

M MAD X

MAD MAX

At 31 years of age, horology wunderkind Maximilian Büsser got the break others can only dream of – he was made MD of Harry Winston Timepieces. At 38, he threw it all in and sank every penny he had into his vision for the interface between craftsmanship and art – MechaWical Art Devices, as he calls his pieces – and the MAD Gallery was born. Eugene Costello talks exclusively to Max about vision, philosophy and a new MAD gallery in Dubai...



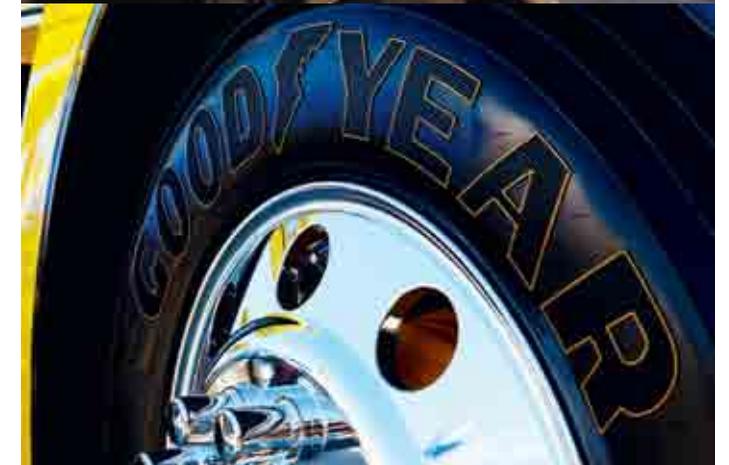
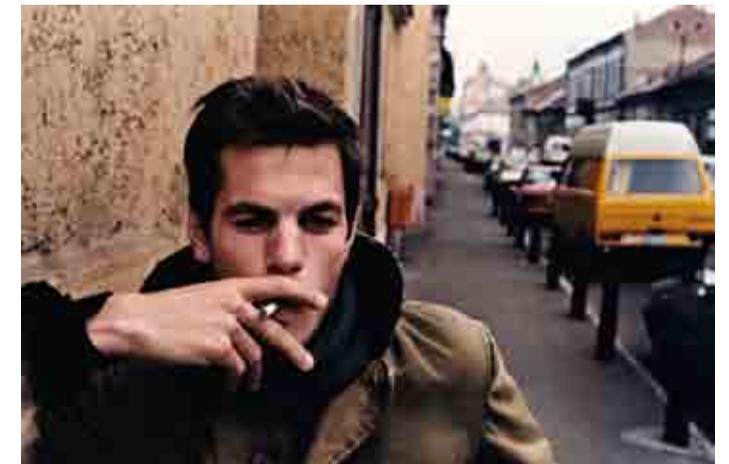


this page: an interior view of the M.A.D. Gallery in Geneva with current exhibition pieces.
 opposite top: a kinetic sculpture by artist, Bob Potts
 opposite bottom: artist Ulysse Fréchin and an example of his work from the series *American Trucks*.

[START]

MAXIMILIAN BÜSSER IS possibly the most unlikely CEO you will encounter. A youthful 47, he wears jeans and Converse, eschewing formal suits and is a self-confessed rebel. But fail to take him seriously at your peril; his boutique watchmaking business in an unfashionable district of Geneva creates such stunning and unique pieces — are they watches? are they art? — that at the 2012 Grand Prix d’Horlogerie de Genève, the first creation by his newly formed workshop Maximilian Büsser and Friends picked up not one but an astonishing two prizes. That Büsser had garnered the Best Men’s Watch gong and the Public Prize was stunning industry recognition for what many had regarded as career suicide borne of a midlife crisis.

