

DAVID BEGBIE

"The medium is sensitive to my own emotions. If I'm feeling calm, the images come out as what I call 'quiet', but if I go at it aggressively I get an incredible series of lines which are more muscular and more masculine as I go searching deeper under the skin. I'm physically involved with the material. My muscles produce muscles. My material leaves a perfect record of my physical activity. It's very graphic and often sensual.

There's always been a very strong element of fragmentation and erosion in what I do. Both of these help to express the passage of time.

A fragmented figure is a modern idea, and one which I use in my own way.

An artist must give himself license to do what he wants; the more he can learn to break down the confines in what he expresses and in how he expresses it, the richer his work will be. In this sense Francis Bacon has been a big influence. It's the depth of emotion he achieves. Many artists are frightened to go that far. Bacon gives you license to try to go that far some time in your own career. If I need to I can!"

JOHN RUSSELL TAYLOR London, November 1987

Sculpture, we usually say without examining our proposition too closely, is of course a tactile art.

We are most likely regretting the present-day hands-off policy of the great public art collections, however responsible in terms of conversation it may be, because after all you can obtain a much more intimate knowledge of a sculptor's intentions, interests and achievements if you can actually run your hand over that curve and into the declivity, savour through your sense of touch the texture of stone or wood or metal. Which is true as far as it goes. But with David Begbie it does not go very far.

There is no doubt that Begbie is a sculptor. What else can you call someone who produces three-dimensional work in a material as palpable as fine steel mesh? And for that matter the comparisons which spring to mind are always with other sculptors. He may make us think of Medardo Rosso, who sought to capture similarly evanescent effects of fluidity and movement in the similarly evanescent medium of wax – though Begbie's works, for all their apparent insubstantiality, are in fact amazingly sturdy. Or of Rodin for his passionate interest in the musculature of the human body, his fascination with the way the light falls on and moulds the shapes of human flesh.

And yet Begbie's work must be the least tactile of all sculpture. If you touch a Begbie, what do you find out? Simply, that it is made of wire mesh. More complicatedly, that most of its visual effect is illusion. He is indeed, like Rodin, fascinated by the way that light falls on the human body, but he never reproduces the effect; he re-creates it in a highly illusionistic way. He is always playing with the intricate relationship between the eye and the mind, which enables us, forces us even, to see things which are not there, to place things in an imaginary space which corresponds to the real space before our eyes very little, if at all. Because of the very delicate and subtle fashion in which the mesh is moulded (mostly with his bare, strong fingers), extraordinary illusions are created, for as we look at the sculpture from different angles, the mesh takes on different visual densities, depending on the angle at which we see it, or whether we see it, as we do in some of the fully three-dimensional figures, in one thickness or two or three.

Thus the effect much admired and wondered at in country-house portraits ("The eyes follow you everywhere you go") becomes a way of artistic life for Begbie. You really do not know till you go up close whether what you are looking at is convex or concave, and if you are in fact looking at it from the concave side, the whole figure seems to move as you move, the pose changing and the expression modifying as the

DAVID BEGBIE SELECTION OF WORKS 1987 - 1988

moire patterns of the mesh constantly throw up new and unexpected effects. His preoccupations are ultimately very similar to those of Rodin or Rosso, and in the broadest possible sense the approach is similar, since they all depend ultimately on the way light plays over material. But Begbie's material is so different, and in his case so much depends also on the way light comes through the material, is stopped or let pass in differing degrees, that the similarities are all at first view, and the moment one stops to think (or actually touches one of the sculptures) it is the dissimilarity, and Begbie's uniqueness which strike one most forcefully.

It must not be assumed, because so much interest attaches to his material and the way he handles it, that he is merely, or primarily, a technical innovator. Since the success of his first one-man show in 1984, a number of Begbie imitators, or at least artists who have learned to define their ideas in Begbie terms, have appeared on the scene. But the more widespread the use of "his" material becomes, the clearer it becomes also that whereas for others the tail is wagging the dog, the material creating the effect for them, in Begbie the tail and the dog, the material and the vision embodied in it, are in exactly the right balance of power. Begbie came to his material because it was ideally suited to doing what he wanted his sculpture to do, physically robust enough to survive quite rough handling and yet visually insubstantial enough to allow his work in it to continue and refine his, as he describes it, "constant fight against gravity".

Whereas most traditional sculpture is very solid, rooted to its base, Begbie's seems to float free. To further this effect he has progressively eliminated armature as far as possible, and claims that he would like to eliminate the sculpture itself as a physical presence, reducing our perception of it to a shadow in a translucent light-box. In all this he is clearly a child of his time, and has learnt from the possibilities inherent in Calder's mobiles or Tinguely's kinetic art. But he still pursues different goals. His is in one sense a consummation of the "Impressionist" ideals inherent in Rosso's sculpture, more liberated from gravity and earth-bound solidity than even Rosso's most instant, improvisatory works could ever be. (And Begbie's are even more improvisatory, in that it is never possible to reverse an effect once created.) In another sense he is the natural inheritor of Baroque illusionism: as his bodies twist and writhe, his faces smile or frown as we circle them, the theatrical effect is intense, and much of the expressive quality comes from our awareness that we are prey to an illusion even as the illusion takes over and creates for us its own psychological reality.

In some of his recent work Begbie has been exploring this theatrical element a little further, bringing figures together in conflict or coition, setting faces in ambiguous relation to one another, taking on different constellations of meaning as you move in relation to them. He could, one imagines, do a wonderful Gate of Hell for himself, but he would also be better equipped than Rodin to match an Inferno with a Paradise of aetherial light and grace. Certainly there seems to be no limits to his technique as long as there are no limits to his imagination. And of that there is no perceptible danger for a very long time to come. He is the master of his own floating world, where everything is as simple and as difficult, as once for all, as a classical Chinese brush-drawing. Like all true art, it is half stage magic, the confidence trick the magician finally believes in, and half real, inexplicable magic. Stage magic can make illusions seem actual for a moment, but only real magic can ensure that they obstinately stay with us, capable of being explained, but never explained away.

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SIR LAWRENCE GOWING

"As he is a splendid sculptural draughtsman, the shape is exquisitely outlined.

It has the rightness and the adjustment to observation which in their absence we always miss in visual art.

