of my ideas crystallized. I became more serious about studying Japanese woodblock prints at UNLV. I had real freedom in graduate school, and it’s because of this, that my mind opened up to the idea of using prints as references in my work. I love to paint, but have infinite curiosity about what other materials can do as well, and having the freedom to explore is a crucial part of making art.

BB: Were your parents’ experiences in the art world part of this mentoring?

GF: My work and my dad’s work are polar opposites. Part of the difference between us comes from the fact that both of my parents were immigrants...
to this country. One similarity though, is the fact that my dad also attended Otis for a time. There was definitely a sense of joy for me when I was able to graduate from Otis, and complete something that he wasn’t able to. I was really getting the degree for both of us.

In terms of literally picking-up skills or traits from him directly, that didn’t happen. I’d say things were more passed-down, than taught. And I was also indirectly influenced by being around him, and from his studio being in our house. I became really curious about his oil paints and I remember looking at his palette and thinking that the paints looked like taffy candy. Color was a really strong key for him, and I think I definitely inherited that from him.

Art conservation came later for my mom as she began to study urushi, or lacquer, from a master of lacquer here in L.A. I saw the artifacts coming through the house to be refurbished and I was interested in the motifs and patterns on them, which are iconic, and definitely have some sort of impact on what I do now. She still practices conservation and brings books and auction catalogues that I’ll refer to often. The strong patterning in woodblock prints is a draw for me, like in Yoshitoshi’s series of firefighters, but the whole range of time periods and woodblock print artists, like Utamaro, Kuniyoshi and Yoshitoshi, are interesting to me as well. I was lucky to have been fostered in a background rich in art. Although I was visually inclined, I had a lot of help.

BB: Yoshitoshi worked during a time of transition in Japan from the Edo to the Meiji periods, when many societal norms were in flux and influences from outside Japan increased dramatically. These transitions can be periods of intense artistic production but also of harsh societal challenges. Have the changes we have seen in Los Angeles in the last 20 years impacted your work?

GF: The 1992 riots in L.A. were pretty intense for me and my family. That time was absolutely influential on my development as an artist. In Red Light District, there’s a direct reference to the fires that were occurring all over the city—a silhouette of the downtown cityscape on fire. That ultimate violation and defacing of the city, and the vandals destroying things and setting them on fire, created what was like a war zone, and it was happening on a scale that I could not have imagined before. The images that came out of the riots, the fires, the intensity of the entire situation, are something that you can’t help internalizing, and as with all of my past experiences, they make me who I am, and I draw on them, both consciously, and subconsciously, I’m sure.
We’ve seen so many changes in the last 20 years. In terms of how that directly affects my work, I think living in this time period has given an edge to my thoughts, and ultimately, to my work. Living through the riots and 911, has changed the way I think about the world, in terms of vulnerability, safety, life and death, and ultimately these things enter my work in one way or another. In my work, however, the wars are fought by samurai.

BB: The dynamic compositions of Japanese woodblock printing, and the rich vein of literary and folk stories depicted in many of them, have made them a perennial favorite with collectors. Yoshitoshi’s *New Forms of Thirty-six Ghosts* is an example. Can you talk about your first exposure to Japanese woodblock prints? Were you drawn primarily to the technical mastery or more to the narrative power of the prints?
GF: I would say the imagery is what first caught my attention. Especially the details and patterns that were depicted on the textiles. Then I started to look at the process involved in creating them. There are so many steps involved, and so many artisans needed to create ONE piece. On top of that, they were all at such a high level of craftsmanship. They used manual color separation, which required one block per color, and all images had to be in reverse, with perfect registration. Mind boggling! This gave me a huge respect for their work, and process.

I first saw woodblocks in person at the Tokyo National Museum, around 1998. There were twenty blocks for one print. I became fascinated seeing that group of blocks and what the artists had to go through to get a single image. Their methods were intriguing to me. The tales that were portrayed were also part of the draw. My dad was very into the stories behind these prints, whether it was samurai and bushidō [the code of samurai conduct], Buddhism, or something else. He was very well-read and excited to tell me the stories behind each print. I researched on my own later, to fully understand them. I’ve also looked at drawings by Japanese tattoo artists, which depict some of the old tales as well. Tattoos are like sumi-e [black ink paintings] and tattooists share similarities with the artisans involved in woodblock printing. Horiyoshi III is a third-generation tattooist, and the images collected in 100 Demons of Horiyoshi III are a great example.

BB: What about the idea that these prints, which are becoming rare and carefully gathered in collections, were originally for mass consumption? Some of them were produced and then treated as if they were almost disposable. That seems like a direct contrast to your paintings.

GF: That notion of irreverence is something I play around with in my work. Graffiti has always had such a bad reputation but it is now in galleries and museums. I think it’s a direct reference to how these prints have been transformed in the eye of the viewer, or collector/gallery/museum over the years. Ukiyo-e were so common in Japan; I’m sure they were used as we use newspaper today, to wrap our treasures in for protection. On a similar note to what is trash and what is treasure: when I first started using stencils, I would throw them away after I was finished with them. One day, my mom, who is a conservator, said to me, “This is art, what are you doing throwing them away?!” So, she developed a way for me to display them, and now they are an integral part of my body of work. It really is about perspective, and often, in regards to art, great works are not given any credibility for many years after the artist is gone.
BB: Classical woodblock prints were an extremely collaborative process, with artists such as Yoshitoshi having worked with block carvers, printers and publishers in order to realize a finished work. Can you elaborate on what role collaboration may play in your studio and street works?

