

TALKING WITH MAX GIMBLETT

AT HIS NEW YORK STUDIO, SEPTEMBER 1999

As a New Zealand-born curator, I have interviewed Max Gimblett on a number of occasions about his work. This particular opportunity came about when it was decided to select a comprehensive collection of his drawings (and a small number of prints) as a proposed donation to the Queensland Art Gallery. Outstanding examples of his works on paper were selected to reflect/demonstrate the development of his career. Although the earlier conversations about his practice are paralleled here in certain respects, fresh observations relating to the task at hand came into focus during this interview.²

Anne Kirker: Max, it's something like day eight and we've selected a diverse range of really excellent works on paper that have loosely been designated 'drawings'. They cover most of your output to date. To begin with building a commentary around them, shall we commence with the New York context and the way that abstraction starts happening in your work? There is the bar imagery within a colour field; two bars which become one bar, in time. Could we talk about the development of this? Why use that particular motif? Perhaps we should go back even further and talk about the shifts from figuration to abstraction in your work, and vice versa?

Max Gimblett: My student phase was an attempt to digest 'meaning' in painting, so it was a way of locating myself in art history. I started with the European abstractionists like Manessier as a model, in Toronto in 1964 and then in San Francisco the following year. I shifted to Bill de Kooning and the specific light of the Pacific. After a period I started doing portraits and it gave me the licence to stare at people and scrutinise. I located myself in the School of Paris around the turn of the century – Cézanne, Picasso and van Gogh.

A.K.: So, in other words, during the brief time you were at the San Francisco Art Institute, you rebelled against the main stylistic menu?

M.G.: Yes, I think it was more that I was attracted to the life force. It was what ever turned me on at the time in a very subjective way; a lot closer to the life force than it was to any idea of the academy.

A.K.: You largely independently put yourself to school by doing portraiture. This is the classic mode of learning, isn't it?

M.G.: Yes. I'm an autodidact – I taught myself but also put myself in a position to be taught. Arshile Gorky used to copy Picasso, and he said something like 'if Picasso drips I drip'. I tried to train myself in some classical, and therefore meaningful, structural manner. Then, to my horror and dilemma, I discovered you couldn't train yourself in all periods of art, so you actually had to dive in somewhere and start painting. So I dived in with de Kooning, having earlier done the European abstractionists, and then found myself doing, say, Cézanne and van Gogh. So I did all that jumping around, and found myself marrying Hockney with Indian Moghul miniatures. Previous to that, I'd had six months taking on Frank Stella's black painting position. So the point was to get to the 'idea' somehow or other. I thought, maybe I could locate myself as being an immigrant from New Zealand in America. I had my eye on the School of New York after the School of Paris – that seemed to be the main point.

A.K.: Two drawings we've selected for the Gallery indicate a further artist of interest in your early student years – Miro. How did this occur? Was it another case of casting around?

M.G.: Yes, I certainly think there's the influence of Miro in those drawings. All the time I was with Pollock and de Kooning, Miro was a factor in terms of surrealism and the vitality of his calligraphic line. I don't see very much art now; I've always felt that whatever I saw influenced me so subjectively.

A.K.: To me, this drawing (*Untitled* 1968, cat.3) also defines a sense of 'dualism', through very clearly defined zones of black and white?

M.G.: I respond to high contrast. You build with repetition and contrast and I've got to say that it is a fact for me that all workings of the mind are dualistic. Mind is dualistic in and of its nature. Silence isn't, but Mind is.

A.K.: At the time you were drawing this particular image, were you investigating Jung, or did this come later?

M.G.: Having been introduced to Freud's writings in London in the early 1960s, I discovered the work of Carl Jung in San Francisco in the mid 1960s. Looking at this drawing, I think of my discomfort at the time, even despair. There was quite a bit of awareness of nature/culture as a dualism, of self and the other, of myself as the lone artist and the culture at large, of a person with very little formal training. In 1967 I started making twice-yearly Greyhound bus trips to New York to see painting.

