

In New York City Max Gimblett has created a floating world where he works with the tension between excess and restraint, movement and stillness. Words by DORITA HANNAH, photographs by KERRY BROWN.

 n Max Gimblett's New York studio stands a simple sculptural form honed from bird's-eye maple. A closer inspection reveals it as a small cabinet with secret drawers within which lie death-heads fashioned by jeweller, and fellow New Zealander, Warwick Freeman. Each tray opens to reveal another skull crafted from paua shell, mother-of-pearl, lead, burnt cow bone, driftwood, tortoiseshell and hand-beaten silver. The grinning silhouettes seem to float in the interiors of each compartment just as the work itself hovers between furniture design, sculpture and jewellery. This "Spirit Box" is like a miniature version of the larger environment of the artist's studio that unfolds images, objects, books, ideas and words, floating like gifts for the eye. It is a space within a space within a space within a space.

Many years ago I consulted the I Ching which suggested developing a "still centre" while all about "the storm rages". This pithy advice has continued to haunt me, especially in New York where one is confronted daily by the exhilarating, disturbing tempest of contemporary urban life. Within his Lower Manhattan studio Gimblett has been rising to the challenge of balancing inner and outer worlds, through influences of Eastern and Western art and philosophy, utilising painting, sculpture, drawing, bookmaking, printmaking and ceramics.

Manhattan has altered radically since 1972 when Gimblett and his wife Barbara (a professor of performance studies at New York University) moved there. As he says, it has gone from "feeling like a small village of artists, to a giant metropolis, from a stream to an ocean".

For 26 years they have lived on the

Bowery, a mile-long boulevard connecting Chinatown with the East Village and separating Little Italy, to the west, from the fast-gentrifying Lower East Side. Originally a farm road, it has undergone many transformations since the 17th century and claims a colourful history through associations with immigration, entertainment, flophouses, drugs and prostitution.

It is also a street associated with artists. Film-maker Jim Jarmusch and actor Willem Dafoe are celebrated local residents and, only a year ago, the late Quentin Crisp could be seen strolling the Bowery and lingering in its cafes. The area has also been the stomping ground for New York visual artists such as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Adolph Gottlieb and Brice Marden. And to the west in Greenwich Village, once lived Gimblett's beloved mentor and close friend, New Zealand artist Len Lye, who died in 1980.

Today the Bowery trades in equipment for New York's restaurant industry and is animated by stainless steel, copper and glass goods constantly on the move. These objects clutter the sidewalk and gleam in the daylight, pre-empting a world three storeys above the street, where Gimblett's alchemical paintings, layered with resin, polymers, metals and gilt, catch light from the west windows of his studio.

His rent-stabilised loft is luxuriously spacious in a city where high rents are forcing artists off the island. Within its 465 square metres are two large spaces. Barbara's workplace, on the quiet side of the building, is overflowing with thousands of books, lining the walls and stacked in piles. Babel lies here amid the millions of pages and towers of publications, but this world of words is systematically ordered and classified.

These words filter into Max's studio

which contrasts with the library as a sparse open space of white. It is, however, a textured space with its whitewashed brickwork, thickly speckled floor and curving vaulted ceiling. Traces of incense hang in the air and music is always playing. Today it's the soft chanting of Cambodian nuns. On past visits it has been Nick Cave crooning his dark hymns or the percussive Tom Waits wailing rich and discordant. Music is an important part of Gimblett's working environment, helping him shift compositional modes. He selects what is appropriate for the moment of making. Music therefore becomes part of the work itself.

The studio is a place of discipline within which nothing is static. Rows of paintbrushes and plastic pots are arranged on the central work bench. Below this surface hundreds of works on-paper are filed in drawers. A sampling of these treasures include books in progress on handmade paper, dream-diaries from as far back as 1963, and sheet after sheet of calligraphic drawings, referred to by the artist as "dancing ink". He uses the environment itself as a living canvas, moving objects around and changing paintings daily.

He rolls away a large portion of wall to reveal a storage room for his paintings. These sculptural pieces take the shape of essential forms; circle, oval, square, fan, ziggurat and quatrefoil, their surfaces suggesting volume through metallic skins, thick glazes and layers of paint. They are works that are the result of direct bodily action, through gestures where paint and ink is brushed, thrown, dripped, poured or danced onto the surface of the prepared canvas stretchers and wood panels.

Gimblett, who professes to be a "physical painter", paints and draws with his whole body, a body he

disciplines through a daily work regime in order to minimise the "wobbles" in his work. His process is focussed, intense and intuitive as he performs the work using breath, body and concentration. All of this is presided over by the figure of a black quartz-stone Buddha from the 3rd century BC, which for Gimblett is the generating force of the house.

He speaks of working in the "mad monk tradition": talking to him is like talking to an eastern sage. His statements are circular and open-ended, including notions of karma, meditation, sacred geometry, tantric forms and painting in



Top sequence:
Calligraphic Ink
Dancing - from loaded
to unloaded brush Max
Gimblett executes a
"one-shot drawing",
created in a matter of
moments, seeking "all
Mind/no Mind".

the third person. He also recognises the influence of European traditions and 20th-century American artists on his development. However, like the calligraphic Zenga artists of Japan's Edo period (16th-19th centuries), he is not interested in the canons of style or taste. He is an instinctual artist whose work troubles the boundaries of artistic disciplines and whose collaborations further confound and open up these limits. He also remains connected to New Zealand and Auckland where he spent his "barefoot childhood".

Currently he is illustrating two limited edition books, collaborating





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Museum, to which he has donated 90 drawings. He is preparing for six upcoming exhibitions in New York, San Francisco, Brisbane and Auckland over the next two years, which will include books, drawings, sculpture and paintings.

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both spirits. The lines, placed with such economy and precision, are whimsical and direct, speaking of an interior and exterior existence.

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with poets John Yau and Alan Loney. He is also the subject of an artist's monograph by Wystan Curnow and John Yau as well as an exhibition catalogue for the Queensland Art Museum, to which he has donated 90 drawings. He is preparing for six upcoming exhibitions in New York, San Francisco, Brisbane and Auckland over the next two years, which will include books, drawings, sculpture and paintings.

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his wife, soon to be archived within a drawer, seem to encapsulate the essence of his life-project. With simple calligraphic brush-strokes he has captured both faces, both personalities, both spirits. The lines, placed with such economy and precision, are whimsical and direct, speaking of an interior and exterior existence.

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