

092 *Dream catcher*  
Jeweller Daniel Brush seeks to make objects that transcend the material

# CHRISTIE'S

## MAGAZINE

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Daniel Brush photographed by Geordie Wood

DANIEL BRUSH: A JEWELLER LIKE NO OTHER

**The CHAMPIONS of Indian contemporary ART**

Australia's *new-wave* Aboriginal artists

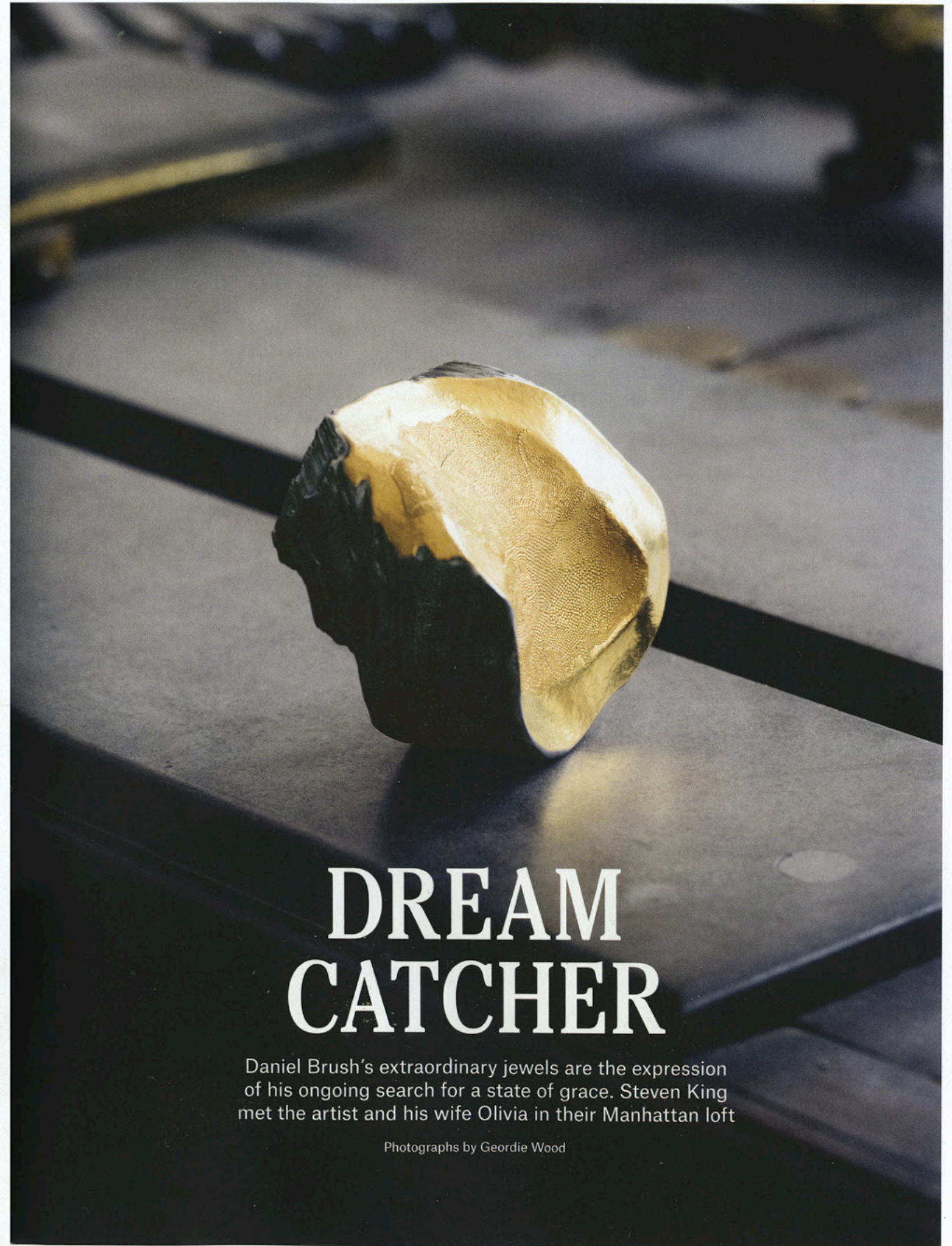
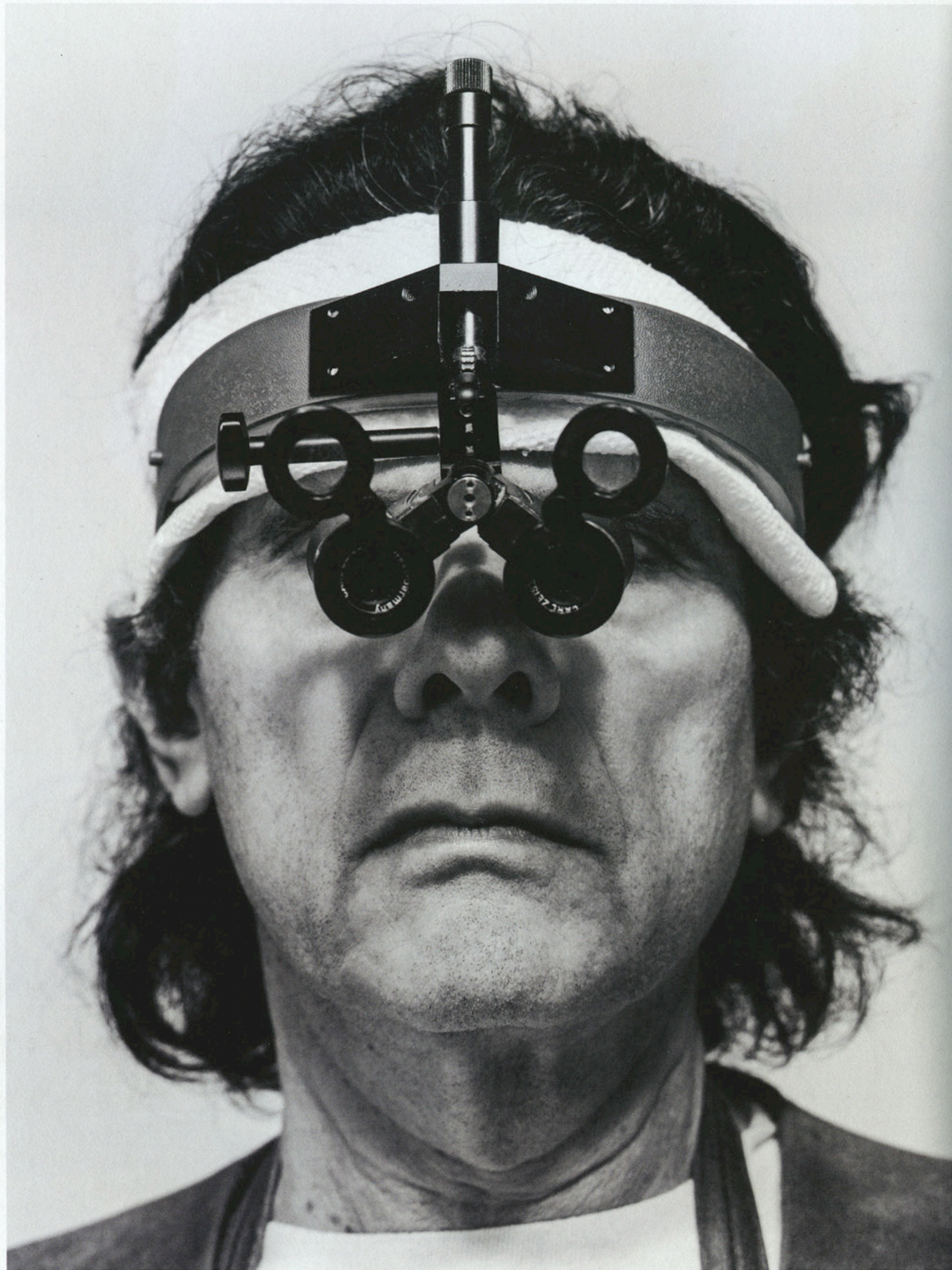
HOW TO BE A 21ST-CENTURY FOP

