

# DANIEL BRUSH



SOME PEOPLE  
WOULD CONSIDER IT  
IMPOSSIBLE TO DO  
WHAT HE DOES

**NICOLAS BOS,**  
PRESIDENT OF VAN CLEEF & ARPELS

Beyond being a place dedicated to teaching, with courses, workshops and lectures for adults and children, L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts also programs exhibitions, here a selection of work by the American artist Daniel Brush.

The CUFFS AND NECKS exhibition welcomes the public to discover the creations of this rare artist. Historian and former university professor, lover of fairy tales, painter and poet, artisan, sculptor and jeweler Daniel Brush is an inspired man who is set apart by his technical mastery, his eclectic spirit and his timeless aesthetic.

**ONE IS IRRESISTIBLY DRAWN IN AND FASCINATED BY HIS INCREDIBLE VIRTUOSITY AND THE DELICACY OF HIS WORK IN ENGRAVING AND CARVING STEEL AND GOLD, HIS ABSOLUTELY PERFECT MASTERY OF GRANULATION, HIS WAY OF SETTING THE MOST MINISCULE STONES IN THE HARDEST STEEL... PAINTINGS, SCULPTURES, JEWELS: HIS MULTIDISCIPLINARY OEUVRE STEPPING OUT OF TIME, INNOVATIVE AND YET ALSO TRADITIONAL, DEFIES ANY ESTABLISHED CATEGORIZATION, CAPTURES AND ENCHANTS US.**

**MARIE VALLANET-DELHOM**  
PRESIDENT OF L'ÉCOLE, SCHOOL OF JEWELRY ARTS

Daniel Brush, revered American artist-goldsmith, painter, sculptor, philosopher, engineer and enigma is not so much a Renaissance man as a modern-day alchemist. Secluded in his Manhattan loft, with his wife and soul-mate, Olivia, also an artist, as his constant companion and collaborator, secreted in a labyrinth of the myriad antique turning lathes, and guilloche-engraving machines that he collects, Brush practises the ancient, noble art of the goldsmith, fusing art and science, with poetry and philosophy.



Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

*Daniel Brush with his ornamental lathes.*

Drawing on a protean talent, towering intellect and awe-inspiring technical skill, he is able to transform his materials, including his beloved gold, as if by sorcery, into wondrously otherworldly works of art that seem sculpted from light and energy; most miraculously, he turns “base” metals, humble, mundane steel and aluminium into jewels of exquisite preciousness. There’s surely sorcery at work in the way in which he softens

steel into shimmering silk, turning the metal’s indomitable masculine industrial strength into a flirtatiously feminine moire ribbon, or the wilting, velvety petals of a lovelorn poppy. The jewels and objects that are conjured from his febrile imagination, via the awe-inspiring dexterity of his hands, possess a pure and powerful deeply emotive beauty. They are at once serious and playful, cerebral yet with a childlike charm, and for those who know how to see and feel, they are infused with the deep spirituality that is the original, earliest role of the jewel.



Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

*Ten butterfly box, 1991-1993*

Pure gold, steel, rare earth magnets  
3 x 3 3/4 x 3 3/4 inches



Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

*Scholar's Table piece, 1994*  
Pure gold, steel  
2 x 3 3/4 x 3 inches

Even more, as I have found, Daniel Brush can – and surely will through this exhibition at L'ÉCOLE, School of Jewelry Arts, – transform all our perceptions and dispel our preconceptions of jewellery, challenging us to re-think our understanding of the jewel, its role, decorative, emotional or talismanic, its place in our lives today, its relationship to the body, to femininity, to fashion and fabrics. Perhaps most thought-provoking of all, through his work Brush questions the very meaning – or as he terms it the “total construct” - of preciousness and value.

For Daniel Brush, these cosmic questions, and many more, are a vital part of his own daily challenge. He wrestles with them, and seeks out, invites confusion, as it is in the midst

of confusion, he explains, that he finds his “big ideas”, his next conceptual or technical obsession. It has been this way for some 40 years.

Born in Cleveland Ohio, his mother an artist, his father a businessman, Brush won a scholarship to art school, the Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, where he met Olivia; his first foray into jewellery was making Olivia's wedding ring. After graduate school, he was a professor at Georgetown University, teaching art philosophy and creating his own course on the relationship of structure to meaning, a relationship that continues to inform his work today. Painting for years in 1978 he and Olivia moved to New York City to focus on his work as an artist, and, he says he's simply carried on from that point, every day just the same.

