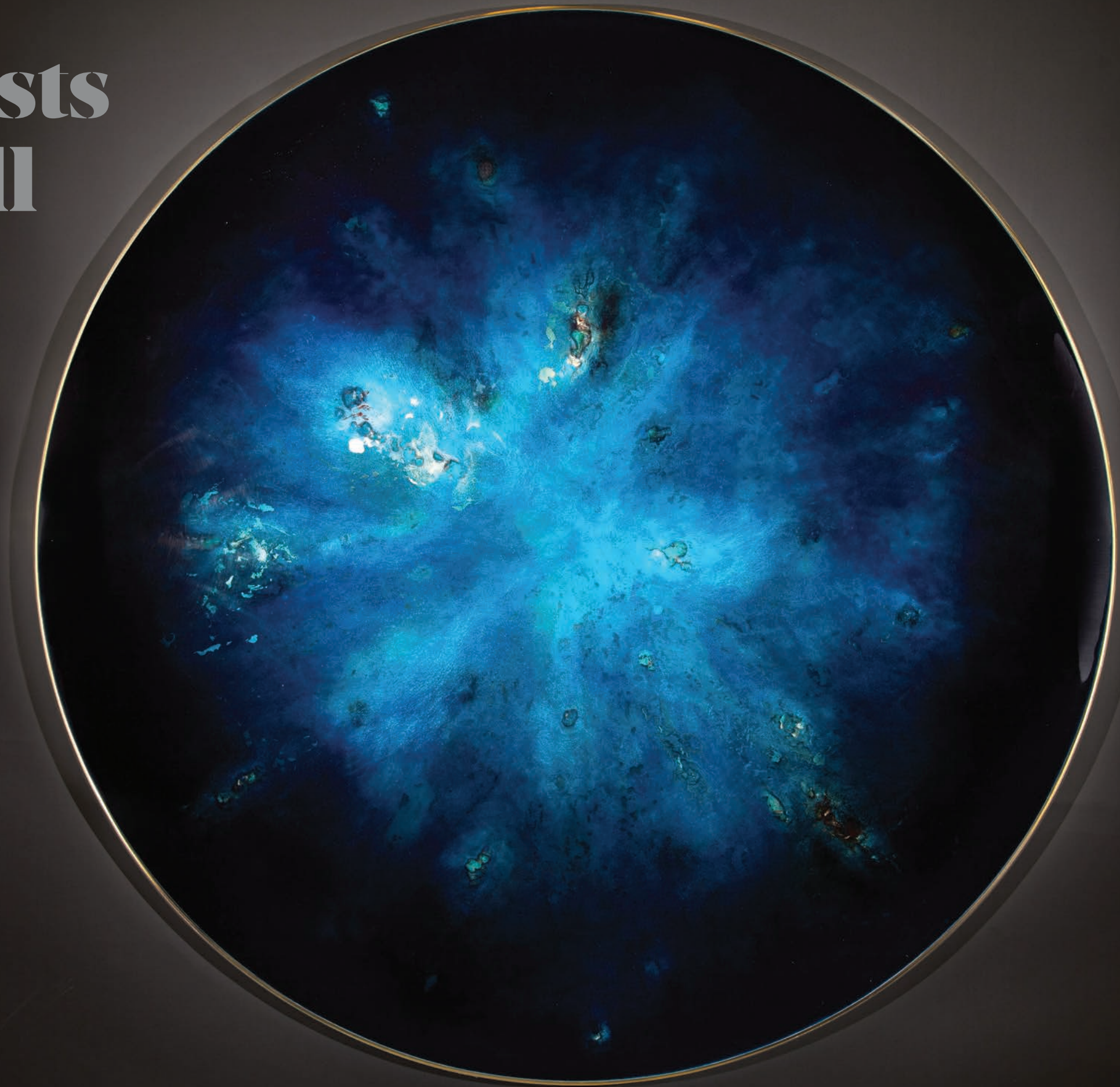


# The artists who will map your world

In an industrial estate in deepest south London, Based Upon mine their clients' histories to create lavish, deeply personal artworks cast in luminous metal and resin

Words by  
Oliver Bennett



Left: this piece, *The Birth of Tramazite*, is key to the Based Upon story as it 'honours the pioneering of a new craft that was 12 years in the making', says the studio's Ian Abell

The delicacy of my bone china cup of tea comes as a slight surprise. At Based Upon, the makers of heavy objets d'art for the world's well-shod, there's a sense of gravitational pull: of bronzes and resins, mass and monumental metal.

Since it began in 2004, the Woolwich-based company has gained a reputation for large-scale installations, including bronze maps, steel tables and sculptural furniture, rendered in a coherent 'narrative' style. Hotels, top developments, private homes across the world, super-yachts and now public spaces: all are being blessed with Based Upon pieces. You can see why. They're extremely satisfying and have the advantage of being both deep and accessible. They're impressive and massive: both mentally and physically muscular.