**JOHN KASMIN and the making of THE MODERN GALLERY**

PLUS

*Christie's, New York: John CURRIN, Gerhard RICHTER & Willem DE KOONING*





# DREAM CATCHER

Daniel Brush's extraordinary jewels are the expression of his ongoing search for a state of grace. Steven King met the artist and his wife Olivia in their Manhattan loft

Photographs by Geordie Wood





Left, Daniel and Olivia Brush at home in Manhattan. Previous pages: the jeweller at work; *Wave*, 1993–96, hammered, chased, pure gold inlet, hand-carved steel



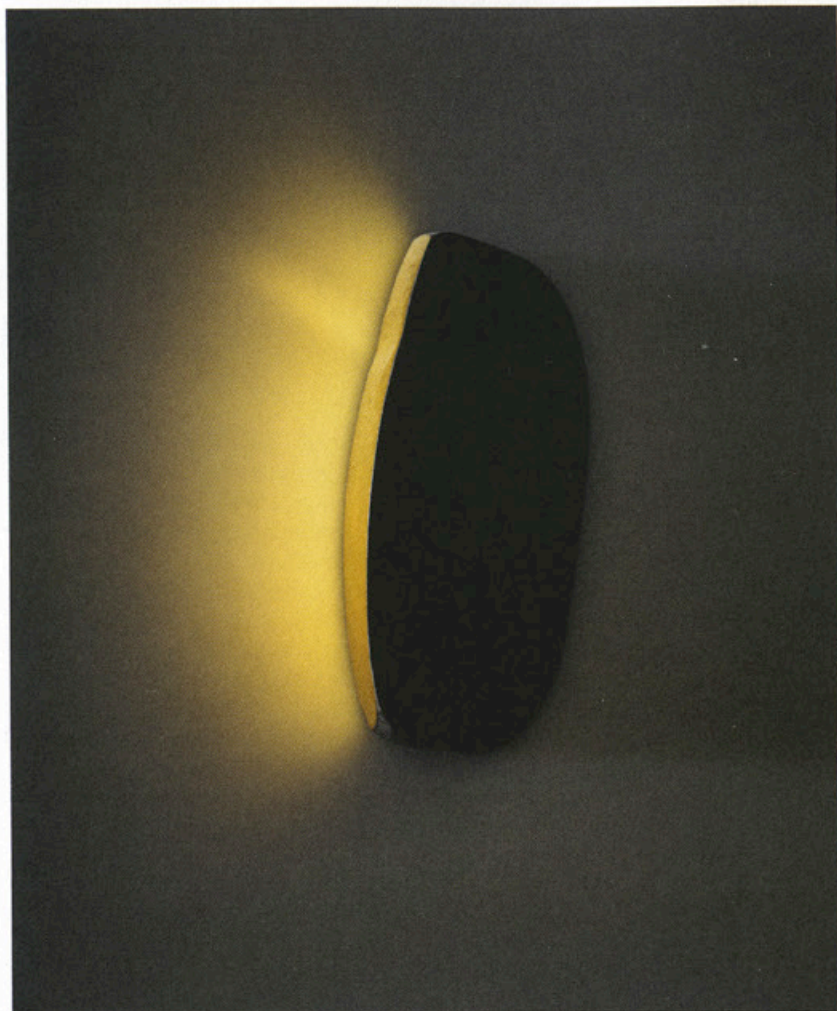
‘You know,’ Daniel Brush – artist, jeweller and creator of enchanted, uncategorisable objects – was telling me, ‘I’m now at the stage, I make these things to let them have a voice. I make whatever I make because I want to make it. I don’t have any notion beyond it. In fact, I frankly don’t know what to do with these things. But I want to be right there at the edge with the cold wind blowing at me.’ We were in the loft where he and his wife Olivia live and work, near the Flatiron Building in downtown Manhattan. It was the Fourth of July. Outside, the weather was close, muggy, still – not so much as a breath of air blowing, cold or otherwise. But inside, as always with the Brushes, the conversation eddied and swirled constantly, this way and that, around questions of creativity and value and how we engage with works of art.

Brush mentioned his excitement at the prospect of attending a performance of traditional Japanese Noh plays at Lincoln Center that was due to take place the following week. Not just any performance – this would be under the direction of the 26th Grand Master of the Kanze School, a direct descendant of Noh’s great 14th-century exponent and theorist Zeami Motokiyo. A first for New York and practically unprecedented outside Kyoto. I knew from previous encounters with Brush that Noh was one of his most enduring passions and sources of inspiration, along with gold, steel and, above all, Olivia, to whom he proposed on the day they met, as art students at the Carnegie Institute, in 1967. So I wasn’t surprised that the upcoming show was more than enough to send him into an ecstasy of anticipation.