## I HAVE TO KEEP PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF JEWELLERY, TO TICKLE HISTORY

His unchanging routine, the regular morning rituals of mind-clearing, especially floor-sweeping, with its meditative monotony, or eating the same meal, have become the stuff of modern legend, perhaps overshadowing the importance of his work. It is true Brush has led a somewhat reclusive life, eschewing most normal outside influences, avoiding external stimuli in order to send his mind into “freefall”, to grapple with unanswerable questions, unknowable concepts, like light or breath, to find ideas, inspirations and answers, the truth and purity of beauty. His is the quest to create something that is both entirely new, never before seen or imagined yet part of jewellery history; a jewel that both honours tradition and subverts it, that jolts us into raw awareness with the shock of the new yet strikes a chord of warm, ageless familiarity. He says, “I have to keep pushing the boundaries of jewellery, to tickle history.” Once an idea, or an irresistible challenge

surfaces – as with NECKS and CUFFS, presented in this exhibition, Brush is gripped with fierce intensity, focused to the point of obsession and beyond. Often, he will immerse himself first in lengthy study and indefatigable research. And then he works non-stop, hand crafting iteration upon iteration of each idea. The results, as you will see here, are astonishing. I will never forget Olivia wending her way through the machines and chests of drawers piled high with rolled up paintings and instruments, carrying a vast, wide map drawer on which were laid out dozens of glimmering choker-necklaces, each different, in design, motif, technique, material, each seemingly more beautiful, or more intriguing, more unexpected, than the one before. Sitting around the single wooden table, in the designated living area, at the heart of the studio, I am revelling in the panoply of chokers, as Brush explains that he is fascinated by the idea of a woman having to decide which jewel to wear, and so, with this extravagant choice, he induces the exquisite agony of the decision-making process. He also, he explains, likes the idea of a travelling case of jewellery, to solve the problem of having to decide which jewels to take away on a trip or voyage. Yet for me, there is an almost indescribably thrilling appeal to this display of so many jewels together, a richness, a deep pleasure, like “playing at shop”, or discovering a lost hoard of treasure. Brush is just as obsessive when it comes to collecting antique or 20th century objects, which he does with characteristic intensity and wholeheartedness: through his passion for engineering, he has collected 1000 pairs of scissors, dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as acres of avionic engagers and liquid crystal watches. This extraordinary sense of abundance is a key element of his work, and another aspect of his uniqueness; it is the abundance of a joyful, unstoppable creative force.

As a goldsmith, jeweller and metalworker, Daniel Brush is entirely self-taught. This seems a near-superhuman feat, considering the finesse of his work, the extreme ingenuity of his technical prowess. It seems particularly extraordinary when it comes to his work in steel and aluminium, or when you gaze in wonderment at The Second Dome,



Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

*Second Dome, 1983-1989*  
Pure gold, 22 karat gold, steel  
3 x 3 x 3 inches

the exquisite gold-topped box in this exhibition, its lid ornamented with granulation, a breath-taking technique perfected in antiquity by the mysterious Etruscans, a technique that has captivated and puzzled, and often obsessed generations of goldsmiths ever since. Tiny granules of gold are fused imperceptibly to a gold surface, creating the impression of a golden haze or frost. Granulation is considered the height of the goldsmith's art. Yet, tellingly, it was one of the first techniques tackled and mastered by Brush when he first turned his talents to metalworking in the 1960's. Brush tells the story of his early fascination with gold and granulation. Aged 13, on a visit with his artist mother to the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, he spotted an Etruscan gold bowl with its frosting of minute gold granules. The effect, he recalls, took his breath away, and from that moment he determined to learn how to work gold, a material, linked to the sun, to the life force, mercurial and molten, that continues to mesmerise him. So that one of his first attempts at metalwork explored the nobility of gold and led to the making of this domed box, paying homage to the bowl that had started it all. He relates how, as always, he made the components himself, entirely from raw materials, crafting 78,000 minute gold granules, which he spent months positioning. He lost his nerve when it came to fusing the grains to the base of gold, a few seconds less, the grains would fall off, a few more and they'd melt into a blob. He let the lid sit for two years before Olivia gently persuaded him, one morning after his usual breakfast of Cheerios, to have a go. The result, as you will see, is a modern masterpiece.

