

MAX GIMBLETT

The work of this expatriate New Zealand artist, who moved to New York in the early '70s, is featured in an exciting new group exhibition now on show at the Guggenheim Museum. Titled *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia*, the exhibition explores the impact of Asian art and culture on American art from 1860 to the recent past. Here, Gimblett's longtime friend and collaborator, John Yau, charts the influence of Asia on the artist's work

WORDS: John Yau

I have known Max Gimblett for around 20 years, and most of our time together is spent in his studio, collaborating on different projects, many of which he has initiated. We have worked on unique artists' books, limited edition artists' books, poem-drawings, and paintings with words. When we are not busy trying to make something, we sit and relax. He drinks tea, while I drink coffee. During these moments, he often talks enthusiastically about a subject that he is preoccupied with. On my most recent visit, he talked about the Japanese monk and calligrapher Sengai Gibon (1750–1837); his reading of the *Dao De Jing* (The Book of the Way); Edo-period porcelain; Japanese screens; the art of gilding; the 17th-century Chinese painter Shih-T'ao and his treatise, *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*; and Zen koans that have caught his attention. His mind is a whirling galaxy dense with information of all esoteric kinds, which he can draw upon in unlikely and surprising ways. Even though I might find it hard to keep up, I always feel energised by his irresistible gusto.

These days, Gimblett has many reasons to be excited. His work has been selected for what is likely to be considered a groundbreaking exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Organised by Alexandra Munroe, the museum's inaugural Senior Curator of Asian Art, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 to 1989* will, according to the Guggenheim, "trace how the material culture, artistic legacies, and philosophical systems of Asia – collectively admired as 'the East' – were known, reconstructed, and transformed by American art and cultural forces." Audiences will "experience how Eastern art forms and philosophies had a far more important and sustained influence on American modern and contemporary art than is generally recognised or understood."



Top: *Face of Silence* (1997), gesso, black bole clay, silver leaf and lacquer on wood panel, 152.5cm diameter

