



Max Gimblett: *The Dawn of Science*, 2004, gesso, pencil, metallic pigment and copper on wood panel, 60 by 60 inches.

# The Shape of Energy

*Geometry and gesture carry equal weight in the abstract paintings of Max Gimblett, a New Zealander who has lived in New York since the 1970s.*

**BY THOMAS MCEVILLE**

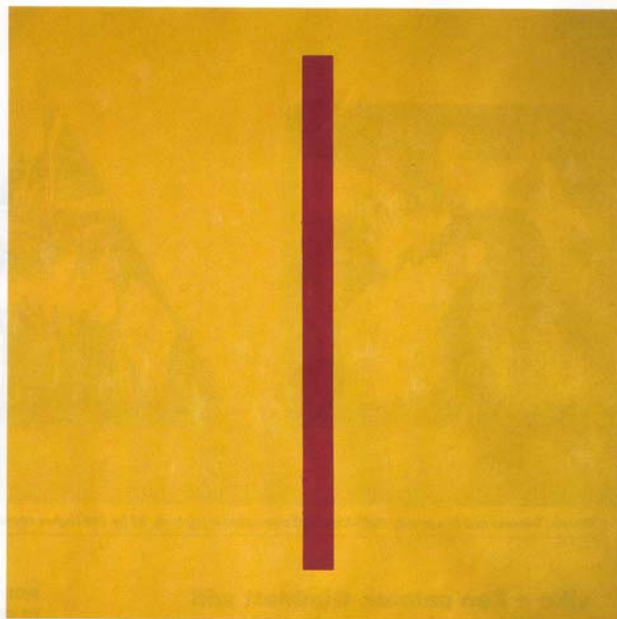
**M**ax Gimblett's new paintings, which were exhibited recently at the Haines Gallery in San Francisco, will function, for the time being, as the capstone of his 40-year-long career. They do indeed recapitulate earlier phases of his work, while also adding new aspects—above all a new kind of surface—that extend the map of that oeuvre still farther. Four of the eight paintings—which range in size from 25 to 80 inches across—are in his signature quatrefoil format; three others are variations on that format; and one, *In the Presence of the Dragon Throne* (2004), is in his "Zen diptych" format, two squares conjoined horizontally, one of which is a more or less blank gray monochrome expressing the idea of emptiness, while the other contains a dynamic single swirling brushstroke that seems to issue from some unseen well of energy. These works not only propel Gimblett's always-developing oeuvre toward a new sense of completeness, but also connect to the earlier works in a kind of summation.

Born in New Zealand in 1935, Gimblett wandered widely in his early adulthood, traveling to Europe in the late 1950s, moving to Toronto in 1962, San Francisco in 1965, then Bloomington, Austin

and, finally, in 1972, to New York City, where he still lives. Though he returns to New Zealand each year, he thinks of himself, after 33 years here, as primarily an American artist.

While studying at the San Francisco Art Institute in the mid-1960s, Gimblett made his first paintings, works done in an Abstract-Expressionist style that was particularly influenced by Robert Motherwell. Despite his focus on Abstract Expressionism, Gimblett was generationally closer to the Pop artists (Andy Warhol, b. 1930; Ed Ruscha, b. 1937), which freed him from some of the conventions of mid-20th-century abstraction. While his emotional regard for art is that of a modernist, he has enjoyed some of the freedoms or permissions that come with postmodernism. This can be seen, above all, in his readiness to incorporate elements from different times and places into his work. He borrows motifs, for example, from medieval Japan and ancient Mesopotamia, and uses materials from all over the world (he supplements conventional paint with many unusual ingredients). Gimblett's ostensibly modernist abstractions are constructed, to an extent, like postmodernist pastiches.

In the 1970s, after settling in New York, Gimblett came under the influence of another transplanted New Zealander, Len Lye (1901-1980). An experimental filmmaker, Lye was also regarded as New Zealand's first self-consciously conceptual artist. His work as a painter and kinetic sculptor opened avenues for Gimblett. For Lye, as for American action painters, the painterly act involved immediate, spontaneous bodily movement, of which the brushmark on the canvas was only a residue. Simultaneously, as part of the same realization, Gimblett also developed an interest in the Japanese flung-ink style of calligraphy, in particular that of the Rinzaï Zen masters



*Yellow/Red—Pacific, 1978, oil on canvas, 80 inches square.*

of the Edo Period, such as Gibbon Sengai (1750-1837). As his oeuvre matured, this actionist way of applying the paint moved increasingly toward the center of his work.

Gimblett's art has gone through several phases while still sustaining a consistent evolution. The development can be most easily seen in the shapes of his paintings. From the time he emerged as an artist in the mid-1970s, up until the early '80s, Gimblett produced rectilinear, abstract canvases of classical Abstract Expressionist scale, with roots or forerunners in the work of painters such as Reinhardt and Newman and Burgoyne Diller. Memorable examples of this phase are *Yellow/Red—Pacific* (1978) and *Awe* (1981). *Yellow/Red—Pacific* displays a hieratic treatment of the square field, while a single upright red bar amid the yellow holds one's attention almost hypnotically.

At the same time, Gimblett was making circular paintings that were, like the rectangles, regular in their geometry, such as *India* (1981) and *Buddha* (1980-86). Painted the year Gimblett's compatriot died, *Blue/Red—to Len Lye* (1980) consists of a circular stretched canvas 80 inches in diameter, mounted in a framing unit that holds the picture plane a couple of inches in front of the wall, giving the work a sculptural physicality. On the round surface a red circle is inscribed concentrically within a blue one, like a bull's eye. In later tondos, Gimblett introduces a small round hole at the center of the painting, suggesting a void at the root of things, as in *Kiss* (1991), *sword of no-sword* (2004) and *Pinwheel—for Len Lye* (2000).

