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MAY 2015

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BEST IN SHOW

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Rock stars

London studio Based Upon leaves no stone unturned in its pursuit of truly bespoke art



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hat do you give the millionaire, billionaire or gazillionaire who has everything? Try a visit to London design and art studio Based Upon, which has made it its business to address this very particular first world problem. But Based Upon is not a service provider; its founders are artists. It has, though, cornered a niche in made-to-commission works that are not just bespoke but highly personal, lasting legacies – furniture and artworks that tell the stories of their clients in an array of luxurious materials and richly layered surfaces.

The studio has just celebrated its tenth anniversary by moving into a gigantic new space in London's Greenwich, and its birthday cake has been topped off with an extra large and glistening cherry: its biggest commission to date. It is also its first public art order, for two sculptures, one for London's Canary Wharf and the other for Hong Kong's Queens Road Central.

The sculptures were commissioned by HSBC Bank to commemorate its 150-year anniversary. A fiscal behemoth, HSBC has deep pockets. But in March this year, as the Based Upon sculptures were unveiled, it also had a scandal on its hands. Press revelations about tax avoidance schemes somewhat overshadowed the unveiling. Still, Based Upon has too much to be getting on with to bemoan a lost moment of glory.

Established in 2004 by twin brothers Ian and Richard Abell, along with their childhood friend Alex Welch, the studio works at the intersection of art, design and craft. Its speciality is the pioneering use of a new material, liquid metal. Having developed a number of innovative mark-making techniques in liquid metals and resins, it is renowned for its extraordinary surfaces – used in many and varied ways, from superyacht interiors to a grand piano or a banqueting table.

While innovative surfaces are the studio's USP, it is Based Upon's talent for creating works laden with significance for its clients that really sets it apart. The designers are meticulous in conducting in-depth research into their clients' backgrounds and life stories – before finding ways to incorporate relevant details into the final works. Among Based Upon's best-known works is 'Fragmented Crack', a piece that involved mapping the life of their client's grandfather. 'It took us from Porbandar in Gujarat, the birthplace of our subject, to the river Nile in Uganda, where we took casts from a mud house in the jungle, and translated that into a piece of functional sculpture.'

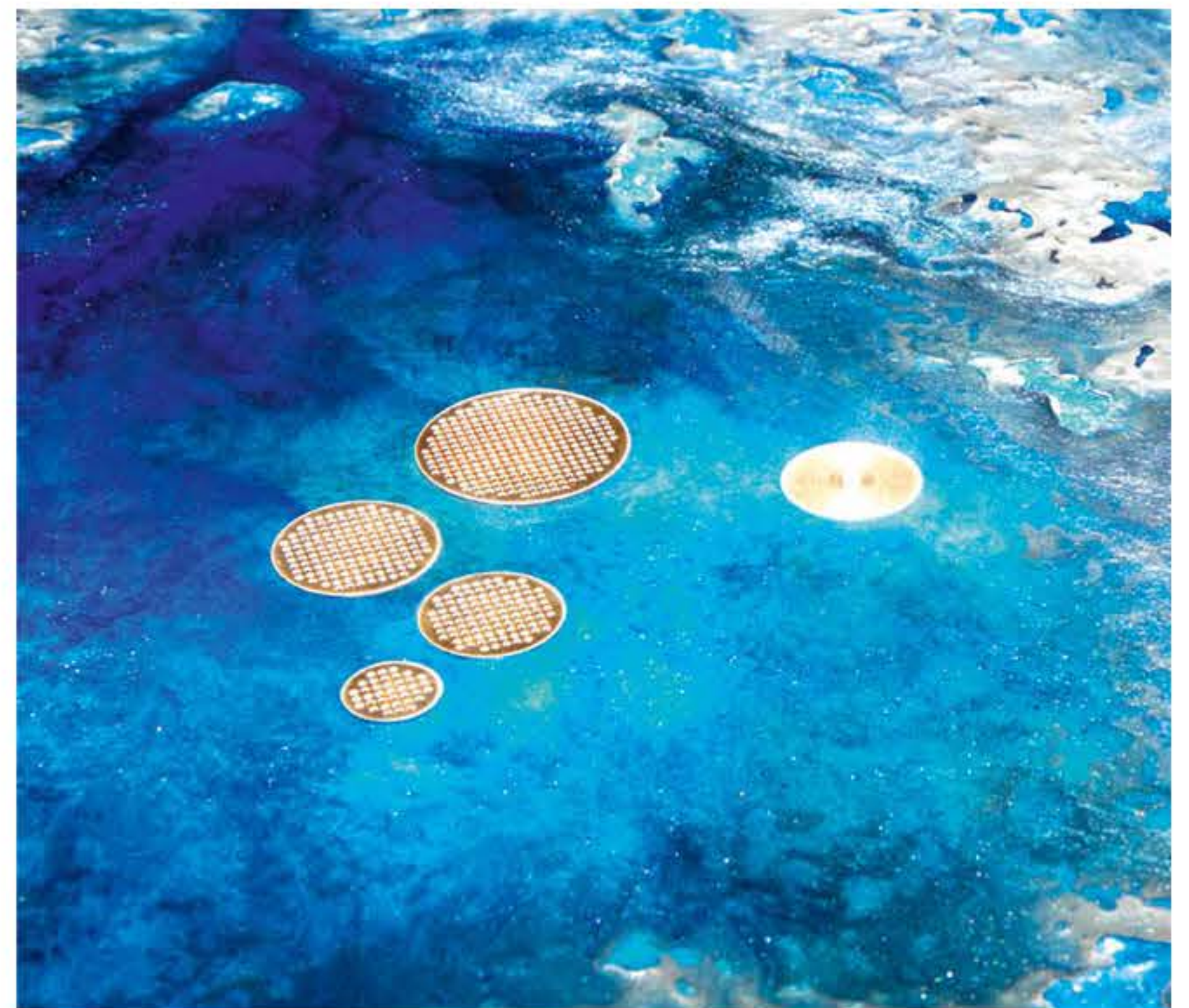
Taking pride of place in the studio's new space is a desk that Ian describes as its most accomplished piece to date. 'It combines all we have learned – at one level it's a desk, on another it's a life story told through the layers of an object.' »

