

METAL GURU

Daniel Brush in his studio on West 24th Street. *Opposite*: a detail of his *Second Dome*, in granulated gold and steel. *Inset*: a diamond and Bakelite brooch from his *Ménagerie Magnétique* series.



BOOK OF DANIEL

For the past four decades Daniel Brush has produced works of art of surpassing beauty and virtuosity; "written", as he puts it, on canvas, paper, steel and gold. He turned to jewellery as a distraction from the pressures of painting, but his jewels are as extraordinary as any of his other creations, and provide a perfect point of entry into his unique, intense imaginative world, says STEVE KING

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DIEGO UCHITEL

As a kid, Daniel Brush was no good at making things. All thumbs. He could barely stick a model plane together. "Glue everywhere." He got over it. Today he is a virtuoso who can make things in gold and steel that the rest of us cannot even dream of.

He looks a bit like Lou Reed—compact, coiled, cranky—but possesses the skills of Benvenuto Cellini. "Some people would consider it impossible to do what he does," Nicolas Bos, head of Van Cleef & Arpels, told me. "But the craftsmanship is not for its own sake—it's creative, it's artistic. In those terms, I don't think you can go any further." Stephen Harrison, who curated an exhibition of masterpieces by Fabergé, Tiffany and Lalique at the Cleveland Museum of Art, believes Brush is in every respect their equal. François Curiel, a Christie's jewellery expert who has known Brush for decades, thinks there is no point in trying to categorise his work. "His creations transcend the realms of



IN HIS JEWELLERY, THE SERIOUSNESS IS OFFSET BY A CERTAIN *INSOUCIANCE*



jewellery, goldsmithing or art. He has developed his own special world of craftsmanship and creativity in which each object is virtually a museum piece."

In the time I spent with Brush, in the loft on West 24th Street where he has lived and worked with his wife Olivia since 1978, the only label he seemed happy to attach to himself was "poet". He gestured towards his tools and machinery, which occupy much of the 5,000 square feet of floorspace, and referred to them as "my typewriter". In that case, he is a poet who writes on canvas, paper and metal, and who paints, draws, sculpts and fashions what he refers to, with old-fashioned correctness, as *objets de vertu*. And he is a poet who sometimes makes jewellery too.

Brush has spoken of his jewellery as an *amuse-bouche*. (He is the least pretentious man you will ever meet but he is very fond of French terms.) Which is not to say that he doesn't take it seriously. He does. He takes most things seriously. When the question of how best to cut buffalo

mozzarella came up in conversation, for instance, he launched into a thoughtful monologue on the relative merits of stainless-steel and ceramic knives versus wire and even dental floss, followed by a consideration of whether a quick, light sawing motion ought to be more effective than a slow, steady downwards push.

But in his jewellery the seriousness is offset by a certain—to use another of his favourite words—*insouciance*. His ideal jewellery collector? One who never wears his jewels at all. His ideal jewel? The engine of a Bugatti 35B. "I got this wonderful note the other day. From this sensational guy. I love it. He says... He has one of my things in a fitted box in his study, where he reads about art. And every once in a while he opens the box with his eyes closed. Touches it. Because he wants to experience it *as if he were blind*. God, I love that! I keep thinking and hoping, the more I engage with people, that it's not just the tactile nature of it, it's that private, quiet, removed, you know, *secret* kind of

thing. There's something... It's just so *personal*. And then you're engaging with another person that you don't know but became intimate with. It's such an odd transference." And the Bugattis? "It's the mechanics. Metal on metal. They're jewelled. Perfectly flat. Hand-shaped. All hand-made. *Beautiful*. God, they're beautiful."

Brush was born in 1947. His parents had a shop in Cleveland, Ohio, that sold children's clothes and toys. When he was 13 years old two things happened that would change his life. His mother took him on a whistle-stop tour of Europe—13 countries in 13 days. This included a visit, presumably speedy, to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where he was transfixed by an Etruscan golden bowl. He knew then and there that one day he would make such a thing himself. Later the same year his mother gave him a Japanese Noh theatre mask—an eerily expressive wooden

object depicting the face of a yamabushi. It now hangs on a wall in his studio.