For Büsser really had scaled the dizzying heights of the horology world, becoming managing director of Harry Winston Timepieces at the ludicrously young age of 31. Büsser — by his own confession, “a painfully shy, geeky child” — had studied for a Masters degree in Microtechnology Engineering and says: “When I came out of university, watchmaking saved my life. At that time, no one seemed to want mechanical watches, so in the industry I found a surrogate family” And this surrogate family warmly embraced this exotic-looking geek (half-Indian, half-Swiss, Büsser has Mediterranean good looks and easy-going charm), leading to a job he loved at, first, Jaeger-LeCoultre, then subsequently, after seven years, at the precocious age of just 31, he took the head job at Harry Winston. In his softly-spoken and sibilant voice, he tells me: “I had it all. I had ▶





[CAPTION]

top: the artist in portrait; Frank Buchwald. bottom: some sketches showing initial designs for the final piece that we see opposite. opposite: the *Machine Lights* is a series of 12 majestic lamps crafted entirely by hand and boasting an almost anatomical form thanks to their alien-like, quadrupedal bases and quasi-corporeal symmetry.

products accordingly and shove them down customers' throats. There was little love and no sense of individual craftsmanship."

He talks again of his parents, and the values they instilled in him: "My parents were the most honest and decent people imaginable. They taught me that, in real life, if someone betrays you or stabs you in the back, you simply walk away and do not see that person again."

"But in business, as managing director at Harry Winston, I had to compromise my values and continue to deal with such people and smile and shake their hand or have lunch with them, despite their appalling treatment of you."

"And another bugbear was that in the industry, I met incredibly talented visionaries and craftsmen who poured their souls into their craft but received no recognition for their work, all that genius is claimed by the brand."

He says that it was at this moment the idea for MB&F was born: Maximilian Büsser and Friends: "It had to be friends because the vision was about a federation of collaborators, not the usual hierarchical structure of the corporate world," he explains in his gentle voice. He had managed to put aside CHF900,000 (nearly \$1m), of which CHF700,000 was to plough into the business, leaving CHF200,000 between them and bankruptcy. He didn't care, he says, if he made money or not: "It was about making watches that I loved, no matter how mad, and completely unlike anything else on the market. I had no idea whether they would sell or not."

On July 26 2005, he began to trade as MB&F, though the 'friends' were to come later. Luckily, contacts in the world of horology retail were sufficiently persuaded ▶

