

# THE TRANSITION FROM THREE TO FOUR

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## IDENTITIES

To locate Max Gimblett in the world one might begin by noting that he was born in 1935 in New Zealand. But that is a simplification of what is in fact a more complex location. In both these coordinates – time and space – there are major displacements in Gimblett's work which invest it with an inner complexity that is often hidden by the studied simplicity of its surface.

Gimblett went through adolescence and early adulthood in the period when American Abstract Expressionism was the dominant form of Modern art, yet he was not chronologically a member of that generation. Franz Kline, for example, was born in 1910; Jackson Pollock in 1912; Phillip Guston and Ad Reinhardt in 1913; Robert Motherwell in 1915 – and so on. Gimblett was twenty years or so younger than these pioneers of American Modernism who, now seen historically, seem to assume gigantic proportions. Closer to Gimblett in time (to confine this discussion for a moment to Americans, for reasons I will come to) are Larry Rivers, born 1923 and Robert Rauschenberg (1925). Among his more exact contemporaries are Jim Dine (born 1936), James Rosenquist (1933), Andy Warhol (1930), and Ed Ruscha (1937). In other words, in terms of American art history, Gimblett is of the generation of the Pop artists rather than the Abstract Expressionists. Yet perhaps because of originating in a part of the world – the South Pacific – which is burdened with little historical mandate in the western sense, Gimblett has felt free to move about in history and has used whatever parts of it his inner purposes needed; chronologically he might be described as on the edge between Modernism and post-Modernism, and though he sees himself, correctly, I think, as primarily a Modernist artist, he has chosen, like a post-Modernist, to redefine and recombine historical elements from different times and places as his personal, rather than historical, mandate decrees. These elements may be eastern or



western, ancient or modern, as the somewhat undefined situation of New Zealand allows.

Gimblett's spatial coordinate involves even more displacement than his sliding scale of time. As a youth he left New Zealand before the realisation that he was to be an artist had fully dawned. In 1956 he went to London, to which he returned in 1959; in 1962 he moved to Toronto, then, in 1965, to San Francisco, and finally, after brief residences in Bloomington, Indiana, and Austin, Texas, in 1972 he moved to New York, where he lives still. In other words, he has lived in New York through the 1970s, 80s, 90s, and the early 2000s, a period when New York was still arguably (perhaps not unquestionably, but arguably) the centre of art historical ferment and change.

In Toronto from 1962–64 he worked as a ceramicist (already, perhaps, drawn to the Far East and antiquity), an activity that awakened him to various materials and their interactions with both ambient light and each other. Then in San Francisco he attended the School of the Art Institute of San Francisco, where he experimented with a series of painterly styles generally rooted in Abstract Expressionism, which was still dominant in the art schools and would remain so for several more years. He especially acknowledges the influences of Robert Motherwell, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and, not as significantly, Barnett Newman, along with somewhat less gigantic but still unquestionably authentic Modernist figures such as Burgoyne Diller and Mark Tobey. While he spends part of each year in New Zealand, and his background there remains a prominent part of his attitude and personality, over the years he understandably came to regard himself as more an American painter than a New Zealander.

Meanwhile there is another even greater displacement involved. Among Gimblett's widespread multiculturalist incorporations are, for example, various Asian and Asian-Pacific styles that would probably not have entered his work if he had grown up in, say, Chicago rather

than Auckland. The main Asian component in the oeuvre is the influence of the Zen painting tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries. It is not only the great painters of the Zen tradition Gimblett has long been drawn toward but also the particular Rinzai spirituality that lies behind some of them.

These displacements – both eastward and westward – did not cancel out Gimblett's identity as a New Zealander. In the 1970s he came under the influence of New Zealand artist Len Lye, who was living at the time in New York. Lye was always interested in a painterly approach to abstract painting, from the most free-wheeling forms of Surrealist abstraction in the 1930s to the 'Action Painting' of the New York School in the 1950s. His liking for 'doodling' and energetic brushwork informed both his films and his paintings. The spontaneity of his bodily movements was an integral part of his technique. Lye's influence encouraged the younger Gimblett to loosen up his style and involve it with sudden and intuitive bodily movements – almost a performative aspect. Gimblett was, in other words, becoming more of an Action Painter, but partly under the influence of his New Zealand countryman rather than exclusively American influences.

Another New Zealand artist who should be compared is Colin McCahon. McCahon's work, beginning in the 1940s but increasingly after 1962, frequently involved painting words, often biblical in origin, mostly in a simple legible script, in a style that is echoed in Julian Schnabel's word-paintings of the late 1980s (with texts based mostly on William Gaddis's *Recognitions*) and also resembles the work of certain so-called Outsider artists, some American (such as Clementine Hunter, William Hawkins, Sister Gertude Morgan, and others), some from South Africa and elsewhere. Many New Zealanders regard McCahon as their foremost national painter because of the uncanny sense of wholeness of being that his works after

1962 convey. Lye, in contrast to McCahon's pseudo-outsider tonality, may be described as New Zealand's first avante-garde artist. Gimblett once met McCahon, who died in 1987 and who is still more or less unknown in the West. (McCahon remarked to the mutual friend who had introduced them, 'He is an American.')

But Lye was his first teacher, oddly not in New Zealand but in the United States beginning in 1972, five years after the term Conceptual Art had been devised by Sol LeWitt. Gimblett's mature work began a few years later and may be described roughly as a combination of American Modernism with Zen tradition under the auspices of a New Zealand ethnicity.

Finally, in summing up these displacements, Gimblett identifies himself as a western Modernist artist, even an American Modernist, yet his work derives as much from influences of the Pacific Basin area where he grew up, though not specifically New Zealand-based influences. The influence of Zen, for example, seems natural to Gimblett, and carries with it an echo of Asia's proximity to New Zealand, but also can be traced partly to American artists with West Coast connections such as Clyfford Still and Mark Tobey. Gimblett has made a harmonious post-war synthesis of America and Japan. The influence of the Japanese painter Gibbon Sengai is at least as present as that of American artists and Gimblett often approaches the pictorial surface – whether paper or canvas – with the sudden warrior-like spirit of Rinzai Zen. Indeed, it might be reasonable to regard him as a global artist, gathering influences and elements from many sources.