The steel mesh that makes these bodies also constitutes their imaginative clothing. It creates an iridescent fabric, with a fluttering sheen that is wantonly voluptuous, harsh yet silky, both at once. David Begbie weaves for imperial nakedness an optical garment, which is more illusory and stylish than ever." 1984

MARY ROSE BEAUMONT

"If one envisages the human form in sculpture one perhaps first thinks of its being carved in marble, since we all still wear what Henry Moore once referred to as 'Greek spectacles.' Alternatively one might reflect on Donatello's DAVID which is arguably the most beautiful sculpture ever made. Or, perhaps nearer to our own time one thinks of Rodin's powerfully modelled figures – and here we are getting closer to what David Begbie is seeking to create: an incomplete part of the human body, a part which speaks eloquently for the whole. The foregoing examples are of the human body carved or modelled, solid either absorbing or reflecting light. Begbie has explored a further range of possibilities – his figures are transparent, made of wire mesh, modelled, painted and galvanised ripples on the surface and passes right through them. The effect is of a presence which is not quite of this world. It is real, but also surreal!" 1984

EDWARD LUCIE-SMITH

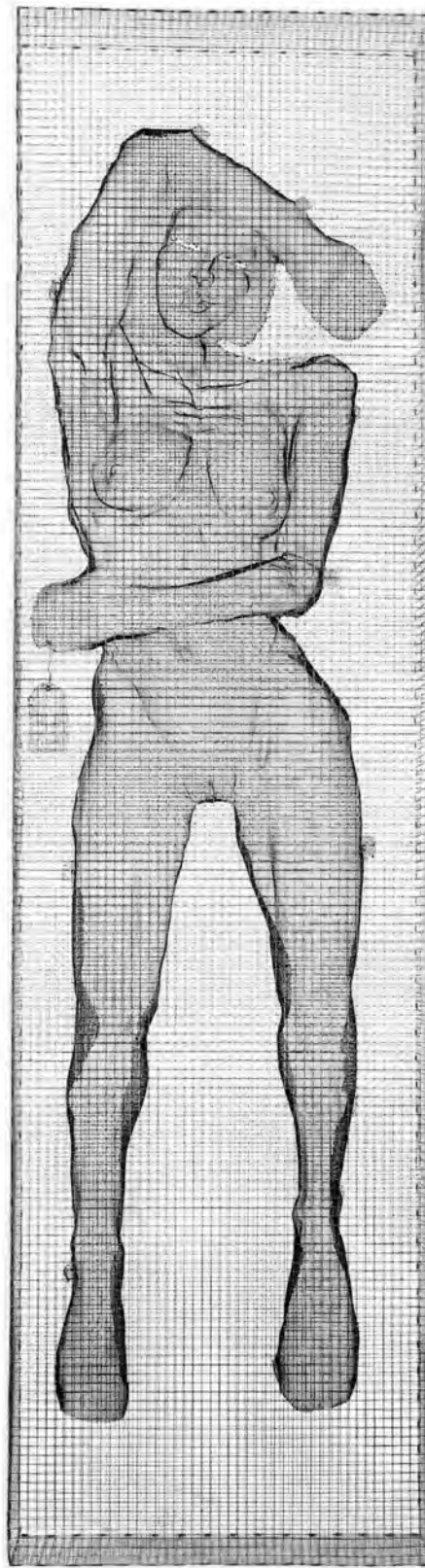
"His work is quite unlike anything else being done at the present moment.

His figures and figure-fragments are moulded from fine wire-mesh. This material turns out to be extraordinarily sensitive: Begbie is able to shape it with his hands to produce the illusion of rippling musculature. He makes it seem as sensitive and pliable as wax. But the mesh provides a whole range of other effects as well – the sculptures become translucent – they are simultaneously there and not there.

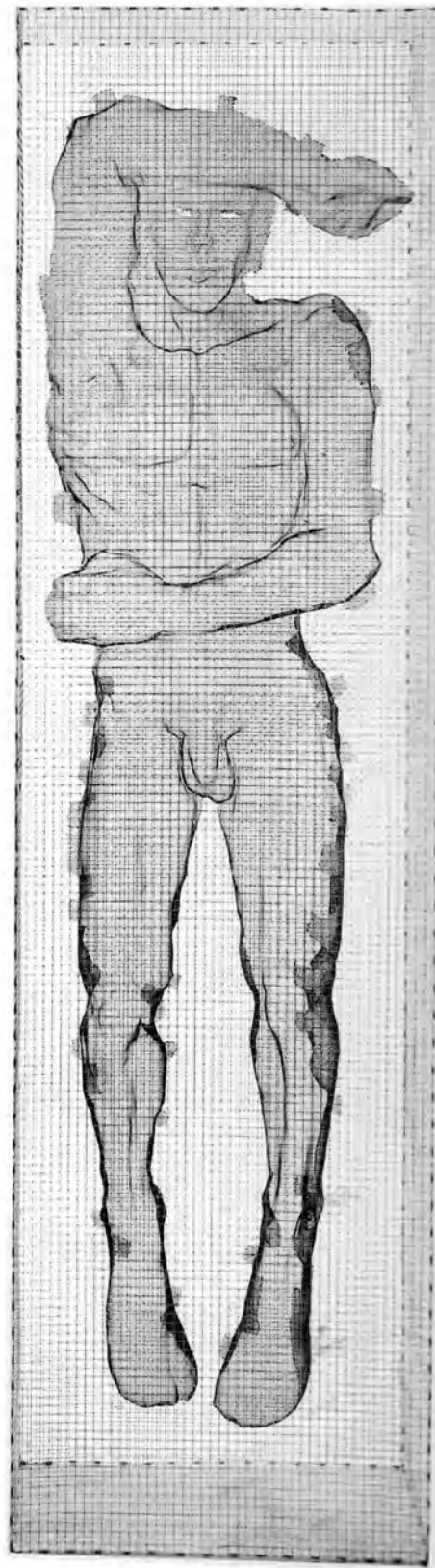
In this new series of works, Begbie has become much bolder – the figures are deliberately fragmented, metal armatures are used to 'draw' with, so that the spatial interaction becomes more complex. Every time the viewer shifts position, a new set of relationships appear:

The fascinating thing is that these relationships remain coherent." 1986

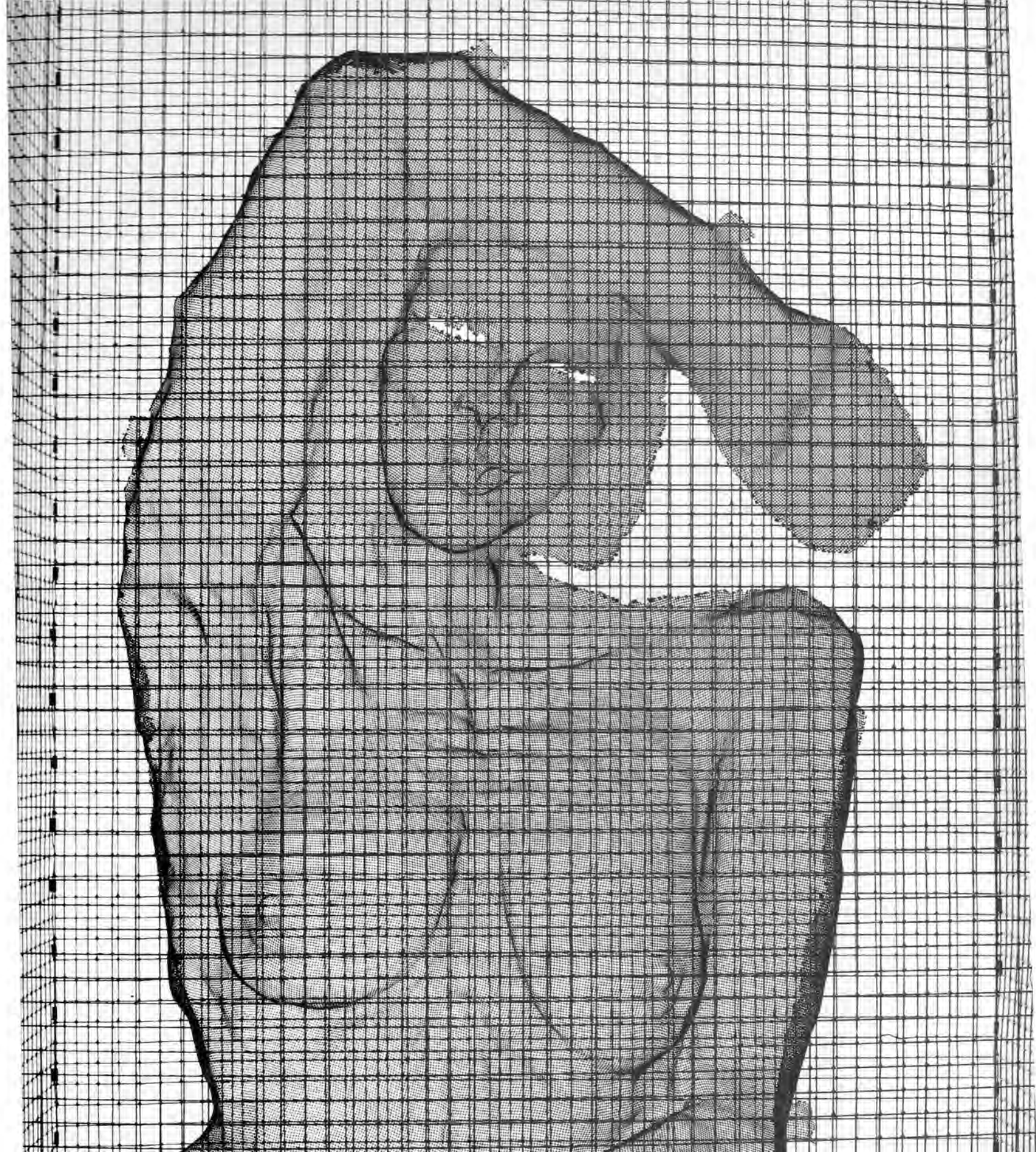
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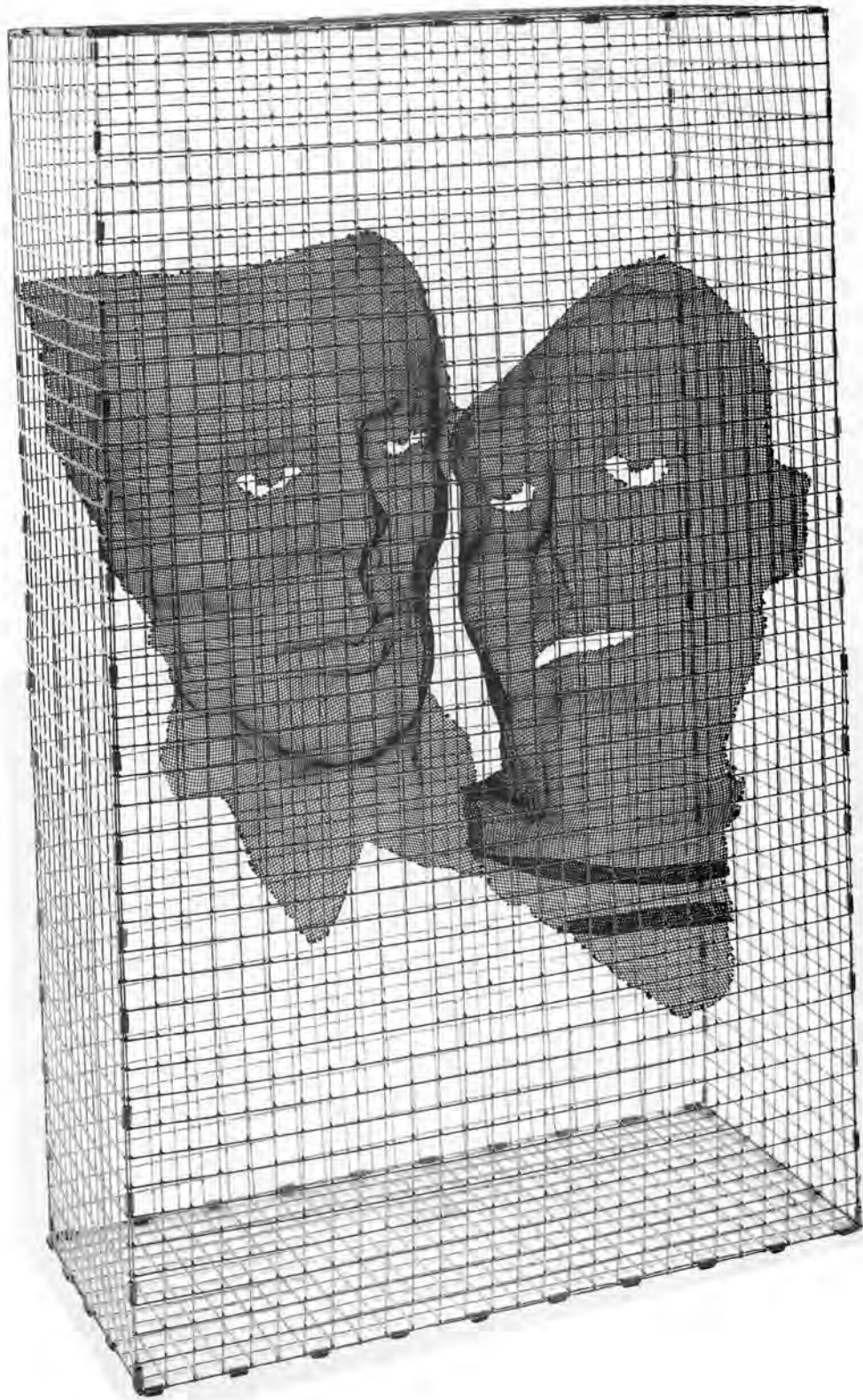