BELOW, DETAIL OF A DIGITAL PIANO, SHOWING SPEAKERS AND A SURFACE IN TRAMAZITE, A MATERIAL DEVELOPED BY BASED UPON BY LAYERING OXIDISING METALS AND RESINS. BOTTOM, STUDY FOR A 7M-WIDE BRONZE SCULPTURE

Commissioned for a Siberian client's 60th birthday as a gift from his family, it began with a week of documentary photography and casting work in the Siberian countryside. 'It's made using a combination of materials and incorporates painterly tableaux and engraved reliefs hidden within its drawers. There are multiple hidden compartments, and a disguised, fully functional safe.'

Neither Richard nor Ian, educated at Durham and Oxford Universities respectively, has a formal art training. And that, they say, has been crucial to their business success. 'Much of our innovation has been the product of naivety; we have explored avenues that a more schooled person would be unlikely to follow,' says Ian. 'For example, we didn't understand why aesthetics and function should be the remit of design, and aesthetics and meaning should be the concern of art. It seemed reasonable to us to create works that combined aesthetics, meaning and function.' Richard continues, 'We didn't have preconceptions about how to build an art or design business, so instead of looking for galleries, we sought out our own clients and collectors.'

Their first public artworks are at once imposing and receptive, commanding and nurturing. Their bronze form is inspired by one of the earliest forms of currency: a grain of rice. Based Upon was briefed to create a form that would resonate with »