Despite this multiculturalism inherent in his oeuvre, Gimblett has not been conspicuously involved in colonial and post-colonial issues. As a white New Zealander he symbolises the colonialist tradition, but his work, like his heritage, contains both East and West, and the eastern element is not especially bound up with New Zealand's colonial history. By way of



contrast, New Zealand artist Gordon Walters began to incorporate Maori motifs into his works in the 1940s and by the 1960s had developed a synthetic style that combined elements of Maori art with elements derived from the European Modernism of Mondrian, Sophie Tauber-Arp, and Victor Vasarely. Two great differences can be observed. First, Gimblett has been far more drawn into American Modernism than that of Europe – though he acknowledges respect for, and some influence from, European Modernists such as Malevich. Second, he has not conspicuously dealt with the particular New Zealand heritage of post-colonial multiculturalism, the troubled relationship between the Maori and the Pakeha (European-derived) traditions. Still, his work remains multiculturalist. Japanese painters from Gibbon Sengai (1750–1837) to Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) and Yamaoka Tesshu (1836–88) mean as much to him, and figure in his work as much as, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock and Mark Tobey.

New Zealand, in terms of the map of the world, is roughly halfway between Japan and the United States. From his position of origin, Gimblett has reached out to both these distant traditions and between them has found a middle way. Other elements from foreign cultures have also entered his work, though less prominently. These include, according to one published list, 'biblical and Celtic myths... Tantra, Koans, Chinese and Islamic calligraphy, Japanese ceramics, and Jungian psychology'<sup>1</sup> – to which one might add Maoritanga, Greek mythology, heraldry, and a host of other things.

## SHAPES

Another factor that contributes to the inner complexity of Gimblett's synthesis has to do with ancient art. Modern artists in general see their work within the Modernist context pretty exclusively, not especially concerned with possible

roots in antiquity. When the Primary Shapes movement, for example, became temporarily dominant, it was regarded by its practitioners as a brand-new beginning for the composition of the image. Yet the emphasis on primary shapes is derived from roots in antiquity – primarily certain cultures of the Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages. Though perhaps less consciously than its Japanese and American aspects, another aspect of Gimblett's work involves archetypal shapes that were formed and defined in those very early ages. The paintings of Gimblett's early period – up till the late 1970s but continuing with less constancy thereafter – usually involved rectangular supports, as western easel paintings in general have done since the Renaissance. In relating to a rectangular picture it is as if one were looking out a window at a *veduta* or view, perhaps a landscape that seems to be on the other side of the wall one sees through – as Leon Battista Alberti described the situation in his *de Pictura* in 1436. This is the most common and hence least conspicuous pictorial shape. One is so accustomed to it that it merely seems natural. The shape does not enter into the work as another pictorial element, or as a sculptural aspect, but functions merely to support the picture, which is what one is looking at rather than the support itself. Gimblett soon began to vary the shape of the support, rendering it an active element in the picture or, to put it slightly differently, rendering the picture into a kind of sculpture – an object whose shape defines its nature. Gimblett's practice evolved through a period of work with circles and circular supports. Finally, in 1983, in an experience which the artist has called his 'mid-life transformation',<sup>2</sup> Gimblett concluded several years of formal searching for alternatives to the rectangle by finding the quatrefoil.

The quatrefoil is defined by the *OED* as 'a compound leaf or flower consisting of four (usually rounded) leaflets or petals radiating from a common centre.' Most of Gimblett's works in this format are geometrised, meaning

that the petals of the flowers are not merely rounded in an organic sense but are composed of four perfect circles that intersect at a single point. It is a format which virtually no other modern artist has emphasised. It also has very deep roots in antiquity as an expression of a way of viewing the universe, which is presented as a vast four-petalled flower, the four petals representing the four quarters of space or other quaternities. This is a religious concept that probably goes back to the Neolithic Age – the era of the worship of vegetation and especially the flowering stage of vegetation.<sup>3</sup> At some point, perhaps in the Chalcolithic Age – in the Old World roughly the fourth millennium BC – in the work of artists of the northern regions of Mesopotamia, specifically the two highly advanced Chalcolithic communities of Halaf and Samarra, the flower icon was reduced to its fundamental underlying element – the centre-plus-quaternity configuration of which it is one variant.

The centre-plus-quaternity (which is also called the mandala configuration) was the earliest exercise of human mental power to make a picture of the whole universe at once, both in terms of time and of space. It survived in the mandala format in India and as the basic configuration of the compass – a centre surrounded by the four quarters of space, North, South, East, and West – and of the clock – a centre surrounded by four quarters of time. It was the original human way of ordering both space and time and it still dominates our conceptions of them (though the digital clock face may change that). In addition the picture contains the idea of subjectivity as the defining power; the centre seems to mark the presence of a subject who, from the central position, stands and regards the world round about. The subject, or individual human, stands as it were at the centre of his universe and surveys it as its lord and master. It is in other words not only, like the Neolithic flowering universe, a picture of what happens outside of us, it includes us. When Sargon of Akkad, about 2350 BC, first expressed the idea of an



individual dominating the whole universe, he called himself the Lord of the Four Quarters. It was he (or subjectivity in general) that stood in the dominating position at the centre, and his feeling of being lord and master is based upon his ability to organise the world around himself, to impose order upon it through an exercise of subjectivity.

In our time the quatrefoil, like archetypal icons in general, has lost much of its ideological content and – as in the chivalry of the French Middle Ages – has come to be used as a mainly decorative motif. But its basic if somewhat hidden ideology speaks of a self-conscious subject surrounded on all sides by quadrants of space and time. Gimblett's choice of it gave his work an implication of universal meaning in a form essentially separate from other forms used in Modern art. It was a new field to develop in his own way, defining both himself and his work as his grasp of the quatrefoil developed.

