

Carbon-fibre artist
Alastair Gibson

Photograph: Jon Lewis



Giving up a glamorous and lucrative job travelling the world as chief mechanic of a Formula 1 team to become a sculptor is, at first glance, quite an unusual move. But for Alastair Gibson it represented an opportunity to combine his twin passions of motor sport and sculpture, while being able to spend more time with his family.

It is not just the fact that Gibson, 47, has chosen to be a sculptor that is unusual, it is the medium he has opted to work with — carbon fibre.

While there are examples of other contemporary artists who have used it, he is unique as a specialist carbon artist. Carbon fibre provides the common link between his old and new lives, since it is used extensively in the manufacture of Formula 1 cars.

An incredibly versatile material, it is extremely light but strong and, with its distinctive pattern derived from the weave of the carbon fibre sheet, it is visually striking, too.

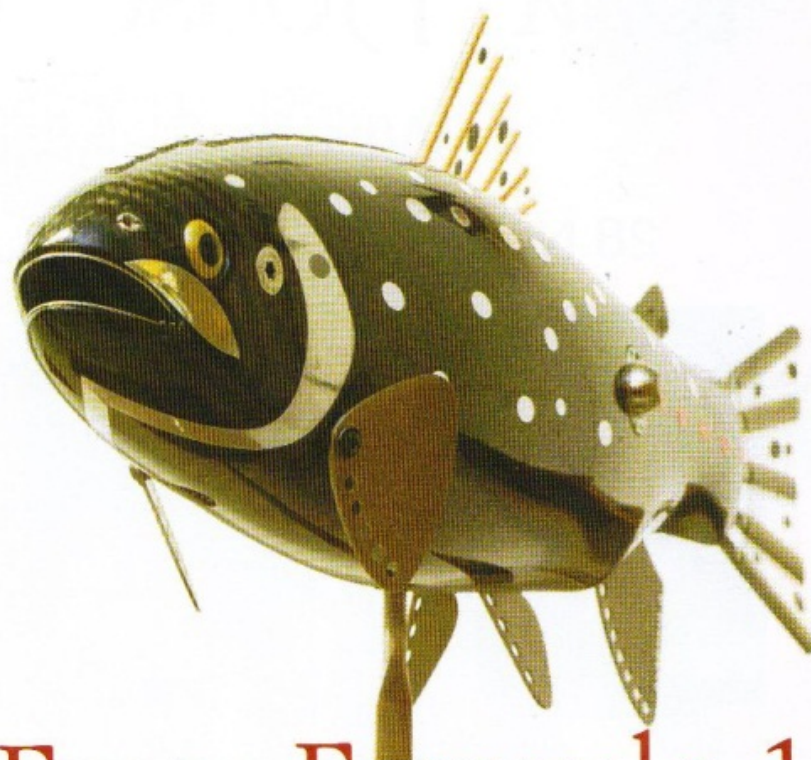
Alastair was chief mechanic for the Brackley-based team BAR-Honda, which subsequently morphed into BrawnGP, winning eight Grands Prix and the World Championship driver's and constructor's titles in 2009 with Jenson Button and Rubens Barrichello.

Although Alastair announced his decision to leave at the end of 2007, he stayed on for the first three races of 2008, in order to help his successor make a smooth transition. In early April 2008, he became a full-time carbon artist.

The seeds for his switch had actually been sown long before then. Born in Johannesburg, South Africa, the diversity of marine life he saw when on family holidays inspired him to begin carving wood.

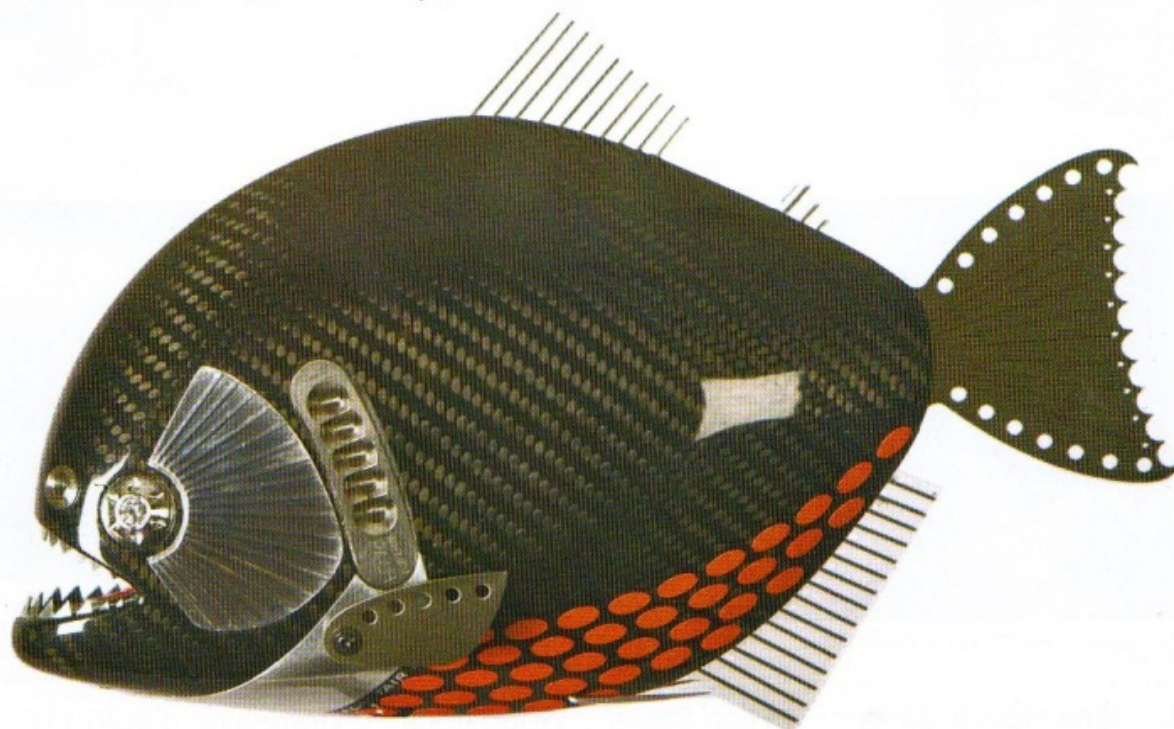
He even took after-school art classes at one stage but, with a racing mechanic — Alastair

