

A COLLECTIVE MOVEMENT

Self-confessed maverick watchmaker, Maximilian Büsser, founder of the eponymous MB&F brand, speaks to **Mark Lean** about how the no-holds-barred imagination of his childhood fuels the creation of cult-of-personality horological machines.

Photo Yong Keen Keong

“I would rather people take my creativity seriously rather than my looks,” says Maximilian Büsser, laughing. The striking similarities between the former managing director of Harry Winston Rare Timepieces and a certain Tom Ford are undeniable. The immaculate dark suit: check. The designer stubble: check. The creative brilliance: check.

As the founder of MB&F (which stands for Maximilian Büsser & Friends), Büsser, previously known in the watchmaking fraternity for Harry Winston's Opus haute horlogerie watches, has, in the past five years, charted a solo career path. In the process, he has forged an entirely new playing field with timepieces he brands as Horological Machines (HM). Established in 2005, MB&F has banded a collective of talented artisans, artists and professionals to create timepieces that are as radical and revolutionary as they are works of art.

“I don't treat the people I work with as suppliers. I also credit them for their individual contributions. I am offering them their first communication platform for their talents. The person who is finishing our movements also does the most complicated pieces from Patek and Breguet, but, of course, he signs confidentiality agreements with them,” explains Büsser.

He adds, “So for the first time, I am telling the world... look at this guy, look at his talents. (In a way), we have created this virtuous circle. I give a face to the talent, and the talent can finally show the world what he is capable of doing.” The inspirations for each timepiece are derived from an incongruous variety of sources that are as much personality-filled as they are personal: Jules Verne novels and films such as *Ocean's Eleven*, for instance.

“The watches are very holistic products. Each design starts off with a

concept, a sketch. For N°1, it was about two worlds coming together. N°2 was a space station from my childhood. What I thought and dreamt about 30 or 40 years ago have been integrated into my creative process. N°3 was a spaceship. My influences range from *Star Trek*, manga, the Thunderbirds... and once the design is complete, I realise that the engine that goes in has to be completely created from scratch,” he says.

It irks him when MB&F is described by less informed sources as a design brand. “When we create our engine, I have to sit down with the master watchmaker, so that it fits the whole concept. The most important in our creation is the engine. We create them from scratch. There are 300 to 380 individual parts in each of them, and it takes up to three years to develop. We are a holistic creator of horological machines. We are not a design brand,” he states with a slight smile.



“MB&F IS ABOUT RESPECTING MY CREATIVE VEIN. IT IS ABOUT LIBERATING MYSELF FROM ANY COMMERCIAL TIES. IT IS ABOUT CREATING WHAT I WANT...”

The Horological Machines are statement-making, to say the least, and, from a design perspective, Büsler says that they are 100 per cent gender neutral timepieces. He clarifies; “Today, 10 per cent of our machines are worn by ladies. What is really interesting is most of these ladies, who have the thinnest of wrists, are from South-East Asia. They go for the timepiece which I find is the most masculine (in appearance): the N°2.”

CHILD'S PLAY

In order to dive fully into the MB&F universe, one has to consider the events that shaped the mindset of the company's founder. An only child, Büsler was often left to his own devices where he “learned to make up an incredibly rich imaginary life”, which, in retrospect, he terms as “probably the richest creative part of my life.”

This compelling notion of creativity is the underlying manifesto of MB&F. He offers an explanation; “It was as if you start dreaming of something, and because it's so unreasonable because it's not something that the world tells you to do, you put it in a drawer and you close it. But now, there comes a point when you start opening that drawer continuously.”

Throughout the conversation, Büsler is full of analogies when he talks about the personal and professional aspects of his life. In fact, in some respects, the two run parallel. He explains; “I had been a very rational person. I am half-Indian, and because my father was Swiss and I wanted to be more like him,

I practically cut out my Indian side for many years of my life. I became a very boring, cerebral person. It was only in the last 10 years that I have started reconnecting with my Oriental side, with my crazier side... that process took three years.”

Undeniably, Asia is also a key market for luxury watches, which makes the timing of his recently discovered affinity to the region spot on. “Clearly, in this part of the world, people look forward; they are ready to experiment,” he says of the Asian watch connoisseur's appreciation for innovation and taste for the extraordinary.

THE TIPPING POINT

Prior to catching the attention of the watchmaking world with his four Horological Machines, each released within the span of a year for the past few years (HM N°4 is set to be unveiled this year), Büsler has had the opportunity for self-assessment.

“There were a few events in my life about seven or eight years ago, which were really tipping points. They made me realise that the life I was living was the life everybody around me wanted to live. Most importantly, everybody was proud of me, but I was not proud of myself,” he recalls, before adding, “MB&F is a life decision. For 15 years, I was creating products, to sell more and to make more money. I was very good at it. But, basically, I was not respecting myself.”

As if to place stronger emphasis on the previous point, he reiterates; “So, MB&F is about respecting my creative

vein. It is about liberating myself from any commercial ties. It is about creating what I want. Probably 99 per cent of the time, people will either hate (my work) or they will not understand what I do.”

And, since the company is viewed as a collective movement, the often contentious issue of copyright does not figure in the equation. Büsler explains; “We don't patent anything. Each new solution we have, anyone can copy (the design) because, by the time they copy, we would have gone on to the next thing. What we are interested in doing is creating, and if everybody can profit from that, great.”

On the cards for 2010: “As for new HM, we will unveil an amazing variation of the HM2, called the HM2-SV,” says Büsler. He adds; “SV is the abbreviation for Sapphire Vision. The whole top plate of the piece is made out of sapphire. It is 3.6mm thick! It is an incredible technical feat, which needs over 50 hours of work just to machine and polish the piece. And, of course, two out of three break because of tensions in the sapphire being machined by diamond lathes. This year will see four major launches, including N°4 in July, an amazing variation on N°3, and a new joint venture.”

As for the reference to Tom Ford, Büsler admits that on occasions “it is something the media wants to play up.” Unless, of course, if the MB&F creations haven't already dominated the limelight in the first place. ■