

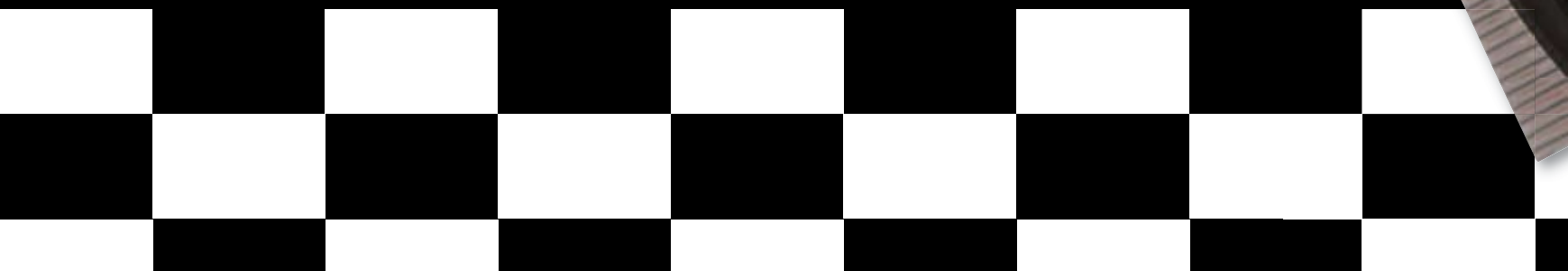


Alastair Gibson

Driven to

SUCCEED

His job as Chief Mechanic of the Honda Formula 1 Grand Prix team would be coveted around the world, but after 14 years in one of the world's most glamorous businesses, Alastair Gibson has given it all up in the name of art. Words: Lynn Parr



SCULPTOR ALASTAIR GIBSON builds fish. But these are not just any old fish. These sharks, mackerel and piranhas are modelled from high-tech carbon fibre and come equipped with fins, eyes and other fittings made of special motor racing components – they are, in fact, marine Grand Prix cars.

But then, Gibson has a unique insight into the industry, having worked his way to the top of Formula 1. Along the way he has produced several sculptures, including a hammerhead shark for driver Jensen Button's dad, John – complete with fittings from Jensen's race-winning car – and a piranha for Rubens Barrichello – again, complete with fittings from one of his cars. Now, leaving Honda in April after 10 years as Race Team Chief Mechanic, he has taken the plunge into full-time art.

"I just thought if I was going to do it, I had to do it properly," he says.

Every part of each sculpture is used on a Grand Prix car in one way or another, from the carbon fibre itself, used for the car body, to the polyurethane foam inside, which is used to make the drivers' seats. Even the stand is made from the underside plank of a car that's been in a successful race.

But why fish?

"Initially, I did sharks because over 400 million years a shark has evolved into what it is today. It's got nothing on its body that shouldn't be there – it doesn't carry a radio or DVD player; every sense is for survival. A shark is a Grand Prix car in nature. A Grand Prix car has evolved over 100 years of racing. Everything on it is made to get it first over the line – it hasn't got anything on it that isn't used. Driver comfort is for the driver to perform at 100 per cent; a driver's drink bottle is there to rehydrate him so he's concentrating all the time. And carbon fibre is just one of those components that allows the car to be the ultimate machine."

Two passions

From a form carved in balsa wood, scanned into a computer to generate a wire model, Gibson cuts a mould in two halves from a high-density pattern-making substance. The carbon fibre, a flexible material composed of many strands of fibres embedded in an epoxy resin, is pushed into the mould with a small spatula. Then the whole thing is put into a bag and processed

in a vacuum. It is then cured in an enormous industrial autoclave at Honda's Brackley factory at high temperature and high pressure.

Once the body comes out of the mould, Gibson grinds out the eyehole with a diamond grinder and fills the fish with two-part polyurethane foam to prevent it from falling apart when he starts adding the trimmings.

The next step is the fun bit. The details include gill covers made from aluminium aero tape used on wind tunnel models, with needle rollers from gearbox hub bearings to form the veins. Fins are fashioned from coated aluminium used to make car radiator tanks. Machined aluminium plugs become eyes. Rear wing adjuster mechanisms find new life as mackerel gills; and the permaglass underside plank used on particular cars is made into a mounting board – "You can see the rubber from the track and all the titanium skids.

"It's very mechanical but it's very arty, as well," he says. "Those are my two passions – I'm passionate about art and I'm passionate about machinery and materials and Grand Prix cars."

Born in South Africa, Gibson's father was a Formula 1 mechanic in the

world's only domestic Grand Prix series so Gibson grew up desperate to be in the industry.

"I've always made things. When I was growing up in South Africa we didn't live in a cardboard box or anything, but we never had loads of cash for toys, so you'd make a car out of a bit of wood. When we went on our annual holiday to the coast, the fishermen would catch big sharks, but they were just after mackerel and marlin so just left the hooks in the sharks and left them on the rocks. I used to take them to the shallows and release them. Some of them died so then I'd dissect them and have a look inside. I'd cut off the fins and dry them on the roof of our cottage and sell them to my mates at school – a proper shark fin is very intriguing. Then I started carving fish out of blocks of wood to sell."

After studying balance engineering in college, he bought and rebuilt a Formula Ford car, racing it for four seasons before realising he preferred preparing the car to the racing itself, and would never be world champion because of his height and build. So he sold it, bought a backpack and a plane ticket, and went to Israel to pick bananas on a kibbutz. Later, he hitchhiked through Europe to England, worked in London as a hod carrier and driver, then got into Formula Ford as a mechanic and, eventually, Formula 1.