The company started in Deptford and recently moved to a large industrial estate in Woolwich. It's a hard-working hinterland of forklift trucks and corrugated roofs. Nearby, old Docklands buildings sport the condemned look of old brick and buddleia. A long way from the swanky homes and hotels that Based Upon pieces adorn, but some clients come and see how their pieces are made.

Ian Abell, one of the twins who set up the company (Richard is the other), says: 'We have 50 working here and room for about 20-30 more.' None has a title – the company is 'like a relay team.' And business is good. Secreted in adjoining studios where paint-guns screech and sanders shriek, Based Upon pieces stand splendid against white walls. There's a piano set into a huge parabola of bronze, and an etched map of London from 2012, where Pooh's friend Christopher Robin holds the Olympic Torch. > Indeed, Based Upon's metal maps are in high demand. Should we call these 'reliefs'? 'We haven't worked out what to call them,' says Ian, who builds them up in millimetre increments of metal, darkest at the bottom, lightest at the top.>

## How it works ON LOCATION



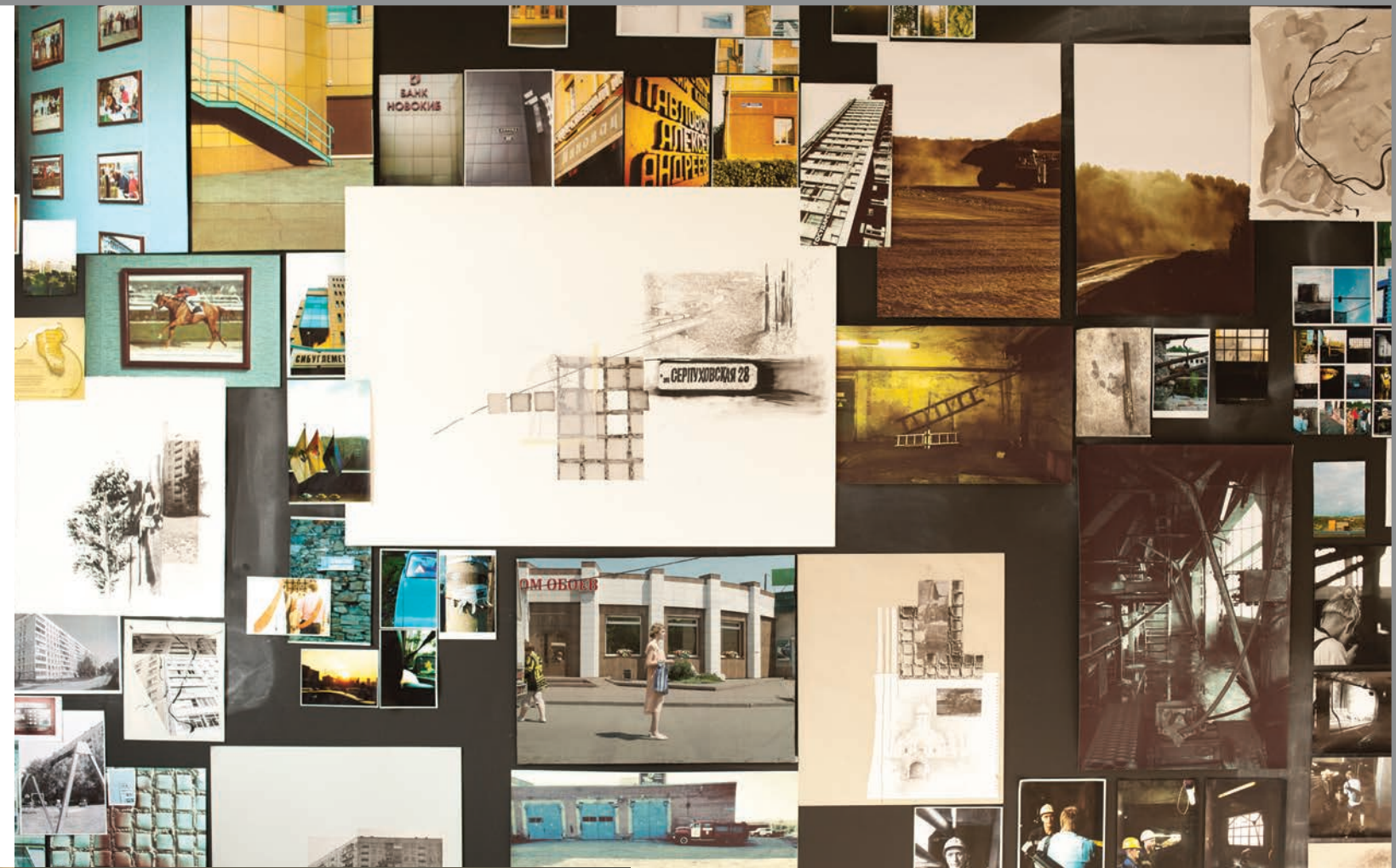
Left: this piece is called *If I Had Known Then What I Know Now*, UK (2013), and looks like crumpled paper, but is in fact highly polished bronze. Below: the workshop is a creative space full of maquettes and artworks, presided over by founding member Lex Welch

Alongside is a Manhattan map: a larger one stands in the foyer of Tiffany's New York HQ.

