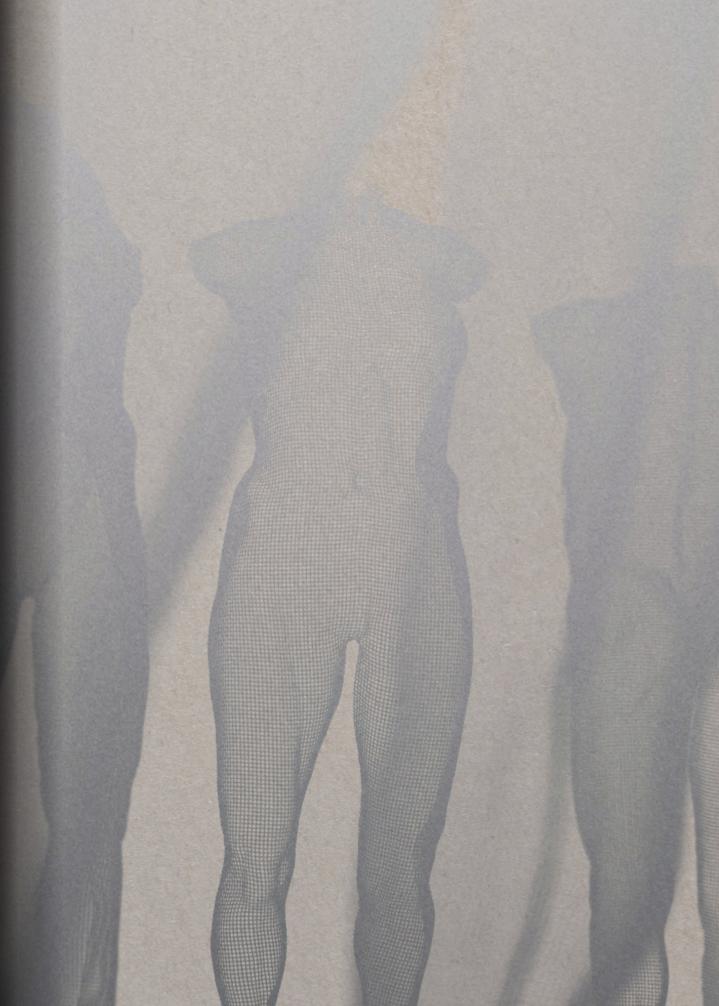
Avoiding Gravity

David Begbie

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# Life in a Day David Begbie

It is difficult not to be fascinated the first time you encounter a piece by David Begbie. It is often not just the physical sculpture that engages, but the shadow it casts – it delivers a rich duality – a conscious multi-dimensional experience. Visiting his studio with two photographers emphasised the relationship between light, natural or artificial, and his work – the sculptures need light to reveal their secret and the natural journey of the sun across the studio skylights provided a constant theatre from the multitude of figures decorating the space.

We spent the day exploring his space. A bizarre and bewitching network of workrooms and living rooms, of primitive art and tribal fetishes, of Southeast Asian figurines and Venetian masks, of sculptures ready for shipping and others flying, propped, displayed or still being loved. Drawers of

eccentric tools, racks of drawings, rolls of mesh, intriguing bookshelves, stepladders and highly ordered phalanxes of spraycans; light rooms and dark rooms; coffee and cigarettes; quiet sanctuaries and a gloriously busy kitchen provided simply endless opportunities for compelling

pictures. Amidst it all was David, puffing, musing and reflecting on his own particularly unique monochrome visual vocabulary, reflecting on the privilege of a well-rewarded life spent examining his own view of the human condition.

This is a life in the day of David Begbie. Aged 42.







So awash with caffeine and a mutual dependence on nicotine, joined by an eclectic audience of masks and tribal personalities, we talked. Since I first encountered Begbie's work, the overarching focus has been the human body. Usually headless.

Sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs and very occasionally in groups. Perfect, sensual, intense, strained, erotic – the human body and its condition has dominated his focus. Consequently, it is hard not to initially ask what drew Begbie to the human form. He stated: "I have always had a passion for figurative art, whether painting

or sculpture. I was always looking for ways to celebrate that passion and at the same time express something about the human condition. So, through the medium I evolved, I developed a contemporary archetypical figure, usually fragmented, of both the masculine and the feminine".

"They appear classical, they appear perfect - but actually they are not. Because

I have always been consumed in the search for the humanity in my figures and through that, the inherent humanity of imperfection".

Such conversation conjures the universal

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There appears to be a generic perception of the beautiful but it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is. question of beauty. What is it? To Begbie, "There appears to be a generic perception of the beautiful but it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what it is. What defines it. It's this elusive quality that I treasure and a quality I pursue – because I think you can see the intrinsic beauty in my work but at the same time, it is difficult to see why".

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Much of his work appears to mirror a calm, classical sense of physical perfection. Equally, there are periods over the years where he seems to be exploring a more intense, defined and stressed bodyform. Inevitably it elicits the question as to whether

this was a response to challenging events in Begbie's personal life or simply a creative expedition. The response from an essentially private man, was ambiguous:

"I have spent my life creating my own unique visual language.

Unsurprisingly, I have become pretty fluent in that language and have understood the properties of the material in which I have worked. Consequently, there have

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Mesh is incredibly sensitive as a medium and a little mark will say a great deal.

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been times where I have explored pushing the material to its extreme - exploring a more aggressive emotion, stressed and angular, predominantly and maybe naturally, in the masculine form".

"Mesh is incredibly sensitive as a medium and a little mark will say a great deal. Its rather like a pencil drawing – it is like one hundred

thousand lines in three-dimensional space – and the material is inherently regular, the moment you interrupt that regularity, you make a mark, like on a canvas. That first mark often determines the rest of the composition. It is intuitive, it takes you on its own journey. Many pieces are created in one sitting. I am never clear when I begin, where I will end – each has its own itinerary".













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I am more drawing in space rather than creating sculpture. My fabric is 90% thin air.

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"The material is incredibly sensitive. The more you work it, the older the figure gets. Young and fresh are light touches – a bit like a Matisse drawing. The more laboured I work the mesh, the greater the opportunity to explore a sense of angst, an intensity of activity, a rawer emotion".

Begbie was initially a painter and that twodimensional discipline has continued to both inform his work but also his perception of how his sculpture is forged.

"I am more drawing in space rather than creating sculpture. My fabric is 90% thin air. So, I am really working and shaping in three dimensional space rather than in a solid material. It almost suggests it doesn't really exist and that elusiveness is very close to what I started out to achieve forty years ago".

Looking back to Begbie's college work, much of his output explored quite formal structures interacting with a variety of contrasting materials. This juxtaposition of the definite with the indefinite is a language that he has revisited at times. The human figure contained or the figure escaping or emerging from a framework. How does he view this theme?

"Of course, it's good to go back and revisit with the benefit of experience – this is true both as an artist and as a human being. They were originally just space frames I played with and now the medium I use doesn't like sitting with any other medium. So I suppose my figures are intent on escaping the clutches of any structure, any cage. It likes to exist in its very own dimension. It also doesn't like gravity. I have spent my whole life as a sculptor and as a human being fighting against gravity. I am not sure that humanity really likes gravity!"

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With the human body as a central theme of so much of his work and the definition provided by the anatomical subtleties articulated being so mesmerising in shadow form, I wondered where this knowledge came from.

"It always amazes me how little people know about our bodies. Not only how they function but also how they are put together. We are born into it and it is often central to how we relate to other

> people and how they in turn relate to us. Whatever shape we are, there is an extraordinary beauty in the human figure. It is a miracle. It is the miracle. Throughout all my work, I have always strived to articulate my version of that miracle. I have always wanted to say something about the passion of life. And of the profound importance of relationships".

"My art teacher took me to life drawing at aged 13. I

had to have a letter of dispensation from my parents to spend time with naked people! It stuck I think".

