



# SHAPES OF SPIRITUALITY

His signature quatrefoil artworks are coveted by the world but colourful octogenarian Max Gimblett tells **Sarah Catherall** it's his fellow New Zealanders who are the most constant and loyal

**M**ax Gimblett sweeps an arm around the light-filled New York loft that has been his art studio for 43 years, and says: "I thought I would die in this room. I was convinced I would die painting here."

The 82-year-old expat artist and Zen master turns towards a shrine of Buddhas sitting on a paint-splattered palatte table covered with paint pots. His soft, grey-blue eyes fill with tears. White studio walls are dotted with colourful Gimblett works — a green rectangular work sits on one wall between two signature quatrefoil artworks. As fans whirl to push away the 30-degree heat, artworks wrapped in packaging lean against the walls, preparing to shift to a new space.

One of New Zealand's most successful and internationally prominent living painters, Gimblett has been working in America since 1962. Later this year, the artist and his wife, the academic Barbara Kirshenblatt, will leave this 4000sq ft space — the studio and their adjoining loft apartment — and shift to another space and home on Broadway: an 1884 building.

The move is significant, as the practising Buddhist describes the studio as his "holy place". "This room turned out to be my body. I feel the walls like my flesh," he tells me.

In his ninth decade, Gimblett is reflective. Now a legacy artist, he has six books to his name, his art has been presented in more than 100 solo exhibitions and is held in major public gallery collections in the United States and Australasia. He is also being acknowledged by institutions he has influenced: what is now AUT, where he studied a management diploma at night school in his late teens, has bestowed him

with an honorary doctorate, and one from the University of Waikato for his services to the arts.

On a hot Northern Hemisphere day, Gimblett sits in a chair near the shrine, refilling my glass with sparkling water as music plays softly in the background on an endless shuffle of CDs. He is, he says, approaching his third Saturn cycle — the others came when he turned 28, and then 56. When he turns 84, his life will "round out". "No one has a fourth cycle. It's a time when I will come to full maturity. I'll be saying goodbye."

I ask what happened when he reached the last stage? At 56, he had a midlife crisis. "I had a doozy. It lasted years. I've had very heavy transformation in my life. Artists do. The art doesn't come from just anywhere. It comes out of turmoil." He was, according to reports, unable to paint for a year, struck by unresolved turmoil associated with his father. Asked about this now, he doesn't want to elaborate.

Gimblett wears a black paint-splattered apron boasting the New Zealand silver fern. New York is home, but he calls his birth nation "my beloved New Zealand". Even his local friends are mainly expat Kiwis. New Zealand, he says, has been kind to him throughout his career. His top dealers are Gow Langsford in Auckland, Wellington's Page Blackie, and Nadene Milne in the South Island. Many of his collectors hail from his birth country. "My support has been on and off in America. New Zealand — solid as a rock. New Zealand dealers are very constant and loyal. I'm a patriotic New Zealander."

Each morning, he arrives at his studio and meditates before the shrine of Buddha and Ganesh. He then begins working at his paint-splattered table. There are two paintings of his wife perched near paint pots. ⇨







"I ordered six 19-inch quatrefoils. I painted them one at a time, painting them on that wall there," he says, pointing. "I thought, these look awkward. They look like a Eucharist no one is going to swallow. But I took them over to New Zealand and half sold out within a week."

He says: "Collectors come to buy a rectangle or a square work. Then they return to the studio to 'buy a real Gimblett'."

**HIS WIFE** of 54 years, Kirshenblatt, emerges from their apartment behind the studio, linked by a dark hallway lined with bookshelves heaving with rows and rows of books. In the open-plan living and kitchen area, she spends her days at a computer surrounded by stacks of books.

She calls him "Maxie", they smile warmly at one another. The scholar, who is chief curator of the exhibition for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, is the "love of his life". Kirshenblatt was born in Canada to Polish Jews. He admires her intelligence, and his eyes well when he talks about the time she got her dissertation published.

She shakes her head though, when he implores her to be part of his story. However, she will talk about her husband's art. "I've seen his art change and mature. People think of Max and think of his paintings, but I love his drawings, in some cases, even more. They're their own thing."

Gimblett rises from his chair and her camera clicks as he demonstrates making a calligraphic ink work. He has been drawing in ink since he began as an artist in the early 1960s.

With an A5 sheet of paper in one hand, he picks up his paintbrush, takes a deep breath, pauses as though thinking, and streaks black ink across the surface. Describing himself as an intuitive artist, over the next few minutes, he makes three works, all different; one with streaks like a lightning bolt, while another is circular — another signature Gimblett shape.

