

# The New Zealand Herald

## TJ McNamara: 'Daring old man' skips along the highwire

By [T.J. McNamara](#)

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The exhibition by **Max Gimblett** at the Gow Langsford Gallery which spills over into the John Leech Gallery nearby, is called *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*. It might better be called "The Daring Old Man on the Highwire".

Gimblett is not elderly yet but he has come to a very mature stage in his work. Like many fine painters with a clear line of development, he is making paintings with the status of "Late Works" that embody all their experience. One of the spectacular paintings gives its name to the exhibition but overall the highwire is a better metaphor because all of his work is a balancing act and his combination of poise and agility has never produced better paintings.

The work displays an endeavour to match a sense of absolute spontaneity with classical grids and geometry. It shows the difficult balance between meditated thought and an immediate impulse. It contains a balance between the outer work and the inner meaning, intellectuality and emotional drive.

Gimblett walks the tightrope almost unfalteringly as well as introducing new variants to his act.

At Gow Langsford he has some large paintings but one wall is occupied by small works, each one completely different from the next and done with an unprecedented gaiety of colour. Also unprecedented in this show are driving patterns of ovals seen in perspective which confers a rushing movement. The long development from the first plain abstractions that Gimblett showed long ago at the Barry Lett Gallery continues.

In those early works Gimblett appeared as a run-of-the-mill New York abstractionist: confident, driving, but not particularly original. Since then he has emerged as a painter with an individuality that is instantly recognisable. Recognition of this individuality and the intellectual drive that produced it was behind the selection of one of his paintings for a large show at the prestigious Guggenheim in New York.

The New Zealand painter still lives and works in New York but his painting cannot be hitched to any wagon. It is completely and decisively his own. The turning point may have been his decision to use shaped canvases, notably using the quatrefoil form.

The shape has a long history, particularly in the architecture of church windows. Gimblett's beautifully made quatrefoils are each a window into a particular visual sensation that is the result of meditation and charged with energy by spontaneous gesture.

The smaller paintings include *The Golden Buddha* as an image of the origins of his philosophy. It is gold leaf polished to a mirror surface through which the face of Buddha is dimly perceived. Alongside this is *The Royal Highway*, a work in two parts. The left side is a classical abstract grid with just the hint of a cross and the second side has a great flourish of colour like a bold act of driving forward.



Joyce Campbell's Anemone, at Two Rooms.  
Photo / Steven McNicholl

In the area of colour, respect is paid to European masters, particularly in *Trellis* – after Henri Matisse, which is particularly rich. Another is Kandinsky whose tightly controlled late work has been mined for circles of colour.

The large title work is rectangular. It does use Gimblett's characteristic gold but adds a new dynamic thrusting perspective of ovals allied with two big brush strokes that also suggest forward movement. The whole thing has less stability than is customary with the artist. The patterns lead outward beyond the edge of the work.

Just how splendid Gimblett's closed large work can be is amply demonstrated in the second part of the exhibition at the John Leech Gallery. There is a very big piece in red, black, gold and silver called *Dragon King* which has tremendous force of colour and gesture. Rather more subtle is the work called *Orpheus and Eurydice* which is on an equally large scale. It is immensely complex, with grey shadows moving over black, and black moving over grey. Then there are big black assertions but silver notes of hope that change with the light. The whole suggests a movement between two states of being.

Gimblett's work is a search for analogies between what is inner and what is outer; what is seen and what is implied. He insists on a profound Zen Buddhist influence, notably from Sengai, the Buddhist monk whose work was the result of long meditation with the outcomes expressed in quick gestural drawing.

This has been absorbed by Gimblett and the outward part of his work is never less than delightful either in the spectacularly colourful work or the exquisite precision of a small work like *Monastery of Joy* where lines precisely incised in the gold surface reveal an emotional red beneath the surface.

The presence of these twin substantial exhibitions rather overwhelms anything else in Auckland until the big explosion of important shows next week.

But there is an interesting show of drawings by musicians, mostly people who performed at the Big Day Out, at Starkwhite.

These drawings have been made into posters, some of them very forceful.

There is also a well-selected thematic exhibition called *Apothecary* at Two Rooms. This is a group of works where some chemical interaction has been involved.

There is a recycling of work by **Cornelia Parker**, the English artist who makes strange visceral works done with rattlesnake venom and black ink, and the anti venom and white ink.

Ghost by **Stephen Bambury** combines the result of chemical action on two aluminium panels allied to silver. Most fascinating of all are some extraordinary prints by **Joyce Campbell**, the photographic results of injecting chemicals into dark fluids.

And for a special frisson, one of **Fiona Pardington's** museum photographs grimly shows the skull of the notorious Marquis de Sade.

**Check out your [local galleries](#)**

### **At the galleries**

**What:** The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze by Max Gimblett

**Where and when:** Gow Langsford & John Leech Galleries, to February 26

**TJ says:** Max Gimblett returns again from New York with works which show the maturity of his individual style and joy in life and paint.

**What:** Art, Music, Alchemy

**Where and when:** Starkwhite, 310 Karangahape Rd, to March 1

**TJ says:** Drawings for posters by local and visiting musicians showing colour line and commitment.

**What:** Apothecary: Various Artists

**Where and when:** Two Rooms, 16 Putiki St, to February 18

**TJ says:** A cleverly selected show where artists have involved chemical processes to create startling paintings, drawings and photographs.

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