



Above, the large old ship's nail found on Scarborough beach which forms the centrepiece of Marcus's nail sculpture of a crucifixion hand. Right, Marcus in front of another of his human form nail artworks

Marcus Levine got through more than 100,000 nails from local hardware stores last year – all in the name of art.

EMMA CLAYTON finds out about the Yorkshire artist's striking work.
Pictures by Mike Simmonds

When it comes to art, Marcus Levine has got it nailed.

The Bingley artist and sculptor, who went to art college with Damien Hirst, used more than 150,000 nails last year as the tools of his trade.

Marcus creates sculptures made of nails, driving 20mm cabinet nails into white wooden panels at various heights and distances, creating the effect of shading in 3D.

He recently held his first major London exhibition,

Hammered, which attracted celebrity guests including Sir Trevor McDonald and actress Susan Penhaligon, and now Marcus is in talks with Rolling Stone Ronnie Wood's son, Tyrone, who owns a London art gallery.

"The exhibition created a real buzz. Tyrone was very impressed," says Marcus.

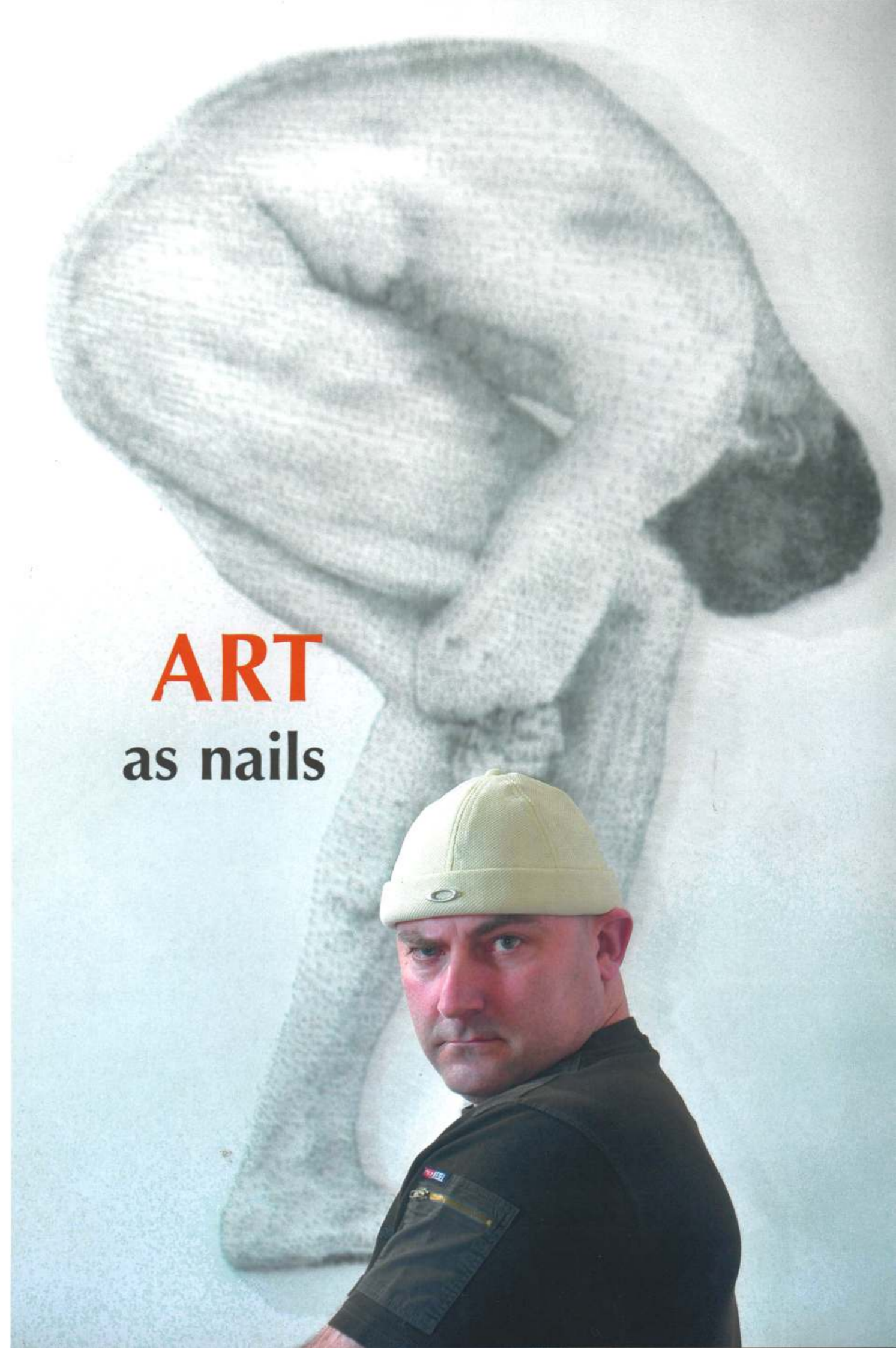
He had the idea of nail sculpture while a student but it was another 15 years before he began experimenting. Now he has regular commissions to create his extraordinary representations of the human form.