‘There’s a particular Noh theatre actor who comes onto the stage and says absolutely nothing,’ he told me. ‘They’ve got an accompanying role. They stand next to an accompanying-role column and say nothing. But they have *yūgen*.’ He paused, casting his gaze towards a distant ceiling, fingers steepled. Brush is very adept at these dramatic pauses – though whether in a way that is more Zeami Motokiyo than Harold Pinter, I couldn’t say for sure. ‘As best I can understand it,’ he went on, scrunching up his features, ‘*yūgen* translates into supreme elegance. And this supreme elegance is not the Western definition of elegance. It’s *big*. It’s, like, you know, *supremely* elegant. So. To have *yūgen*. Wow. I say to myself all the time, what do I have to *do*? How do they *do* it? How do I *get* it? *Where* do I get it? Do I keep working? Do I keep thinking? Am I on the right track? Am I supposed to be doing something else, maybe? What if I’ve wasted my time doing all »

All artworks: private collection





Above, *South Light*, 2001, hammered pure gold inlet, hand-carved steel

this stuff? Like, is it a good thing to *want* to have *yūgen*?' He paused again, relaxed his scrunched-up features, smiled. 'I think so. I do think so,' he said.

I felt as though I'd been given a present. *Yūgen*. I looked it up. According to one source, *yūgen* relates to understatement, intimation, elegance, aristocratic grace, composure, equilibrium, serenity and quietism. 'It is almost impossible to find a parallel of this *yūgen* quality in the West, since it is something hardly ever created and appreciated by Westerners. But in Noh the beauty of *yūgen* is the core of its ideals. Without this quality the Noh ceases to exist.' This wonderful, obscure, all-but-untranslatable term is actually a hugely helpful one in considering the body of work that Brush has produced over the past half-century. The early paintings and drawings, jagged, fraught and intense. Exquisite sculptural pieces of profound mystery in ivory, steel and gold. Jewellery, witty and whimsical, in precious gemstones, Bakelite and ultralight NASA metal alloys. All so outwardly different that you might not believe they could have sprung from the same imagination, and yet all imbued, in glorious, ineffable abundance, with *yūgen*.

I asked François Curiel, Christie's pre-eminent jewellery expert and Asia-Pacific chairman, and a friend of the Brushes for more than 30 years, how he would sum up such an apparently disparate and dislocated oeuvre. 'Daniel's creative genius is contradictory, unorthodox and diverse,' he agreed. »



*Bunny Bangle*, 1988-92, hand-carved Bakelite, pure gold, pink Argyle diamonds, Burmese rubies



*Brush often hangs on to what he has produced for years before parting with it. He sells only when and to whom he pleases*



‘He works with and pairs up the most unusual materials, spinning the most extraordinary objects out of them. He has created jewels and art objects over a wide spectrum of distinctly different styles and themes. There is no boundary to his inner universe, and he seems to me to be just flexing different creative muscles during different creative periods. He produces artworks with microscopic precision, notably those in granules of gold and intricately carved steel. His technical skills are awe-inspiring.’

Curiel is one of a very few people who are in a position to comment in this manner with any sort of authority. Brush’s output is tiny, and he often hangs on to what he has produced for years before parting with it. He doesn’t accept commissions, seldom exhibits, doesn’t have a dealer, and sells only when and to whom he pleases. ‘There’s no other agenda than get up, work, go to sleep. There’s no agenda to get up, make a business, go to sleep. There’s no »

Above, 18 ounces of refined pure gold. Left, the studio





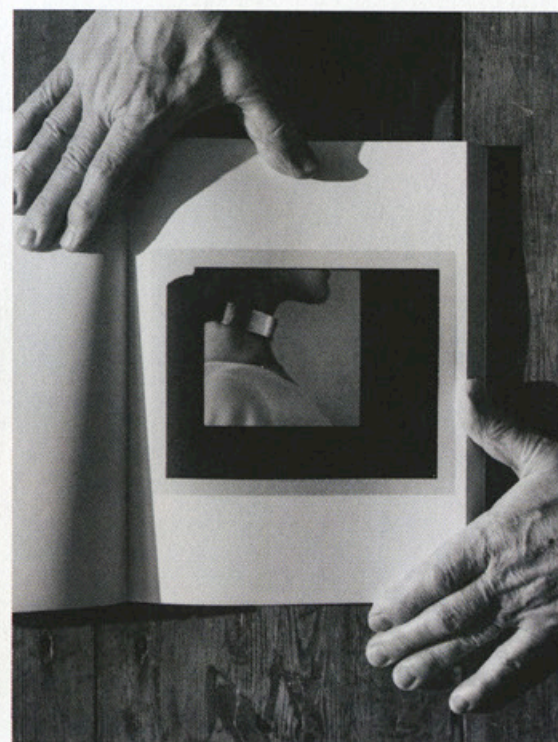
Above, *Justinian*, 1989–93, pure gold, 22-carat gold, steel

agenda to get up, get famous, go to sleep.' Hardly anyone, in short, gets to see, let alone own, the things he makes. Despite or perhaps because of this snow leopard-like elusiveness, a retrospective of his work at New York's Museum of Arts and Design in 2012 was the best-attended show in the museum's history.