In the mandala configuration the centre-with-quaternity (often in a lotus form that relates to the quatrefoil) is usually surrounded by a circle. This has to do with the fact that to have shape and order, something must be finite and enclosed, but also with the fact that the circle is innately infinite – without beginning or end,

or where every point is both beginning and end. So the mandala configuration presents the finite world in the midst of an indefinable infinity. The quatrefoil, the softest and most flowery of the major variants of this motif, reiterates this relationship four times – adding both more references to infinity and more references to the finity of the square. This area of thought is often referred to under the rubric of the ancient geometrical problem called squaring the circle.

One of several geometrical problems defined by the ancient Greeks, this involves the construction of a square whose area is equal to that of a given circle. Early Greek geometers working with straight edge and compass regarded this as impossible with those tools, and modern mathematicians agree. Still, later Greeks devised a method using so-called higher curves, and the problem was solved algebraically in 1882 by the German, Ferdinand Lindeman. In any case, the phrase 'squaring the circle' has expanded its suggestiveness beyond this original technical meaning and has come to stand for a kind of spiritual challenge involving unifying different modes of cognition and feeling. All this is implied in the quatrefoil.

Jung, who was fascinated in a loose and non-mathematical way by the idea of the squaring of

the circle, and who has exercised a lot of influence on Gimblett, posits that 'the four directions and the four elements [are] a symbolical equivalent of the four basic elements of consciousness.'<sup>4</sup> The squaring of the circle then is the harmonious integration of the four basic elements of consciousness. But, after this definition emphasising the balance of the components, Jung proceeded to point out that 'the transition from three to four is a problem.'<sup>5</sup> To be more explicit, he explained, 'The incomplete state of existence is . . . expressed by a triadic system, and the complete (spiritual) state by a tetradic system.'<sup>6</sup> He calls more or less any symmetrical combination of square and circle the 'squaring of the circle',<sup>7</sup> not using the term in the exact sense of the ancient Greek geometers but in a looser sense involving ideas of spirituality. He sees this conjunction of square and circle as 'a rearranging of the personality. . . a kind of new centering.'<sup>8</sup> 'They express order,' he declares, 'balance and wholeness.'<sup>9</sup> He does not deal with the problem of obtaining shapes of equal area, but simply defines it as 'the form of a circle in a square or vice versa.'<sup>10</sup> According to this reading the quatrefoil represents a process of integrating different functions of the mind, from practical earth-measurement to access to the absolute, or transcendence.

*Ghosts, Demons and Dragons* – 2 1987/88  
1015 x 4825 mm (40' x 190') (triptych)  
acrylic polymer on canvas  
Chartwell Collection, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,  
Auckland, New Zealand





The circle, in Jung's view, represents the unconscious,<sup>11</sup> while the square 'is the quaternary form of the *lapis philosophorum*'<sup>12</sup> (the Philosopher's Stone). The quatrefoil, with its four circles symmetrically arranged around a centre, can be regarded as participating in the mystery of the squaring of the circle – as a possible shape for the Stone.

Gimblett has made several works based on the paintings of Sengai, the Zen painter of the 18th to 19th centuries about whom Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki wrote a book.<sup>13</sup> The particular work that is most relevant to the squaring of the circle, and thus to many of Gimblett's own works, is Sengai's black ink drawing *The Universe*, comprising three figures arranged horizontally from left to right: a square, a triangle, and a circle, each made with a single brushstroke. Several of Gimblett's works reproduce this sequence of shapes in a similar horizontal arrangement and in the same order. Some are drawings (like *Ghost Sengai*, 1990/95), some are painted triptychs which reproduce the three shapes not as representations but as shaped canvases, that is, sculptural presences (such as *Ghosts, Demons and Dragons – 2*, 1987–88), while in one case (*Sengai*, 1997) they have become three-dimensional solids.

Sengai's title, if indeed it is authentic, implies that these shapes are the building blocks from combinations and repetitions of which the universe is made up. A traditional Japanese interpretation of this painting is repeated word for word in Suzuki's book and at least half a dozen others. 'The circle-triangle-square', as Suzuki puts it, 'is Sengai's picture of the universe. The circle represents the infinite, and the infinite is at the basis of all things. But the infinite itself is formless. We humans endowed with senses and intellect demand tangible forms. Hence a triangle. The triangle is the beginning of all forms. Out of it first comes the square. A square is the triangle doubled. The doubling process goes on infinitely and we have the multitudinosity of things, which the

Chinese philosopher calls "the ten thousand things", that is, the universe.'<sup>14</sup>

There are other ways of interpreting this series of primary shapes. In one sense it seems the physical universe that is implied by the title, but the three shapes could as easily represent different modes of thought or understanding – that is, the mental universe. Traditionally the circle represents cyclicity – such as, say, the eternal-recurrence idea of time or history – but at the same time it represents cyclical forms of thought such as the idea found in Zen and other contexts that all modes of thought lead ultimately back to a beginning or ground zero. The line forming the circle never goes anywhere but back to its own beginning, endlessly, and thus can be called a symbol of infinity – whether infinite space-time or infinite consciousness.

The square traditionally is the basic iconograph of three-dimensional space – space with a centre and four directions, extended finitely. It similarly represents matter and the whole material realm. In psychological terms it relates to what in the slang of a not-so-distant bygone era might have been called 'square' types of thinking (somewhat as in Alan Watts's popular work of the 1960s, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*).

The triangle is somewhat less obvious. In terms of the spatial universe it can be seen as upright, indicating a pointing upward toward some kind of transcendence. Psychologically it may indicate different subjectivities bearing on different agendas – perhaps two subjectivities competing for control of a third, or perhaps three separate but interrelated subjectivities. In some sense it can be felt as a stage that mediates between the square and the circle. As such it relates to the traditional problem of squaring the circle. Suggesting that the triangle in Sengai's *The Universe* mediates the square and the circle is geometrically simplistic, but is based on the idea that if the number of lines involved in a figure such as a square is reduced the figure comes closer to the one-line construction of the circle.