"My children wonder what I get up to in my studio. I'm like the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang inventor Caractacus Potts beavering away in his shed," he smiles.

A flair for art landed Marcus a place at Jacob Kramer College in Leeds, where a fellow student was a young Damien Hirst.

"Damien and I shared an enthusiasm for photography," says Marcus. "We often used to chat in the darkroom together. His interest lay in macabre subjects. Later, when he created the infamous ▶

ART as nails





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◀ shark in formaldehyde and pickled cow and calf, I thought 'it's not just having ideas – it's having ideas and making them happen that makes it special.'

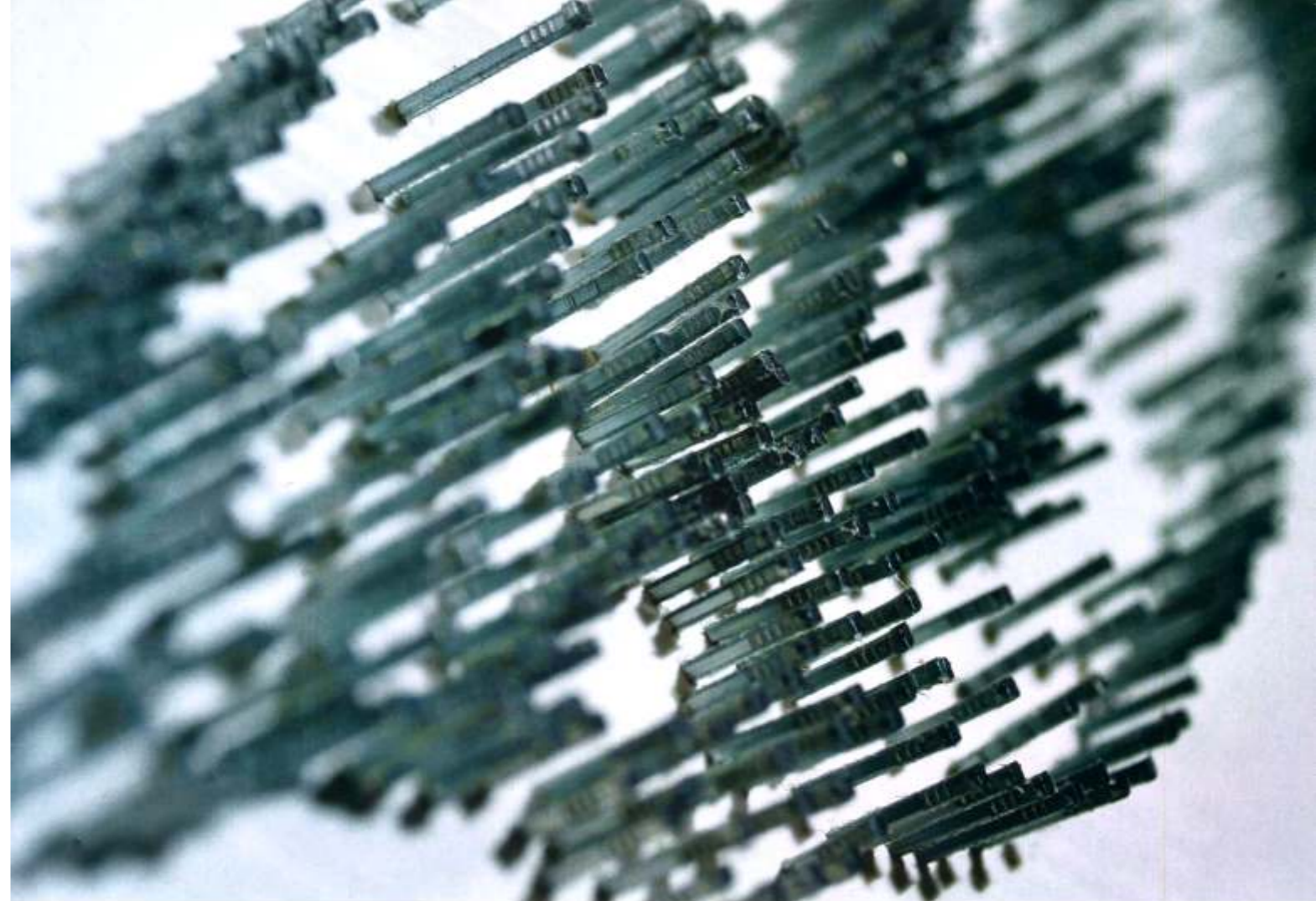
Hirst went on to become a Turner Prize winner and his success was a driving force in Marcus's decision to become a full-time artist.