The richness and eclecticism of Brush's work is echoed in his conversation. He seldom leaves the studio – though he is approaching 70, this is a matter of temperament and habit, not age or infirmity. Yet he's anything but standoffish, and his appetite for talk is insatiable. During my recent visit, as well as addressing the subject of *yūgen*, he spoke, for the best part of six hours, about cowboy boots, German bisque dolls, Bugatti engines, endangered species, macaroons, calligraphy, snaphaunces, Hedy Lamarr, Vladimir Horowitz, *Modern Farmer* magazine, machine guns, mimesis, fishmongers, ballet, Scotch whisky, Polaroid film, 'classic seven' Upper East Side apartments, punctuation marks and the engineering marvels of Casio G-Shock digital watches.

'Life's messy,' he said at last. 'I'm not good with the messiness of it. Because the more I study, the more I learn, the more I know, the more life says, you don't know *anything*, dude.'

Below, *Necks*, 2014–16, limited-edition book of 115 chokers. Opposite, *Poppies*, 2010, hand-carved stainless steel brooch set with diamonds

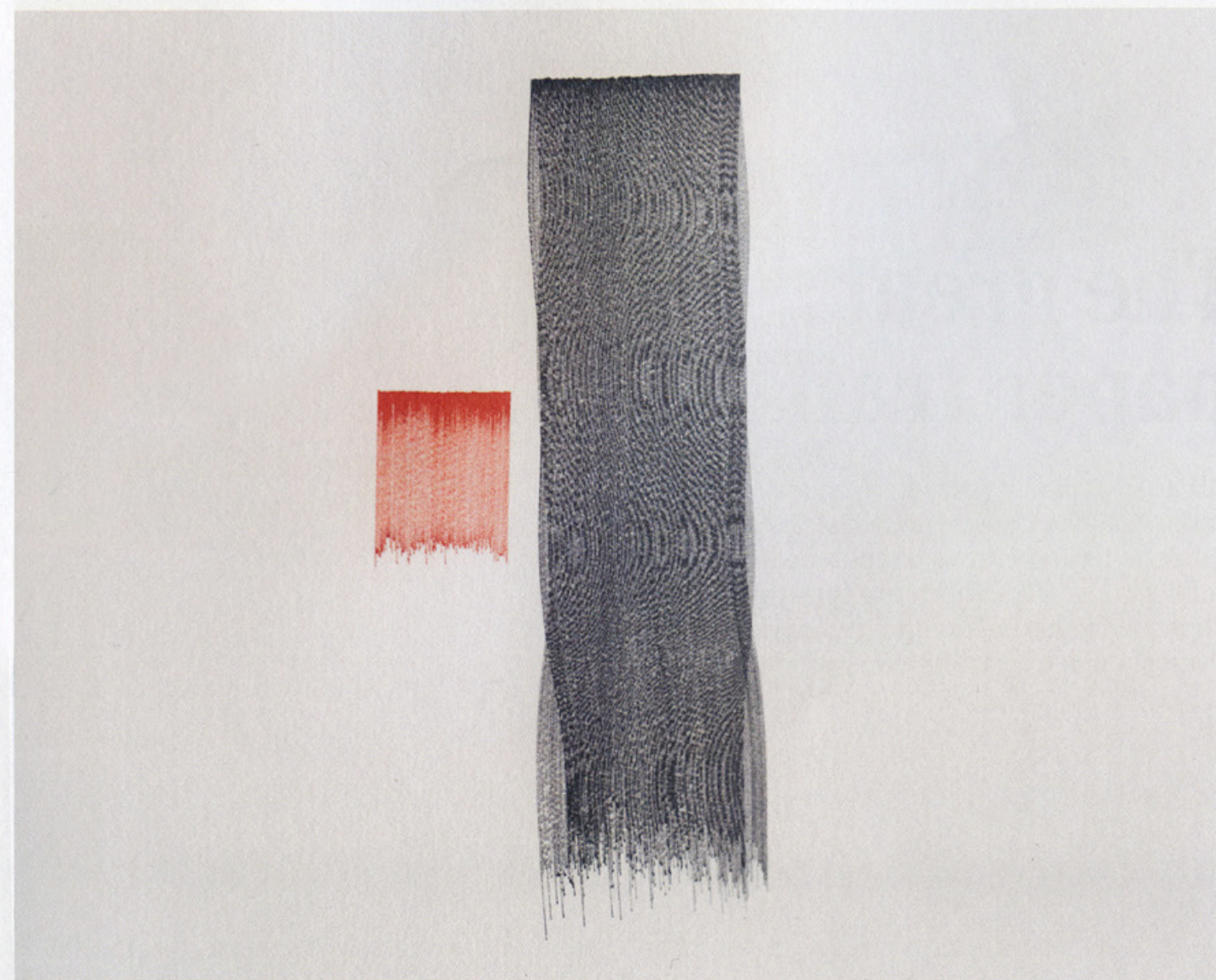


We talked, too, about the various projects that had been preoccupying him since my previous visit, three years earlier. There was a book of black-and-white photographs of his chokers, entitled *Necks*, which will be published next year, the first of a trilogy. 'I like the idea that you can maybe look at jewels in a new way,' he said. 'Maybe not look at them at all. Maybe get over the requirement of them all being on display like in a catalogue, where they're for sale, they all have clarity. So I kind of like the idea that it's a poetry book, a dream, and the book has more to do with what I was engaged in than the actual work that it photographs. So Olivia and I worked on this for three years. Purposefully old expired Polaroid film, purposefully one model that you'll never identify. I wanted to make the kind of chapbook that you used to be able to find at Gotham Book Mart on 47th Street, which sadly is gone.'

And there were a number of pieces of jewellery that drew on traditions of the Indian subcontinent and of Native American tribes of the southwestern United States. At Brush's request, I held one of these pieces in my hand for an hour or so before looking at it. It was a Colombian emerald, about the size and shape of a large Bic lighter, that had formerly »







Left, Brush in his studio. Above, *Zo*, 1978 to present, pen and ink on paper. The drawing is part of a 40-year series about the women plays of Noh theatre

