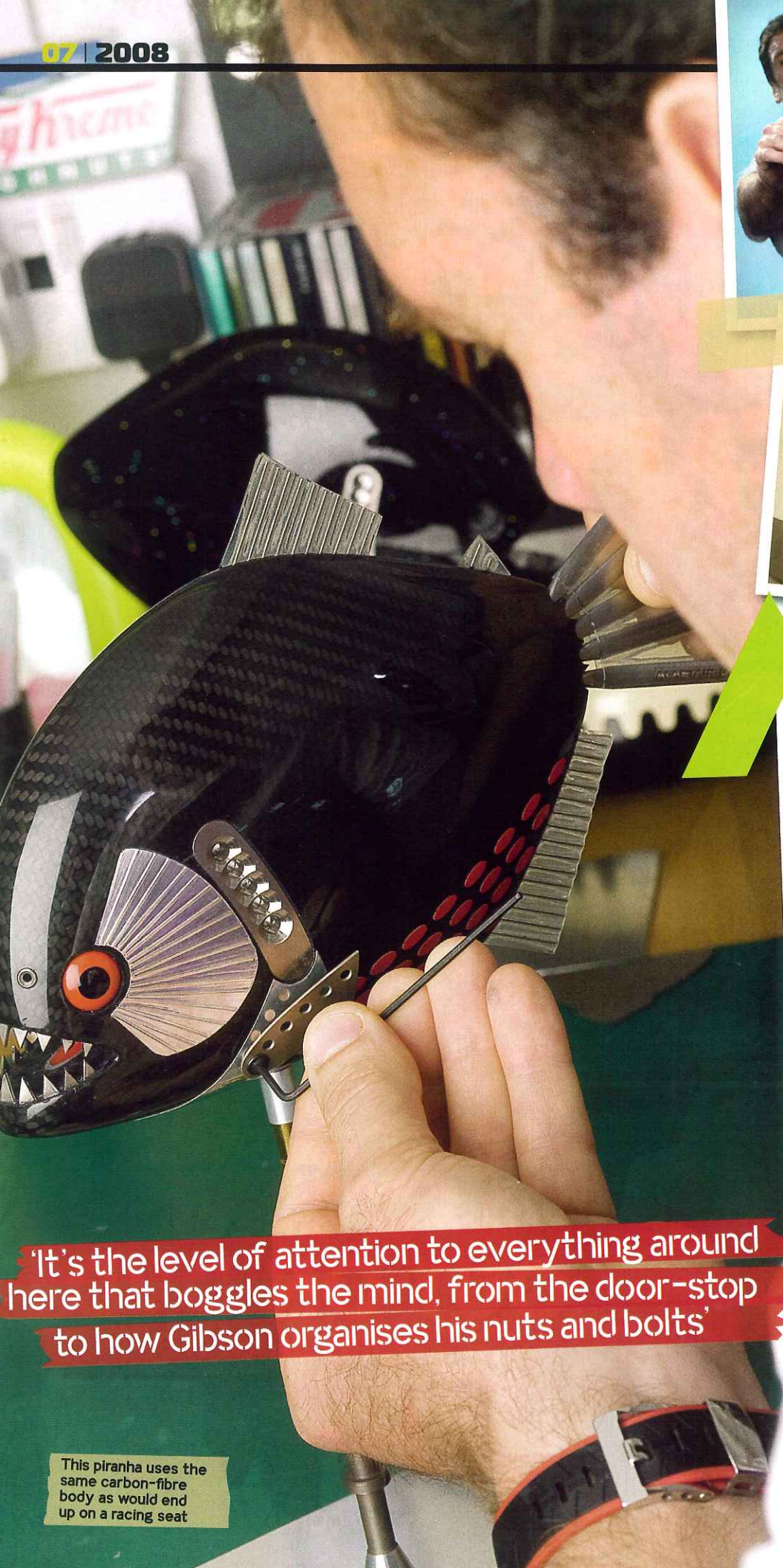




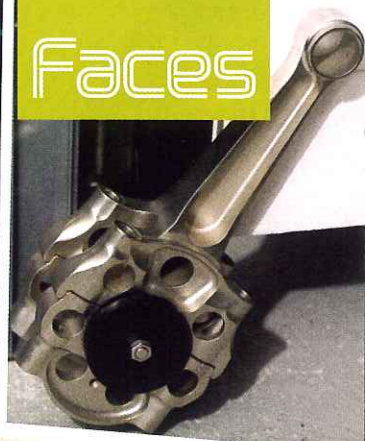
Scalemodel

Alastair Gibson used to be an engineer at Honda. Now he designs carbon-fibre fish. So how did that happen? **Piers Ward** wades in for answers