"The effect that ancient works have had on me has been acute. I was always in awe of the classical. My work kind of plays homage to the Greeks but I have equally been intrigued by Renaissance Italian masters and some 20th century artists. Rodin

and Giacometti are two that I cannot avoid, particularly the latter's expressive drawings. His relationship with primitive art resonates with me. He did a series of portraits that were flattened and stylised that

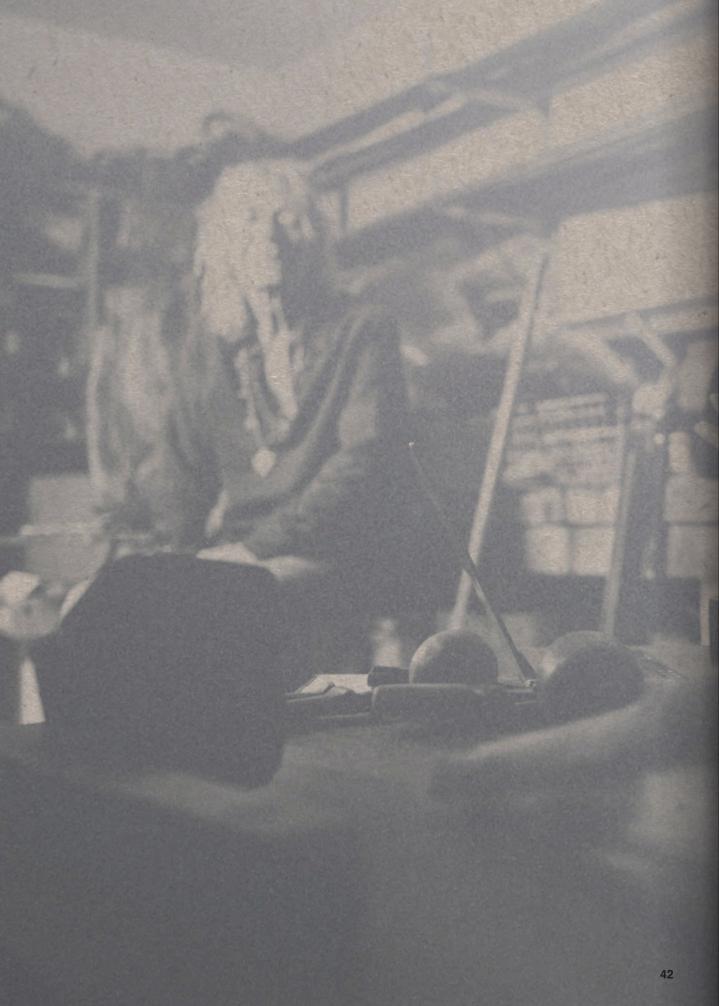
demands the viewer to ignore the person and embrace the sub-conscious. I find that fascinating - his heads have the most extraordinary presence in a room and my ambition is for my work to have that same sort of presence".

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Socrates and David Begbie



"I had a phone call in 1984 from a recently married ex-girlfriend, she had attended a private view in Knightsbridge of a young sculptor and thought I would be genuinely unbalanced if I did not go and see. She was convinced I would be in love. Of course I obeyed. And yes, it was astonishing, surprising and curiously

bewitching. I bought my first sculpture that evening. I met David, whose hands were not a pretty sight, I fell in love with the shadows, the ephemeral and delicate nature of the pieces, the contemporary salute to antique torsos and, of course, the black. I adore black and white photography, and in David's work was that similar beguiling challenge to fill in the missing.

Over the years I have added to that first purchase. Sadly, never enough. I share with him an obsession with hand-crafted African tribal masks, of fetish statuettes and figures, and the work of the late photographer Brian Griffin, a neighbour of David's. His sculptures punctuate the world at Socrates,

sitting happily amongst the photographs and other artworks from around the world, consistently delivering surprise and pleasure."