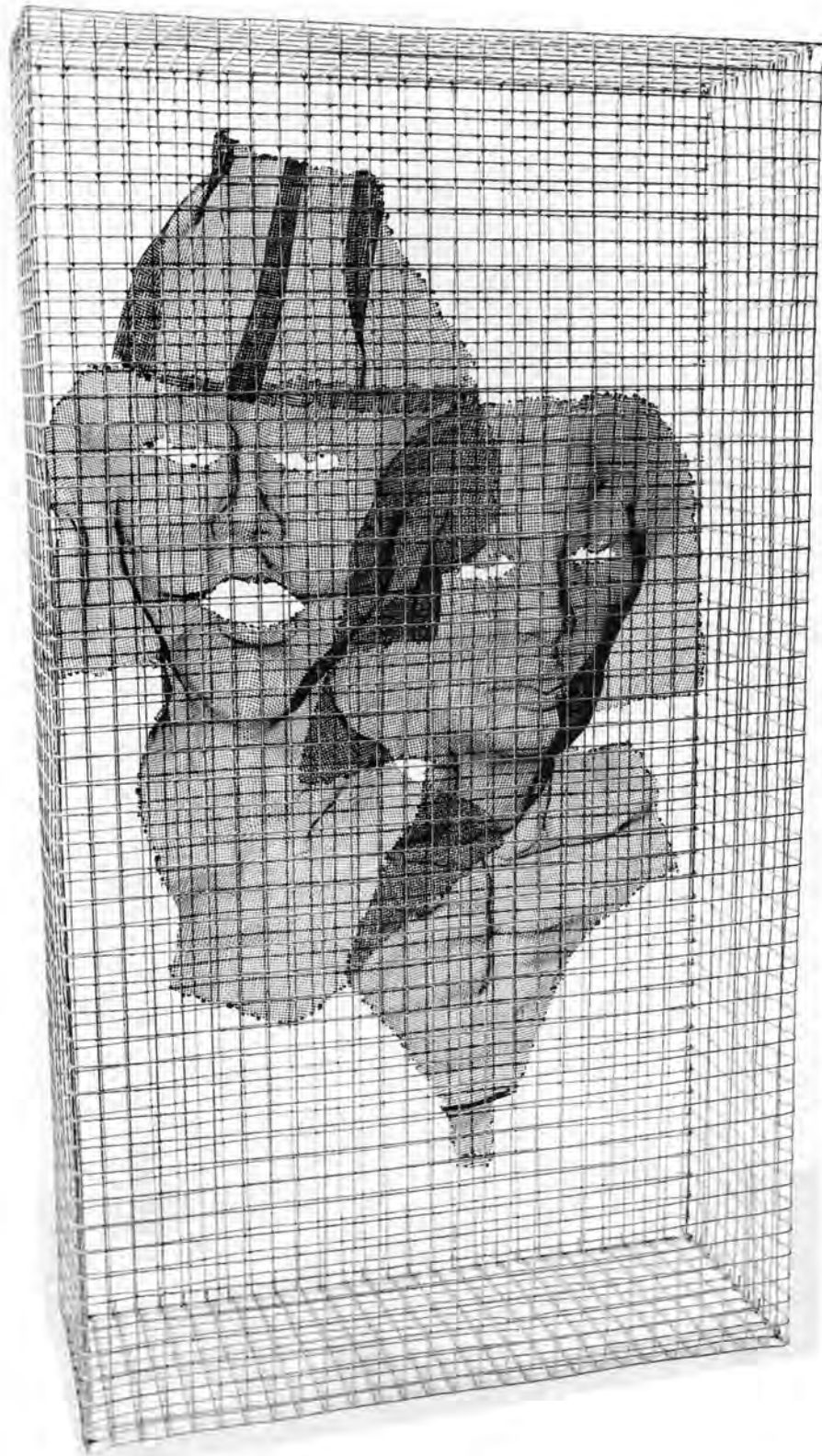
CASE 1987 216.5 x 58.5 x 19.7 cm



CASE 1987 216.5 x 58.5 x 19.7 cm