A.K.: What do you remember seeing in New York?

M.G.: I saw Stella's black paintings; I also saw a drawing that he wrote on diagrammatically, of how he got himself to that position. I made a jump from de Kooning to Stella. But it's not all as clean as this, you know.

A.K.: However, in terms of motif, what emerges from the very early abstract oil-pastel drawings (such as *Studio group study no.2* 1975, cat.7, illus. p.28), in terms of motif, is the sense of the window or 'frame within a frame'. Also, the colour is saturated.

M.G.: In Bloomington [Indiana], I looked out an open window and painted half the window as a framing device. I asked myself what was out the window? All I found was colour, in other words, feelings. The window is a threshold where form and colour interchange.

A.K.: In your studio, we're looking now at a black ink drawing from 1976 (*The Bachelard suite no.22* 1976, cat.10, illus. p.30), which suggests the beginnings of the calligraphic impulse in your work. Is that right?

M.G.: Yes, the calligraphic ink drawings began in San Francisco in 1965 and certainly continue from there. By 1972, I was painting in New York and was a member of a critique group – exposed to 30 or 40 painters, very intensely. Seeing what other people were doing. I entered the Cunningham Ward Gallery and showed with John Walker, Lynton Wells, Ross Bleckner and Alan Cote, among others. My critique group included David Reed and Ron Janowich. There was a lot of discussion in cafes and bars, and studio visits. I was learning

a lot. I had been trying to centre myself since the ceramics days in the early 1960s. My ceramic bible was M.C. Richards's book *Centering*. I was trying to get to an essential form. I'd spent a childhood in the Auckland Museum looking at Maori Taonga, Japanese pots and Buddha figures. I didn't differentiate between American gesture painting and Asian calligraphy.

A.K.: Now when I look at this drawing from 1976, with its tall scroll-like structure, it seems not to be intended as a preparatory work or after a particular painting; rather, it lives on its own, unlike the oil pastels and the 'bar' drawings.

M.G.: In these years, the colour works seem to be close to painting, and the inks aren't. They're a drawing impulse. A lot of the inks are stand-alone works.

A.K.: Now, about the drawings relating to specific paintings – do they precede or come after?

M.G.: Both.

A.K.: And the motif?

M.G.: The archetypal shape/motif has its emphasis in poetics, in metaphor and the importance of 'naming'. The motif tells you about cultural location. In my painting, shapes are symmetrical; they generate from a structure that reveals itself from the centre out, at a steady pace.

A.K.: We have been looking at the rectangle with two bars which start at the margins of the extreme edges and then move in and become one. Could you explain that process?

M.G.: I was painting the space between people. In 1977–78, there was a reduction occurring. I went from about seven-colour paintings to one-colour paintings, and I shifted to light-generated works – same pigment, but two mediums, gloss and opaque.

A.K.: The other thing that happens with the drawings is that many of them start developing a pencil line that extends along the lower edge of the field; then what happens is that the central field drops in gravity on the sheet of paper (*Buddha* 1980, cat.28, illus. p.34).

M.G.: That pencil line is the 'ground of being'. Gravity is inherent in the paint. In the theatre of the paper space, everything is expressive. I want the drawing to be some mysterious object of the life force.

A.K.: *Tantric suite 31 – with Burgoine Diller in mind* 1977/78/91 (cat.16, illus. p.56) is a transitional drawing begun in 1977 and completed in 1991, and can be read as a summary of your motifs. Tell me about this.

M.G.: The circle and triangle inside the square arrived in 1977. As soon as the square arrived from a generalised rectangle, I had the possibility of having an image that was at one with its support. I found a 70-inch square, which was Le Corbusier's 'modular man'. The main structure in the square is the 'X'. That is its strength. And then there is a Greek cross that is also the four directions. These are lines of force.