After completing a graphic design degree he had a spell working for television company HTV before taking up an offer from his father to join the family business, selling printing machines. It was Hirst's pickled cow and calf that led Marcus to quit his job and take the plunge into art. "I thought 'I want to do that, I can do that,'" he says. "I travelled the world with the business, but in the back of my mind my intention was to quit. Friends thought I was mad giving up my job and nice car. It was a line of work that rewarded me well, but ultimately left me feeling unfulfilled."

The second turning point came after buying an apartment in Hungary, where his wife is from.

"I wanted it to be contemporary, with white walls. The idea was to start to create paintings for that space. I was my own client. There was no one there to say 'you can't do that or you can't do this'. It was then that I finally decided to somehow figure out a way to make nail sculptures work," says Marcus.

"I'd initially had the idea for nail sculpture as a student, I thought nails would be nice to work with and liked the idea of a metal form undulating across a surface. I first thought of gluing heads of nails onto a sculpture, then, standing in my apartment, it occurred to me that a sharp little nail could create something as soft as the human torso. My wife modelled for me, the first one took about three months to complete." ▶



● For more about Marcus Levine's work visit levineart.co.uk

◀ Marcus sculpts life studies and abstracts, and is aiming to expand into public art. With sculptures made of up to 50,000 nails, he gets through a huge number.

"It's a laborious process because I work very close-up so I can only see a small section of what I'm working on. I have to keep stepping back to see how it's forming," he says. "With hair, I undulate the height to get the texture of the hair, and rotate the heads round if I'm doing a line or an eye or an eyelash. The higher the nail is the more of a shadow it casts."

Natural light plays a role, with shadows changing across the sculptures. By altering artificial lighting, they can appear as light as a pencil sketch or as dark as a charcoal drawing. Nails at different heights and distances apart create the same effect of light and shade as another artist would do with a pencil.

"My daughter found a ship's nail, with a head the size of a 50p, on Scarborough beach and I wanted to use it to create a sculpture with a Crucifixion theme," says Marcus. "I

shelved it for four years, promising myself I'd do it for my first London show. I created a carpenter's hand squirted with 'blood', with the nail embedded into it."

Marcus also credits another Jacob Kramer old-boy as an influence – Bradford's David Hockney.

"He's deeply routed in painting but he'd go on holiday and take photos and create the most amazing collages," says Marcus. "Now you see that device on car adverts! He was the first person to do it."

"Like Hockney, I don't want to be labelled. I want to push boundaries, pursue more great, striking poses. It's about the abstract, that's important to me."

Despite the international success and

riches of his old college friend, Marcus has no burning desire for that level of fame.

"There are many great names that have never been recognised by the art establishment. I'm not looking for recognition, but I'd love to create some big public pieces of art," he says.

Most of his nail sculptures are representations of the human form. His commissions have included a sculptured portrait of two children's faces. "It was hard to capture details like the wispy baby's hair, it took two months to complete. It was meant to be an anniversary present for the mother, then it became a birthday present then a Christmas present because it took so long!" he laughs.

Initially, Marcus was an abstract artist but turned to figurative art when he realised he could portray the human body so skilfully. He remains interested in non-representational art, though, and is keen to further explore the abstract potential of nails. "Jackson Pollack is another great influence, he takes abstract to another level," he says.

Above, the old ship's nail before being used by Marcus in his crucifixion work. Right, Marcus in front of one of his more conventional works of art. Far right, another of his artistic creations