After this early, archaeologically-inspired phase of Brush's experimental metalwork, he made the transition to more conceptual, sculptural, minimalist works – an extension of his linear paintings into three dimensions, and into metal, in most cases a combination

***Red Breathing - Cantos for the Women plays of the Noh theater, 1991-2003***

117 drawings (One of the series), ink on paper  
Each 60 x 40 inches



Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

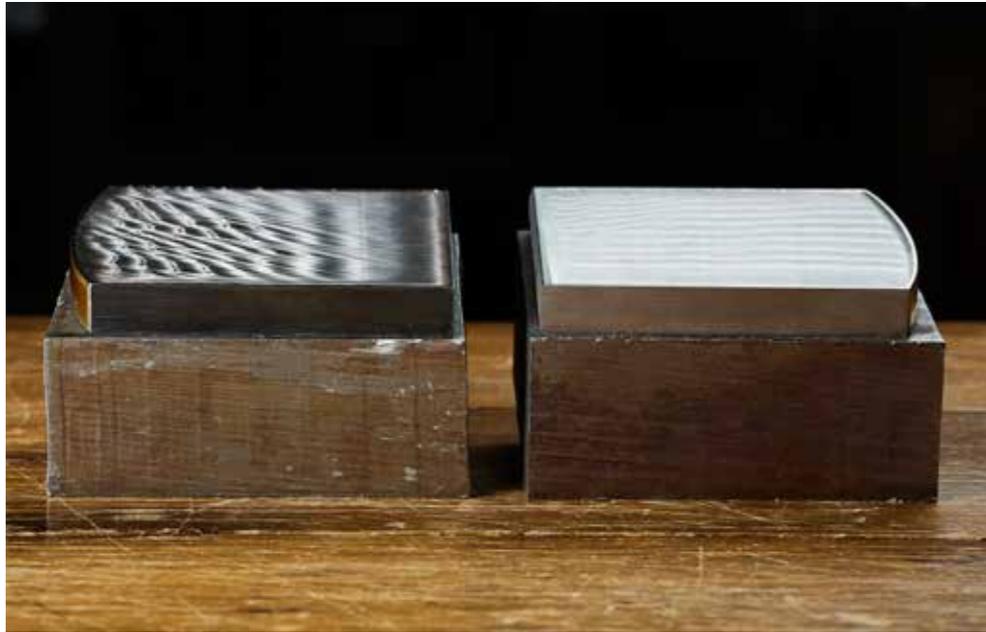


Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

**Tablets #9,24 2003-6**

Iron, steel, pure gold  
Diptych, overall: 4 1/2 x 8 13/16 x 2 3/16 inches

of steel and gold, as in the sculpture in this exhibition. The emphasis here, in these sculptures was on both line and light, two preoccupations that were taking hold of the Brush imagination. For these, Brush had to explore and master the technique of engraving. He began to be fascinated by the fine engraving on banknotes; “I had never done any engraving,” he explains, “so I spent a couple of years studying and learning. I realised that most engraving is chip carving that removes metal. I wanted to put a billion dots into the metal, like Seurat, to translate pointillism into metal.” He made his own tools to do this, and his engraving, on steel, a colossal challenge, requiring consummate skill, was to become one of the most expressive and distinctive features, shaping the evolution of his jewels.

FOR BRUSH,  
CRAFTSMANSHIP,  
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AND SHOULD NEVER BE  
AN END IN ITSELF

One important point must be made here: for Brush, craftsmanship, or virtuosity is not, and should never be an end in itself. As Brush has taught me to understand, craftsmanship should disappear, it should be at the service of the concept and artistry of the jewel or object, an “effortless flow from craftsman to viewer,” a language through which to express what an artist wants to say. It is he says about “lightness of spirit”; never about virtuosity.

For Brush, jewellery is not merely an accessory. A devoted and knowledgeable student of jewellery history, he understands the elevated place occupied by the jewel through millennia in communities and cultures across the globe; he sees the jewel as an amuletic object, as protector from ill fortune or an invocation of goodwill, or as he describes it “a vehicle to get closer to the gods, to let dreams come”. He likes the idea (a favourite phrase of his, usually the preamble to a profound and provocative observation) of the jewel as a small, intensely personal object that can be held, instead of worn, kept close at all times, in a pocket, tucked into the palm, so that the owner can feel its sensuality, warmth and energy, to feel grounded or protected. He made a series of hand-held, tactile pebble-like objects to conjure this experience, and evoke a powerful, emotional, and visceral response.