So, as Jung understood, the triangle is the main problem. 'If the wholeness symbolised by the quaternity is divided into equal halves, it produces two opposing triads.'<sup>15</sup> Its wholeness is gone; it represents 'incomplete' existence because of the loss of the fourth element. Jung feels that the quaternity is the unconscious, and that when the archetype of quaternity moves across the line into consciousness, it leaves one of its four parts behind in the unconscious, 'held fast by the *horror vacui* of the unconscious.'<sup>16</sup> 'Thus there arises a triad which... constellates a corresponding triad in opposition to it'<sup>17</sup> – and thence the ten thousand things. There seems to be a rough (but only a rough) correspondence between Jung's analysis and that which Suzuki and others have fastened to Sengai's work.

A somewhat parallel idea to Sengai's representation of the universe by elementary geometrical forms is found in Plato's *Timaeus*, where a small number of three-dimensional shapes (the 'Platonic solids') are conceived as the totality of elements making up the order of the cosmos – an idea which seems to have come to Plato from the geometrical/metaphysical tradition of the Pythagorean school. There is not much similarity between Plato's list in the *Timaeus* and Sengai's three shapes, but the underlying structural idea is similar: that the universe can be broken down into a small number of figures ('primary shapes') that combine somewhat as the Four Elements have traditionally been regarded as capable of combining into any of the myriad of things.

Several of Gimblett's paintings are based on the format of concentric circles – such as *Zen*, 1980–85; *Echo*, 1990; and *The Wheel*, 1998 – in all of which the inner circle is made up of empty space, that is, it is a round hole in the centre of the surrounding circle. Others of Gimblett's works involving the format of concentric circles lack the central hole. In *Blue/Red – to Len Lye*, 1977, for example, the inner smaller circle is red while the large surrounding concen-



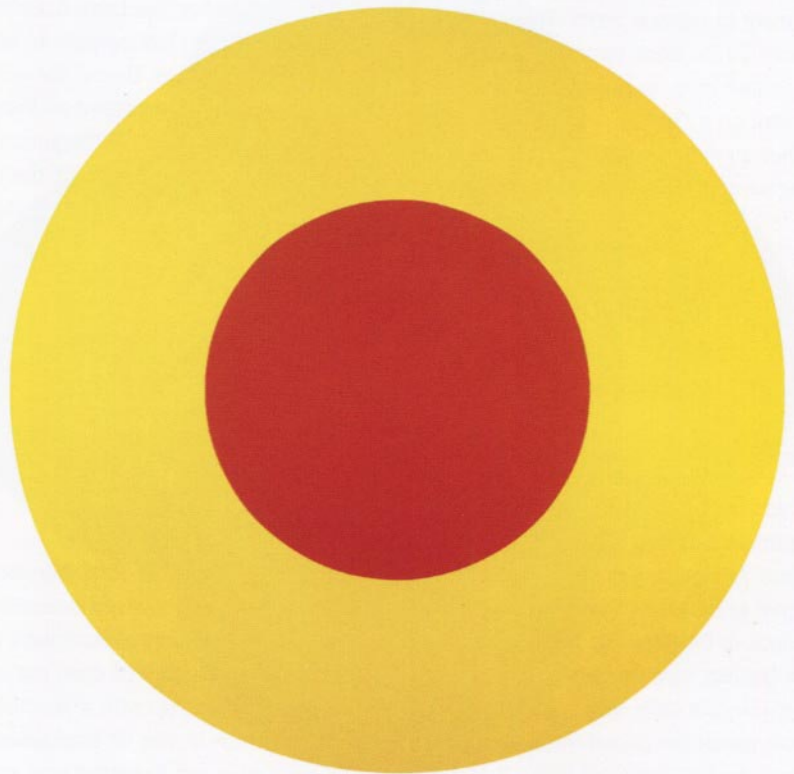
tric one is blue; in *Black/Red*, 1981, the inner circle is red and the outer concentric one is black.

Like the centre-plus-quaternity format, the format of two concentric circles is very ancient and possibly very meaningful. Andre Leroi-Gourhan<sup>18</sup> sees the two concentric circles as one of a variety of related iconographs for the reproductive organs of the Double Goddess, who presides over both begetting and perishing.

The works with the empty or hollow circular centres suggest a place which is indefinable yet somehow at the centre of it all. Something is implied about the place the painting itself comes from, where it passes from non-being into being. De Kooning is famously supposed to have remarked that 'there is a place where it happens' – meaning where the painting comes into being. This 'place' is evidently outside the ordinary space of everyday life (which might better be described as square); that is, it is a different space from that of ordinary life, a space that is Other. This formulation, as well as the hollow centres of the circular works, relates to Gimblett's koan-like saying, 'no mind/all mind'. It is the place which, in terms of ordinary consciousness, is vacant, yet in another sense accounts for everything, as in the Buddhist idea of emptiness. There is a quasi-religious sense behind this empty circle, a sense reflected in Gimblett's remark, 'You walk up to the altar and paint.'<sup>19</sup>

In terms of the black-ink drawings of the Zen tradition, a circle made with one stroke of the brush is known as an *enso* or a *mu* painting – the painting of nothing. The one-stroke painting or drawing is made quickly, without premeditation or reconsideration or revision. If it is perfect it becomes perfect in an instant. It represents the unity of the mind and the action, neither preceding and controlling the other but both arising spontaneously from the hollow center of *mu*. In the Zen tradition, and also in Gimblett's practice, a painting can be worked and reworked, sometimes over a period of months or even years. The no mind/all mind one-stroke black ink drawing, on the other hand, is to be done instantly

India 1980/81  
2030 mm (80") diameter  
oil and wax on canvas





and with no revision. It is a primal mark, a mark which is the trace of the beginning of everything – the first mark of the universe.

This Zen approach is similar to the Late Modernist practice called Action Painting and involves the negation of traditional modes of painting which are based on long-established conventions. In the twentieth century the conventions of different national artistic traditions around the world came to be set aside at different moments under the influence of the example of Action Painting. The moment comes when the artist decides to try to step completely outside his or her inherited set of conventions and simply make a primal mark, a mark that is not premeditated or learned but rises only from the present moment, not carrying the burden of the past on its back. A classical instance of this moment of transition was the formation of the Indian group called the Bombay Progressives in 1947, right after World War II, when old ways seemed outworn and a new Americanism seemed about to replace them. The artist Tyeb Mehta (born 1925) once remarked, 'It took courage, at that time, to pick up a brush, to make a mark on a canvas' – meaning a mark that was not an inherited icon or motif, a mark expressing what it feels like to be outside of all tradition, to be a lone individual bringing up an unknown mark from the unknown depths of one's own sensibility; to make a primal mark upon the blank sheet of nothingness. This was the lonely courage that the confrontation of tradition with Action Painting required – as once Pollock, when someone said, 'You're supposed to paint from nature,' replied, 'I am nature.'