Beautiful things

Gibson began collecting the components that would enhance his sculptures from a love of all the bits that make up a Grand Prix car. ▷

MAIN PICTURE Alastair Gibson (left) presents Jimmy Rembiszewski of British American Tobacco (BAR, now Honda) his *Racing Mackerel* at the British Grand Prix

LEFT *Piranha*, commissioned by driver Rubens Barrichello, trimmed with fittings from his car



ABOVE
Hammerhead Shark

ABOVE RIGHT
Carbon fibre comes as a flexible material that can be pushed into the two halves of a mould, making sure the weave patterns are lined up

BELOW
Brown Trout



“If you walk around the stores of an F1 team there are little bolts that have just been thrown out. All beautiful, polished titanium parts. You ask the store man, ‘What’s happening to those?’ ‘Oh, no, those are last year’s; they’re going to get chucked away’. A lot of parts in Formula 1 have got lifing on them so they’ll be used for maybe 200km then that’s that: they’re thrown away. So I thought I’d better start collecting things.”

Despite his high-profile job, which included being the ‘lollipop man’ in the pit lane – “Such a difficult job” – he felt he needed a hobby, and began carving fish.

“The first one was carved in balsa wood then pannelled with steel. Then I thought, ‘Wow! Carbon fibre is the future; it’s got a bit of mystique to it’. It’s a fascinating medium.”

He has been retained by Honda as a race team consultant for one day a week.

“That’s the best of both worlds, and ensures I keep my house and also keep up with the technology. And I’m doing a Koi carp for Ross Brawn (team principal), so I’ve done a bit of a deal with Honda for parts.”

His studio is spotless, ordered and tidy as an F1 truck, with rows of little trays of titanium parts on the bench and stacked boxes full of materials, all carefully labelled – ‘Mackerel parts’, ‘Carbon fibre’, ‘Spitfire parts’...

Spitfire? “Oh, I bought a Spitfire instrument panel and am restoring it.” There is even a polished radial aero engine master connecting rod from a Pratt and Whitney

Wasp plane fixed as a doorstop.

Working from home will be a welcome change from

the constant high-pressure travelling of the F1 life.

“It means I can be more of a father because I’ve always been away. But now I can be home every day and pick up my son from school and have the weekends to go to places – it’s fantastic. As you get older you can’t cruise around the planet anymore – it’s scary: just hotels and lost washing.”


So far, his sculptures have sold mainly within the F1 racing world, but it’s important to him to expand to other markets – though he will probably stick to fish, perhaps made from parts of classic cars.

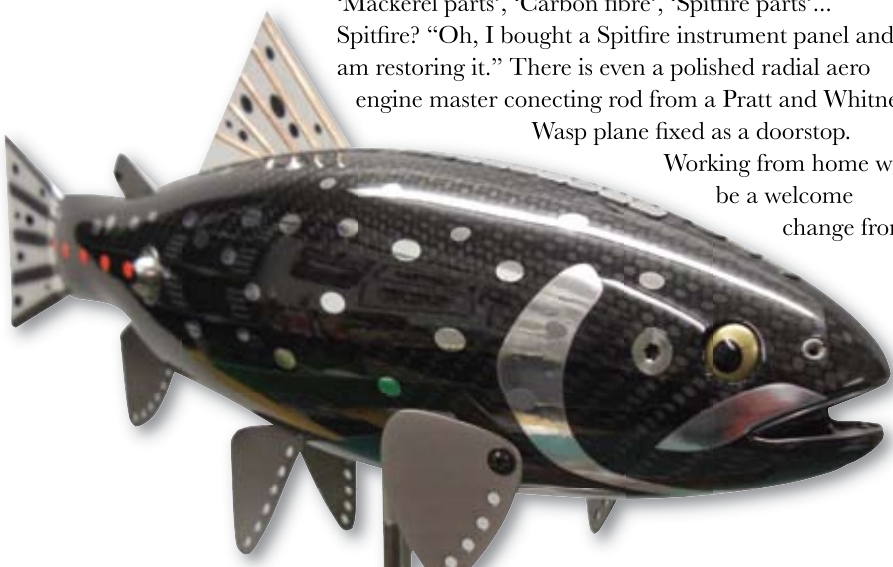
“Cars are beautiful things – especially old classic cars like the old Bugatti. There’s also a Rolls Royce fish out there, with all the louvres on the side, and there’s beautiful detail on the bonnet catcher of the Maserati that I can use in a sculpture.

But first there are 17 commissions waiting to be filled.

“I’ve been commissioned to do a two-metre, life-sized mako shark, the fastest fish in the world. I’m going to make all the teeth out of titanium. It’s going to be tons of work but it’s going to be something very special. I’ve also been commissioned to do a human torso with one side open and full of Grand Prix car parts.”

He’s not allowed to work for another team for two years, so he’s got that time to make sculpture pay.

“But if I go back, I’ll probably go back to Honda because they’re a fantastic company to work for.” 



Profile

Born in 1962 near Johannesburg, South Africa, Alastair Gibson originally studied art, but with ambitions in Grand Prix racing, he did a diploma in balance engineering and set off for Europe. Working his way up the motor sport ladder, he entered Benetton F1 in 1995, and Honda (then BAR) in 1998, where he worked as Race Team Chief Mechanic for 10 years until April this year. His limited-edition carbon fibre sculptures have been exhibited around the world and are in a number of private collections. They start at £4,000. Contact him through www.carbonart45.com.