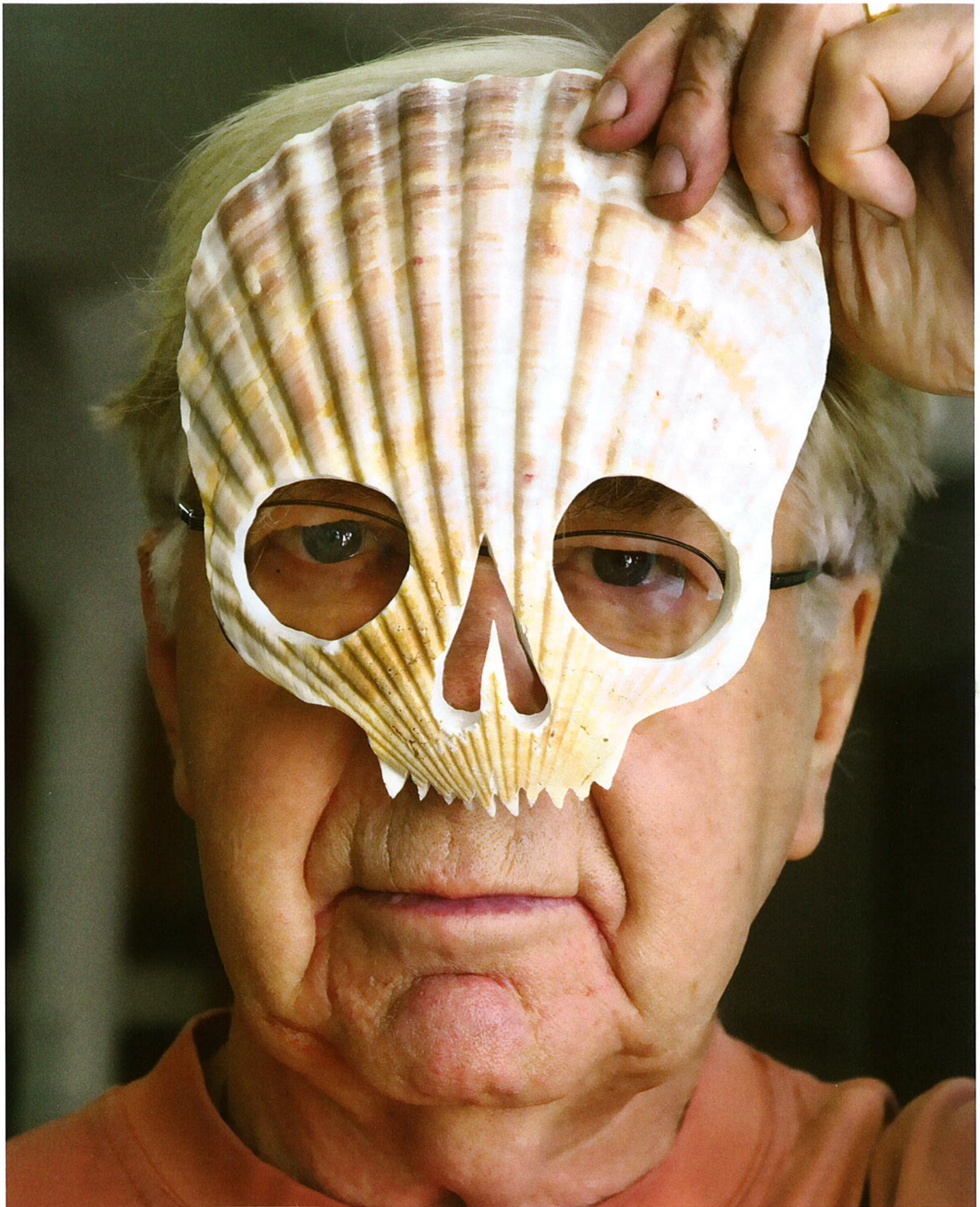
Above: *Action Painting* (1995), acrylic and vinyl polymers on canvas, 228.5cm diameter

From the time period covered by the exhibition, and the broad range of media it will feature, it is apparent that Munroe is advancing the view that America's engagement with the arts of Asia is every bit as important, and perhaps even more so, than its well-known dialogue with European art. And while a number of people share this view, myself included, it will be the first time that a major museum in New York will have organised and documented the far-reaching influence that the arts of Asia have had, and continue to have, on American artists and writers.

Gimblett's preoccupation with Asian art and thinking, particularly its manifestations in different schools of Buddhism, began long ago. I would hazard to say that every step he took reinforced his interest in Asian arts, crafts and philosophy. Born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1935, Gimblett remembers seeing Maori and Pacific Island art as a child. In 1962 he moved to Toronto, Canada, where he worked as an apprentice and studio potter, an experience that served him well when he began to have his paintings coated in gold, silver and palladium. "Covering their delicate surfaces with epoxy," he says, "is similar to glazing porcelain; it protects them, and gives them a uniformly shiny surface. The paintings are like light on water."

During this formative period, Gimblett was influenced by the work and thinking of potters Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada; he read Leach's *A Potter's Book* and M. C. Richards's *Centering in Pottery, Poetry and the Person*. Guided by their study of the arts of Asia, which included pottery and poetry, Leach and Richards were iconoclasts who believed that art and life were inseparable, and that each influenced the other. Like Leach and Richards, Gimblett uses all kinds of materials in his art, and joins together different traditions into a harmonious unity. In the painting *Face of Silence* (1997), for example, he has used gesso, black bole

Face of Silence, collection: Four Seasons Hotel, San Francisco; photo: Tom Warren. Action Painting, courtesy: Nadene Milne Gallery, Arrowtown in association with Cowi Langford Gallery, Auckland; photo: Tom Warren. Portrait photo: Warwick Freeman



Max Gimblett in 2008 with Scollop Shell Skull from the series Spirit Box (1986–2008)