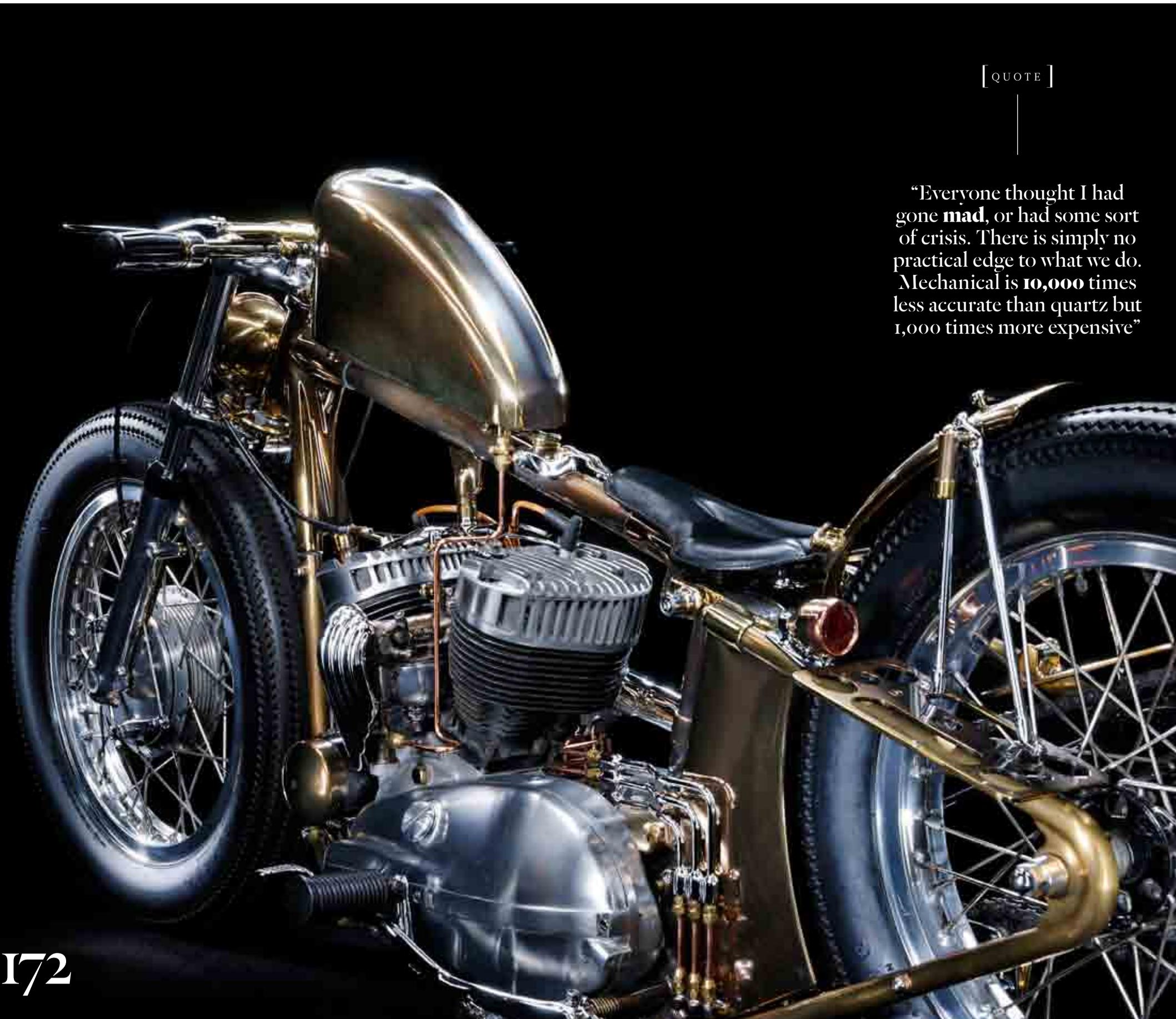
▶ everything that one aspires to in the corporate world. I had power, I had recognition, I had money — a lot of money — yet, somehow, I still felt unhappy without really knowing why."

The change came, as change often does, unbidden, unsought but wholly transformative. When Büsser was 34, just three years into the role, his father died.

Büsser speaks simply, openly, movingly: "When my father died, it sent me into a complete spin. I had always been a complete go-go-go person and this stopped me in my tracks. I had not had an especially happy childhood, and had never been close to my father. I wondered if he had died with any regrets — and the realisation hit me that if I were to die, what would I have to be proud of?"

He warms to his theme, explaining how, with a sudden flash of insight, he knew instantly the corporate world was not for him: "As a product manager at Jaeger, and more so at Harry Winston, I would look at what the market would take, produce expensive





[QUOTE]

“Everyone thought I had gone **mad**, or had some sort of crisis. There is simply no practical edge to what we do. Mechanical is **10,000** times less accurate than quartz but 1,000 times more expensive”

[CAPTION]

One of a series of pieces of mechanical structures that adopts and extrapolates the concept of a motorbike. Each piece takes three years to construct.

► by his passion and pedigree to take a punt and he managed to sell 25 units of his first piece, HM1. (The HM, incidentally, is a nod to his insistence on calling the pieces ‘horological machines’ rather than plain ‘watches’; nothing so mundane for these wonders of micro-engineering and craftsmanship.)

These pre-orders amounted to CHF700,000, doubling the company capitalisation at once, though the orders came in drips and drabs, he says, rather than overnight.

Speaking of his vision and philosophy, he says: “I want to be free, to have creative freedom. I do not think of my work as watchmaking; I think of it as creating kinetic sculptures, or building mechanical machines that give time.

“Everyone thought I had gone mad, or had some sort of crisis. There is simply no practical edge to what we do. Mechanical is 10,000 times less accurate than quartz but 1,000 times more expensive. Only a lunatic would do such a thing,” he says with a laugh.