As we talk, Based Upon's youthful workers, clad in masks and dungarees, paint, polish, hang and clang. They're mostly art school graduates – 'from Central St Martins, Goldsmiths, furniture design, sculpture, product design – all kinds.' Enthusiasm is valued. From the main studio spaces are smaller specialist studios: a paint studio, a place where they painstakingly work the tramazite, and a room with a robot that engraves steel. 'We use the technology as a starting point, then finish it by hand for the detail,' says Ian. And close to this room is the crucial Goods Out room, where hefty crates await distribution to India, Africa, Brazil, the Middle East. Based Upon is a beacon of British creativity.

The studios house a mixture of home-originated works and commissions. There's a vivacious *Last Supper*, the third for an African client's home. Here, Based Upon photographed the faces of 13 devout Christians at a retreat in Somerset, then

» Hefty crates await distribution to India, Africa, Brazil, the Middle East. Based Upon is a beacon of British creativity »



modelled, then cast them: a meticulous process that resulted in an extraordinary tableau.

Nearby is a desk for a Siberian businessman: a 60th birthday gift from his daughter, for which a small Based Upon team flew to Siberia to create a personal archive prior to starting work. 'Our research is a huge investment,' says Ian. 'It's an immersion in personal history that involves visits, interviews and photography.' It often incorporates mementos and biographical objects to create personal pieces for clients, which Ian calls 'a new kind of portrait: one of personal significance'.

So to the Based Upon originals, such as the *Fragmented Crack* table of 2013. Here, a Based Upon team took casts from the banks of the Nile, using the alginate paste that dentists use to mould teeth (see following page). Back on the Thames they cast the cracks, brushed the exterior, polished the core. This matt-shiny dialogue is also startling in *Grain of Rice*, two public sculptures made for HSBC (see following page). 'We took a single grain of rice and blew it up to >

Above: this mood board shows Based Upon's research process, which takes months and explores the place and biography of clients. Top left: *The Baby* (2015) is a hand-sculpted piano, and the product of a collaboration between the studio and Goldfinch Pianos. Left: Richard and Ian Abell, founders of Based Upon



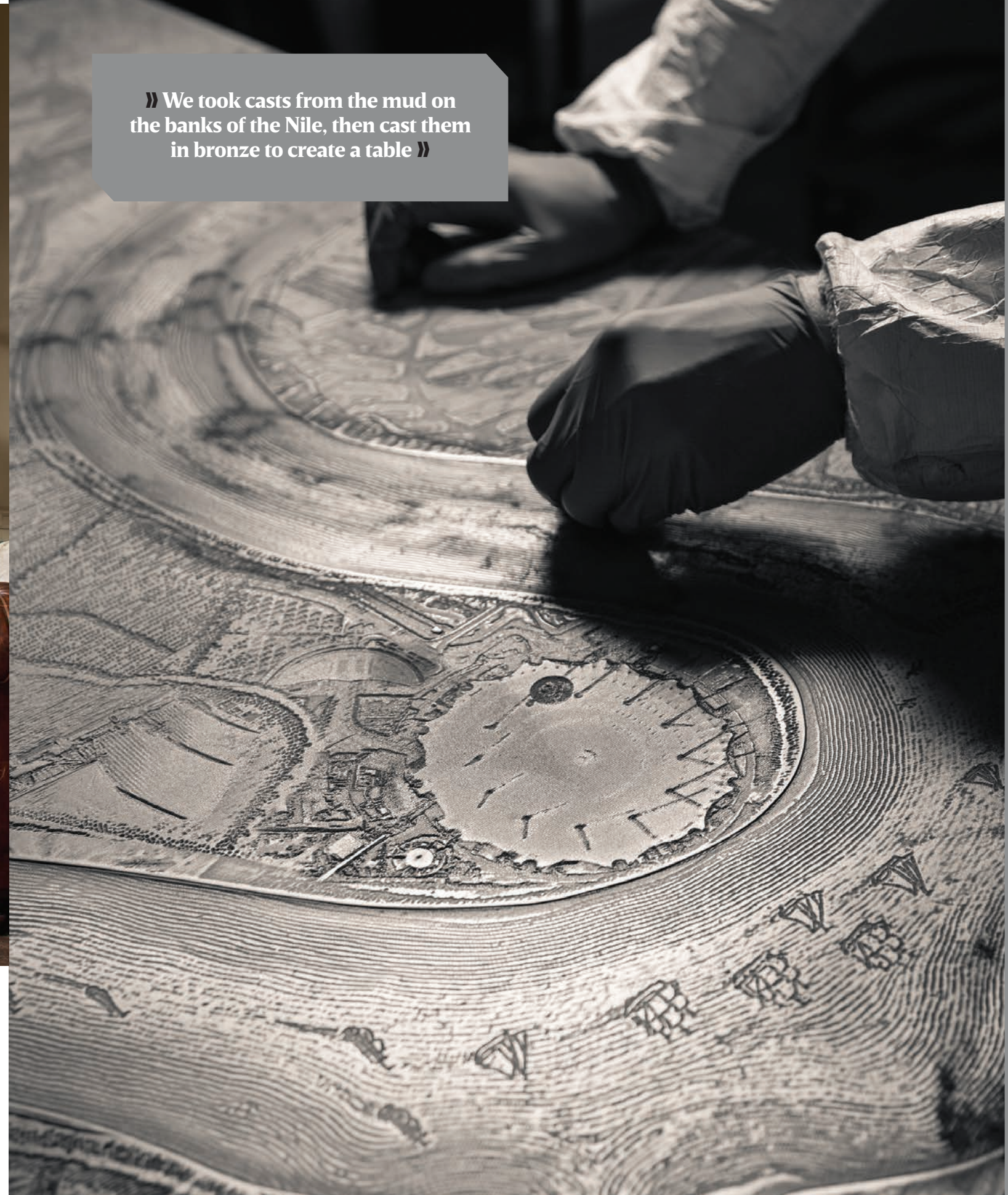
Above: *Fragmented Crack* (2013) at Aynhoe Park, Oxfordshire, one of an edition of five and a signature *Based Upon* piece

