

SPIRIT & SPACE

Photographer Martyn Thompson gains rare access to the Manhattan home of artist Max Gimblett, revealing the place in which he lives and works

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARTYN THOMPSON WRITER: TIFFANY BAKKER

IN THE MAIN LIVING AREA, A PAIR OF ITALIAN CHAIRS (BOUGHT SECOND-HAND TWO DECADES AGO) AND A TABLE THAT BELONGED TO GIMBLETT'S FATHER-IN-LAW, ARTIST MAYER KIRSCHENBLATT, TAKE PRIDE OF PLACE. THE ARTWORK ON THE WALL, TITLED *CHUANG TSU*, IS BY MAX GIMBLETT HIMSELF.

THIS PAGE: MAX GIMBLETT AT WORK CREATING A JAPANESE ENSO INK DRAWING. OPPOSITE: THE TOOLS OF GIMBLETT'S TRADE FORM THEIR OWN STILL-LIFE IN HIS STUDIO.





AFTER 35 YEARS, GIMBLETT'S OFFICE OVERFLOWS WITH THE DETRITUS OF A LIFE DEVOTED TO CREATION. THE MASKS ON THE WALL ARE FROM INDONESIA AND THEIR MOTIFS ARE ECHOED IN GIMBLETT'S ART.

THE AIRY STUDIO SPACE IS A CONSTANTLY EVOLVING PALETTE, THE DIMENSIONS OF WHICH ALLOW FOR PROJECTS OF IMPOSING SCALE. ALTHOUGH SPARSE, IT IS RARELY AUSTERE AND HUMS WITH EVIDENCE OF INHABITATION. FRONT AND CENTRE IS GIMBLETT'S QUATREFOIL, KUBLA KHAN, WHILE ANOTHER OF HIS WORKS, ORPHEUS, RESTS ON THE REAR WALL OF THE STUDIO.





AMID THE CLUTTERED FUNCTIONALITY OF THE KITCHEN, THIS PAGE, FLOURISHES SUCH AS A TRIO OF EMPTY WALL-MOUNTED SPICE RACKS REVEAL THE ARTISTIC EYES OF ITS RESIDENTS. OPPOSITE: BOOKS AND A ROCKING CHAIR HINT AT THE PROCESS OF STIMULATION AND CONTEMPLATION ESSENTIAL FOR AN ARTIST LIKE GIMBLETT.

ASK WORLD-RENOWNED New Zealand artist Max Gimblett what the word 'home' means to him, and his answer is simple. "Primarily, it means a place where my wife lives," says the affable 75-year-old. "I met my wife in 1963, in Toronto, when she was 19 and she came and lived with me. The second or third day she was there, she brought a little Chinese tapestry into the space and pinned it on the wall. That turned it into a home."

Currently, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the artist's wife of 47 years, is in the midst of a four-year stint in Warsaw, where she's the core exhibition chairperson of the new Museum of the History of the Polish Jews. Yet, her influence informs much of the 427-square-metre warehouse that the couple has lived in since 1974.

The warehouse, which Gimblett says has not changed structurally in the ensuing 37 years, is situated on the Bowery on New York's Lower East Side and is a true artist's sanctuary. With the living area situated toward the back of the property, Gimblett's expansive studio faces the iconic thoroughfare. It is here that he has created the quaterfoils and Japanese sumi ink paintings which have made him an iconic figure in global art and seen him exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum. "The space gives me continuous focus because I work where I live," he says, "and I can come in here at any hour."

Gimblett's studio is something of a paradox. From the paint-splattered floors to the racks of large canvases and white boards that stack against a wall, the colourful inks and paintbrushes that abound throughout the space, there's little doubt an artist works here. Yet there is still an overriding calmness and sense of order, no doubt in part because Gimblett is an ordained Buddhist monk.

"I like that it's an open, white space and that's all a visual artist really needs," he says. "You need open white space and you need solitude to find out who you are. You need to take off your masks and your persona. Art is, as I see it, a spiritual pursuit."

When we meet, a few of Gimblett's pieces line the walls, but he's quick to point out that "the art changes daily". Nearby, a cluster of new quaterfoils takes up space on the floor; Gimblett is preparing for a September show at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh.

Aside from his creations, the studio also includes elements from his travels over the years – which have been widespread since he left his native New Zealand in the 1950s. He directs me to his own "altar", where a travelling Buddhist shrine sits alongside a Chinese God of abundance and the elephant Lord Ganesh ("remover of obstacles in daily life") – all of which heavily influence his art. There is even a human skull, sourced from a doctor's collection in Holland. "I think every artist's studio needs a skull," he smiles.

While Gimblett's studio may reflect a sense of order, his living space is altogether more eclectic. It has a messy charm that evokes a warmth and character that makes one feel instantly at home. "We didn't make it over or do anything middle class," says Gimblett. "It's quite funky and it's quite crude, really."



Barbara's 19,000 books engulf the space, while the art created by her father – famed Jewish outsider painter Mayer Kirshenblatt – lines the warehouse's back brick wall, along with mementos from the couple's travels. These take myriad forms but it's the phalanx of Indonesian papier-mâché masks which line one wall that catch and hold the eye. There is also a baby grand piano ("Barbara plays") and a pair of Italian chairs purchased at a second-hand furniture store. The remainder of the furniture was mostly sourced from the pavements of New York City. "They're found objects," says Gimblett. "We come from the generation where we didn't put a cent into our furniture – we pulled our furniture up off the street. For years, we slept on a mattress on top of a loading platform."

The couple now sleeps on handmade beds, the plans for which were taken from famed Australian sculptor Clement Meadmore's book *How To Make Furniture Without Tools*. Gimblett constructed them himself. "They're made without sawing," he adds. "You make your measurements, order your lumber and glue it together."

While Gimblett ensures he visits his homeland every year – "I feel very close to New Zealand," he says – New York City is his home. Albeit a small part of it. "New York is like [a series of] neighbourhood by neighbourhood, so this is my neighbourhood," says Gimblett. "I very rarely go outside of my own neighbourhood, so even going up to 31st Street is an adventure for me. It's just who I am." **VL**

A book of interiors by photographer Martyn Thompson is due out in 2012.