His other masterstroke was to start a weekly blog that he curated, a collection of stories that amazed him, from around the world, “craftsmen who shared my vision. And by doing the blog, I came across fellow visionaries.”

Visionaries such as Chicara Nagata who takes the concept of a motorbike and turns it into something almost indescribable (see picture): “I flew to South Japan as I had to meet him. We spoke through an interpreter, who explained that each single piece takes three years, a total of 7,000 hours of painstaking craftsmanship. So I said: ‘But Nagata-San, what do you live on?’ Though the translator, he said that he worked as a graphic designer to scrape a living. Then he seemed sad and the translator did not appear to want to explain what he had said. But I persuaded her, and eventually she said: ‘He is very sad because his wife has left him, he has no money but he cannot stop doing what he does.’”

And it is this passion, so lacking in the corporate world, that is at the heart of what MB&F is about.”

For Büsser, the object is only half of the appeal: “These are the most drop-dead gorgeous machines I have ever seen. But are they the most practical? Of course not! That is why we have Ducati or BMW. When you buy a Nagata, you are buying not just a motorbike. You are buying three years of the life of a very talented and tortured and tormented soul.”

And so the MAD gallery was born —it stands for Mechanical Art Devices and allows Büsser to showcase the work of such geniuses as Nagata. Büsser had low expectations for the gallery, ►



[CAPTION]

shyly — and she is crying. It is Thursday lunchtime, and he leaves me with one invaluable piece of news: “We are opening our third gallery soon, we had hoped it would be in the Art District, but that project has been put back until 2016. We are hopeful that it will be at the start of 2015 but we are still looking for the right location. I shall let you know when we find one. Perhaps you would attend the opening?”

Two days later, I am writing up this interview at my desk in my flat on England’s south coast, overlooking the communal gardens and, just beyond, the English Channel. I realise I have made a mistake with my shorthand and written down something absurd that cannot possibly be true.

I call Büsser on his mobile phone. He takes my call. “How lovely to hear from you, Eugene,” he lies charmingly. “I apologise for the signal — I am climbing in the Alps. How can I help you?”

I explain that I appear to have written that he draws a net salary of £55,000 and also whether he wants me to include such a personal detail. “Why ever not? I have nothing to hide,” he says. So can he give me the correct figure? There is a pause. “That is the correct figure,” he says. “Your notes are correct.”

But, I protest, your watches cost so much, not far off your annual salary. “Yes,” he laughs. “I cannot afford what I craft! I am a creator, not a collector!”

But... but... but... I stammer, “Surely you cannot afford to live in such an expensive city as Geneva on such a modest salary?”

“Why ever not?” he asks again, gently amused. “I do not live in an expensive district, I do not own my flat and the rent is modest. I live simply and I love what I do. That is to be truly rich, is it not?”

And with that, this enigmatic, gentle, diffident and — above all — genuinely free spirit is off. To climb every mountain... ■

[END]

left: Japanese artist, Chicara Nagata at work on one of his ‘road machines’ that take over 7000 hours to craft. opposite: the pieces that started it all, one of Max Büsser’s Horological Machines; wonders of micro-engineering and craftsmanship.

► tucked away as mentioned in an unfashionable part of Geneva. He thought, perhaps, two or three visitors a day would come; in fact, it is now 27 per day and, through the gallery, they have sold 1,400 pieces to the 15,000 visitors that have come through the doors of the gallery in two and a half years. Not bad work for a project that was meant to be a plaything.

As Büsser says, “I saw the gallery as an emanation of my vision, so to see how successful it has been is extremely rewarding. It is not about the money — I think our cheapest is £300, while the most expensive is £150,000 — but an affirmation of our vision.”

He gives one final example. “Our piece Thunderbolt took three years to build and cost us £2m. I took my thinking to the very limit and I didn’t give damn if the thing sold or it bankrupted me. In the event, when we released it in 2010, it became our bestselling piece.”

Büsser has to go. He is at home in his apartment on parenting duty for his 18-month-old daughter — “I started late,” he says,