The intense focus on his exploration of steel, on engraving, and the play of light - the soul of a jewel - led to the enchanting series of cut, carved and engraved steel and diamond set poppies, the industrial, enduring toughness of steel totally metamorphosed into floating, ephemeral, poetic softness, the world-weary petals, some trailing slender tangled stems, gleaming with a satin-like sheen. Playing with contrasts of sheen and lustre, Brush sets these jewels with tiny antique diamonds, often early Indian diamonds with their exceptional limpidity, contrasting the modernity of steel with the antiquity of diamonds, the opacity of the metal with the evanescence of diamond light. In these ethereally beautiful jewels, Brush reinterprets the classic flower jewel, questioning the meaning of preciousness whilst distilling his ideas into rhythmic, romantic visual poems of fluidity and tactility. Another important point to make at this juncture: all of these underlying messages come instinctively and spontaneously. Brush explains that he never designs anything, he begins each day as with a blank page, not knowing what he will make, waiting for the ideas to filter through the confusion into the vacuum, and then, if it's a jewel, he'll work straight into the metal. Jewels give him respite from his huge, physically demanding large-scale paintings and sculptures, and he enjoys the



Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

*Daniel Brush explaining the Scholar's Table piece.*

JEWELLERY IS NOT  
MERELY AN ACCESSORY

change of pace, the change of scale and volume, revelling particularly in the intimacy and intricacy of jewels.



Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

***Poppies, 2010***

Stainless steel, diamonds  
Each approximately: 5 11/16 x 2 15/16 x 3 inches



Photo by Wesley Stringer ©

The main part of this exhibition is devoted to NECKS and CUFFS; both provocative, quintessentially feminine jewels that throw up questions of strength and fragility, of ownership and independence, protection and power, both drawing attention to emotive parts of the body, the wrist and throat. For CUFFS, Daniel Brush explains that he was enthralled by an exhibition of the magnificent jewels of the Nizam of Hyderabad, by the

***CUFFS, 2000-2013***

Stainless steel, diamonds  
1 1/2 x 5 inches

central role of jewellery in Indian history and culture, and in particular by the significance of the bangle. In his usual way, as the momentum of one project slowed down, he began studying and thinking, and in his usual spirit of total immersion, he began drawing with diamonds, recalling the origin of this king of gems, as if self-curating, he says, creating a series of bangles, with a wealth of different designs, some lyrical, others structural and geometric. This mix of styles added yet another dimension to the collection: an expression of one of his ongoing, major dilemmas, how to reconcile the two opposite themes, lyricism and structure; a combination he feels has never before been tackled in jewellery. This is the first page in the book “CUFFS”. Daniel relates the spark that lit an idea for one of the bangles; a fleeting glance, an incident in a restaurant, as a couple passed by the table at which Daniel and Olivia were seated “Tall grey suit in his early eighties, hand in hand, with short green sleeveless sequins in her early thirties. We sat at our important middle table-that table. Sequins locked a judgmental stare onto Olivia moving from North to South Pole. That evening I started the “Bitch” bracelet.”

Similarly, it's fascinating to know that the “big idea” for the collection of NECKS, the colliers de chien, in all its variety and abundance, was in fact sparked, partly sparked, by a simple, prosaic, practical consideration. A friend, a jewellery devotee, who was visiting his studio, to listen to Brush and inhale his wisdom and genius, happened to mention that she had wanted to buy an antique dog-collar necklace but that it didn't fit. It was enough to send him into a spin, to drive him to grapple with the concept of making a dog-collar fit, to think about the way a choker looks on a beautiful neck, the ergonomics and meanings of this very particular, emotionally-charged jewel. The idea also ignited one of Brush's long held dreams: to create a book of visual poetry, as he calls it, “a jeweller's musings”, a poetry anthology of jewels that would be an artwork in itself. He envisaged a vast and varied series of chokers, intended as an entire collection, a complete work of art, and each choker was made specifically with this book in mind, to fill the pages, he says, in the service of the book.