been part of a headdress worn by an elephant belonging to the Nizam of Hyderabad. Brush had drilled and seeded the stone with little diamonds, transforming it into something that resembled an elongated, unripe strawberry. It made me laugh out loud, as he rhapsodised about its provenance. 'Emerald. Nizam. Elephant. It's a *big* story. And it gets *bigger*, right?'

He also showed me delicate dreamcatchers of ruby and conch pearl, threaded along simple dark-blue strings that turned out, on closer inspection, to be strands of lapis lazuli. Many Native Americans, he told me, make objects intended both to bring on dreams and to banish them while under the influence of hallucinogens, in order to engage directly with the spirit world. 'Can a jewel *do* that?' he asked. 'I think a jewel has to go beyond engaging the fashion designer. For me, for me. Can a jewel take your breath away, in and of itself, so that it doesn't even have to be *worn*? Can it be held in your hand so you *dream*? Can it become an intimate sculpture without a utilitarian function?'

The questions were rhetorical. But they invited a further question in response. All right, I countered, let's say a jewel can do or be those things. How

exactly do you measure your own success as the maker of such talismanic objects? Brush's answer returned us from the astral plane to the studio floor with a bump. 'I keep working,' he said simply, unhesitatingly. 'Ideas keep flowing. It doesn't stop. More confusion. More pieces. More work.'

A couple of weeks later, I emailed to ask whether he'd enjoyed that longed-for Noh performance at Lincoln Center. He wrote back: 'All Noh theatre stage sets from my reading follow a prescription. From the left, there is a long entrance walkway, a bridge, where the chorus and actors enter a small, designated space. When the chorus entered, the spacing between the men was not perfect and their feet rose at different elevations and cadence. Olivia and I abruptly left. I was not willing to jeopardise 50 years of a romantic dream that inspired 50 years of my work. I felt so much better when I got back to the studio and had Olivia's lentil soup. I'm working away like a wild man.' Despite the disappointment, I took this to be on balance a positive outcome. If you want to catch a dream, make your own dreamcatcher. If you want to see some *yūgen*, you'd better make that yourself, too. And if you're Daniel Brush, you can. ♦ [www.danielbrush.com](http://www.danielbrush.com)