

HYPERALLERGIC

Some Things I Know About This Artist

by John Yau April 1, 2012



An installation view of the Max Gimblett show at the Gary Snyder Gallery (all photos © Max Gimblett, courtesy Gary Snyder Gallery, New York)

Max Gimblett was born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1935. From 1962 to 1964, while living in Canada, he worked as a potter, an experience that has influenced his relationship to materials and process. In 1965, he moved to San Francisco, and began studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, and became friends with Phil Sims. It took Gimblett a decade to hit his stride.

From 1977 until 1982, he defined vertical, hard-edged geometric bars within a monochromatic field. He worked on squares and occasionally tondos, where he articulated a circle in the center of a monochromatic field. The rigidity of this approach caught up with him. He has often referred to it as a mid-life crisis. He had worked in a formalist manner until he was nearly fifty. He was connected with the “radical painting” group that included Marcia Hafif, Joseph Marioni, and Phil Sims. Dissatisfied, he stopped painting in 1982 and reevaluated; he wanted to reinvent himself.

He remembered that two years earlier, in 1980, he had purchased small amounts of gold and silver metallic leaf. He began experimenting with them, while exploring a vocabulary of basic materials. After a year he settled on the quatrefoil, a form that resembles a four-petaled flower, as the shape for his canvases. By choosing to work on quatrefoils, which dates back to the pre-Christian era, and is used in symbols found in both Western and Eastern religions, he moved away from non-referential geometry towards a geometry loaded with symbolic associations. He had found a way to open a door, to bring all the things he studied and experienced — his childhood in New Zealand, including early encounters with non-Western art — into his work. During 1983-84, he traveled to Japan, India, and Kenya. He began reading Jung.

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I met Max around 1991, and shortly afterward we began collaborating on unique books, artist’s books, and works on paper, some of which have been shown in New York, Miami, New Zealand and Australia. One of the things about collaborating is that it gets you, as Robert Creeley said, “out of the habits of your own thinking.” The other thing is that it helps dissolve any notion of autonomy that you might still have — the thing that you write isn’t your own. Somebody is going to do something to it.

Not surprisingly, every artist I have collaborated with has his or her own way of doing things. With Max, I go to his studio. I write in ink or acrylic on sheets of paper that he gives me. Sometimes they are blank. Other times they are drawings or mixed media works. I have gone there with an idea in mind, and I have gone without an idea of what I might do. More times than not something unexpected happens. I believe that we have done over twenty unique books, as well as two artist’s books, and many works on paper.

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For many years Max has been a serious student of Japanese ink painting. He began studying Buddhism in 2006. His work was included in *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 to 1989* (Guggenheim Museum, January 30–April 19, 2009). Based on the series of Zen Buddhist poems about the ten stages toward enlightenment, his ten sumi-ink paintings were the focus of “Oxherding — A Collaboration with Lewis Hyde” (Japan Society, New York, October 1, 2010 to January 16, 2011).

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Max is currently having a show of paintings at the Gary Snyder Gallery (March 1–April 7, 2012). There is a wall of different-sized quatrefoils arranged salon style. There are a number of large quatrefoils, squares, and a couple of tondos. It is his first show in New York in a number of years, and, to my mind, the best (and that includes the ones in which our collaborations were shown).

Max’s palette ranges from grays, pinks and reds to blues, yellows, violets, and blacks. It includes silver and gold leaf. The vocabulary is made up of zigzags and receding ellipses, like something you might find in an early video game, and gestural swirls, often silver, black, or red snaking around inside the quatrefoil. In the paintings where there are both ellipses and a quick gestural swirl, he realizes two contrasting ideas of space. The strongest paintings are the ones in which he compresses three or four layers, each consisting of a distinct mark made in a different color. The paintings’ surfaces often resemble porcelain, at once hard, shiny, and delicate. They are weird, goofy bouquets in which East and West, gesture and geometry, gold leaf, silver paint, dusty pink, lime green and tangerine have coalesced.

Max Gimblett: The Holy Grail continues at the Gary Snyder Gallery (529 West 20th Street, 10th Floor, Chelsea, Manhattan) until April 7.