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From Formula 1 to fish . . .

Michael Oliver meets Alastair Gibson, an artist inspired by his former career as a Formula 1 technician



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Snr — as a father, he seemed pre-destined to work in motor sport.

Training as a balance engineer — ensuring engines run smoothly and without vibrations — Gibson Jnr arrived in Europe in 1987 to see if he could make his way in racing.

He quickly worked his way through the ranks until, in 1995, he joined Oxfordshire-based Formula 1 team, Benetton.

It was around this time that he first got the idea for his sculptures. "I would walk around the parts stores and pick up little pieces made of titanium. I would think about the work in them, the accuracy and how beautiful they were," Alastair said.

"At the end of the season they would be scrapped. I thought: 'They shouldn't be thrown away, they need to be seen and appreciated'. So I started collecting them and thinking about how they could be displayed."

Taking the marine life he saw on childhood holidays as inspiration, he began making his first pieces incorporating these components.

"On weekends off I started doing sculptures. Every year I used to do three or four pieces and give them to girlfriends, or my sisters."

A move to the BAR team sponsored by British American Tobacco, owner of the Lucky Strike brand of cigarettes, presented him with his big breakthrough opportunity.

In 2003, BAT backed a series of exhibitions,

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called Tribe Art, featuring the art of people working for the company and three of Alastair's carbon fibre pieces — a tiger shark, white shark and thresher shark — were chosen.

Starting in London, the exhibitions visited Tokyo, Milan, Frankfurt, Jakarta and Rome. The exposure prompted further interest in his work, including a commission from team driver Rubens Barichello for a piranha and, before long, Alastair was being asked regularly to create sculptures for clients.

Although his range initially had a marine theme — the brown trout, hammerhead shark, mackerel, mako shark and the piranha — he has since branched out into the field of natural history with a human skull, and plans further additions, including a lion skull, in the future.

Each side of the fish body is made of carbon fibre, using sheets pre-impregnated with resin, which sets hard after a process of vacuum-sealing and baking in an oven.

The Formula 1 components are used to create the distinctive detail features.

Alastair meticulously records information about what the part is, which car it came from and when it was used, and the finished pieces are mounted on a Permaglass board cut from

the underfloor planks fitted beneath the F1 cars. The resulting fusion of marine life and high-tech is visually spectacular.

The human skull is made using a slightly different process, being machined from a solid block consisting of 318 sheets of carbon fibre. The end result is lacquered, giving it a beautiful reflective finish which, combined with the pattern from the layers of sheets, is arresting from every angle.

Alastair's work has been exhibited around the world, from the Grosvenor House and Chelsea Art Fairs in London to the Houtbay Gallery in Cape Town and, most recently, the Monaco Yacht Show, where his pieces were displayed on the Camper & Nicholsons luxury yacht, *Sherakhan*.

He also held a show in August at the space venue in his home town Brackley. The best part of his new life is being able to spend more time at home with his wife, book designer Carolyn, 45, and son William, seven.

"I like to be able to say 'Let's go for a bike

ride' or do something together. For the first five years of his life I was cavorting around the world, I wasn't having an influence on how he was growing up or on family life," he said.

He also has more time to indulge in his other hobbies of rebuilding vintage motor cycles and visiting air shows.

Now he is ready to take the next step along his career path, which includes moving into a new studio with more room to create his sculptures — a giant manta ray and a pike are on the cards — meet potential clients and display some of his work.

He is also looking for a high-end venue such as a gallery or dealer in Oxford or London where he can exhibit his pieces permanently.

What seemed like a radical career change actually makes perfect sense.

His art has provided him with an ideal outlet for his creativity, while capitalising on his background in the high-tech world of Formula 1.