PARTY1987 63.5 X 35.5 X 12.7 cm

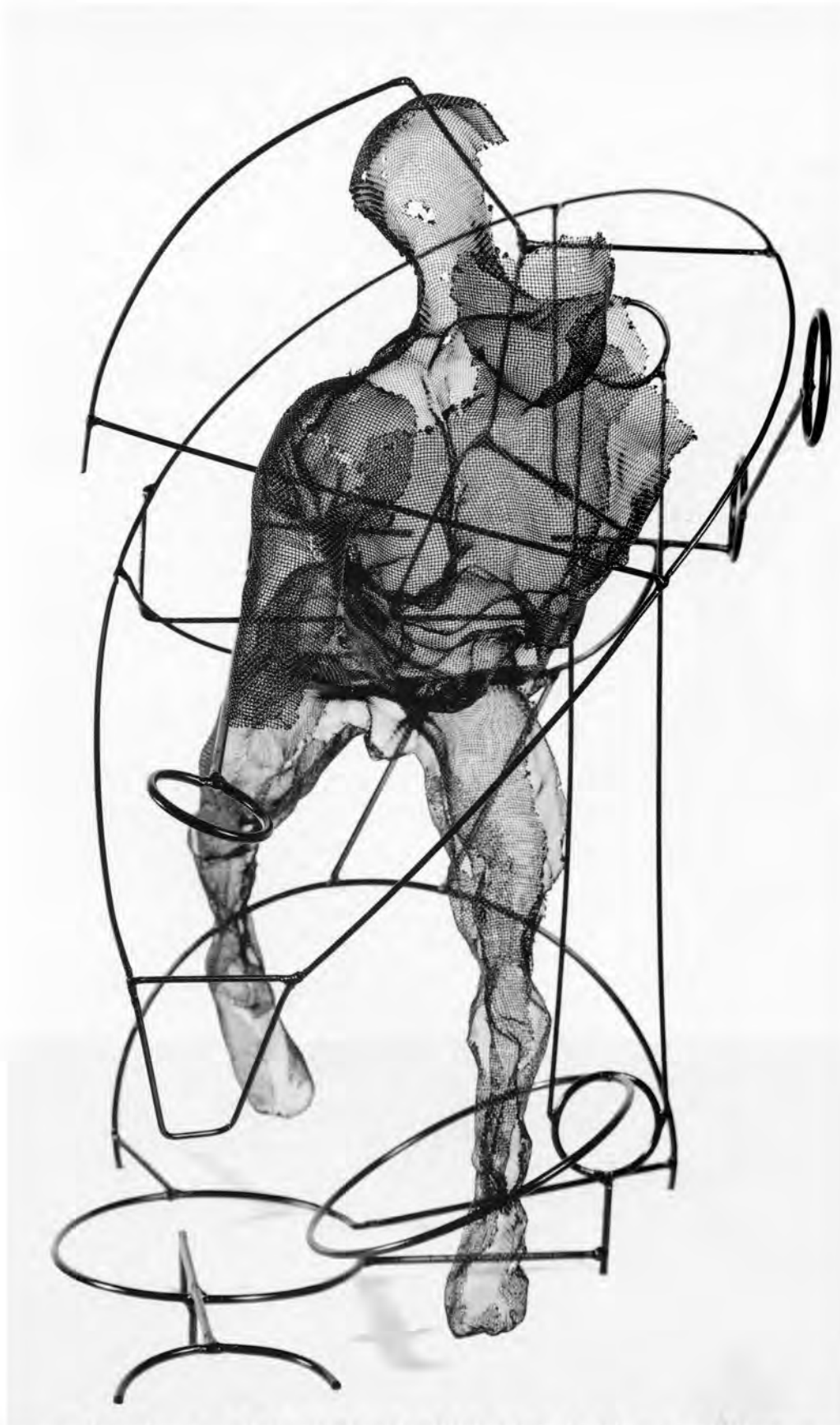


FIGURE & APPARATUS 1987 63.5 X 38.1 X 50.8 cm