Gimblett, as observed above, may be regarded as having made a synthesis of American Action Painting and Zen quick painting. There does indeed seem to be a significant relation between them. Pollock or De Kooning, not unlike the Zen quick-painter, may be regarded as having asserted mentally a state with nothing behind it, a state from which the primal mark could leap instantaneously. This does not mean that the

mark is unlike any the artist has previously made. The Zen painter, like Gimblett, might make hundreds or thousands of *ensos*, as Pollock, when he approached the empty surface before him on the floor and dripped loops of colour upon it, knew the arm motion of the gesture from hundreds of previous occasions – or as Gimblett has practised and re-practised what he calls his forehand and backhand gestures.

In the Cabalistic tradition of *zim-zum*, primal being is regarded as a totality or unity with no inner differentiation; then it withdraws from around its centre leaving an empty space in which a universe may arise. At that moment the empty circle at the middle of the painting awaits that first mark from which all later ones will grow or derive. In terms of Modern western painting Malevich used the circle as such a primal shape; similarly, Gimblett describes Kenneth Noland's target paintings as representations of the tantric ontology in which each level expands into a larger or more multifarious level – somewhat like Leroi-Gourhan's idea of the Magdalenian iconograph. In other cases (such as James Lee Byars) the emphasis on the circle may be regarded as Platonic (which means by implication Pythagorean). In that tradition the circle represents the unchanging perfection underlying the changing imperfection of the everyday world; above the level of the moon, says Aristotle, everything moves only in circles, whereas below that level, in the everyday world, things move erratically and unpredictably in an inexplicable way that springs out of the infinite web of causality.

## POETICS

Despite these connections with various cultures and ages, one should not overemphasise the iconographic aspect of Gimblett's work. It is meaningful indeed, but does not subsist by itself. It is mixed up with a sensibility-based poetics which is, like its iconography, distinctly his and, as is apt to be the way with poetics,

not always easy to put one's finger on. Some of his works, for example, such as *Jade* and *Buddha Amida*, both 1985, and *Chapel by the Sea*, 1986/87, employ all-over composition, which recognises no beginning and no end, no centre, no development from a primal mark. Its effect on the viewer is more of sensibility than construction. The surface is suspended in an inchoate state before it has hardened into symbolic forms that might be called an iconography. In *Fish – 2*, 1984, the combination of all-over composition with conspicuous dripping not only involves a hint of homage to Pollock, but adds to the sense of a poetics that is still flowing and seeking; it had not dried yet, like primordial life-forms in the early oceanic phase of the earth. In a different way *Zen*, 1996, is also somewhat pre-iconographic. Except for the inconspicuous implication of a quaternary, it is an appeal to pure sensibility. It has a sense, I think, of what Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, called 'intimate immensity'.<sup>20</sup> It is not that these elements of sensibility have no connection with the iconographic aspect of the oeuvre; it is that some works emphasise the one aspect more than the other.

A useful approach to this theme is suggested by Wystan Curnow's linkage of Gimblett with James Lee Byars. There are similarities in their poetics that are partly derived from the fact that both these culturally western artists were deeply influenced by Japanese tradition. The glaring differences in the poetics of their materials and surfaces involve nuances in how they received this Japanese influence. In Byars's case the main influence was one of the two originating creators of the Noh drama, Ze-Ami (or Seami) (1363–1444); in Gimblett's case it was the Zen painter Sengai (1750–1837). Though both were Zen-oriented, Ze-Ami, four hundred years earlier, was much closer to the pre-Zen religion Shintoism, characterised by a precious delicacy of mysterious images. He wrote of *yugen*, which means more or less 'what lies beneath the surface', illustrating it with images: 'When notes fall sweetly and flutter delicately to the



ear'; 'a white bird with a flower in its beak'; at both the beginning and end of the book a phrase is repeated three times: 'Deeply secret, deeply secret, deeply secret.'<sup>21</sup> Sengai, though by no means lacking delicacy, also infused his brush with a rugged strength and at times a deliberate parodic crudeness.

Another element of the Japanese tradition that had tremendous influence on both Gimblett and Byars is the *mu* painting, the zero or nothing painting mentioned before, a circular brush-stroke made quickly in a single movement and not revised – also called the *enso*. Yet in terms of the Action Painting aspect of the *mu* painting, Gimblett has made it a part of his practice, while for Byars not the making but the admiration of the *mu* was a part of his practice; his appreciation of the idea behind it *was* the work – but he didn't make them with his own hand. Gimblett, in contrast, long immersed in the tough warrior tradition of Rinzai, has made perhaps hundreds of one-stroke *ensos* with a hearty shout and an emphatic stamp of his foot.

Gimblett is more forthrightly Zen, even entitling some works by that word alone. For Byars the strangeness of Shinto ('deeply secret, deeply secret, deeply secret') was a way to avoid being in any tradition: it was too secret to call it a tradition. But Gimblett earnestly reveres and practises what he has come to understand as Zen painting. This in itself is a strong element in his poetics, but typically Gimblett complicates it by mixing in other forms of sensibility, without necessarily any iconographic intention. Sometimes the Zen element appears pure or isolated, as in *Transformation*, 1984, but more often it overlaps in some way with elements from western tradition, especially American Modernism. In for example *Black/Red*, 1981, one could think of a Suprematist work or a tantric work.