GF: Collaboration plays a role in my larger works only. On those panels, I invite friends from my crews to come in and tag the backgrounds. I started doing this because I wanted to mimic how we work on the street. In abandoned train yards and tunnels, there were no-harassment zones where you could work without being bothered by anyone. The yard walls became heavily layered with graffiti, and I wanted to recreate a small piece of that within my paintings; the layer over layer over layer look. In my current work, the layers are more understated. The use of gold leaf adds another dimension, so when I get my friends to tag on the panels, I’m never sure what that last layer is going to look like. My friends never know either, of course, so it’s a surprise to them when they see the final piece as well.

Within the graf yards, you mostly had to be aware of gangs, but other than that, you could practice on a large scale. There were also big graffiti battles there, East versus West, the battle at Belmont, Slick-Hex battle, etc. It was a good time to be working, with the whole L.A. street scene that was happening then. All this was happening around 1986-1987. That period has definitely been a huge influence on me. The graffiti community was tiny then, everyone knew each other. Writers brought their black books, sketchbooks, and showed them laid out on the lawn in front of City Hall, and you could easily meet other writers. This was the beginning of a new world opening up for me, and I was able to start to experience the diversity of L.A.

BB: Japanese woodblock artists focused on the finished surfaces of the prints to varying degrees. Shading effects (bokashi), intentional inclusion of the wood grain of the block, and addition of materials like mica to inks were part of the arsenal of effects that they could use to shape the finished appearance. The prints were also made on a range of papers of standard, set sizes. These choices were challenging technical parameters that also had the power to completely change the effect of the work. In contemporary painting, how do technical parameters impact your work?

GF: In my case, my techniques differ from traditional ones, primarily because of my medium. Spray paint has been uncommon in “high” art practices,
until relatively recently. Using spray paint to create graffiti art is something you have to learn on your own, on the streets, and it is that very aspect that inherently adds another dimension to the practice of graffiti art. Maybe it’s edginess. The way spray paint is applied, for the sake of art making, is generally not taught in schools.

After starting at UNLV, I began using stencils to make my paintings, because I wanted a way to control my marks. I became familiar with stencils by using them in the graffiti yards. When working on a piece in the streets, you often have to make your marks very quickly, and stencils made that easier to do. I began to realize that stencils would allow me to make the marks I wanted to make in a more precise way on the surfaces of my paintings. As opposed to the time constraints of the graffiti yards, this time, they were used entirely for precision. Stencils allow me to still be free with the paint, but to also maintain control. I think that in this time of making art, each artist sets up their own parameters that they work within, and that can always change, depending on the concept. Our interests and backgrounds lead us to these parameters naturally.

In my practice, I’m always trying to hone my skills and become technically better and better, each time I break off a new painting. When looking at ukiyo-e, I always feel that I want to be able to be on par with the artisans who created them. Their mastery of the intricacies of woodblock printing and their ability to create such minute details is incredibly inspiring to me. In addition to studying and referencing the woodblock tradition, I also try to follow the screen tradition and make references to that within my work. This is something else I began while at UNLV. Screens are traditionally used within Japanese architecture, to suit structures in a practical way. Whether they are used as multi-panel screens or sliding door partitions, they are a large part of the language of everyday life in Japan. In my next painting, I guess you could say there is a double reference to these screens, as I am using my traditional set up of several panels, but also, what is being depicted on the surface are a row of sliding doors [shōji].
Gajin Fujita’s paintings resonate with particular meaning for those living on the edge of the Pacific Ocean. His ability to deftly navigate multiple worlds, whether in the continuums between contemporary and pre-modern art, Japan and America, or street and studio art, positions the paintings as the nexus for myriad experiences, both those of the artist and the viewer.

Fujita (b.1972) draws deeply from his study of ukiyo-e and other forms of Japanese art in his contemporary practice. Ukiyo-e were popular woodblock prints of the 17th to 19th centuries that featured images of famous beauties, kabuki actors and tales of Japanese history and folklore. Their dynamic compositions, colors and patterning continue to compel audiences centuries later. Fujita’s paintings share a continuity with these qualities of ukiyo-e, but the presence of street calligraphy and exquisitely-finished shining surfaces signal a distinction in both concept and intention.

This exhibition shares the range of Fujita’s work and his evolving practice over the last decade with visitors. Secondly, it functions in conversation and counterpoint to Masterpieces of Tsukioka Yoshitoshi, on view in the Changing Exhibition Galleries from May 18 to August 12, 2012. Fujita engages the Japanese woodblock print as one reference among many. By looking more closely at this historical source of contemporary inspiration, visitors not only gain a deeper appreciation for a rich artistic tradition and the captivating works it produced, but are also able to better discern the unique expression of Fujita’s paintings.

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