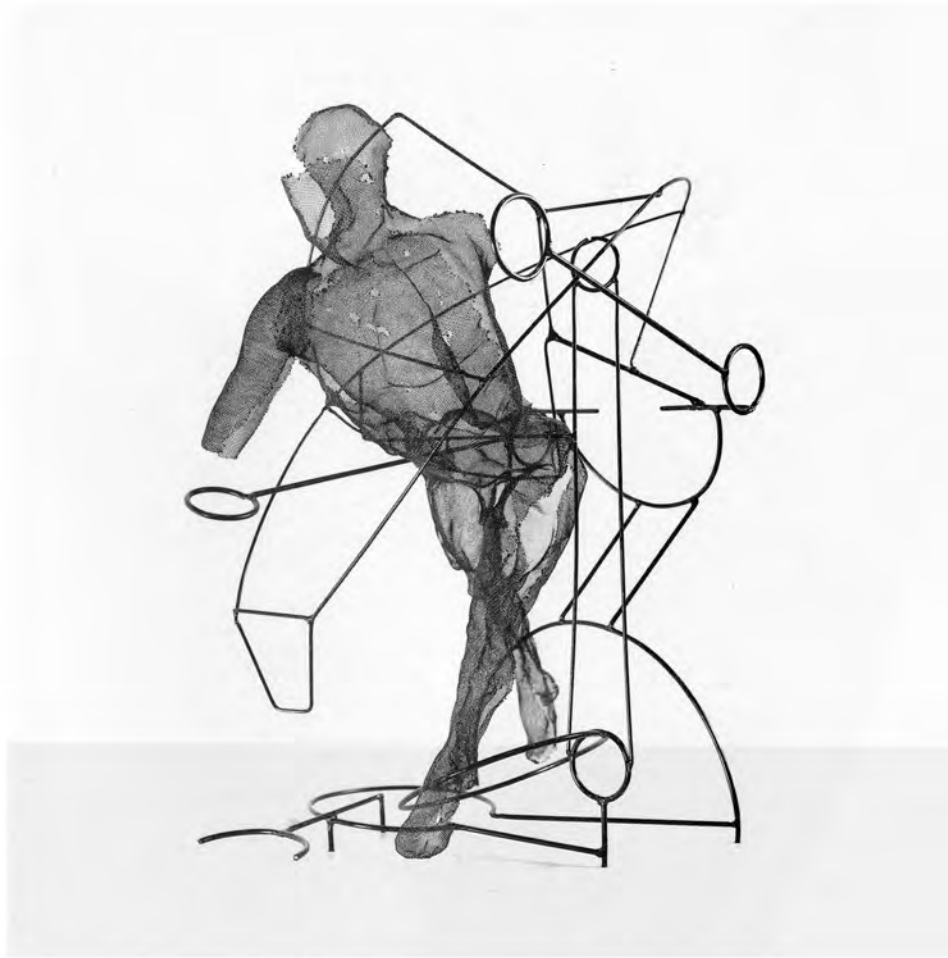
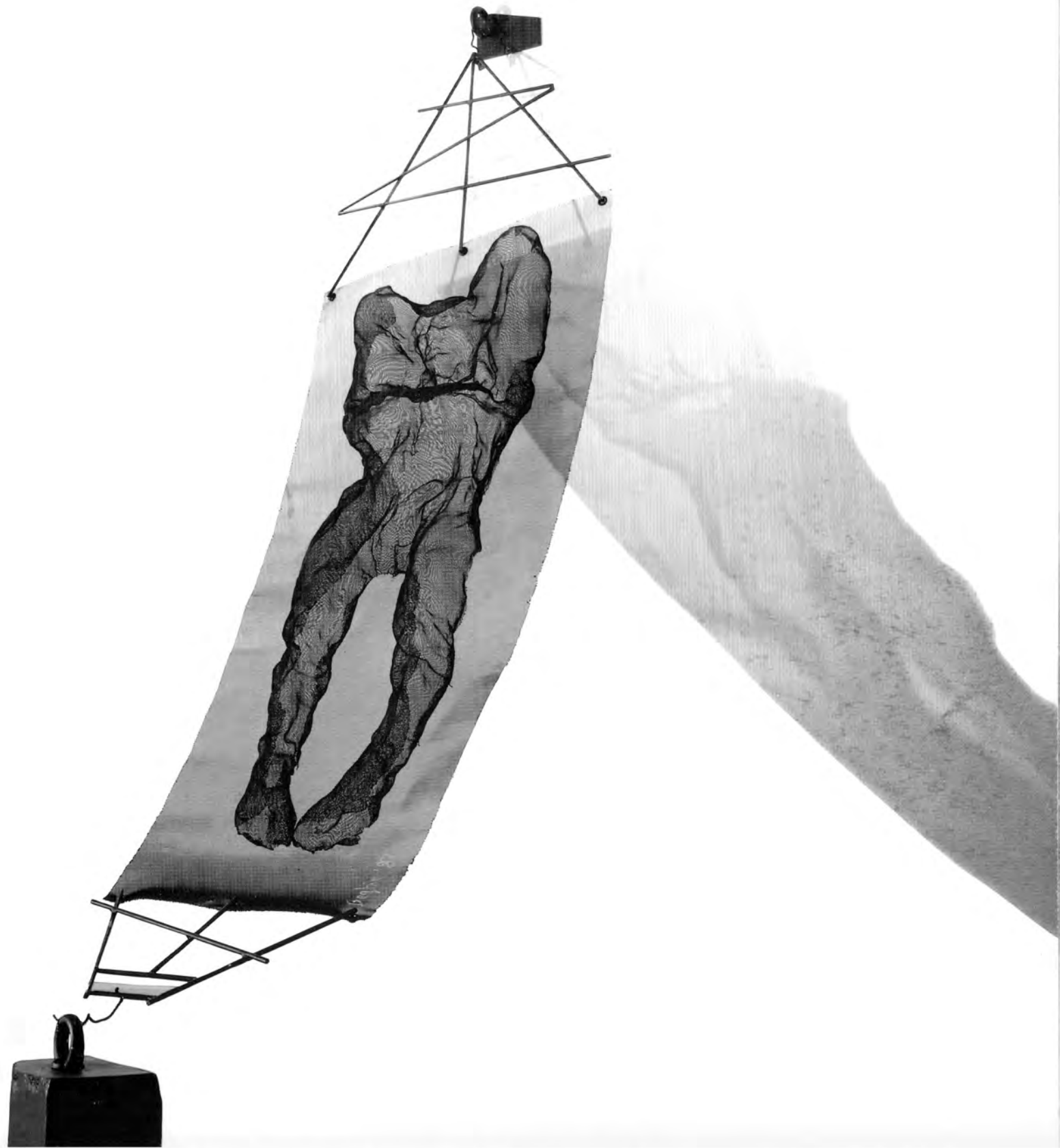
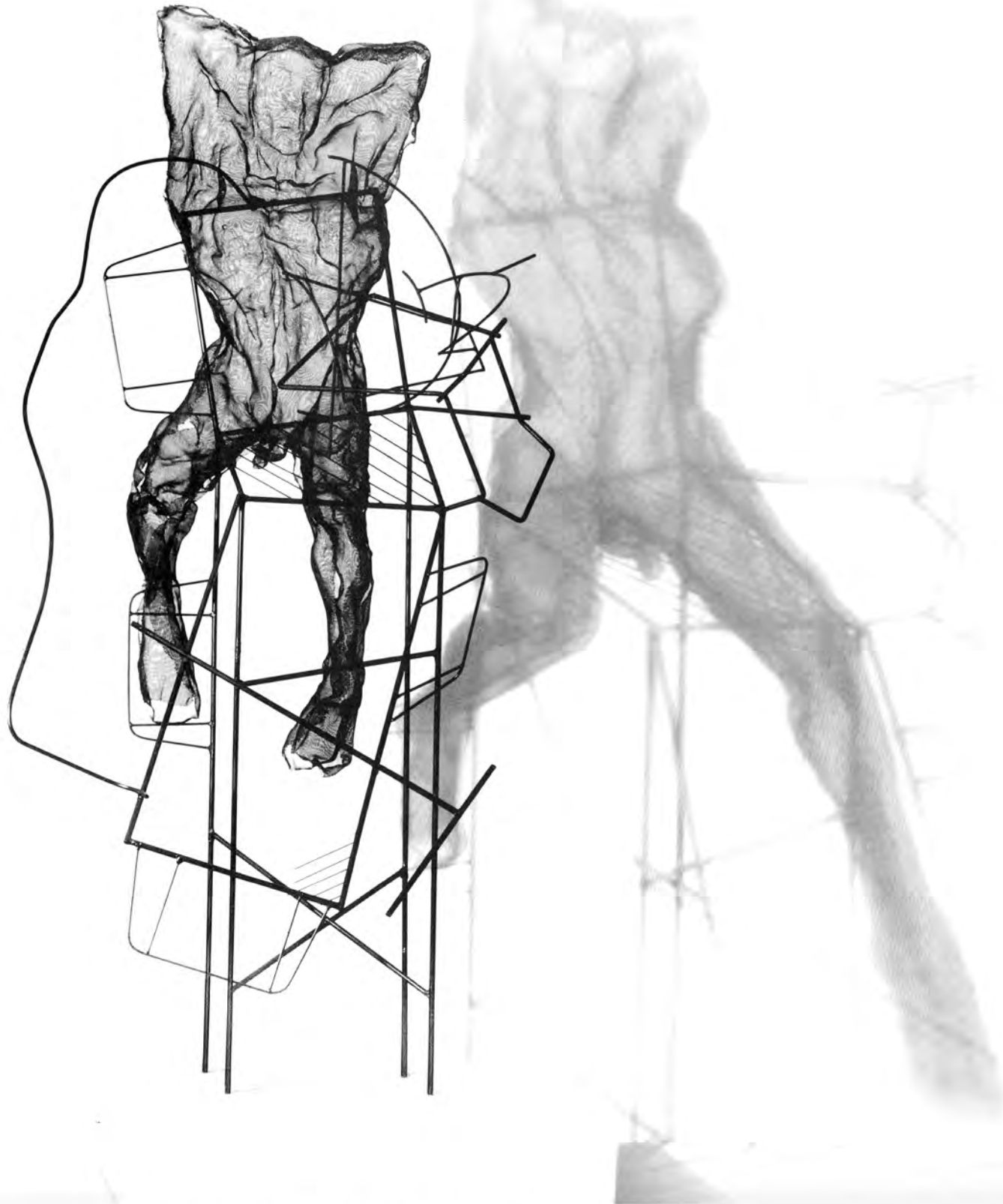