'It's the level of attention to everything around here that boggles the mind, from the door-stop to how Gibson organises his nuts and bolts'

This piranha uses the same carbon-fibre body as would end up on a racing seat



Hammer-head sharks can detect an electric signal of half-a-billionth of a volt. Fact



ALASTAIR GIBSON HAS THE WORLD'S coolest door-stop. As you walk into his artist's workshop it quickly catches your eye – a con rod from a Dakota DC-3. Except, being a super-organised ex-F1 chief mechanic (there aren't any other sort), Gibson's door-stop isn't just left on the floor. No, this con rod has been chromed, then fixed to a bench next to the door so that it slides out of the way when not needed.

You need to understand this before you enter Gibson's world – he's an artist, but not as you'd expect. That surreal carbon-fibre fish sculpture that snapped at you on the previous page is made from out-of-life Honda F1 bits and is beautifully detailed, but it's the level of attention to everything around here that boggles the mind, from the door-stop to how he organises his nuts and bolts. There's no suggestion of the chaotic artist's studio, no sense of the mayhem and flamboyance one might expect popping in to see Picasso. This is an environment that belongs to someone organised to the point of being obsessive compulsive. The man's even got a specific rack for the CD that's playing at any given time, neatly located next to his stereo, with a neatly cut piece of paper above it on which the words 'Now Playing Al's Choice' are neatly typed.

Gibson was chief mechanic at Honda's F1 team, and was the lollipop man for 615 grands prix. It's hardly surprising that he only ever made one mistake. It's quite a famous mistake, though. At Imola in 2006, he let Jenson Button go before the fuel man had removed the nozzle. Gibson realised his mistake too late, brought the lollipop back down rapidly and says now, "I thought I could hold him there if I jammed the stick against my hip and against him, but, shit, he went like a rocket!" The offending lollipop is still in Gibson's attic, complete with a section of Button's helmet jammed in it from when he took off. It says a lot for Gibson that he can laugh about it. ☺

But enough of the past. These days, Gibson is focussing on his outfit CarbonArt45, and uses his garage as his workshop. It's immaculate. If you've ever wandered around an F1 garage, you'll recognise it immediately. There are some artistic touches, such as a picture of Damien Hirst's diamond skull, but mostly it's posters of F1 cars.

Which makes sense, as this is the main source of Gibson's inspiration. He used to fish when he lived in South Africa, but F1 provides a greater inspiration. Fish have evolved over millennia to do their job perfectly – they're honed to ecological perfection. In some ways, F1 cars share in this evolution – there isn't a single spare part on them that is surplus to requirements. "Stuff is only there for a reason," says Gibson, "Even the driver's water bottle is as small as it needs to be."

F1 also gave him his incredible technical knowledge of the processes essential to making his curious works of art. After all, Gibson uses out-of-life Honda F1 parts to make up the details. So

there are boxes with gearbox parts in them (all labelled, of course) – the Piranha's nostrils are made out of bodywork fasteners, the teeth are aluminium, even the stand it sits on is an old gearbox selector pull rod. His technical knowledge of all this stuff is incredible – he knows where every single bit went.


Sourcing these parts isn't what takes the time, though, as he still consults for Honda one day a week and can get his hands on the off-cuts. It's the physical process of making the various moulds to form the carbon-fibre shapes that does that. Gibson starts with a bit of balsa wood to create the basic shape, and simply takes an old fish knife to it. For the piranha, that's fine because it's only about a foot long, but Gibson is building a two-metre Mako shark this summer. "And you've got to use self-discipline for carving, as it's too easy to go ape-shit." Then you simply end up with a long tooth pick.

But you can't use the balsa wood to make the carbon-fibre mould. Wrap balsa in carbon fibre, put it in an autoclave, a kind of pressure cooker for industrial materials, and the pressures would squash it flat. So Gibson uses a computer to scan the balsa pattern, then feeds those co-ordinates into a milling machine which turns a lump of hi-tech TB 650 resin into a fish shape. From that, you get two moulds that are then lined with pre-impregnated carbon fibre, stuffed in an autoclave, to create two halves of the fish. Still with me? Okay, now file them down, fill them with two-part expanding foam, glue them together, put the out-of-life

F1 parts on them and, bingo, you've just made one carbon-fibre fish.