**Andrew Derrick** 



"My work is quite ambiguous in many ways. The basic elements are the ability to draw in space and deliver a multi-dimensional image that is both the physical entity and the shadow it casts. My ambition as a sculptor was firstly to replicate the subtlety and sensitivity that you find in drawing and painting and then to create some form of virtual reality – not so much an object

in space than the idea of an object in space. In a sense, a marriage between the classical and the contemporary, the physical and the conceptual. It is on the edge – part reality and part ephemeral".

Begbie's work is also optically dynamic. Its interaction with light and particularly natural light as the sun moves throughout the day, means it is unusually fluid as a work – most sculpture is

essentially static and for it to change the viewer must move – with Begbie's work, the actual object or its projected progeny moves and evolves.

"When making the piece it is often as much by feel as by

eye. I have that impression of modelling space, stretching space – that these figures are being pulled out of thin air. The light projections are a phenomenon unique to the material itself. With artificial light I try to find the optimum

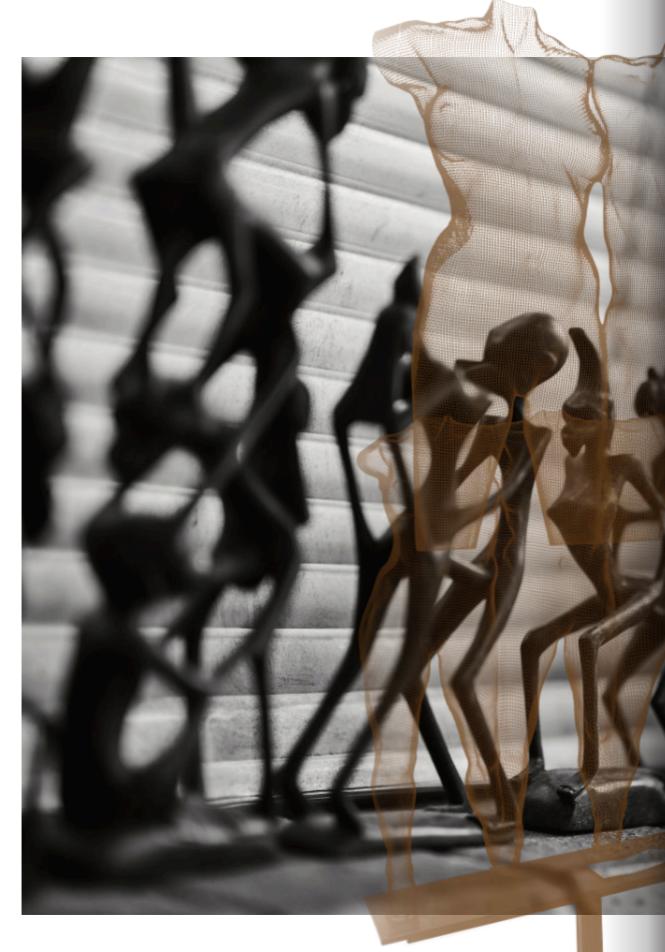
position – rather like taking a photograph, that produces a composition of the three-dimensional sculpture and its projected image. The shadow is inseparable from piece itself. The sculpture itself is actually quite elusive and doesn't give you all the information from a single angle, the shadow is curiously more articulate and illustrates better the nuance, emotion and the soul of