Gimblett's repeated emphasis on the circular format is another element of his poetics – in part a deliberate rejection of the square, albeit acknowledging that in some cases the circle lies within the square of the support. Circular

*Buddha Amida* 1985  
3050 mm (120") diameter  
acrylic polymer and metallic  
pigments on canvas  
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki,  
New Zealand





thought is far more to Gimblett's taste than rectalinity. It implies Vitruvian man inscribed within the circle. An ordinary dimension is 80 inches (2032 mm) in diameter. Somewhat larger than normal human size, it is nevertheless close and can embrace the human form in its extended Vitruvian position comfortably.

Yet another aspect of poetic sensibility that Gimblett and Byars share in part lies in their choices of materials, which in both cases go well beyond the ordinary materials of painting and sculpture. Byars favoured gold, gold-leaf, and tissue paper alongside traditional materials such as marble. (He never used paint and canvas.) Gimblett's use of materials yields even further to personal sensibility in its many nuanced varieties. 'Here,' in the words of Wystan Curnow, 'is an inventory. We have gold leaf and gesso; we have bole clay and plaster, pearlescent pigments, polyurethane, acrylic polymer, French vinyl and Plexiglas. And mirror glass. We have shellac, silica, sea-shells. Mother of pearl (gold-lipped, black-lipped). What is more we have cow bone, turtle shell, paua and epoxy resin; we have lacquer, pumice, silver, moon gold, copper and lead. We have inks from five countries, and yes, we've got kauri gum, we've got jade and we've got Japanese leaf.'<sup>22</sup> The 'inventory' is like an inventory not only of Gimblett's personal sensibility but also of his life, its various locations and the influences picked up in them, his feeling of closeness to Japan as well as to American Minimalism, and his feeling, in part derived from Zen, of an inner linkage between different realms of nature and forms of life. It is in part this vast array of both natural and artificial materials that combine to create what Gimblett has called *Temenos* – an ancient Greek word which (as Liddel and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon* puts it), signifies 'a piece of land that is sacred to a god: the precinct of a temple.' Gimblett's statement that when hanging his works, 'I experience *Temenos*... I feel whole,'<sup>23</sup> is not so far from Byars's declaration, 'I make atmospheres.'

## PAINTINGS

The diptychs composed of two equal-sized square panels hung side by side with their edges touching (such as *Concord* and *Current*, both 1999, *The Brush of Porfirio Didonna*, 1999/2000, and *The Brush of All Things*, 2001) serve not only as retinal or sensibility-based paintings but also underline the inner structure of Gimblett's whole oeuvre. Sometimes the relationship between the panels suggests an iconographic reading, as in *Concord*, where the left panel is a monochrome of oil-gilded red gold and the right panel is an *enso* on a paler ground. The *enso* as a painting of zero, of nothingness, roughly equals, in Buddhist terms, the Prajnaparamita idea of emptiness. The monochrome panel on the left shows nothingness or emptiness, while the right-hand panel indicates the concept iconographically. They may be interpreted as two forms of the same primal reduction to zero that according to much Buddhist thought underlies all apparent forms. Here the one-stroke circle is the 'primal mark'.

Other diptychs suggest the group of dualities to the resolution of which Gimblett's work is dedicated: between East and West, between meaning and sensibility, between expressiveness and geometry, and between Modernism and tradition. Usually the formal element (an *enso* or a similar form) occupies the right-hand panel, emptiness declares itself on the left. These paintings make an appeal that could be called minimalist (without the capital M) – but the emptiness theme is also dualistic, indicating what has been called fullness-emptiness, or the plenum-void. They are paintings that reside in silence yet from which, it is implied, all sound proceeds.

*Sky Gate*, 2003, is a quatrefoil 60 inches (1524 mm) in diameter. Here and in a handful

of other paintings (*Guardian*, 2000, *The Golden Flower*, 2001, and a few more) the inner structure of the quatrefoil – the four circles intersecting at one point – is brought clearly into the open, distinct from the monochrome ground. Usually in the quatrefoils Gimblett permits free handling of the ground, often with all-over patterning, but in *Sky Gate* the ground stays monochrome so the quatrefoil pattern can clearly distinguish itself from it. Insofar as the quatrefoil is a cosmogram, or symbol of the order of the universe, it is as if the universe decided in this one instance to mask the usual multiplicity of its surface so its inner structure could frankly declare itself. A moment later it may mask itself again with seemingly disordered inner turmoil, as in *Action Painting*, 1995, or all-over patterning that, as in *Blue Spirit*, 1997, implies extension beyond the edges into an infinite or indefinite expanse. The inner structure of *Sky Gate* is outlined in 'moon gold', the traditional association of gold with eternity suggesting that here we are looking at the inner order that never has changed and never will change.

Title and image together suggest that the ability to enter the sky – or, to enter heaven – depends on bringing four separate totalities into absolute and interlinked balance. The quaternity suggests the four elements or the four directions, or other aspects of totality that Jung has said are associated with the number four. Each circle is itself a totality, without beginning or end, or with both beginning and end everywhere; linked by the idea of quaternity they create or suggest a greater totality that encompasses them all. The whole structure is flower-like, and the petals of the circles may be seen as emerging from the monochrome ground as the process of creation spreads itself outward from one central source through some power which can either lie hidden within it or spread itself momentarily outward into visibility, or both at once. Alternately, they may be seen as fading back into the centre as the subjectivity that is dealing with them has balanced them and



prepared itself for entry into the invisible power at the centre. Each of the four realms which emerges is itself a perfect circle, indicating that reality, when spread out into distinguishable parts, is perfect, as it is when combined into a whole. Reality is perfect both as whole and as part; whole is contained within part as part is contained within whole. This is part of the secret of 'emptiness'. The whole demonstrates its dynamic ability to expand and contract yet remain the same. In a sense the whole and each of its parts is a perfect whole. This is the type of idea that underlies the great Buddhist text the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which may be in whole or in part of Chinese composition and which underlies at some distance many passages in Zen texts.

Gimblett's colours sometimes seem expressive or based on pure feeling, like Abstract Expressionist colour, and sometimes seem symbolical. In this case, insofar as the title suggests the Gates of Heaven, there is an odd resolution of duality in the image, because, as one author puts it, 'Yellow is the colour of the gates of heaven'<sup>24</sup> – whereas red is the colour of hell. Here Hell is contained, or neutralised, within the golden circles of heaven.

