

# views



**Daniel Brush**

BLUE STEEL GOLD LIGHT



# LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING

A conversation between artist Daniel Brush and David Revere McFadden, Chief Curator of the Museum of Arts and Design

**Brush:** I'll tell you a few things that have been roosting and roaming around my mind for about 45 years. When I was about eight years old, one night at a family dinner, this couple was invited. During dinner the woman's sleeve went up a little bit on her arm. She was a very discreet, nice-looking woman with a printed flower dress. There was a little number on her arm.

I didn't know what it was and all I knew was that her name was Rabbi Seligman's wife.

What affected me when I was at Carnegie Institute was that I saw a performance... maybe it was a performance, or maybe it was a religious act of some sort, I don't know. I was up on the mezzanine, looking down at this long, white piece of cloth, maybe 10 inches wide, 100 feet long. And all the students, including me, were like, "What is this? We were laughing about it.

And a figure appeared and the figure was neither male nor female and the figure was in white. And the figure was attenuated, in posture and way of walking. And it took, at that point, an interminable amount of time from the start to the other end—maybe three hours, maybe it was six hours, I don't know—and when the figure got to the end, it was an hour to turn around and another three to six hours when the figure left. There was no explanation, description; most of my friends had gone. There was laughing, jeering, and silence, but I've never forgotten it.

When I was in school, the Noh theater started cropping up and I don't know how it started cropping up. I might have read a transliteration from Donald Keene, who was a professor at Columbia. I certainly saw the Tokugawa Exhibition in Washington D.C. when they brought all the imperial robes and the Noh theater masks.

I'd never been to Japan, but the more I read about it, it bothered me so much. It irritated me so much that I felt companionship with it more than my Western and, if you will, European education. I had been in school I went to school as a painter and, I was extremely well-taught and then well-versed in modern, post-modern—

**McFadden:** Western canon, right?

**Brush:** Yes, it's the Western canon, we all wondered how it... you know, the flipping picture plain, and Cézanne could then be discussed through Monet, Renoir, and foreground, middle ground, and background.

But at the same time, I wondered about the subtlety that I saw in Asian art—a brush pot, an egg cup; one gesture opening up a world for me. I couldn't quite get it together. I mean, from my background, from Cleveland, Ohio, then wondering about Zeami and his writings from the 14th century.

I could hardly understand my fascination, but the fascination became virtually full time, and I loved the levels of understanding that were required for a Noh theater actor. I never wanted to be a Noh theater actor, but I love the discipline. Father to son... there were no women. Of course there are women now, but in the traditional Japanese Noh theater, it's father to son through generations.

There are nine levels of understanding. If one is to attain the ninth level, one has to start on the third level, because you wouldn't live long enough to get to the end. The seventh level is described as the art of the flower of stillness; snow piled high in a silver bowl.

As I understand it, the male actor is about 35 or 40 years old and at that point, they are allowed to walk out onto the stage and stand next to the *tsure* column—one of the six columns—and assume the role of an accompanying actor.

More study, of course more discipline... it's level eight, the art of the flower of profundity. It's described, if I remember right, when you look out and you see all the mountains covered with snow, except Fuji. Is it because Fuji is so high, or is it because Fuji is so deep?

So at that point the actor maybe can play the role of Zo. Zo was a female character, about 45 years old, and there's one particular play where she's described as, for that split second, losing the vision of where her child is, but deeper down, more concerned about the loss of her feathered robe. And if the male actor and the character come together, the actor will achieve *Yūgen*—supreme elegance.

**McFadden:** What is number nine?

**Brush:** Number nine is the art of the flower of mystery. You've worked your whole lifetime studying; you're probably, I would imagine, 65 to 75 years old. It's described as the art of the flower of mystery. In the city of Silla, at midnight, the sun shines bright.

There is one particular play I try to get a handle on; I've never seen it; I've pictured it in my mind. It's an empty stage; there's a chair and there's one banyan tree. The play is called *Komachi*. The male actor in protected, revered robes and mask, sits motionless on the stage for an hour and a half. Not a sound, not a movement. But the audience is supposed to understand, not with their mind, but with their whole thread of understanding, that not only the actor but the character, when young, would blossom into a full-blown peony.

**McFadden:** Do you see this as a metaphor for how your life has evolved?

**Brush:** Well, I couldn't presume to think that I'm on any of these levels, but I just long for the intensity and severity of the work required to arrive at, if you will, a kind of transparent etherealness.

**McFadden:** And that carries through all the different aspects of your work?

**Brush:** Yes. I train to paint and I study voraciously the history and science of metals. What I always feel is that that title is the painting and what one sees is a record of the breathing. And in the "objects of virtue" I hope that the language, the skill would become transparent. And if it becomes transparent the viewer would reach below the surface, below the materials, and feel something between me and them. I always wonder how anybody could possibly understand what I am doing. Generally they don't have the same referential context or training that I might have, but I feel that if my study, my training, my discipline reaches to the end of myself, then they would know that I was there... really there.

Opposite page:  
DANIEL BRUSH  
*Black Horizon #1*, 2005  
Steel, pure gold  
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