FIGURE & APPARATUS 1987 63.5 X 38.1 X 50.8 cm



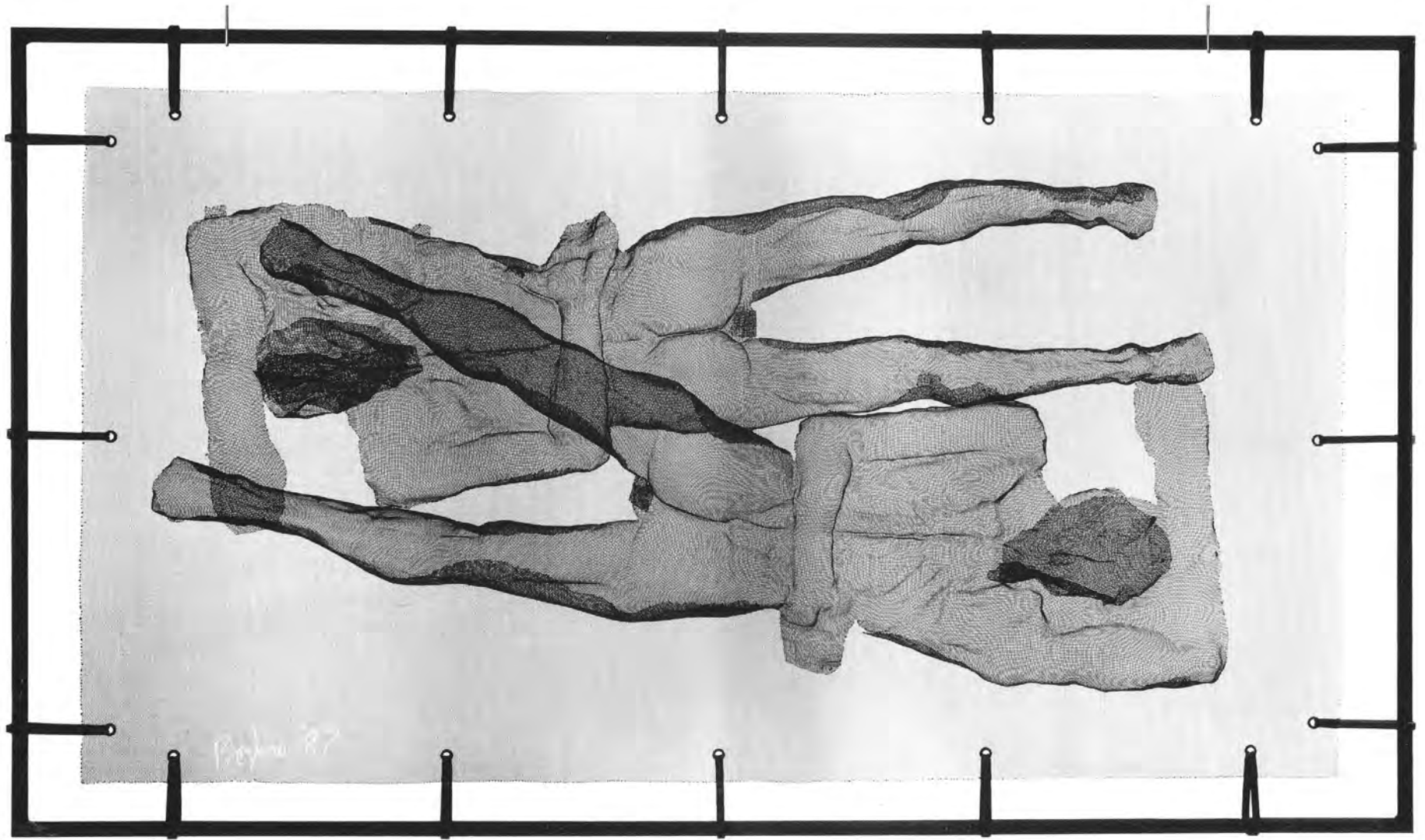
ARRESTING MALE1987 Steel and Concrete, 410 x 91 x 20.3 cm