NEW ZEALAND TO NEW YORK

John Hurrell charts the journey of this Auckland-born son of a factory foreman to New York (via London and Canada) and the profound influence on his practice of not only Zen Buddhism and the work of Asian Masters, but also Christian symbolism, ceramics and Abstract Expressionism – in particular, Jackson Pollock

Max Gimblett, a New Zealand-born painter, has been profoundly influenced by Zen Buddhism. He believes in karma, the material consequences of one's actions that determine one's bodily form and location in past, present and future incarnations. (In previous interviews he has claimed to have been a Japanese woman courtier, a Roman centurion and even a beagle.)

He came into his current life as the only child of Dora and Frank Gimblett, born in 1935 in Auckland. His father was a margarine factory foreman, his mother ran a milkbar, and they lived in Epsom, Newmarket and Grafton. He went to two primary schools. At the second, in Grafton, he was taught by Una Platz who became an important art historian. "Max sat in the front row and smiled at me for the whole year," Platz later said.

After the sudden death of his father following a heart attack, young Max boarded at Kings Preparatory School in Auckland where he soon experienced problems arising from his dyslexia. His secondary education was at Auckland Grammar, but after two years his mother – against the headmaster's wishes – pulled him out so that he could learn a trade and pay the rent on his room.

He became an apprentice at Classic Manufacturing, a clothing manufacturing company on Elliott Street, starting as a floor sweeper and working his way up to dressing models and then becoming a salesman. He then moved to W.H. Airey Co., travelling around with patterned swatches and samples, his likeable sincerity, energy and directness ensuring his success in sales.

Although he had no talent for art at school, he illustrated his story books as a child. He still has some of these, including an illustrated copy of Winnie the Pooh. With his mother, he regularly attended St David's and St Andrew's Presbyterian churches where he began to notice certain ornamental Christian symbols – like the quatrefoil – that years later formed a crucial part of his painting vocabulary.

As a child and teenager he explored the Auckland War Memorial Museum, particularly its Maori hall and modest room of Asian bronzes and ceramics. (He didn't really discover contemporary art until he went to England.) He also had a passion for books and frequented a bookshop on Wellesley Street, as well as Grafton Public Library and Auckland Public Library.

By the time he was 20, Gimblett had developed a curiosity about the world beyond Auckland, and in 1956 travelled by boat to London where he worked for 18 months as a management trainee. He was so affected by this stay, and by a night he spent in New York on the way back, that on returning to Auckland he remained unsettled. He returned to London in 1959.

In London, after making good use of the library at New Zealand House, Gimblett felt that he might have talent as a writer. He became friendly with a coterie of Australian artists, including Michael Johnson and Brett Whiteley. When Gimblett found that his writing wasn't working, it was Johnson who suggested he try ceramics.



Photo: © Evea-Jheeri

Top: A young Gimblett potting at the Canadian National Exhibition, Toronto in 1963

Above and below: Gimblett in his studio on The Bowery in New York in 1976 – three years after he permanently settled in the United States



Photo: © Angel David Molina, 1984

Among the artists Gimblett met was Billy Apple, a New Zealander, who mentioned that he was about to go to New York. This prompted Gimblett to cross the Atlantic too, travelling to Toronto in 1961 to stay with a writer friend, Duncan McWhirter. As luck would have it, McWhirter introduced Gimblett to a ceramicist, Roman Bartkiw, who was looking for an apprentice.

Gimblett studied with Bartkiw for a year before working with another Canadian potter in Toronto, Merton Chambers. One of Bartkiw's pupils, Doris Kirshenblatt, introduced Gimblett to her daughter, Barbara Kirshenblatt, an Honours student in English. Barbara and Gimblett fell in love, eventually marrying.

