



A one-of-a-kind interpretation of MB&F's Horological Machine No. 2, signed by artist Sage Vaughn, auctioned at Only Watch to benefit Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy research. Photo courtesy of MB&F

MAX BUSSER

FOUNDER OF MB&F BY KATY DONOGHUE

WHITEWALL: You were at Harry Winston, a classic brand that is the epitome of luxury, especially when we think of diamonds. How did you go from that to founding a new watch company, MB&F?

MAX BUSSER: I come from a family where you don't become president or CEO of anything. I always had the ambition of enjoying myself, and that's what my parents told me. So very luckily, I entered the world of horology 19 years ago — it was the restart of mechanical watches. Jaeger-LeCoultre was coming out of bankruptcy, like most of the other brands in those days, and we were pioneers, explaining to people the beauty of mechanical movements. I had an incredible seven years at Jaeger, then one day a headhunter contacted me and said, "We have a job as managing director for Harry Winston timepieces." I said, "Okay, let's give it a try." Four months later, they give me the job. Now suddenly I'm the head of Harry Winston timepieces. I never expected anything like that in my life, but what I didn't know is that Harry Winston was, like, seven employees. What I didn't know is that they were essentially bankrupt. But after a year, the little team, we managed to save that company and then we grew. When it was growing, I was getting all this recognition, power, and money, which was all wonderful, but the bigger the company was becoming, the less I was enjoying myself, and I didn't understand because I had this dream job that I had never dreamt of and I should have been so happy. And then my father passed away seven years ago. That was sort of a trigger: "Does this have any meaning — this rat race I'm living?" So I started imagining what I would like to do, because creating more watches to sell more, to make more money

cannot give any reason to my life. So I started imagining something that was impossible. A very small company that would only create pieces we believe in that nobody would understand. When we came out with our first, then second, then third, people said, "Are you nuts? What is this?" But it didn't matter; we were enjoying ourselves. We're much closer to art than to, I feel like saying, interior decoration.

WW: A lot of watch brands are proud of their lengthy, Swiss heritage. How do you compete with that at MB&F?

MB: Before the quartz era, before the seventies, the movement had to be the most reliable, the most precise — that was what we were asking for. So nobody was going to go do any fantasy around it, it was an industrial object — something to give time. It was only after the quartz revolution in the seventies that the mechanical watch became more of a piece of art or a piece of craftsmanship. Then you have all the fashions: different alloys, bigger watches, whatever, different functions here and there, but it still stays the same engine at the base. I feel like saying that everyone is driving down the same highway; there are fast cars, slow cars, but everyone is going the same way, and at some point we put the car on the side of the curb, got out of the car, went into the forest with a machete, with all the risk that entails." But that's us. We didn't want to continue to go down that highway that has been the same way for the last 100 years.

WW: You call the timepieces Horological Machines. So would you say these are more like kinetic

sculptures or art pieces?

MB: The big danger, I think, is that too many people stop at the look of our pieces. They look and say, "Oh, it looks this or it looks that." But, really, the most important part (maybe for me because I was an engineer in a previous life) is that, let's not forget, there are 365 parts. It's an engine. So people stop too often at the aesthetics, but the engine is what really is 70 to 80 percent of the value of what you're buying. This is not only something that looks like this or like that — there is really incredible mechanics behind it.

WW: How did you come up with the name, Horological Machine?

MB: That's an amazing story. I am pathetically useless with names. Each time during my career that we had to find a name, it was always a problem for me. Probably the only real extraordinary name that I had was the Opus Series in Winston. So we were trying to find names, and every time I found something that was not bad, I would look at the intellectual property and someone had registered it. So I was going nuts and the product was soon going to be coming out. And one day, I went a boutique in Geneva and there was a perfume by Andrée Puttman. It looked like one of those old pharmacy bottles. And the name in French meant preparation. Instead of calling it Mania or Angel or whatever you want to call it, it's like perfume preparation. And I came out of that store, and said, "We're going to call it Horological Machine." Because that's what it is! It's a machine based on a horology, but it's a machine, first of all.