

Based Upon makes work inspired by nature and landscape.  
Grant Gibson meets Ian Abell, one of company's founders

# The story tellers



There's something incongruous about Based Upon's Woolwich headquarters. Approaching the industrial estate in which its workshop is located, I can hear the steady hum of activity from the surrounding sheds, rather strangely punctuated with the jingle of an ice-cream van and the noise of excited children in a school playground nearby. We're near the Thames Barrier and across the water sits a large Tate & Lyle factory, a little rusty around the edges and in desperate need of a lick of paint.

The area is a throwback to the city's industrial past, a pocket of the capital that has stubbornly refused to gentrify. Put simply, it isn't an environment you would expect to find a company

with a reputation for creating high-end work that sits somewhere in the intersection between design and art.

The building itself provides a pleasant surprise, too. The entrance is tight and dark, the walls painted black. However, walk through a second door and suddenly the environment is transformed and you're in a vast bright, white space with light flooding in through the high roof above. 'We invested a lot to make it a state-of-the-art facility,' explains Ian Abell, who co-founded Based Upon with his twin brother, Richard, in 2004, 'because we want our people to work under really good conditions.'

There is an array of pieces in front

Clockwise from above left:  
*The Birth of Tramazite*,  
Tramazite, aluminium  
honeycomb and bronze;  
*Four Fragmented Crack*,  
second edition, 2018,  
bronze and patina; in  
the Based Upon studio







of us, some of which are functional – a piano and a cocktail bar, for instance – others sculptural. On the far wall is a clutch of mixed-media pieces from the ‘Breath’ series that, like most of the company’s work, take their initial inspiration from the landscape and then play clever tricks with materials. In this case, the pieces look like circles of solid rock but are actually soft, moving fractionally as if breathing. It’s kind of fascinating.

Over a partition sits a five-axis CNC machine – used on the company’s extraordinarily complex engraving projects among other things – adjacent to a metalworking shop and the woodworking area. Based Upon moved

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to Woolwich just over four years ago, having grown too big for its first home in Deptford. It currently employs around 50 staff who come from a variety of backgrounds, including fine art, textiles, structural engineering, architecture and film making. Interestingly, the Abells themselves weren’t initially trained in art or design. Ian graduated from Oxford University with a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, while Richard studied accountancy in Hull. They were both involved in the first dot.com boom that started at the tail end of the 1990s and came to an abrupt end in the noughties. ‘It seems comic now, but in 2001 nobody knew if people would seriously do transactions over the

internet, either at a consumer or business-to-business level,’ remembers Ian, the twin who appears to enjoy doing the media side of the job. ‘There were a number of things we did a bit too early. Then there was that kind of void before the resurgence.’

So instead they turned their attention elsewhere. ‘We were both interested in ideas and creating things that were new, but we realised there was something that was more tangible,’ he says. While Ian considered writing novels or making films, it was Richard who pushed them down the path they’re currently following. ‘He was keen to do something working with his hands. Something where we could see real things being



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created on a daily basis.’

Their timing was immaculate. The pair emerged just as the design/art market was beginning to take off and they quickly developed an identity, informed by nature – they have a fascination with cracks and fragmentation in the landscape – and a well-honed sense of narrative. ‘I like something to have a story. I like to understand the reason behind it and for there to be a layer of depth,’ explains Abell.

To amplify his point we look at a large, weighty-looking desk the company has made for a Russian, mine-owning client. The process started with a trip to his childhood home in Siberia, where the pair took hundreds of photographs and drew numerous sketches. Eventually these were turned into a book and presented back to the client as part of the piece. The finished desk is also loaded with references to his life, including a message from his daughter in Chinese engraved in a secret drawer, and a piece of coal from one of his mines cast in bronze.

The duo also became closely associated with an unusual material, liquid metal. ‘It was a hook for us to start,’ Abell freely admits. ‘It was something that, as a material, nobody else had seen in Europe – we picked it up from an Australian company. It gave us an edge and a point of difference. We found we could make things that had an unfathomability to them.’

This material experimentation has continued. A number of recent pieces have included Tramazite, for instance, which the company created by layering oxidising metals, resins and the powder of stones. Making it is ‘a very slow

hand-crafted process’, Abell assures me. However, the company also has a fascination with more traditional materials too, particularly bronze: ‘I like the way it can be morphed and formed, the archaic nature of how you have to work it. It has a permanence and a presence in its final form but, at the same time, you can sense that it’s alive.’

Our tour continues and we turn into an adjoining space, full of staff working on projects in various stages of completion. Interestingly, much of the thinking and design work happens on the third floor of a Victorian industrial

building a short walk around the corner from the workshop. ‘It’s a more contemplative development space that’s separate from the scale and weightiness of the production facility,’ explains Abell.

There’s a bar at one end, but perhaps most intriguing is the meditation room, blinds drawn on a summer’s day, dimly lit, with cushions scattered. It’s not something you see in an everyday work place, but it has become an essential tool for Based Upon. ‘I’m grateful for it. I work with a group of people that also appreciate it,’ says Abell. ‘We did a session once as a group where we were looking very free form to generate new ideas. We sat with everyone in silent meditation with our eyes closed. The idea was as something dropped into your mind you’d come and write it on a blackboard that was at the front, and then return to your position. You were literally allowing something to drop in without judging or critiquing it.’

Abell is aware that meditation isn’t for everyone: ‘I wasn’t sure what the consensus was going to be, whether it was a little bit quirky and odd for some, but that session went really well so we started to use it a little more.’

And perhaps this is the secret to Based Upon’s success, a combination of the spiritual and the technical, the conceptual and the practical, the digital and the hand. Art created not from a garret but from an industrial estate. It’s a fascinating end to an intriguing visit. [basedupon.com](http://basedupon.com)

**Above: making *A Grain of Rice*, 2015, bronze and patina.**

**Below: *The Baby*, 2013 glass fibre, brass, Tramazite, liquid metal**