*Awe*, 1981, is a 100 x 100 inch (2540 x 2540 mm) square – larger than human scale and thus more abstract and closer to an absolute cosmic order. It does not seem to represent a flowing and transient human state of mind (as do, for example, the three gigantic *ensos* *One Stroke Bone – for Anthony Fodero, big mind*, and *Empty Water*). *Awe* is not only too large but too hard-edged and uncompromisingly symmetrical to represent a momentary glimpse of the flow and gush of human thoughts and feelings. It has reminded some viewers of the work of Barnett Newman (though that is not Gimblett's favorite comparison; for that type of work he prefers Burgoyne Diller).





In this work Gimblett's choice of the black seems very personal. Chinese tradition, and to an extent the Zen black-ink tradition that derives largely from it, recognises five different blacks.<sup>25</sup> A particular blue is, at least to the western sensibility, an even more personal choice. Blue is regarded as 'the colour of ambiguous depth.'<sup>26</sup> This is not only because of its association with both sky and sea, but because of perceptual qualities within it. In Yves Klein's blue monochromes (which have impressed Gimblett) this is easily illustrated. If a viewer stands some distance from one – say ten or fifteen feet – it seems to suggest an infinite cosmic depth – much as Klein once remarked that they were portraits of the night sky as seen through his studio window. But as the viewer moves closer the ambiguous depth of the blue gradually flattens out till, up close, the works seem to be (as they are) flat painted surfaces directly in front of one.

The upright blue bar in *Awe* seems to be behind the black, but not infinitely behind it so much as at a middle distance. This is an ultra-simplified, even dissected, version of Hans Hoffman's push-pull relation between adjacent colours. Yet the bar itself is positioned as an icon or votive object, which implies that it is in front of, rather than behind, the black framing surface.

The paintings consisting of bars in a field in a figure/ground relationship immediately precede the quatrefoils. Both demonstrate a tendency toward the cosmogram, an extremely simplified picture, or symbolic suggestion, of the universe. The quatrefoil is a softer and more complex unfolding than the bar, which is contracted about as far as it can get, holding its selfhood rigidly within itself – at least for the moment.

The upright central bar that is seen in *Awe*, and also in *Red Violet/Blue – Summer*, 1980; *Light Green/Red – to Dora*, 1978; and *Yellow/Red – Pacific*, 1978, is about the height of an average human being, occupying Gimblett's characteristic 80 x 80 inch (2032 x 2032 mm) square

which might just contain a huge (basketball-player-size) human with arms widely extended, inhabiting the square the way Vitruvian man occupies the squared circle. Yet the hard-edged rigidity of these works seems to deny that they represent transient states of mind so much as unchanging ratios underlying the changing appearances of things, as in Pythagorean mathematico-aesthetics.

Gimblett is not exactly what one would call a religious artist. He is a secular artist who has great respect for religious traditions and often uses suggestions of religious iconography in his work. His attitude might roughly be compared to that of the Bengali Renaissance, in which Ramakrishna and Vivekananda proclaimed all religions to be based on the same intuitions of the sacred underpinnings of the universe. Most of Gimblett's religious references are to Zen, but some are Hindu, and a handful of works involve Christian references in either their motifs or their titles.

One of these in the present exhibition is *Crucifixion after Peter Gabriel*, 1989/90. *Crucifixion* embodies one of the dualities that Gimblett's synthesis is involved in both pointing out and, in a way, resolving. Gimblett describes the development of his work as moving through a series of styles which he characterises as either wet or dry. First it was wet – in his early years in the Abstract Expressionist tradition; then it became dry in hard-edged works such as *Awe*. Then it became wet again with the quatrefoils. Art historically the wet is conspicuously associated with Abstract Expressionism as represented by Pollock, the dry by Newman. The wet is the trace of the dripping, pouring, or throwing of liquid; it does not have clean sharp edges but one part of the picture seems to flow into the next (or sometimes there are no parts to be distinguished at all). The Chinese-Japanese flung ink tradition could also be

mentioned here. The dry involves geometrical regularity and hard clear edges, usually made with the aid of tape; it does not show brush-strokes nor does it mingle colors together so much as show them side by side in discrete areas. Perhaps the essence of the distinction is hard edges versus ragged dripping edges.

One distinctive trait of *Crucifixion* is its mixing of these two approaches, which ordinarily have been kept separate. Another is its use of the central Christian motif despite the fact it compromises the centre-plus-quaternity format. Gimblett first covered the entire area the cross was to occupy with tape, then threw paints at the surface, first white, then red, then green. Removing the tape, and retaping the edges of the cross-shaped space from outside, he painted it black onto raw canvas. The effect is of hard edges alongside the splash and drip of flung paint.

The cross shape here compromises the centre-plus-quaternity format because the Christian cross lengthened one limb, which it put at the bottom, supposedly so the cross would more resemble the human bodily shape as crucified. In addition it is not placed precisely in the centre of the quatrefoil surface, again denying the centre-plus-quaternity format. It is a picturesquely work whose effect on the viewer is immediately startling or arresting, at least in part because of these dislocations and dualities.

*One Stroke Bone – for Anthony Fodero*, 2002; *big mind*, 2002; and *Empty Water*, 2003, are outsized *ensos* or *mu* paintings. Each was made in a single muscular full-bodied stroke with a household mop dipped into black paint once only, like a giant ink brush into an ink pot. Each starts, as is characteristic of Gimblett – almost a kind of ethical principle for him – in the upper right corner. Two are circular, as if inviting or declaring the *enso* connection while the materials of acrylic paint (mixed with vinyl



polymers) and canvas stretched on a rectangular wooden frame clearly point the work in another direction, that of the western tradition of easel painting.

In the two circular examples the swirl of the mop is guided by the shape of the support – the edge. Still, they do not duplicate it mechanically but vary it in suggestive ways. One circle seems to have exploded into being, the other to have been thoughtfully and rationally contrived by the forces (whatever you call them) that make things what they are.