Feverishly, he set to work, turning as ever to steel, engraving the metal, sometimes with the undulating lines of his earlier work, some replicating the moire effect of a black silk ribbon, some lyrical, others geometric, some with long gem-set or pearl pendants, others still with aluminium sculptures, light-catching and voluminous. To celebrate this exhibition, the book “NECKS” has been re-made in a special limited edition.

Aluminium, he explains, is a material that has attracted and bewitched him for some time. “I've spent 15 years thinking about aluminium”, he says. He was captivated by a pair of

*NECKS, An Artist's poetry book*  
2013-2015

Tiffany opera glasses made in the 1880s when aluminium was a new metal, exciting, scarce, and he adds “with a value it doesn’t have today.” Most of all he is captivated by the light of aluminium, by the way in which aluminium, especially when engraved, is transformed by its ability to capture and play with light. “Aluminium has an extraordinary light-emitting quality, it’s otherworldly, it engages you, pulls you in, smiles back at you. It changes as the wearer moves through ambient light, and it brings light to a woman’s face.”

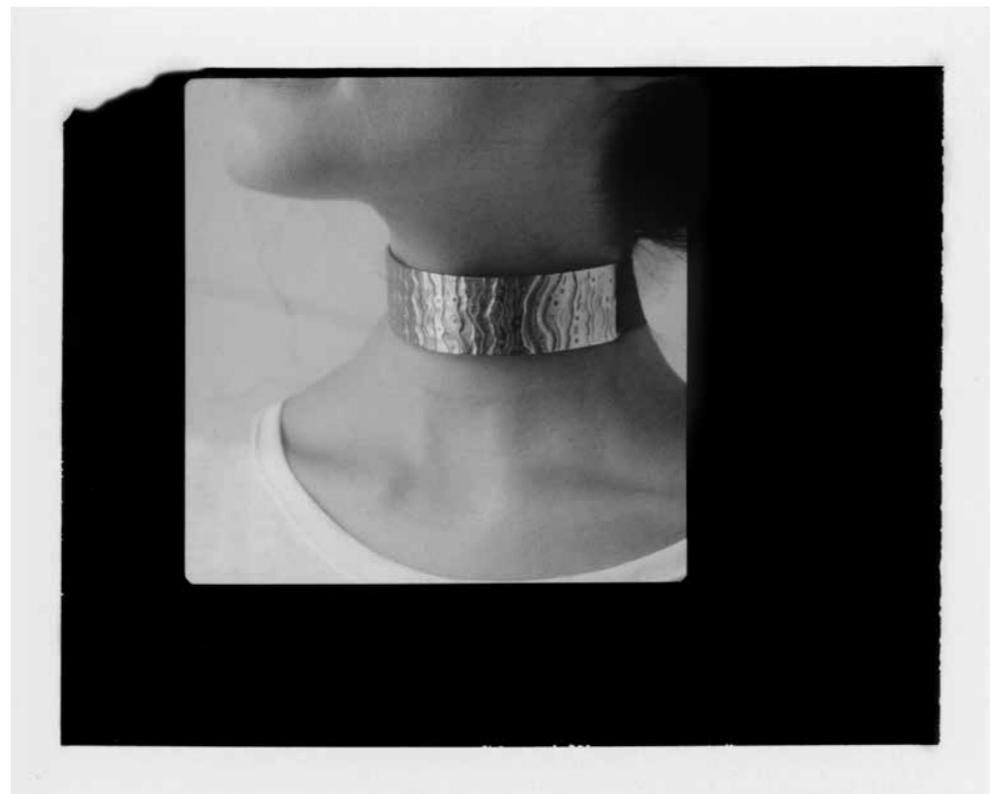


Photo by Wesley Stringer ©

The light in all these jewels, I can’t help but think is not only “lightness of spirit,” but surely also the same light in a gleaming nugget of gold, an alluvial diamond or pearl that

*NECKS, An Artist's poetry book  
2013-2015*

was in earliest times believed to be the spirit of the divine. Just as Daniel Brush seems to exist out of time, so he seems able to collapse time, to collide ancient and modern, to both revere and renew the oldest jewellery traditions and beliefs. And he clearly understands the challenges posed to jewellers today by an ever more technology-driven generation. With NECKS, for example, he wants “to capture the imagination of today’s 30 year olds.” He says, “I’m trying to push further into a light-filled youthful take.”

