Thursday Morning

ARCHPRIEST OF ALCHEMY

There's something of a gambler in Max Gimblett. PAT BASKETT finds out why this very talented artist can afford to take a risk.

CHANCE IS a tricky thing. It can also be expensive. Max Gimblett risks a few hundred dollars each time he applies a coat of gold or silver leaf to a painting.

How the metal adheres, the crackles that form, or whether the surface is glossy or lustrous is only partly due to the skill with which he manipulates the materials.

Art needs something else — and for Gimblett it's chance.

Sometimes he knows his interior state didn't match what he wanted to do with the painting — and out it goes. The failure rate is enormous, he says, at between 20 and 30 per cent.

What he's after is an alignment of hand with heart, or mind with soul in a spontaneity that is better recognised in the East than the West. Here it's known by the rather clumsy, clinical word "automatism."

Bang! The clap of his hands resounds like the clash of cymbals.

"It's Zen!" He beams and points to a drawing. It was made with one stroke of a piece of cardboard he found lying around in his studio. The resemblance to a Chinese ink drawing of a waterfall is uncanny.

Even a drawing is something of a gamble. The paper on which his cardboard stroke was made might be one of those sheets that cost $22 each, the invoice for which he carefully loses (somewhere in his accountant's office). How many others ended up in his waste paper basket is of no consequence.

Gimblett uses a koan, or Zen riddle, to express what he means: "At every step the pure wind rises."

He adds a nice, double-edged sentence of his own: "I have a lot invested in freshness."

A Gimblett grin.

He has a rule. "I never think of the cost." That he can afford not to, tells something about his achievement.

His name has been on the gallery circuit in Auckland, Hamilton, Christchurch and Wellington almost every year since 1977. He's skipped only two years but that gap is more than made up for by having two, sometimes three exhibitions a year — a demanding schedule for any artist.

But it accounts for only half his output. As well as a flat in Mt Eden Gimblett has occupied for the past 20 years an enormous industrial loft converted into a home-cum-studio on the Lower East side of New York.

His CV runs to 17 pages and lists as many exhibitions in New York and California as in New Zealand, plus some in Australia and a couple in Sweden. On top of that there are six and a half pages of selected group exhibitions he's participated in.

Then there are about 20 public and private collections which have bought works (including the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art), more pages of publications and, books about him or mentioning him, and a smaller section of teaching positions and residencies held.

What is impressive is the comprehensive nature of the document. How does he find time to keep records as well as paint?

It turns out that success has brought the ability to muster and pay a team of part-time assistants, one of whom keeps his computer files up to date.

A range of tasks occupies several others. One makes the wooden stretchers for his irregularly shaped canvases, some of which are quatrefoil, some tondo (round). A large work in his recent show at Gow Langsford was tear-shaped.

There must a team, he says. "I'm a composer, I have the ideas." He does the drawing, plans the proportions, makes the final judgment — and pays the bills.

He also applies a lot of self-discipline and is mindful of his actions in other ways. "I'm conscious of what I eat when I'm painting well. And you have to be kind to others, otherwise the vibes are off."

Precious metals have been included in his pallet since the early 1980s.

Gilding, or applying the gold leaf, is done by Gimblett himself if it's oil-gilding. Water-gilding requires the skills of a specialist craft worker. Board is needed for this, not canvas. Sixteen layers of gesso and fine porcelain clay are applied and very finely sanded.

Gesso is a brilliant white preparation of chalky pigment mixed with glue. It was used during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as a ground or base for painting and gilding.

Water is poured over the board when the layering has been built up; when it has dried, Gimblett eases into the ground. The water-gilder then applies the gold leaf, which is so fine that it is transparent when held up to the light.

GIMBLETT's paintings use several qualities of gold: 12K white gold, 23.7K Swiss gold leaf, 22K lemon gold, 18K moon gold, as well as copper leaf and "variegated metal" leaf.

He describes the process of gilding as very emotional, very personal.

Oil-gilding is a simpler technique but its surface lacks the buttery, mirror-like quality of water-gilding.

The ground consists of layers of paint over which an acrylic size, or glue, is applied to hold the gold.

Recently Gimblett has fallen in love with a new way of using the expensive stuff. It comes in a tube which he squeezes over a board he has prepared with gesso.

As it dries it crackles. Small crackle shapes are called "fishes row," larger ones are "crabs claws."

The nature of the pattern is only partly determined by the thickness of the gold. If chance has been kind and the effect is pleasing Gimblett finishes the work by rubbing oil paint into the cracks. Then he seals it with a coat of shellac.

Gimblett's New Zealand prices are a little less than what he gets in New York. The lowest at Gow Langsford is $4800 for a smallish work with silver leaf. Several are priced between $5000 and $9000.