A.K.: When did the triangle first arrive? (e.g. *874 Broadway* 1974, cat.5, illus. p.29)

M.G.: The triangle arrived in the 1970s. It was Barney Newman's Jerico and Sengai's Universe. The most important book to me that I began with was Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art*. The triangle is prominent in this book. It stands for aspiration. It's the movement upwards. It is a sailboat as well. As an only child, my family was a triangle. A symbol for the journey of one's life – three comes just before four, the 'quaternity'.

A.K.: This work-on-paper with triangle motif (*Silence* 1982-83, cat.39, illus. p.42) employs metallic pigments. Why metallic pigments?

M.G.: Early 1980s. Mid-life transformation at 46 years old! I was given internally the stuff of alchemy – gold, silver, copper, black, red, white, green. Tremendous eruption at mid life, and this is one of the very few drawings that has survived from a whole year where I didn't paint. And that is the transition from geometric, spiritual colour paintings to a loose, wet treatment of the motif in the quatrefoil shape. This is a return to de Kooning and drawing in paint (*The Bronze Age* 1987, cat.62, illus. p.44).

A.K.: Now, looking at the range of papers you use, how important is the support to you? (*Heaven's Garment* 1993, cat.74, illus. p.52)

M.G.: Well it's one of the most important things for my drawing impulse. Actually, the paper chooses me; I simply participate. It is equal to the ink. I collect papers on my travels and from David Aldera at New York Central Supply Co. I have hundreds of different papers in my drawers. Collecting paper is like collecting cultures and traditions. I think of mulberry paper from Japan made by a master. Each sheet of mulberry is different. I'm also very aware of the surface light in the paper, and it's a question of seeing it and accepting what is there, trying to respond to it in a sensitive manner. Of course, paper has a particular scale. This comes from the paper-maker and the mill, and some of those scales are quite intriguing – the square, the long horizontal, the tall vertical, the circle. With shaped paper, I've already moved a long way towards my statement before I have even begun with wetness and mark making. Papers have an enormous range of edges, the deckle is crucial, the watermark is often intriguing. Some papers are embossed. I once got to buy some of Robert Motherwell's papers; I did some of my best inks ever on that paper because I felt I was working with Motherwell, certainly working in a tradition highly influenced by him.

A.K.: In adding ink or some other pigment to the support, there are obviously mentors or precursors for you.

M.G.: Oh yes, I get inspired, and – in no particular order of introducing them – I've been immensely inspired by Sengai and many other great Asian masters (including Islamic), and by the calligraphic gestures of Jackson Pollock, de Kooning and Robert Motherwell. When I first settled in New York in 1972, I met Len Lye, who was to become my main teacher. His drawing on film was an enormous influence in my action-orientated calligraphy.

A.K.: With the calligraphic gesture, how did it initially emerge? (e.g. *Bridge* 1979, cat.19, illus. p.31)

M.G.: I began with loose gestural marks in 1964. The following year, calligraphy on paper began as a method 17

M.G.: To me that wasn't crucial. I was struck by the notion of silence. In the non-verbal, in silence and meditation, you have utter freedom. It is about expressing this enormous thing that you're feeling and the impossibility of that. If you are a painter, you utilise the conventions of painting. And a piece of paper is this moveable plane that is part of the whole drawing tradition. Even if you make your own paper, you still have to designate an edge. When you're in silence, it is as though forever, never dying, but then you've got to come back to the body, so that's where the motif and support get together. How do you suggest immense freedom to somebody, to yourself, someone else? How do you represent it? How do you even begin to compose it or get it ready to be allowed to happen? So there are limitations. One of the ways I tried to handle the conventions of the support was to shape the canvas. I didn't accept that a painting was necessarily a rectangle. I resisted that notion, as others have.

A.K.: Earlier, you mentioned being willing to accept the lessons of a master like Sengai, and using them in your own grammar. You're prepared to take the canon he represents and move it forward.

M.G.: Yes.