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Perhaps, though, the play of light in his jewels also somehow reflects the light-hearted side of Brush’s ideas, his uninhibited joy on seeing and handling a colossal Mughal emerald that once graced the Nizam’s elephant or a fragment of “excruciatingly beautiful” Sleeping Beauty turquoise. There’s lightness in the wit of his earlier Menagerie Magnetique, the characterful creatures, carved in Bakelite and set with

diamonds that he refers to as “amuse-bouches”, or in the charm of Loose Threads, the hundreds of tiny twists and curls and strands of carved steel and diamonds, each different, mimicking the threads that always cling to Olivia’s clothes after she’s been working at her textile design. It’s a lightness that draws us in, illuminates the intensity of his intellect, the depths of his cerebral, thought-provoking concepts, that seems to run counter to the 40 years of obsessive academic study, of subjects ranging from Japanese Noh Theatre, to the poems of Emily Dickinson or the mechanics of Bugatti cars. The lightness too that peppers his discussions, that enthralls in his conversation, so warm, entertaining, humble and totally unpretentious, as, for example, when explaining his inquisitiveness he tells how he asks “How did the Egyptians work faience? how did Boucheron’s steel chasers work? What did they have for lunch?”

WE ARE ALL FORTUNATE NOW THAT, AFTER SOME 45 YEARS, DANIEL BRUSH IS STEPPING OUT OF THE SHADOWS, OUT OF THE TANGLE OF HIS ANTIQUE MACHINES, IN ORDER TO SHOW AND SHARE HIS JEWELLERY, IDEAS AND SUPREME ARTISTRY. FOR ME ESPECIALLY, DURING THE PRECIOUS TIME I HAVE SPENT WITH DANIEL AND OLIVIA IN THEIR LOFT, LISTENING TO DANIEL TALK, ABOUT HIS WORK, HIS INSPIRATIONS, ABOUT THE HISTORY OF JEWELLERY, IN HIS EASY, ENGAGING, UNPRETENTIOUS WAY HAS, IN ALL TRUTH, BEEN THE HIGHLIGHT OF MY OWN MANY YEARS OF LEARNING ABOUT JEWELLERY. **IN THOSE MOMENTS WHEN I SIT WITH DANIEL AND OLIVIA, WHEN I SEE AND HANDLE THE JEWELS AND OBJECTS, I FEEL MY OWN CONFUSION DISSIPATE AND I UNDERSTAND EXACTLY WHY I WAS SOMEHOW LED, BY SERENDIPITY, INTO THE JEWELLERY WORLD, INTO THIS RARE OPPORTUNITY TO WITNESS LIVING JEWELLERY HISTORY.**