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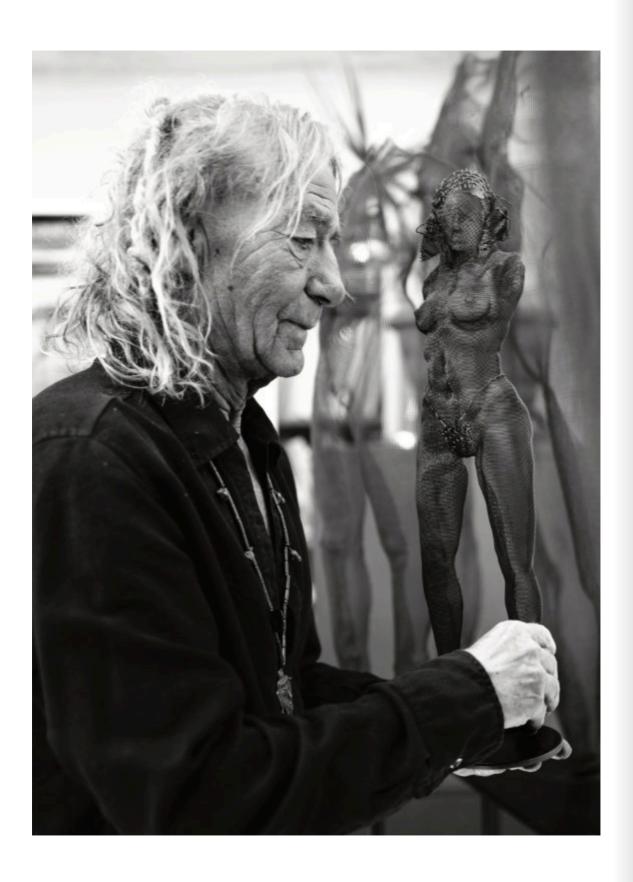
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the piece".

"The medium is constantly exciting. It always surprises. After 40 years, it is still a source of the unexpected. The shadows themselves are powerful – and I have never understood why shadows are so powerful. They carry so much promise and play with the subconscious. I study them constantly wherever I go, whether sharp of

> soft, specific or indeterminate. Everything around us is largely made of something, except shadows. In a world articulated by light, shadows are alien - they exist despite the light rather than because of it".

> "Each life is a journey, as an artist who has created a monotone universe of human torsos, there have been significant episodes of colour, of the two dimensional, of cage-like interventions and more recently, diverse

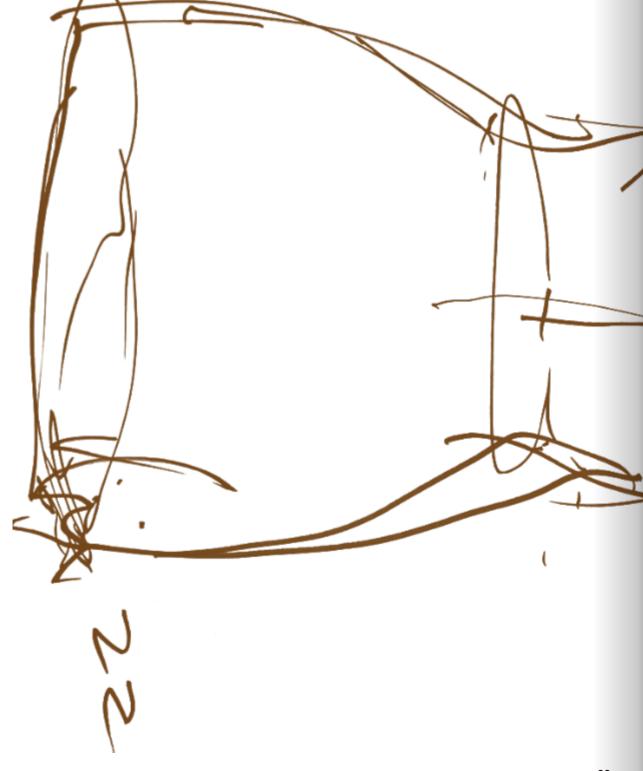
and unexpected subjects."

"After working with the mesh for so many years, I now understand the qualities of the medium and its opportunities and it has inevitably become a very personal vocabulary. This familiarity allows me to float between the highly figurative and the abstract, and to explore both the threedimensional form and the two dimensional. I began as a painter, so I still find playing with two-dimensions a fascinating exercise"