A.K.: Now to the skull motif. How did that happen? What does it mean? (e.g. *This is my brother Spine, in whom I am much pleased* 1998-99, cat.96, illus. p.55)

M.G.: It means bone. It means structure. It means what is under the skin. It means what we all share. I don't find the skull morbid; I find it very uplifting. In the history of painting, of course, it is a central motif. In Zen, it is a motif of meditation. It's like a rock.

A.K.: The skull gets merged with the quatrefoil. It also gets embedded in the egg form in the drawing *Karma* 1989/93 (cat.65, illus. p.46), and sometimes in a labyrinth; it gets merged with the hand.

M.G.: Yes, these are all archetypal symbols.

A.K.: Moving the commentary again, let's talk about your collaborations with poets – John Yau, Robert Creeley and Lewis Hyde.

M.G.: I read poetry as a boy – D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and Rilke were, and are, my poets of inspiration. Poets have said the things that I want to say visually to myself and others. Now, the fact that I've been allowed to work with John Yau, Bob Creeley and Lewis Hyde is one of the great honours of my life.

A.K.: And, of course, the poets don't necessarily talk in narrative terms. They write symbolically, in metaphorical terms, about feelings, emotions.

M.G.: Yes, poetry is whole; it's complete to me. My voice is this body of drawings covering 30 years of activity. It is very stimulating to work with these poets, as the textual and visual voices intermingle. With John Yau, he and I investigate the alien and the non-human and the energy of being. John is the poet I collaborate with constantly. We paint and write together and, through Jade Studio, have published twenty one-of-a-kind books; so far, we've collaborated on over a hundred works on paper.

A.K.: It seems to me that when you collaborate with Yau, you are given licence to plumb other sides of

your creativity and personality. For instance, there is humour in these collaborations. What do you say to that?

M.G.: What's so fantastic about the collaboration is the give and take, the back and forth, the before and after. There is a brevity to it because its poetry. I have an utter amazement about what John writes in the space of the page, the text's spatial location, where the direction is, and where it is going to (*Gimblett/Yau collaboration no.1* 1997-98, cat.78, illus. p.27 and *Gimblett/Yau collaboration no.2* 1997-98, cat.79, illus. p.27). It is an utterly refreshing and passionate experience.

A.K.: Let's mention now the journals that you've kept for many years and the way that image is integrated with text. Tell me about them.

M.G.: Yes, I've kept journals since the early 1960s, the first two when I was a studio potter in Toronto. I've got 40 or 50 journals that have a wide range of content. I travel with them. I guess the sense to the journals is that there is nobody looking over my shoulder. They are not censored; they are private. Early on in my searching, quite a lot of despair is recorded, and other people's notebooks, like those of Albert Camus, helped me a lot. Exposing a full range of very inner experiences, the journals carry my humility. They keep me honest.

A.K.: How often do you go back into the journals. How often do you reflect on what you recorded in the past?

M.G.: All the time. I go back into them all the time, embellishing and adding. I have no set dates. The journals, like the papers, are collected from all over the world, with different feelings to them. I take them to seminars and learning situations, like the Jung Foundation seminars. The journals have themes, they have repetitions, and in some cases they record dreams I've had. Sometimes they have poems. The journals are mobile and transportable, and not easily relinquished. They are turning into an opus in their own right.

NOTES

- 1 Anne Kirker, Head of International Art, Queensland Art Gallery.
- 2 See, for instance, 'Max Gimblett's works-on-paper', Wystan Curnow in conversation with Max Gimblett, *Art New Zealand*, no.10, Winter 1978, pp.26-7; 'Gimblett reflects: Anne Kirker in conversation with Max Gimblett', *Eyeline*, no.35, Summer 1997-98, pp.14-17.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Double page 'Home' from Journal 1989-; Double page 'The Expatriate' from Journal 1989-; Double page 'Other Room' from Nepal Journal 1995-; Double page from Nepal Journal 1995-
(Photographs by Anthony Fodero)