*Vivienne Becker, Jewellery historian*

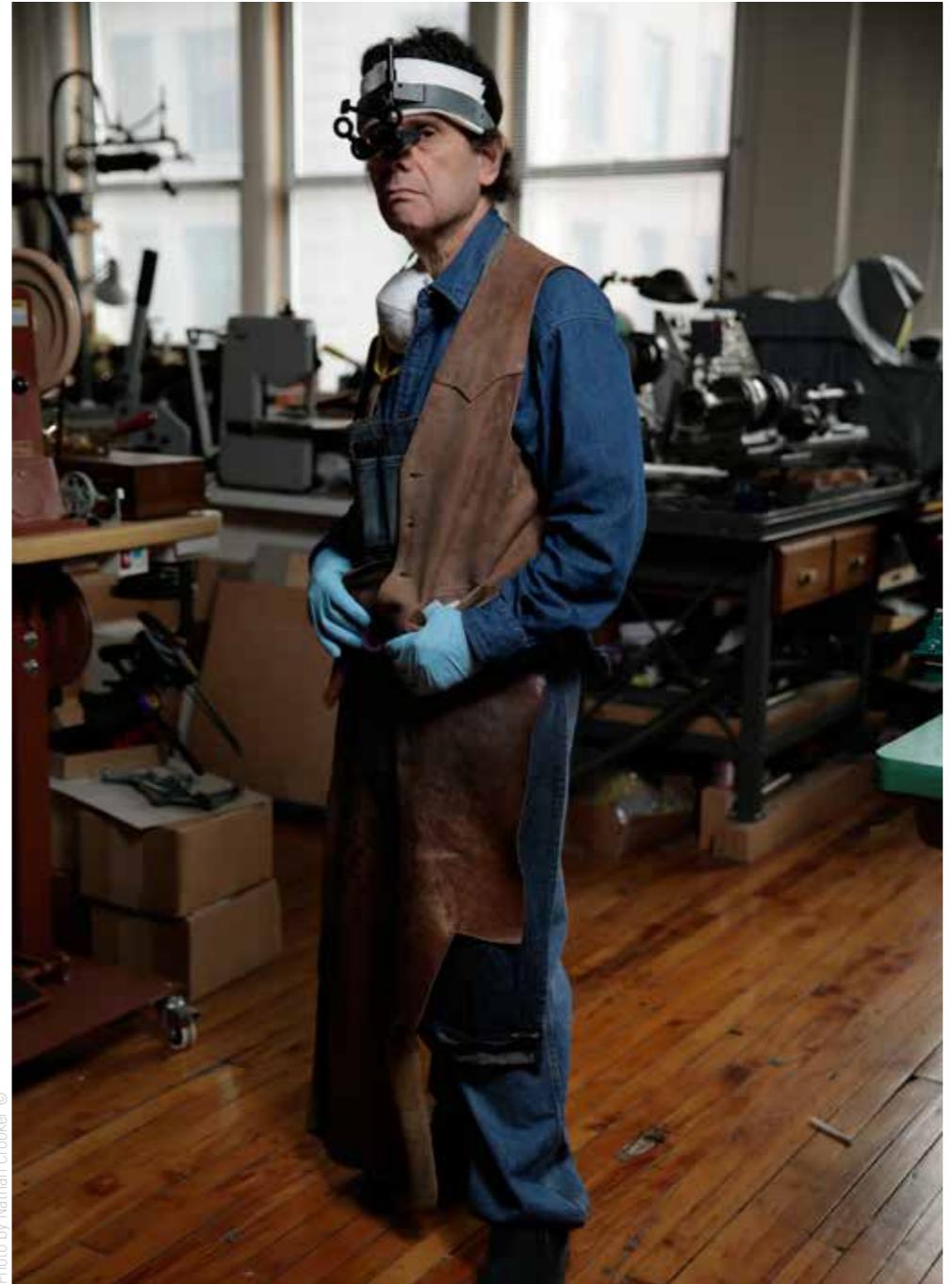


Photo by Nathan Crooker ©

*Daniel Brush in his studio.*

## NECKS

NECKS is the visual poetry book for an artist's jewelry dream. It records a passage of time, a young woman's drama with decision and an artist's engagement with materials. One hundred seventeen "colliers de chiens" were purposefully made for the book. A neckpiece was constructed, a photograph was taken, a page was organized, until the momentum stopped. The work lasted four years. The young woman became older, the film expired and a knowledge of steel increased. The concept was not to create a collection of jewels for many 'necks', but rather to create a collection of jewels for the unrequited 'neck.'

## CUFFS

Steel, downtown, biker girl, chic, radical, out there, bondage, New York, Paris, New York, Paris, twenty something, seventy something, svelte and sweating, Burma red, Kashmir blue, Joplin and Glenn Gould, walking the line with Barnett Newman. Everyday in the studio, in the early morning sweeping the floors, the sounds and confusions of all the years persist. Somewhere in all of this I hammered at steel, set diamonds, bent metal and cuffs resulted. Seventy-two cuffs became another passage of time. Another three years. When photographed I thought of Irving Penn's corner portraits.

## L'ÉCOLE

In late summer 1983, five years after Olivia and I moved to New York, I started on "Gold Dust Wand". Years of study in the art of ornamental turning got me going. Just before Christmas two years later, I collected gold from the studio floor, filled the wand, took it to the skating rink at Rockefeller Center and sprinkled fairy dust. There were smiles from ear to ear.

I was a university professor for nine years. The students were my teachers as well. We all searched for the "great dialogue", a charged intellectual and emotional pursuit that would break down barriers and make ideas more transparent, or I should say, even more difficult. The classroom became collaborative. It was a daily studio of ideas that inspired everyone to go further into his or her journey, to keep searching for an idiosyncratic voice. It is an honor to participate with Van Cleef's L'ÉCOLE and to have the opportunity to share, learn and search once again and maybe even to encourage future fairy tales.

*DANIEL BRUSH*