In 1963, after evening classes in drawing at the Ontario College of Art where he developed the gestural method that is still a crucial part of his practice today, Gimblett became excited about light and colour and bought some paints. It was in Toronto that he discovered he was a painter, and he still has many of his works from that time. The following year he enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute. In San Francisco he encountered the cross-cultural symbolism of Carl Jung, having earlier been influenced by Freud. He also regularly visited the city's Asian art museums.

In 1972 Gimblett and Kirshenblatt moved to New York where a couple of years later they met the New Zealand artist Len Lye, who became Gimblett's mentor and friend. The two shared common preoccupations. Lye's interest in making "Old Brain" [automatic] drawings and kinetic sculpture that served as an unconscious substitute for his (dancing) body paralleled Gimblett's interest in his own body as a "transmitter" of brushed drawings that come out of a "no-mind dance."

Gimblett continued his earlier exploration of colour properties, application techniques and figure/ground relationships using squares and rectangles. In the late '70s and early '80s he moved to single circles, and in 1983 combined four overlapping circular forms using precious gold, silver and copper leaf on canvas. He began to apply his calligraphic method to shaped canvases too. "It took a long self-generated apprenticeship [for me] to be able to paint wet and loose with firm authority within myself, within my language [speaking of his body as a transmitter or conduit], and many years before I made the Asian Masters conscious," he says.

One of the Asian Masters he refers to here is Sengai Gibon whose calligraphic paintings Gimblett has seen many times at the Idemitsu Museum in Tokyo. What about western masters? How does he make them "conscious"? Says Gimblett: "For me, Pollock is the American classicist and the dialogue is between Pollock and de Kooning. Pollock is essentially a field painter, while De Kooning is a European figure/ground painter. I am interested in both, but am much more connected to Pollock by conviction, temperament and body gesture. I have always been committed to falling in behind and following the classicists – Cézanne, Picasso, Pollock."



Courtesy HuiPress, Makawa, Hawaii

“As with many other artists of his generation, Gimblett felt the pressure to either reinvent Abstract Expressionism or leave it behind”

clay, water-gilded silver, lacquer and wood panel. In 1982/83 he began using a quatrefoil as a shape to paint on. Historically, a quatrefoil is a symbol found in both eastern and western religious practices. In addition to being basic to the shape of windows in Gothic churches and a symbol for the Virgin Mary, the quatrefoil also represents the lotus flower, which is a symbol for the Brahman becoming Buddha, a pure being rising out of the mud.

Gimblett's early experiences helped focus the way he looked at, and began building upon, postwar art, particularly Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism. In 1965 he moved to San Francisco and began studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute, formerly California College of Art. Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still were among the artists who had taught at the school, and their presence was still strongly felt. One of Gimblett's fellow students was the monochrome-painter Phil Sims, with whom he formed a lifelong friendship. On his own, and inspired in part by the work of Robert Motherwell, Gimblett began practising

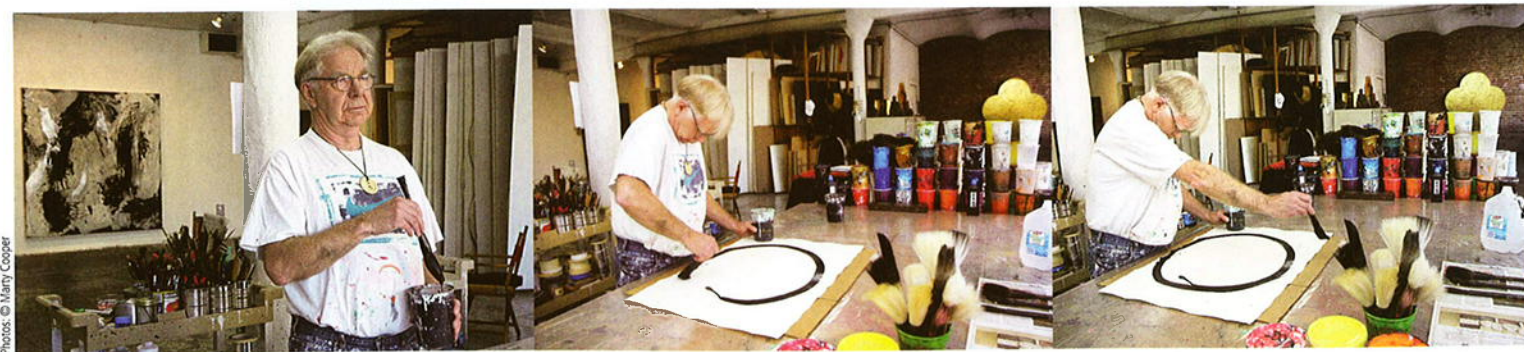
calligraphy, unaware that the Zen priest Shunryu Suzuki, author of many seminal books, including *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, was teaching at the Zen Center across town. When I press Gimblett to tell me more, he says, paradoxically, that he “didn't know this in his conscious mind,” but that he was “indeed being influenced.”