I ask Gimblett about the yellow quatrefoil



I feel my body fill  
up with colour and it  
comes out my fingertips.  
If I go green, it comes  
out green. If I go red, it  
comes out red.

Max Gimblett

work on one white wall. Gold metal on the work glints in the afternoon sunlight. "Yellow is certainty. Yellow is an aspect of the sun, and sun is consciousness. Indian gurus say there is no such thing as a person, and what is important is the level of consciousness. What the world is trying to do is come to a higher level of consciousness."

A work of that size will sell for about

US\$55,000 — an incredible price for someone who grew up so poor he had to leave school to help support his mother.

**BORN IN** 1935 and raised by his mother, a working class Scot, and an aunt in Grafton, Auckland, Gimblett visited the Auckland War Memorial Museum weekly, inspired by its collections. At the age of 15, he had to leave school to work to help pay the rent.

In his late teens, he went to night school for three years at the now-AUT to get a management diploma. At 21, he fled New Zealand. He says: "I really ran away from New Zealand. I had quite a lot of turmoil as a teenager and I had to run. I ran to England, and to New Zealand, then to England again. Then I learned to paint in North America."

He began painting in 1963, studying at the Ontario College of Art and the San Francisco Art Institute. When he and Kirshenblatt shifted to Austin, Texas, for her academic posting, he began exhibiting in dealer and public galleries.

"All those years, we lived off her university salary, which was quite small." ⇒

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Max Gimblett

I've had thousands of lives. I imagine I've been everything. I've been a murderer. I've been a criminal. Artists are imaginative types.

Max Gimblett

Gimblett says he did his first mature paintings when they moved into his current studio in New York 43 years ago. Back then, the East Village road was home to artists and drug addicts. "It was Skid Row. There were dead bodies at the entrance," he says.

Since then, he has painted hundreds, possibly thousands of artworks, in the space which gets afternoon light. He won't say the actual number. "My dealers don't like it," he smiles.

In the citation for his honorary doctorate, Waikato University says Gimblett has forged a record of artistic achievement unmatched by any other New Zealand artist in terms of his international practice and exposure, while also developing a consistent and passionate following in New Zealand. His work has contributed to the dialogue between East and West, fusing elements from Eastern spirituality, calligraphy, and sumi ink painting with Western concepts of abstract expressionism, modernism and pop art.

**ABOUT 20** years ago, Gimblett had a dealer show in San Francisco, when two monks came. One invited him to the zendo for a cup of tea, and asked him to draw some calligraphy.

As they drew together, the monk said, "You are my calligraphy teacher". Gimblett says he turned to him and said, "Well, you're my Zen Buddhist teacher."

In 2000, Gimblett took a Buddhist name — Kongo Hitsu Kaku Shin (Diamond Brush, Awakened Heart) and prepared to take his vows in 2006. "I've been spiritually searching all my life."

He is referring to his childhood. An avid Sunday school attendee, he later befriended the American Catholic soldiers his mother invited into their home, attending Sunday Mass with them. Later, he travelled the world with his Presbyterian *Bible*. A few years ago, Gimblett helped save the 1920s St David's Church in Auckland, making 800 15-inch quatrefoils in brass to sell. "I was able to give the church a cheque for \$1 million."

"Tibetan karma says you have many lives, birth, death, intermediate beings. Your spirits build up life to life."

"I've had thousands of lives. I imagine I've been everything. I've been a murderer. I've been a criminal. Artists are imaginative types."

How much of his spirituality comes through in his art? "A hundred per cent." He draws from Buddhism, Christianity and classical mythology.

Sipping water, he yawns. He still goes to the



Aided by assistants, each artwork starts with a support and a canvas shape. Gimblett applies layers of acrylic paint of various densities to the surface. When the light is right, he dips a Chinese horsehair calligraphy brush into the paint, waiting for the colour to flow from his octogenarian body to the canvas.

"I feel my body fill up with colour and it comes out my fingertips. If I go green, it comes out green. If I go red, it comes out red."

"I perform a gestural mark, inspired by spiritual and dance traditions."

After a few days of observing and contemplating the work, he coats it with resin to get the perfect colour, creating a shimmering, mirror-like surface, finally gilding the calligraphic stroke in precious leaf metal. "Recently I have been experimenting with various mediums mixed with acrylic paint creating surfaces that are as dynamic, vivid and saturated as the resin surface without using resin itself. It is invigorating."

**1983 WAS** one of the most significant years of his life. He went to India and got a Buddhist guru, who helped him on his spiritual journey. That same year, he discovered the quatrefoil shape.

"I'm going to cry. I had a dream in 1983. It was a quatrefoil. It said, 'Paint me and I'll heal you'. No one else was painting them. It's the signature shape."



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