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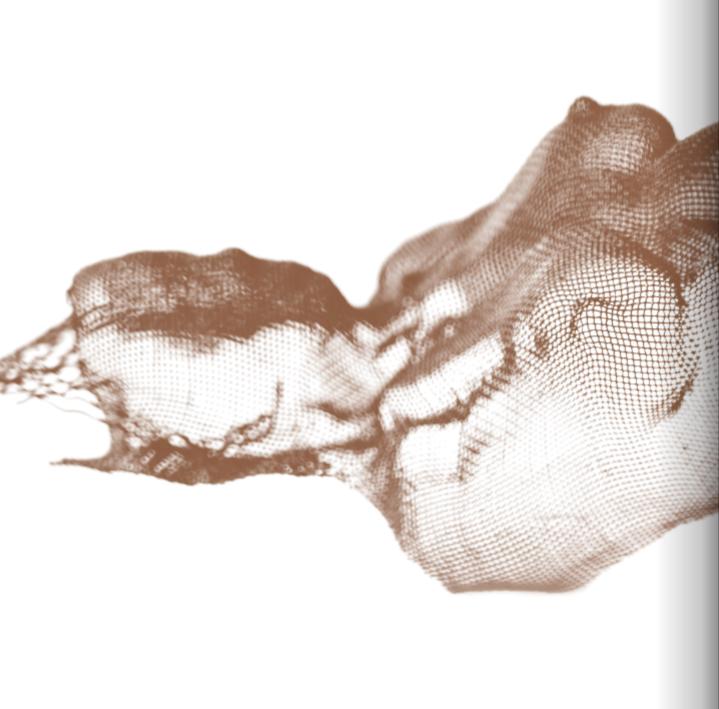


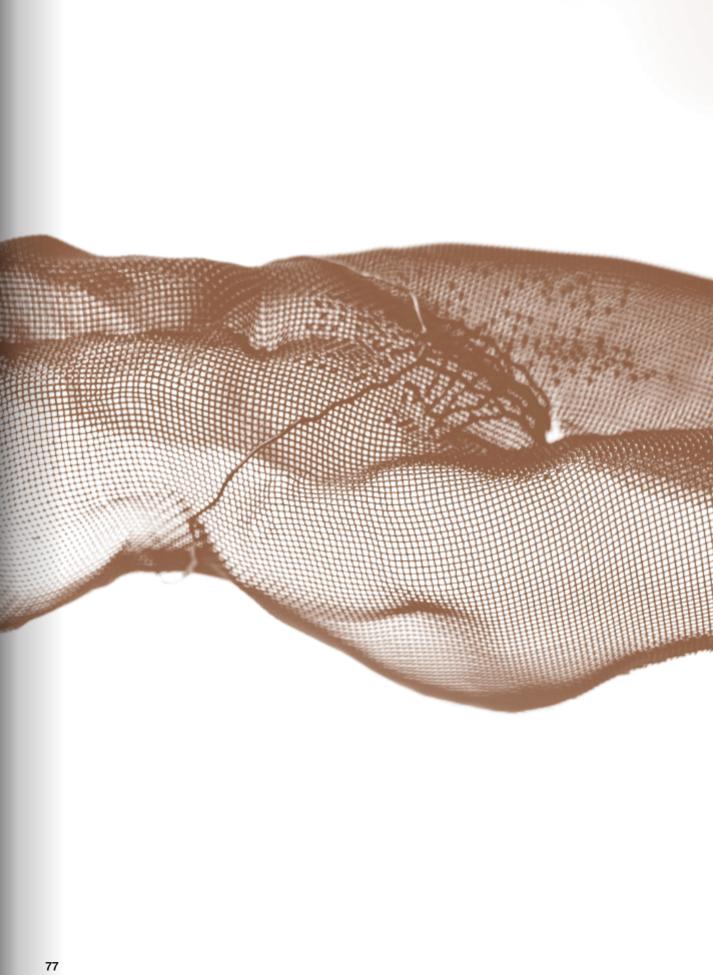












"Currently, I am more inclined to work with broader subject matter – and to explore the extremes of positive and negative. In my figurative work, when creating both masculine and feminine subjects, they can each take on the characteristics of each other. Even when working with multiple figures of the same sex, the sexuality, physicality and pursuant psychology can be fluid. It emphasises the central ambiguity of the

work and maybe reflects the struggle that exists within any individual".

As we sat in his kitchen surrounded and watched by a small selection of his collection of tribal and primitive figures and masks, I wondered how it might have informed or influenced his work.