As with many other artists of his generation, Gimblett felt the pressure to either reinvent Abstract Expressionism or leave it behind. He began, understandably enough, by choosing the latter, but eventually moved to the former. No doubt his practice of calligraphy led him to re-evaluate his approach, and to move away from the hard-edged, geometric abstraction that typified his work between 1975 and 1982. In a sense, he went back to his beginnings, to the practice of calligraphy and his childhood memories of Asian art. This is one reason that drawing, and drawing in paint, are central to his practice, the other being the discipline of daily work that he learned as a studio potter. And yet if the practice of drawing has come to be regarded as ego driven, an attempt to prove mastery, Gimblett's prolonged engagement with Asian art, as well as his study of Buddhism, has given him

the opposite understanding, which is that drawing is both unique and, paradoxically, egoless.

Gimblett recently completed six enso (or circles), which are the Japanese symbol for infinity and regeneration. The most famous enso is found in Sengai Gibon's drawing of a circle-triangle-square – a symbol for the universe and the endless variety it contains. In copying, but, paradoxically, not copying a simple symbol that Sengai Gibon made in one gesture, Gimblett literally made hundreds of drawings as preparation for etching over a three-week period while he was artist-in-residence at HuiPress on Maui Island, Hawaii. At the end, he kept six etchings that he felt attained the seamless synthesis of the anonymous and particular that he sees as being inherent to Sengai Gibon's work. Gimblett doesn't see himself as copying. Rather, he is being receptive to fundamental images and meanings; he is a conduit for forms (circles and gestures) and motifs (skulls), which he believes can be made fresh.

Gimblett's sense of history, which can be characterised by his belief in the enduring power of certain shapes, should be considered in light of what modernism and postmodernism have come to mean at the end of the first decade of the



Photos: © Harry Cooper

Top, left to right: *Bushido*; *water is never clumsy*; *Guggenheim Enso* (all 2008), sugar-lift aquatint on handmade Japanese Sekishu, published by HuiPress, Makawa, Hawaii, each 100 x 75.5cm Above: Max Gimblett at work in his New York studio

ALEXANDRA MONROE, CURATOR OF THE THIRD MIND: AMERICAN ARTISTS CONTEMPLATE ASIA, 1860 TO 1989



Alexandra Monroe

Alexandra Monroe, the curator of *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 to 1989*, was appointed Senior Curator of Asian Art at New York's Guggenheim Museum in 2006. Monroe's position is the Museum's first-ever curatorial appointment in Asian art. Her most recent

Guggenheim project, in 2008, was Cai Guo-Qiang: *I Want to Believe*, a retrospective of the contemporary Chinese-born artist's work that she co-curated with Thomas Krens, then Director of the Guggenheim. (Richard Armstrong took over as Director in November 2008.)

