

## CAN LIGHT CAST ITS OWN SHADOW?

BY DAVID REVERE McFADDEN

On a gray December morning in 2011, as I set out to meet with Daniel and Olivia Brush to talk about Daniel's work, his exhibition at the Museum of Arts and Design, and this publication, I happened to glance at the sky over Madison Avenue in New York City. The patch of sky directly above my head was covered with dense clouds, unremarkable in their ordinariness on that winter day. Suddenly a ray of sunlight pierced the lower layer of clouds, and the refracted light turned the cloud layer into a rainbow palette of color. The effect lasted for no more than a few seconds, just enough time to stop breathing, look, and start breathing again. The Manhattan sky had just written the preface to my conversation with Daniel and Olivia.

Daniel Brush makes things we never expected to see. His work stands outside the hierarchies and boundaries that fragment and territorialize the art world. He makes marks on paper and on steel. His artwork tells us about the movement of time and dimensions of space. The range and diversity of his work are exceptional: palm-sized objects made from steel are intricately carved to resemble otherworldly landscapes, imposing drawings appear to vibrate with delicately penned lines in red ink, and steel threads are inlaid with coruscating diamonds.

I'll tell you a few things that have been roosting and roaming around in my mind for about forty-five years. For some reason I stumbled upon Japanese Noh theater while I was in school. I've never been to Japan, but the more I read about it, it irritated me that I felt a companionship with Noh and with Japan more than my experience in Western culture. My fascination with Noh became a virtually full-time occupation. I loved the levels of understanding that were required for a Noh theater actor. In one play, based on the female poet Komachi, the robed and masked actor sits motionless on the stage for an hour and a half. Not a sound, not a movement. I long for the intensity and severity of the work required to arrive at, if you will, a thing of transparent etherealness.\*

Really seeing Daniel Brush's work demands focus, time, and silence. His artworks are ultimately signals for breathing. Standing in front of one of them can induce a state of attention in which all of the senses outside of vision are in a state of suspended animation: sounds are muffled, smells waft by unnoticed, and touch is numbed for an instant. Somehow the rules of gravity do not apply in these extraordinary moments. A wall sculpture of solid steel confounds logic

as it appears to float in the air, cushioned by a penumbra of golden light, while a mathematician's geometric drawing made in the finest steel shimmers with minuscule cut diamonds.

I kept thinking that, was it possible . . . was it possible to make something . . . you know, after hours and hours in the studio, hammering, chiseling, inlaying, all of that. Could all of that virtually disappear so that if somebody had the object in their hands or in their eyes, could they see the maker in it, or a reflection of their making of it? Like if they saw and if they felt enough in the piece, they in essence made the piece.

Daniel talks about his methods of working as if he were an athlete training for the Olympics. He talks about being in a place in which body and mind, hand and eye, are tuned to precisely the same pitch. They vibrate in one single note.

I had to train to paint, and what I always felt and hoped was that what one saw was a record of the breathing. And I think, you know, you can feel the breathing on every line, because that is what it's really about.

I got to thinking over and over again that what was required was to make things as I felt. I had to think differently. I didn't want to think like a scientist or a craftsman. I had to think like a little girl with delicate fingers, laughing and joking. I wanted to have that insouciance, you know, a fierceness, but a casualness.

Daniel's work is ultimately about weaving a subtle relationship between the work, the maker, and the viewer. All are drawn together in a dynamic synergy of the visionary and the tangible. His works are also collaborative on another level, owing to the relationship between Daniel and Olivia. "We got married the day we met. I am going to say this standing firmly in front of you, my feet absolutely square: the work is as much Olivia's as it is mine. There's no distinction in my mind. She made it all."

The drawings, wall pieces, and wearable sculptures exist in a single universe, in which any dialogue between materials and process is needless. In their intricacy, their complexity, and their perfection, the works are virtuosic, but the artist does not strive for virtuosity. *Epistêmê* and *technê*, knowledge and craft, theory and practice, thought and action, are indivisible.

“So you know, I wanted to be able to do something that was so mind-boggling and challenging, but at the same time, do it with an open hand. I didn’t want to say ‘I’ve done it, I’m so amazing.’ What I was more interested in was the ability to obviate my fear of success or failure and to remove the ego in my work. I wanted it to be a moment that happened.”

There is a warmth and modesty that emanates from Daniel’s work. These are intimate objects that whisper their invitations; most are small enough to be held in one hand. And, throughout his works runs a wry and gentle sense of humor. A red plastic pig might wink at the viewer with tiny diamond eyes, or a cloud of ephemeral butterflies might perch on the sharp edge of a steel cliff.

He remarked, “It would be terrific if somebody came into my exhibition and said ‘I can’t put this together. It looks like one guy did this and some other person did that.’ I like the idea that they walk out of the exhibition and say, “That was something to chew on.”

At the studio, I attended to one of the steel wall sculptures. Daniel had turned off the lights, leaving the studio in a velvety half-light in which shadows soften and blur. The surface of the work is engraved with thousands of lines that refract light like the scales on a butterfly wing. As I moved and as the light changed, the surface transformed from charcoal gray to pale blue to soft green to a vague pink to silver. Even more extraordinary was the fact that the wall behind the sculpture was suffused with a golden glow created by a thin layer of gold applied to the steel on the side of the sculpture. The reflected light became the shadow of the piece. Daniel described the significance of this subtle effect, which is central to his work.

When Olivia and I first got together, over forty years ago, we went to Florence. We were there one day at about five o’clock p.m. I was totally captivated by the Campanile. What pinned me to my seat was the beauty of the light at five o’clock. After years of searching for the secret to my work, I finally realized it is all about light. So all those objects I made, with gold being the important thing, it was the gold that helped me see the light. So in all those objects and pieces that I had made, gold was the important thing. I’m employing the gold to help me see the light.

Can light cast its own shadow? In a logical world, the answer must be no. In the world of Daniel Brush, another logic applies.

\*All quotations of Daniel Brush are taken from interviews by the author on December 16, 2011, and January 4, 2012.