"So she gives me this mask. I say, 'What's this?' She says, 'It's a yamabushi. Yamabushis are neither male nor female.' I say, 'Okaaaaay...' She says, 'They travel alone in the wilderness, and in their quest for enlightenment their eyes become ablaze.' That's why the eyes of this mask are metallic, so when it was new, it reflected the light." Brush leaned forward and scowled at the yamabushi. Then he stepped back and, with a wild cackle, said: "So she completely screwed me up!"

These twinned obsessions, gold and Noh, each with its ancient rituals and romance, its rich philosophical and sacred associations, have preoccupied him ever since. In one way or another they inform every painting, drawing, sculpture, *objet* and piece of jewellery he has made.

He and Olivia were both art students at the Carnegie Institute of Technology in Pittsburgh. They agreed to get married on the day they met in 1967. After postgraduate work at the University of Southern California, Brush accepted a position at Georgetown in 1971. Before long he was a tenured professor, and had

staged two well-received solo exhibitions of his paintings in Washington, DC. Nevertheless, in 1978 he quit academe and moved to New York to concentrate exclusively on his art.

Like his Abstract Expressionist heroes, he found the process of painting emotionally and physically exhausting. But where another artist might have headed down to the Cedar Tavern to blow off steam when the existential struggle became too much to bear, Brush instead set about teaching himself the goldsmithing techniques of the Etruscans. He has spoken of his early experiments in gold as the equivalent of doing the *New York Times* crossword—a way of using his mind, when he couldn't paint, without losing his mind.

His first piece in gold, made years earlier, was Olivia's wedding ring. But the technical fluency of his Etruscan-inspired work is staggering, and almost certainly unmatched in our time. When their son Silla was born, Brush presented Olivia, in her hospital bed, with 11 fibulae—slender tubes of gold, exquisitely wrought and hammered three times thinner than cigarette paper, based on the pins used to fasten Etruscan robes. And there were the granulated-gold domes, which have

come to occupy a special place in the Brush mythology. They are astonishing objects, mysterious, meticulous, radiant, unreckonably fine. His *Second Dome* is patterned with 78,000 gold granules, each 0.008 of an inch in diameter and applied individually using a single-haired sable brush. When he had his first big survey exhibition, at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in 1998, the museum was obliged to employ a dedicated cleaner to remove the nose prints from the glass cabinets in which the domes were displayed.

I noticed that the domes had a similar tractor-beam effect on visitors to the hugely successful Brush retrospective this past winter at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. As Lee Siegelson, a vintage-jewellery specialist and friend of the Brushes, put it to me: "His stuff is what you show your kids when you want them to see what a human being is capable of making."

Work in different materials, using different techniques, followed. An interest in ornamental turning in ivory led Brush back to steel, which, along with gold, is the substance that has held the most enduring fascination for him. Then in the late 1980s one of his collectors, who was also a gem dealer, presented him with a gift of 1,000

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carats of pink diamonds. "Go home and play with these," the dealer said.

Brush liked the saturated hue and "blossoming beauty" of the stones. They reminded him of the plastic dresser sets sold in his parents' shop, usually comprising a mirror, brush and comb, sometimes with a rhinestone-studded bangle. "I remember little girls begging their mothers to have these things. I probably didn't think about it then, I just observed it. And then I guess later I saw the same thing happening all the time. Now the little girls are older and they're waxing away for their necklaces and jewels and all this kind of stuff. And I just thought it would be hysterically funny to make a big-girl's dresser set. But I wanted to do it in a really, seriously *aching* way." The results include *Bunny Bangle*, a luscious, entirely wearable confection of engraved pink Bakelite, pink diamonds, gold and rubies, which Nicolas Bos calls a "signature piece".