"I have never consciously copied and have always gone to great lengths not to steal. But we do not live or think in isolation, we draw from all that we see, hear or

experience. Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. Whilst the vast majority of my work is fragmented, disembodied heads or headless torsos and figures, when they are occasionally put together, there is something of the primitive about them, something of the fetish figure. My current work is an effort to respect and embrace the impact that African and Asian pieces have had and particularly, the extraordinary power of the mask".

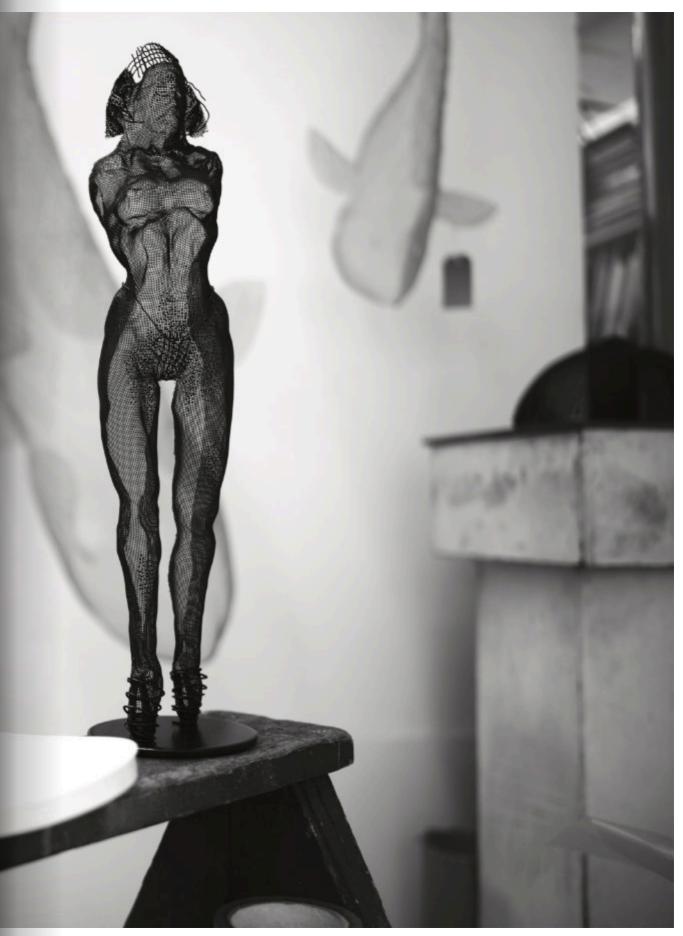
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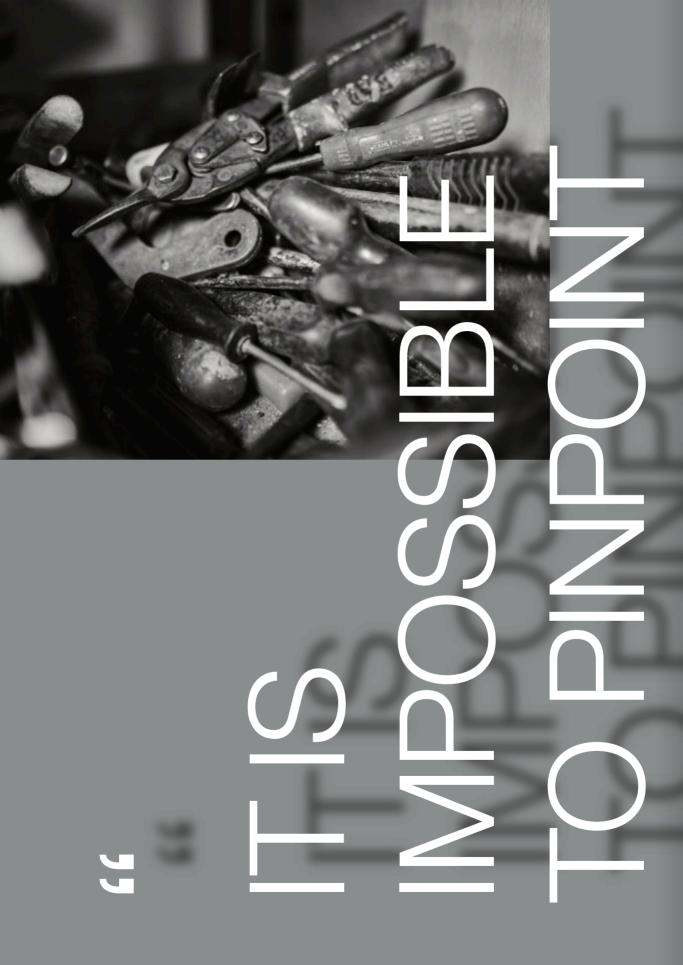
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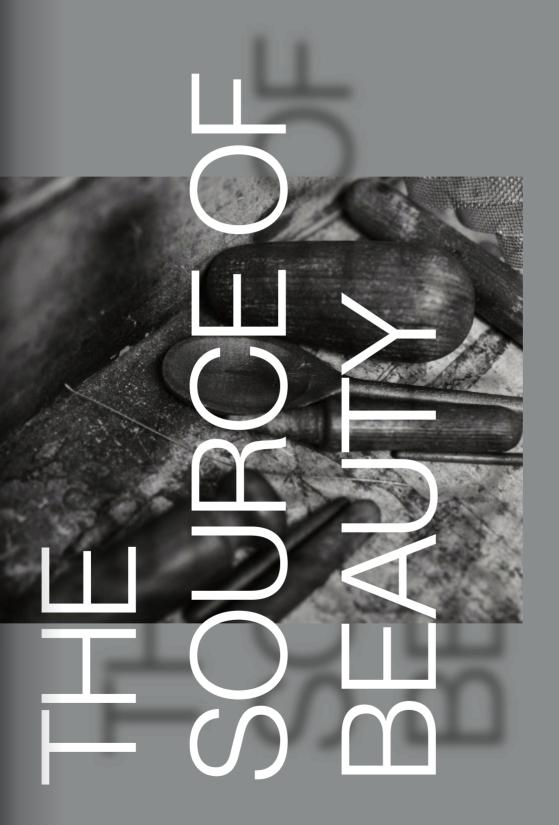
"Most primitive or tribal art is traditionally made of wood, their masks are largely the same, whilst I paradoxically work in a super contemporary medium. I find masks have a powerful presence in any room and they have fascinating roles to play. They allow anybody to be whoever they