Prior to joining the Guggenheim, Monroe was Vice President of Arts and Culture at the Japan Society in New York and Director of the Japan Society Gallery (1998–2005). She is well-known for her 1994 exhibition, *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. This landmark survey of postwar Japanese art, which opened at the Yokohama Museum of Art and travelled to the United States, introduced viewers to the complex history of avant-garde Japanese art and highlighted Japan's distinct cultural tradition. "I wanted to show how modern Japanese art was profoundly specific to its time, place and artistic psyche, even if its 'style' looked international," explains Monroe. "Most modern Asian art was [at the time] dismissed by western critics as derivative; the show was a way of exposing the fallacy and blindness of this bias, and to instigate a new way of seeing modern and avant-garde art in a non-western context."

The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, which explores the impact of Asian art and philosophy on American art, has a similar agenda to *Scream Against the Sky* in terms of proposing a "new way of seeing American art." "The *Third Mind* challenges decades of entrenched critical history that analyses American modern and contemporary art exclusively within the context of European/western discourses," explains Monroe. "It is my hope that [it] will be a revelatory exhibition, enabling visitors to see 130 years of American creative culture through an entirely new lens – a lens that reveals the transformative influences of Asian art and ideas on the

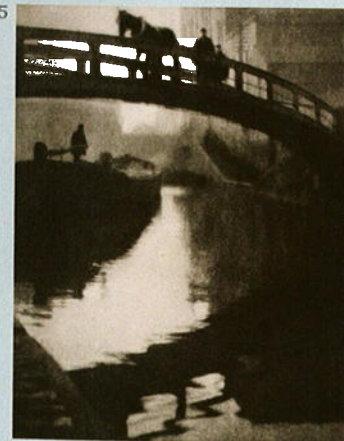


formal and conceptual achievements of American modern and contemporary art."

The exhibition is enormous, comprising some 260 works by 114 American and Asian-American artists drawn from major public and private collections in the United States and Europe. The range of artists (and writers) in the show is impressive, with the participants having been part of artistic communities across the United States, from Boston and New York to Seattle, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The list of participants includes James McNeill Whistler, Mary Cassatt, Georgia O'Keeffe, Ezra Pound, Isamu Noguchi, John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Nam June Paik, Yoko Ono, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Ad Reinhardt, Agnes Martin, Dan Flavin and Walter de Maria.

One of the themes of the exhibition is the development of alternative models of the "self" considered central to western art and philosophy. "The dematerialisation of the 'self' based on Asian metaphysics and techniques of focused consciousness to bring about transcendent awareness is central to the show's thesis," says Monroe. "By the early 1900s, for example, Arthur Wesley Dow and Edward Steichen articulated the purpose of art to be a reflection of the mind at one with nature. They appropriated this language and aesthetic from Asian texts that proposed a very different notion of the self than what Descartes and his western Enlightenment tradition defined. The 'self' in this alternative tradition is less an ego of fixed character than a conduit for pure unmediated experience. In the case of John Cage, for example, this refutation of the artist/composer is evident in his use of chance operations or silence to allow 'sounds to be themselves'."

The Third Mind, which runs until 19 April, will be complemented by a series of live and screened lectures and performances by a range of artists and performers, including Laurie Anderson, Merce Cunningham, Yoko Ono and Marina Abramovic. Says Monroe of the enormous work involved in putting the exhibition together: "I have been engaged with this research for 10 years and feel I've just begun to unravel the profound web of connections linking artists, writers, thinkers and the works of their imagination to Asian sources. Hopefully, the exhibition will offer new tools to see what artists have known all along... I think it will be an eye-opening, mind-bending experience for everyone who sees it."