The showpiece of the exhibition, a four-panelled work called *Muse* with one panel of 12K water-gilded white gold, was bought by Fay, Richwhite for $25,000.

Critics remark on the similarity of the surface texture of some of his works to the cracked gold of Russian icons and early Renaissance paintings. Gimblett acknowledges this. The tube is not a cheat, he says — call it a variation.

The similarity to religious painting is more than skin deep. A daily practice of prayer and meditation are the wellsprings of his art.

The language on which he draws comes from the tantric tradition. Zen, Judao-Christian beliefs and aspects of sacred ritual. Krishnamurti is one of his spiritual mentors, the Japanese Zen teacher Gibbon Sengai, who died in 1837, is another. And Carl Jung.

He has sat in "zazen" meditation in New York city and goes on Catholic as well as Episcopalian retreats.

He believes that the creation and contemplation of art can function as a spiritual practice in itself.

To explain the relationship between Zen and art he is giving a talk at the Auckland Art Gallery on August 27.

A sense of the Japanese sits strongly in many of his works. Their surface texture and their subtle, matt colours resemble the glazes of Japanese pots. Sometimes he achieves the effect of density, rather than the superficiality of paint, by applying pure silica suspended in acrylic polymer to the canvas.

He lays the painting flat, pours the mixture on, then waits for it to pool. Whether the process comes off or not, he says, is like panning for gold — another chance operation.

Pottery is part of his personal history, as the three large dishes in *Rodorid Perth*, the retrospective exhibition of his work at the Fisher Gallery, show. These were made in Auckland potter Phillip Luxton's studio.

THE path to painting began with a stint as a potter. Gimblett, who left Auckland in the late 1950s, describes himself as a dropout from Auckland Grammar.

He found a respectable job as a textile salesman, but disenchantment sent him overseas to Canada where he apprenticed himself to a potter for two years, throwing domestic ware on the wheel for no more than the privilege of learning how to do it.

He didn't stick to making pots: the waft for the final result to come out of the kiln was too long, he says, compared with the immediacy of painting.

There, nearly 30 years ago, he married Barbara Kirschenblatt, an anthropologist, expert in folklore and social historian. She's not with him on this trip, but often accompanies him on the annual sojourns.

After their marriage in 1964 they lived for several years in California. It was the hippy heyday and Gimblett — now a casual but conventional slacks and T-shirt man — wore felt hats, had a beard, smoked a pipe, and imbibed Zen.

It was also a time of relative impoverishment and struggle to live as an artist; it was 13 years before he could afford the airfare to return to New Zealand. That was in 1972. Since 1981 he's been back every year.

The year 1972 was a milestone in another way. He and his wife moved into the New York apartment where they still live.

It sounds a far cry from Mt Eden. There are painters and sculptors on every floor. Such names as painters Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg once had studios there.

The area is home to a whole community of artists and intellectuals. An ever-changing parade of "off-Broadway" performances means there's always something to go to.

Surprisingly, Gimblett is planning on increasing the amount of time he spends there. He's looking for an old factory where he can work. But he rebuffs notions of the expat coming home. In the real sense, he says, he never left.

He calls being treated like a visitor "lift psychology . . . somebody is trying to get above me." The truth is that he is fortunate in being able to live and work in two cities.

New Zealanders are "culturally exotic" in New York and Gimblett considers this a plus.

Pressing him to explain some of the differences between the New York art scene and its antipodean, post-colonial smaller version is like squeezing a dry lemon. He would rather talk about the parallels between alchemy, psychological processes, and what goes on in a painting. The painter uses paint — gold or plain oil — and hopes for the same kind of magic transformation that the alchemist strove for in turning base metals into gold.

Gimblett's work appears to lie within that category of abstraction called "modernism" and also given its pared-down design elements, "minimalist" — terms which have come to seem restrictive to his work.

The appropriate term for what he is doing now is "post-historical" — "never, absolutely not post-modernist." The words are almost a shout.

HE explains: "Post modernism became very taut and deconstructed. Post-historical means that we need to consider a work in its own terms so that we textualise it within that particular artist's concerns.

"It's not overly concerned with consistency of identity, since artists can produce very different things. It's been very freeing for me."

At 58 he'll carry on taking chances — with gold or whatever. He's the one in debt, he says, not his art.

"It probably won't ever repay me but that's my pleasure. Art is an expensive dancing partner."

The next venture is a commission to make a set of pure gold, hand-hammered table sculptures — for a New Zealand patron.

● Max Gimblett ... plenty of self-discipline plus teamwork ... I'm a composer, I have the ideas.

PICTURE: GEOFF DALE