want, they conceal, they create characters, they can hide a multitude of sins. I am currently working on a series for a new exhibition – a theme undeniably born from the faces that I live with every day".

The anomaly of a Begbie mask is that by its nature it will both reveal and conceal – another simple illustration of the central ambiguity of his work. My final question, was he satisfied to date?

"I have been very lucky. I have been so privileged to be able to spend my life making things and expressing my own view of humanity and the human condition. I have been lucky that people have liked my work and been kind enough to collect it. And there is a quiet and indulgent pleasure in knowing that I will leave behind a body of work that will hopefully continue to emphasise the sheer miracle of what we are".

















### The Photographers

Andres Reynaga

Born in Peru and subsequently inspired by his time at Central St Martins in London, Reynaga is a celebrated international fashion and advertising photographer and film maker with a particular passion for portraiture. Based in London, he has worked closely on a multiplicity of projects with Socrates over many years. We have created award winning films and literature together, as well as exploring special projects of which this Edition on David Begbie is one. Unless otherwise stated, all photos are copyright Andres Reynaga.

Nobuyuki Taguchi

Taguchi was born in Yokohama, Japan, and has been working in London since 1990. He studied Fine Art in Sculpture at the University of East London, and emerged with a fascination for black and white street photography. Socrates published their first Edition on Taguchi's work in 2020, having worked with him on a number of projects, where his particularly idiosyncratic eye contributed a unique and often profoundly surprising perspective. Images on the following pages are copyright Nobuyuki Taguchi.

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