1 Fluxus Collective, *Fluxkit* (1964–65) (assembled by George Macjunas), mixed-media, 28 x 44 x 38cm 2 Tehching Hsieh, *Punching the Time Clock on the Hour, One Year Performance*, April 11, 1980 – April 11, 1981 (1980–81), mixed-media installation 3 Georgia O'Keeffe, *Abstraction* (1917), watercolour on paper, 40 x 27.6cm 4 Robert Rauschenberg, *Gold Standard* (1964), mixed-media, 215.9 x 360.7 x 130.2cm 5 Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Regent's Canal, London* (1904), photogravure print, 21.6 x 17cm

1. Gilbert & Lilia Silverman Fluxus Collection, Detroit; Walter Art Center, Minneapolis 2. Collection of Mr and Mrs Gerald E. Pezas, Santa Fe, © 2009 Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation/ARTS, New York 3. Glenstone Foundation, Potomac, Maryland 4. Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York 5. Photo: Tim Nighswander 6. Collection: George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Photo Processes, New York. Gift of the artist.



“We don’t stand outside the paintings; they pull us in, something that something that neither Chinese landscape painting or Abstract Expressionism ever did”

21st century. He is certainly not a modernist, if by that word we mean the will to be original. And yet he is most definitely not a postmodernist if we understand that term to mean advocating the death of the author through the deployment of such strategies as citation and parody. I would go so far as to say that Gimblett might not believe in the author (or artist as authority) at all, unless you consider reality itself to be the author. And, by refusing to align himself with either camp, he achieves a hard-won independence from the strictures integral to the supporting discourses.

Gimblett’s most recent series of paintings was done with the Chinese painter Shih-T’ao in mind. Scholars believe that when Shih-T’ao, a successful landscapist, was approaching 60, he wrote *Enlightening Remarks on Painting*. Shih-T’ao belonged to what western art historians have defined as the “Individualist school.” Its loosely connected adherents rejected the “Orthodox” approach favoured by the ruling Ch’ing dynasty. The Individualists believed that the Orthodox school’s emphasis on techniques of imitation and allusion, and its preoccupation with correctness, were pictorial issues; and they ignored “Nature,” which, according to the Daoists, was in continuous change. Shih-T’ao believed that instead of fetishising the past, as the orthodox artists had, the individual should observe nature. One becomes authentic and also finds self-expression by being true to “Nature” and change.

As I learned about Shih-T’ao, I came across numerous similarities between his and Gimblett’s attitude to painting. (I could also imagine



Courtesy Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland



Courtesy Haines Gallery, San Francisco and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland

Gimblett [given his belief in reincarnation] telling me that he and Shih-T’ao had started talking long before they ever met.)

The paintings for and after Shih-T’ao are on square formats with a palette of black and different tones of silvery grey. Embedded in smooth glistening grounds, the undulant gestural paths appear to be caught between unravelling and ravelling. Some of the forms push against (and presumably past) the paintings’ physical edges. While some of the gestures are black, others are tonally closer to the silvery ground, as if they’re sinking into it, as well as, paradoxically, floating on top. This is particularly so when a black gesture is overlaid with an iridescent silvery one.

In contrast to the speed we feel when looking at the work of Abstract Expressionists such as Yves Klein and Willem de Kooning, everything feels slowed down and glacial in these paintings. The glassy surfaces catch our reflection, making us part of their calmly turbulent world. They also evoke the fragility of porcelain and the glowing surface of moonlight on water. We don’t stand outside the paintings; they pull us in, something that neither Chinese landscape painting nor Abstract Expressionism ever did. The immediacy of the lines belies the demanding effort it took to make them. Gimblett may be approaching 75, but he paints like someone in his twenties. There is joy in the face of impending chaos.

Max Gimblett is represented by Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland and Haines Gallery, San Francisco

Exhibition: *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860 to 1989*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, until 19 Apr; *Max Gimblett: Full Fathom Five*, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland, 28 Apr – 22 May

Top: Max Gimblett in his New York studio 1 *The Golden Path – for Master Shih-T’ao* (2007–08), gesso, acrylic and vinyl polymers, iridescent gold pigments, epoxy and gold leaf on canvas, 152.4 x 152.4cm 2 *The Fire Sermon – with Shih-T’ao in Mind* (2008), gesso, acrylic and vinyl polymers, epoxy and palladium leaf on canvas, 203 x 203cm