Right: *Based Upon's* maps are engraved by machine and finished by hand. This shows North Greenwich and the Millennium Dome, close to where the company is based. 'It's a new piece for a private family and has no name yet,' says Ian. 'It tells the history of London in a 5x7m engraving'

10m high,' says Ian. 'The idea is that inside the individual grain is the hidden potential – and that one grain of rice creates worth as it becomes a big pile.' The outer roughness speaks of the beauty of imperfection, part of the Japanese concept of *Wabi Sabi*. In *If I Had Known Then What I Know Now, UK* (2013), the UK renders a crumpled-paper effect in solid bronze, something that looks discarded refashioned as precious.

In a corner, a new piece is being forged – a public commission for Berkeley Square. 'I found a >

» We took casts from the mud on the banks of the Nile, then cast them in bronze to create a table »





» We may not fit in, but in a sense we're creating a category, trying to progress the idea of priceless »

small rock in the Isle of Skye that seemed incomplete,' says Ian. He went back to find a big rock of similar shape and fashioned a large bronze tip, as if to complete it. 'Humans believe we can fix nature.' Based Upon wants to make a series for clients with rocks that hold significance.

The Abells come from Hartlepool and complement each other. 'I worry about whether we're doing the right things,' says Ian, 'while Richard worries about doing things right.' We cross to Based Upon's creative hub in an old warehouse 100 yards away. Here a convivial atelier hosts shelves full of artefacts, computer stations, a break-out area with grey beanbags, kitchen and a bar.

Looking out to the Thames, Ian likes the heavy ships and factories along its banks. 'It's a working river and reminds me of home.' He did PPE at Oxford University, the degree that stocks Government, and became a management consultant. Creatively unfulfilled, Ian and Richard, as well as Lex Welch, set up Based Upon. 'Although I come from a background that had no

art at home, I wanted to do something more than work with numbers,' says Ian. 'It was a deliberate attempt to make life more interesting.'

So where does Based Upon's work sit on the art spectrum? 'A lot of questions are being asked about the distinction between design and art,' says Ian. 'In a sense we're creating a category, trying to progress the idea of priceless. We want to make work that lasts. After all, if you work with ancient materials like bronze it lasts for ever.' Based Upon's work is a blast against short-termism; short attention spans and the ephemeral. Even the company's name evokes continuation and longevity – as does its near neighbour, the River Thames. ● *Based Upon are showing at Masterpiece London art fair, 30 June-6 July*

Opposite: Grain of Rice (2015) is Based Upon's first piece of public art. Commissioned by HSBC, it is a grain of rice, symbolic of the bank's creation of aggregate value, and is highly burnished within, as if a beckoning doorway. 'We wanted something that would work between East and West,' says Ian. There are two: one in Canary Wharf, one in Hong Kong

Above: The Twist Table (2014), also at Aynhoe Park, is a parabola of steel with a sleek polished top and a real sense of solidity – another signature piece