In a way that probably derives from feeling as much as intellectual contrivance, Gimblett here as elsewhere combines central traditions of the East and the West. *One-Stroke Bone – for Anthony Fodero* combines western signs of impulsive unrestrained vigour in its Pollockian splatter, and similar eastern signs in terms of its relation to the flung-ink school of calligraphy. Gimblett's state of mind in the performance of the painting act (for it is here rather performative) seems to have been somehow between, or somehow combining, elements of Pollock's and Sengai's sensibilities.

*Empty Water* is smaller (50 rather than 80 inches in diameter) and shows a tighter control. The circle almost closes itself but not quite; some openness is necessary for the flowing of water to happen or – as Zen texts ultimately based on Nagarjuna say – 'It is emptiness that makes the world possible.'

*big mind*, in contrast to those two, is a horizontal rectangle roughly based, in both directions, on the human figure – Vitruvian man occupying geometry again. The compromised or quirky nature of the circle – which is almost squared at three corners – allows it to participate loosely in the squaring-the-circle theme. *big mind*, as the universal subjectivity, is the squared circle, impossibility seen in actual action. It incorporates two of Sengai's three primary shapes – with a gap where the missing part makes life possible.





## ENDS

In the last twenty years the question has repeatedly been raised what the future of art might be – or if it even has a future. The idea that art would have a kind of an end was first raised by Pliny the Elder in his *Encyclopedia* in the first century AD. It was revived, for our time, by Hegel. Recently the idea that art has already ended or is just now actually at its end has been much discussed. In 1984 an anthology of essays was published called *The Death of Art* containing Arthur Danto's essay, 'The End of Art'. In the same year Hans Belting published a little book called *The End of the History of Art?* Two years later came Victor Burgin's *The End of Art Theory*. Then the idea died down for a while, but it has recently come back with renewed energy and even a kind of ferocity. In 1998 Fredric Jameson entered the discussion with an essay called "End of Art" or "End of History?" In 2003 Julian Spaulding's *The Eclipse of Art* appeared, and in 2004 Donald Kuspit published a book called, again, *The End of Art*.<sup>27</sup> The two recent books, by Spaulding and Kuspit, were more or less invectives against post-Modernism. Spaulding feels, to simplify and encapsulate his much longer argument, that art has lost its channels of connection with the larger public world around it; Kuspit, again to simplify and encapsulate, that art had long fulfilled the function of revealing the unconscious of society, and that now it has turned itself into the service of the conscious mind as an instrument of social-cultural-political critique, and has lost its depth as it renounced the deep service it once provided.

I might agree with them if I felt that post-Modernism had become as puritanical and exclusivistic as Modernism was in its day. But it has always seemed to me, on the contrary,

that post-Modernism (as many have said) is essentially a pluralistic ideology that does not exclude any option except the exclusion of options. In other words, today, and in the foreseeable future, it should be possible for an artist to root his or her work in Modernism, or in pre-Modernism, or in post-Modernism, or in any combination of these paths.

Max Gimblett's work is an instance of such comfortable acceptance of multiplicity, which can contain paradox or contradiction without feeling itself discredited. The one clear requisite, it seems to me, is the same as it has long been – that the artist be sure that his or her work is true to his or her innermost feelings and emotional needs, whatever they might be. Gimblett's oeuvre contains elements of pre-Modernism, Modernism, and (as pointed out here and there in the foregoing pages) post-Modernism too. It draws freely from East and West, and from various ages of history, without seeing a need to be exclusively and solely either this or that. It contains multiculturalism without conspicuous post-colonial preoccupations; it acknowledges and honours aesthetic feeling in Kant's terms without feeling bound exclusively to that pole. Gimblett seems to believe (as John Yau put it)<sup>28</sup> 'that time is circular', and in a circle, as mentioned above, beginning and end are everywhere, so anything can be accepted as having the same value as anything else. There is no need to exclude; indeed, to exclude any part of a circle would destroy its circularity and thus the totality of its meaning. Above all Gimblett has remained, whatever sources or materials he was dealing with, true to his inner urges and needs. The Zen stamp of the foot is an expression of earnestness. There is a simple honesty to it all that seems to avoid the various proclamations, lamentations, and celebrations that the idea of the end of art has embodied.

1 Lita Barrie in *Walters Gimblett Bambury*, Christchurch, New Zealand, Jonathon Jensen Gallery, 1992, np.

2 John Yau, 'Going Forth', in Wystan Curnow and John Yau, *Max Gimblett*, Auckland, New Zealand, Craig Potton Publishing in association with Gow Langford Gallery, 2002, p. 107.

3 For early examples see Beatrice Laura Goff, *Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1963, figs 404, 411, 58 and elsewhere.

4 C.J. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Princeton University Press, Bollingen series vol. XX.14, 1970, p. 210.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

6 C.J. Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XX.5, 1968, p. 360.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 361.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 360.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 361.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 363.

13 Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Sengai the Zen Master*, London, Faber and Faber, 1971.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

15 Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, p. 235.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 André Leroi-Gourhan, *The Dawn of European Art*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, and other works.

19 See p. 58, 'How do you know when a work is finished?', interview with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. A version of this interview will appear in *Art from Start to Finish*, edited by Howard S. Becker, forthcoming.

20 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1968, chapter 4.

21 Arthur Waley, *The Noh Plays of Japan*, New York, Grove Press, 1919, pp. 21, 22.

22 Wystan Curnow, 'An Exhilaration of the Spirit' in Curnow and Yau, *Max Gimblett*, p. 23.

23 John Yau in *ibid.*, p. 103.

24 Alexander Theroux, *The Primary Colours*, New York, Henry Holt, 1994, pp. 69–70, 159.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 90.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

27 Berel Lang, ed., *The Death of Art*, New York, Haven Publishers, 1984. Arthur Danto, 'The End of Art', was republished in his *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 81–116. Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art*, English translation, 1987. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*, Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey, Humanities Press International, 1986. Fredric Jameson, "End of Art" or "End of History?" in *The Cultural Turn*, London, Verso, 1998. Julian Spaulding, *The Eclipse of Art*, Munich, Prestel, 2003. Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

28 John Yau, 'Going Forth' in Curnow and Yau, *Max Gimblett*.