'THE BABY' PIANO

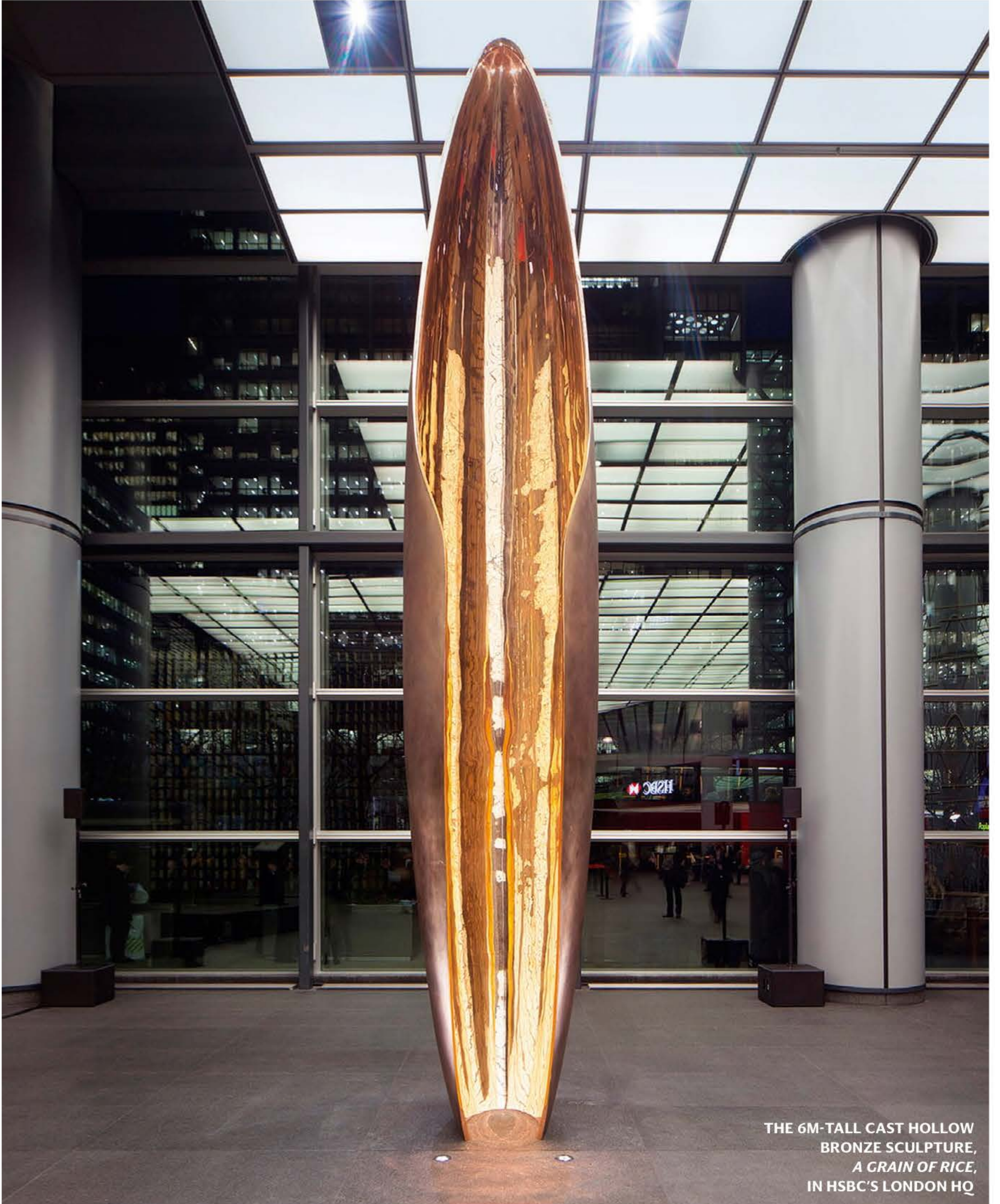


Eastern and Western worlds alike. And in both cultures, a grain of rice as a single entity is rich in symbolism; untradable alone, but of limitless value when combined as part of a greater number. The rewards of a bountiful rice harvest begin with regard for each and every grain.

'We wanted to celebrate something tiny and almost anonymous,' says Ian. 'At first we thought about casting a single grain in bronze and surrounding it with huge lenses that would make it appear very large and allow the viewer to inspect it; we then thought about changing its scale.' The design team 3D-scanned the rice grain, hoping to capture enough detail to scale it up to 6m for the London sculpture and 10m for Hong Kong, with all of its imperfections on display. But they couldn't quite get the resolution they needed. Instead, they decided to sculpt an abstracted form based on the

grain, focusing on the scoop from the end – a quirk of a rice grain. From a sketched form, the team sculpted models by hand and, using 3D-printing, refined and re-refined the rice grain until they were happy with its form and proportions. 'It was always important to us that a viewer should be able to step inside the work and experience a mirror-polished cocoon that would challenge their perception both visually and acoustically,' says Ian.

The outer skin of the work is made up of 150 engravings that capture HSBC's history – Based Upon's more familiar process. 'We were keen that the outer skin should have the feeling of an old coin with very intricate imagery on its surface, so we had to work out how to achieve that on a complex curve at 10m high.' The team made a master model of the sculpture and sent »



THE 6M-TALL CAST HOLLOW
BRONZE SCULPTURE,
A GRAIN OF RICE,
IN HSBC'S LONDON HQ

A BESPOKE GENTLEMAN'S
DESK IN BRONZE, OAK,
LEATHER AND TRAMAZITE



‘Public sculpture that has a strong contextual narrative is where we would like to focus’

that to the foundry to be cast in bronze.

The final work was cast in 16 pieces and required fine craftsmanship to perfect, maintain the form and polish while never compromising the detail of the engravings.

Having seen their first public sculptures go up, the designers would now like to devote more time to such projects. ‘Public sculpture that has a strong contextual narrative is where we would like to focus,’ says Ian. But Based Upon’s next trick, launching this summer, will be to create editions of its own work. ‘We would like to do much more of that, and put significant shows together in interesting spaces,’ says Ian. ‘But we will continue making works that seek to capture the essence of their commissioner or cause.’ Billionaires with milestone birthdays coming up, take note. ✨
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