Brush was quick to admit that there was nothing novel in his combining precious and everyday materials. Coco Chanel, for one, designed jewellery with Bakelite and diamonds (the same Bakelite, Brush noted, that GE used for insulating material and that turns an ugly shade of brown with age). But in pieces like *Bunny Bangle*, or the bejewelled animals of his *Ménagerie Magnétique* series, or the more recent *Loose Threads*, Brush transcends easy high-low playfulness. *Loose Threads*, in particular—176 squiggly strands of stainless steel embedded with tiny Mughal diamonds, meant to resemble the threads that attach with static electricity to Olivia's clothes as she goes about her own work with fabrics—is witty and tender and beautiful. He calls it a "love letter" to his wife, scrawled in calligraphic loops of metal and stone. The poet, writing again.

Brush tends to be represented in the press as a sort of high-rise hermit, tricked out in industrial fancy-dress, an OCD eccentric who sweeps the floor of his loft for two hours every morning, only eats pea soup for lunch and prefers the company of 18th-century lathes to human beings. The sweeping-the-floor part is true. The pea-soup part was true for a long time—though he switched to a fat-free muffin, lightly salted nuts and a banana some years ago. But for a supposed tongue-tied recluse, he is oddly given to welcoming others into his world and engaging them in earnest conversation. Here is a man who speaks



WHAT'S UP, DOC?

Clockwise from top: Bunny Bangle, in pink diamond, ruby, gold and Bakelite; a detail of Loose Threads; Gold Heart, one of Brush's "intimate sculptures" in gold and steel; "U" Fibula, one of his Etruscan-inspired fibulae; Silla's Rattle, in gold, sapphire and ivory. Opposite: tools and machinery in Brush's studio; visible on the bench is another small sculpture in steel and gold. Inset: a black diamond, emerald and Bakelite brooch from his Ménagerie Magnétique series.





GOLDEN COUPLE

Daniel and Olivia Brush at home, March 2013. Inset: a diamond and Bakelite brooch from his Menagerie Magnétique series.

eventually Olivia said, 'How many more cinder blocks can you raise the bed on?'

He was able to continue working through those years thanks to the largesse of a few remarkably enlightened, patient, non-interfering and well-heeled patrons who were willing to support him financially with no expectation of receiving anything in return. "I got this immensely powerful reputation with, like, five people in the world. And then one of them dies and there's only four people in the world who know about me."

That began to change with the Smithsonian show in 1998, which not only brought his work to a far wider audience than he had ever had before but also marked a turning point in his own outlook. "If it's all tucked under the bed, you can't have an engagement."

Today Brush's door is open to anyone with a genuine interest in his work—though, like a nightclub bouncer, he reserves the right to refuse admission. A personal introduction might or might not help. He cares enormously, almost to distraction, about where his work goes when it leaves his studio. He speaks not of collectors or buyers, let alone clients, but of guardians, caretakers, protectors. Even after a piece has been sold, it is not unusual for him to ask for it to be returned so that he can make adjustments or alterations or simply spend some more time with it.

On several occasions during the days I spent with Brush he used the phrase "compassionate awareness" when talking about creating and experiencing art. He seemed to see this as a fundamental

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not in sentences but in entire chapters that add up, as the hours slip by, to great rambling, learned, humorous, impassioned, warm-hearted volumes. He is longing to be heard and understood—and to be entertained, surprised and challenged. "I want the big dialogue," he said. "I don't want to be in a university, I want the pick of the litter. You know, I want the person who's going crazy studying *semicolons* to drop by."

The question of how Brush makes a living is interesting. His attitude towards commerce is not hostile—on the contrary, it is characterised by an exceptional degree of trust and intimacy. But, as ever, it is hardly conventional. He produces very little. He has never accepted a commission or had a dealer. Forget about selling out—for a long time he refused to sell anything at all. "For 30 years I put it under the bed. And

obligation that artist and viewer share. An obligation, basically, to pay attention, to speak clearly, to listen attentively.

"I like the idea," he said, "that in different places—in my pure scenario, you know—someone will look at my work and then maybe I'll hear something about what they felt. I think about it all the time. What, really, is a jewel? Maybe it's the *engagement* with the thing that makes it valuable, that makes it precious." □