He only resigned from Honda a few weeks ago, but he's already got 18 orders for various things – Ross Brawn even wants an exact replica of his prized koi carps. You might have thought that leaving F1 would make a man scratch around a bit, anxious for the buzz of competition, but Gibson is really excited about cracking on with this art.

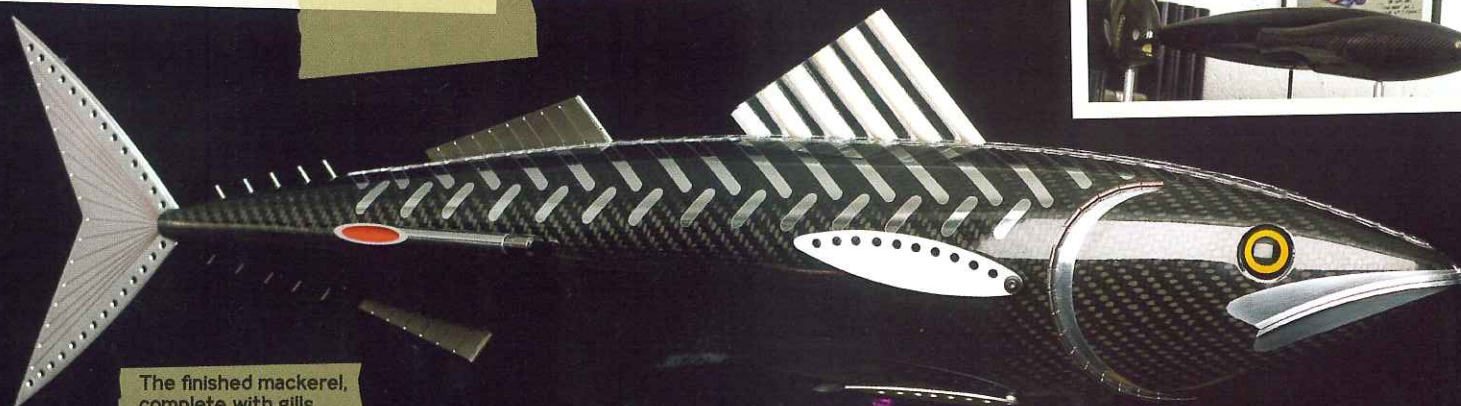
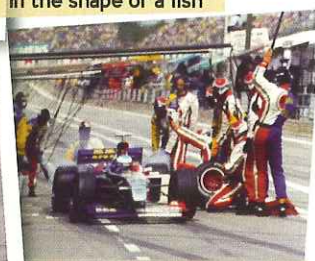
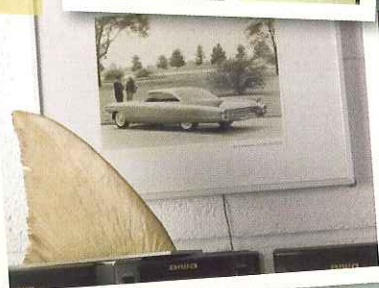
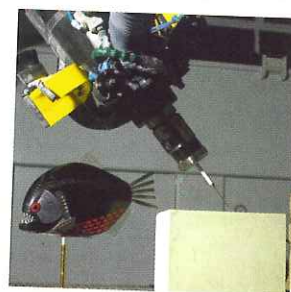
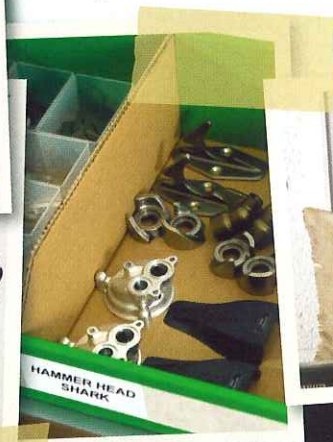
There's some serious drive here. He enjoyed F1, but doesn't regret leaving it behind, perhaps feeling it took more from him than it gave back. Gibson was an artist before Honda, but without F1, these fish wouldn't exist – F1 has given him his precision and technical know-how, but it's also given him

the desire to succeed. His biggest disappointment in F1 is that he was never part of a championship-winning team. I don't think there'll be as much regret here. 

Gibson in his lollipop days as part of the pit team. F1 car not in the shape of a fish



The early stages of production for the piranha (left) and the trout (right)



The finished mackerel, complete with gills from gearbox hub bearings. Yours for £4k