

If you can't buy your grail watch, here's the next best thing.

Words Luke Benedictus

# ROUGH TRADE

**G**rowing up in Toronto, Gabriel Lau was always fascinated by watches. But when he moved to Hong Kong 10 years ago to take up a role as marketing director for an architectural coating and metal fabrication company, his interest cranked up to a new level. "Here, there are watch shops everywhere," he tells T+T.

Without the funds to buy the sort of luxury watches he lusted after, Gabriel found another intimate way to engage with them. In 2019 on his Instagram account (@labeg), he put up a pencil sketch of his grail watch at the time, a Rolex GMT Ref. 6542. The photo showed a cut-out of the drawing that Gabe had wrapped around his wrist. "New hobby," he wrote. "Drawing watches I can never afford."

That was just the start of Gabe's magnificent (paper) watch collection. Since then, he's drawn hundreds of watches from countless luxury brands ranging from Patek Philippe and Richard Mille to Vacheron Constantin and IWC. Over time, the style of the illustrations has also evolved from two-dimensional pencil and paper etchings to coloured pictures drawn with fine-tip pens and acrylic paint. Drawn free-hand, Gabe's drawings replicate the watches' exact case sizes, and are highly detailed - right down to the minute markers on the bezel. "I look up all the details and the specs of the watch, and then I try to draw it as close and visually possible as the real thing," he says.

Yet the appeal of the drawings ultimately lies in their wonky charm and wilful imperfections. Technically formidable

watches that are COSC-certified to be accurate to a fraction of a second are expressed with a childlike wonder, and this underlying sense of joy captures the giddy enthusiasm of the wide-eyed watch lover. "I'm not a good enough illustrator to draw hyper-realistic art pieces," Gabe admits. "But I purposely make them ugly because I think it just brings the fun into watch passion and collecting."

Another paradoxical quality is the way that Gabe recontextualises luxury timepieces in the far more accessible medium of paper and ink. "I wanted to point out, value can come from anything," he says. "Materials can become valuable by putting in the effort, the work, the details."

There's certainly demand for Gabe's creations. He regularly gets commission from clients for framed pictures that cost from HK\$4,000 (A\$750). Usually, the requests are to draw a favourite piece in their existing collection or the grail watch they most desire. Such interest is hardly surprising. After all, even if you have the funds, many high-end watches remain inaccessible to most people at retail and not just if you hanker after a Nautilus or Royal Oak. Research last year from Morgan Stanley and consultancy LuxeConsult revealed there was a waiting list for almost 100 per cent of Rolex models at UK retailer Watches of Switzerland. Back in 2014, that situation only applied to 10 per cent of the Rolex collection. If you lust after an unobtainable watch, Gabe's creations may be the next best alternative. Despite being made from paper and ink, they'll still tell the right time twice a day.