*Orpheus, 2004, gesso, polyurethane, pencil, epoxy and moon gold on wood panel, 70 by 70 inches. Photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Haines Gallery, San Francisco, and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland.*







*Ghosts, Demons and Dragons-2, 1987-88, acrylic on canvas, triptych, 40 by 190 inches overall. Auckland Art Gallery.*

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*Blue/Red—to Len Ige* is one of the paintings Gimblett calls his “Geos,” an acknowledgment of the imagery as well as the fact that the paint is applied with a geometrical regularity. The Geos—characteristic of what Gimblett calls his “dry” style, with the more gestural works being termed “wet”—have an iconic, even awe-inspiring, presence. Some of these works of Gimblett’s relate to 1970s New York abstraction—the complex shaped canvas abstractions of Charles Hinman, the minimalist geometry of Robert Mangold.

The influence of Zen painting can be seen in Gimblett’s work of the 1980s and comes to dominate in the 1990s. In that period, Gimblett used ragged-edge brushstrokes that seem to imply a spontaneous and instantaneous event. The impact of Zen emerges especially in his paintings based on works by Sengai. Gimblett’s triptych *Ghosts, Demons and Dragons-2* (1987-88) persuasively re-creates the inner dynamics of Sengai’s black ink drawing *The Universe* in a different medium. Both works comprise three motifs: a square, a triangle and a circle. Sengai made his with single brushstrokes, the forms arranged horizontally from left to right; Gimblett’s stretched canvases follow a similar sequence of shapes.

That there might be an overlap of meaning and intention between the New York School tradition and the Rinzi tradition of Zen painting has

been remarked on before, but there has perhaps not been as perfect an avatar of the intersection as Gimblett. Indeed, he has devoted himself with his whole being and sensibility to the affirmation and explication of this overlap. Gimblett sees spontaneity as part of that tradition. Like a traditional Zen painter, he will repeat a basic brushstroke such as the one-stroke circular *mu* over and over to arrive, through practice, at perfection within true spontaneity.

In the mid-1980s, during a moment of revelatory discovery that he has referred to as a midlife crisis, Gimblett turned to the quatrefoil format, in part to balance out the extreme gesturalism of strokes like the *mu*. Strictly speaking, a quatrefoil is made up of four circles that intersect at the same point; more loosely, it is any four-petal vegetal motif. The supports of Gimblett’s quatrefoil paintings can be either canvas or wood panel and they are generally about 80 inches



*In the Presence of the Dragon Throne, 2004, gesso, black clay, silver, shellac, epoxy and pigment on wood panel, diptych, 25 by 50 inches overall.*



Buddha, 1980-86,  
acrylic on canvas,  
80 inches in diameter.

across, a size into which the artist feels a human form would comfortably fit. A fairly wide framing strip holds the painted surface out from the wall. He employs a rich variety of materials: oil or acrylic is combined with clay, wax, vinyl polymers, water-gilded silver, moon gold, Japanese leaf, mica, and metallic pigments.

When Gimblett applies paint to the quatrefoils, he usually does so in a way that acknowledges the shape of the support. The gestural swath in *Action Painting* (1995) was painted with a mop that had been dipped once in black paint then applied with a vigorous continuous motion. In *Crackerjack* (2004), a burst of quick action leaves a single swirling brushstroke that seems to arise from the depths of the painting. In some quatrefoil works Gimblett dispenses with gestural marks. *Sky Gate* (2003), for instance, features a smooth surface of deep red traversed by thin, curving gold lines that limn the four-circle form of the quatrefoil shape.

In the Haines show, the quatrefoil format has been enriched by a significant addition to Gimblett's artistic vocabulary. Through a complex process that involves diluting epoxy resin in the paint, the artist has achieved a quality of surface that may be unique in modern painting. It looks like porcelain, glowing from within while still shining on the surface. This technique seems somehow to emphasize both surface and depth; the drawn

sword of no-sword, 2004,  
acrylic on canvas,  
80 inches in diameter.



elements acquire a new sharpness and stand out more assertively against the ground.

In addition to its striking formal presence—large and strong and yet flowerlike—the quatrefoil has iconographic resonances that go far back in time. The four-petal cosmogram involves the center-plus-quaternity that underlies much Neolithic, Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age art, and still informs the clock, the map and the compass—indeed the whole way of simplistically conceiving the world as a space-time entity. It must be stressed that the quatrefoil is a softened and feminized form of this brutal map of control.

Not only is it a form that no other abstractionist has fully explored, but the quatrefoil format has allowed Gimblett to fully mingle the painterly and the linear in a subtle visual syntax. In the orderly confinement of the quatrefoil shape, the energy of the mark can break free. The wild fume of the brush gesture rises through the geometry of the frame and asserts itself as fundamental energy. This energy is like nature; it is the infinite within the finite. Time and again, Gimblett shows us these two forces held in each other's embrace within the totality of a pictorial surface. □

Max Gimblett's recent paintings were on view at Haines Gallery, San Francisco [Mar. 3-Apr. 23]. A retrospective of his work was seen at two New Zealand museums, Auckland Art Gallery [June 19-Aug. 29, 2004] and City Gallery, Wellington [Dec. 12, 2004-Mar. 6, 2005].

Author: Thomas McEvilley's latest book is *The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post Modernism* (McPherson & Company). He is chair of the new Art Criticism and Writing MFA program at the School of Visual Arts, New York.