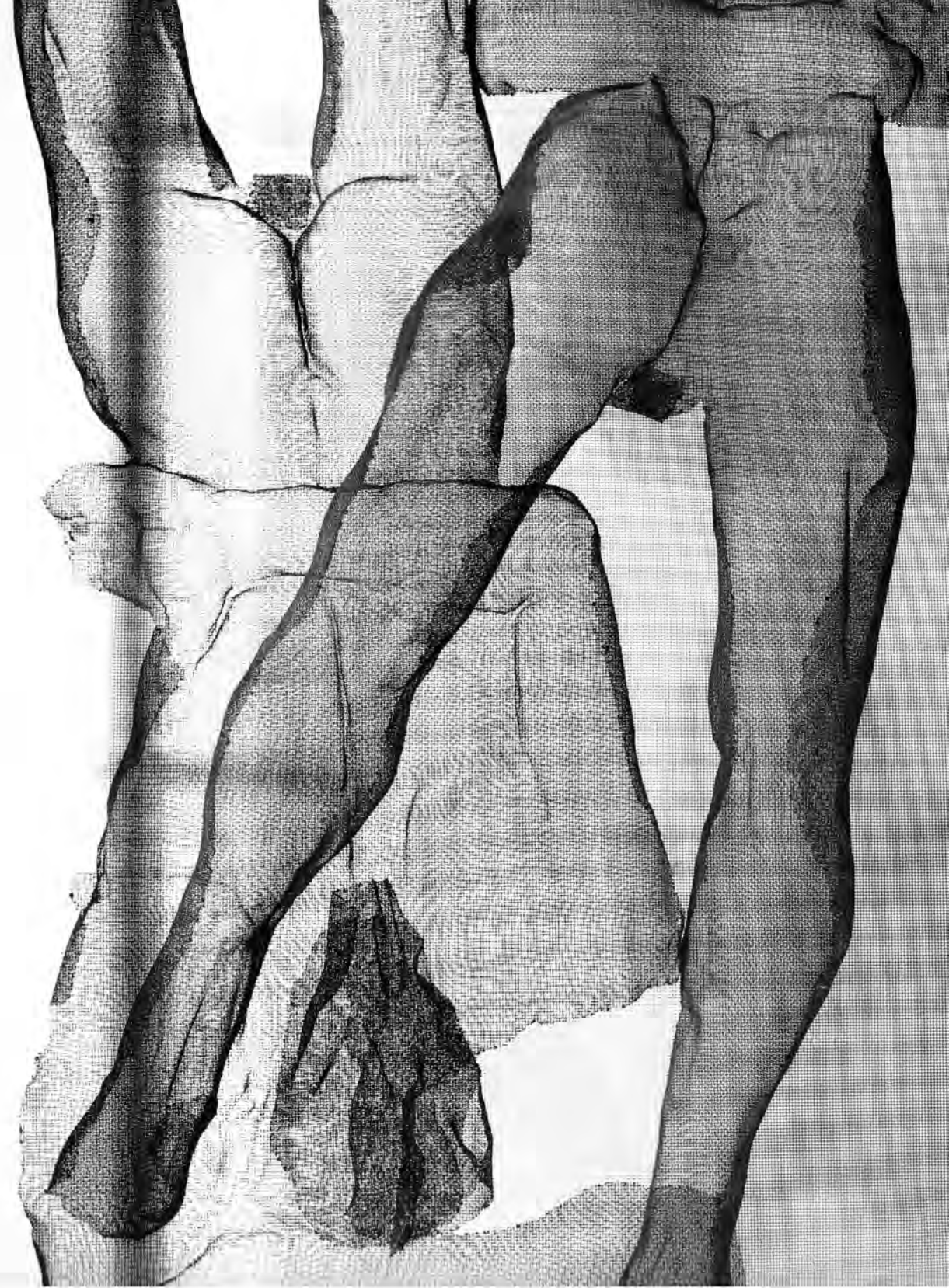
HI-CHAIR 1988 236 X 114 X 127 cm



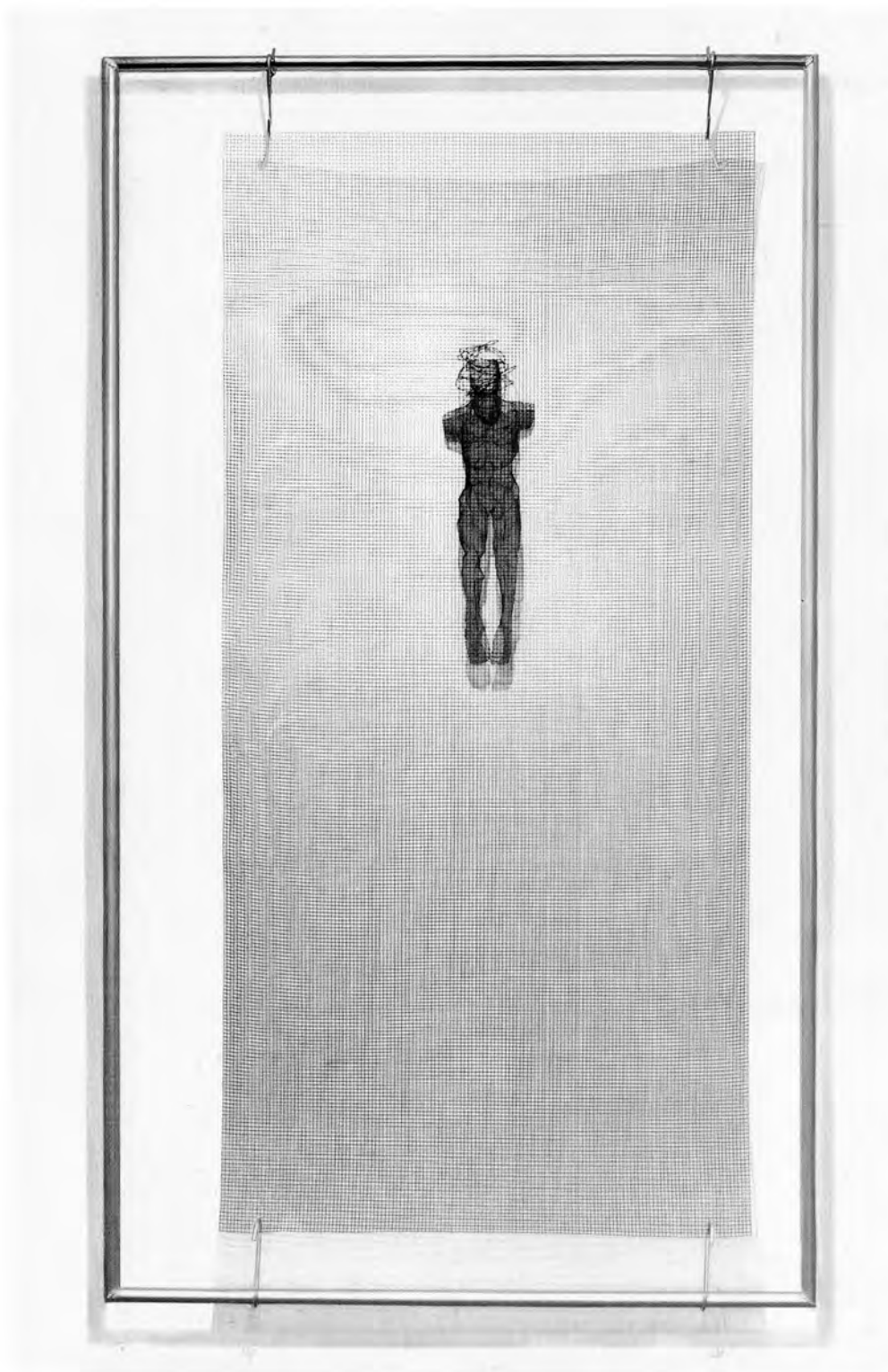
RESTLESS MALE 1987 269 X 144 X 12 cm



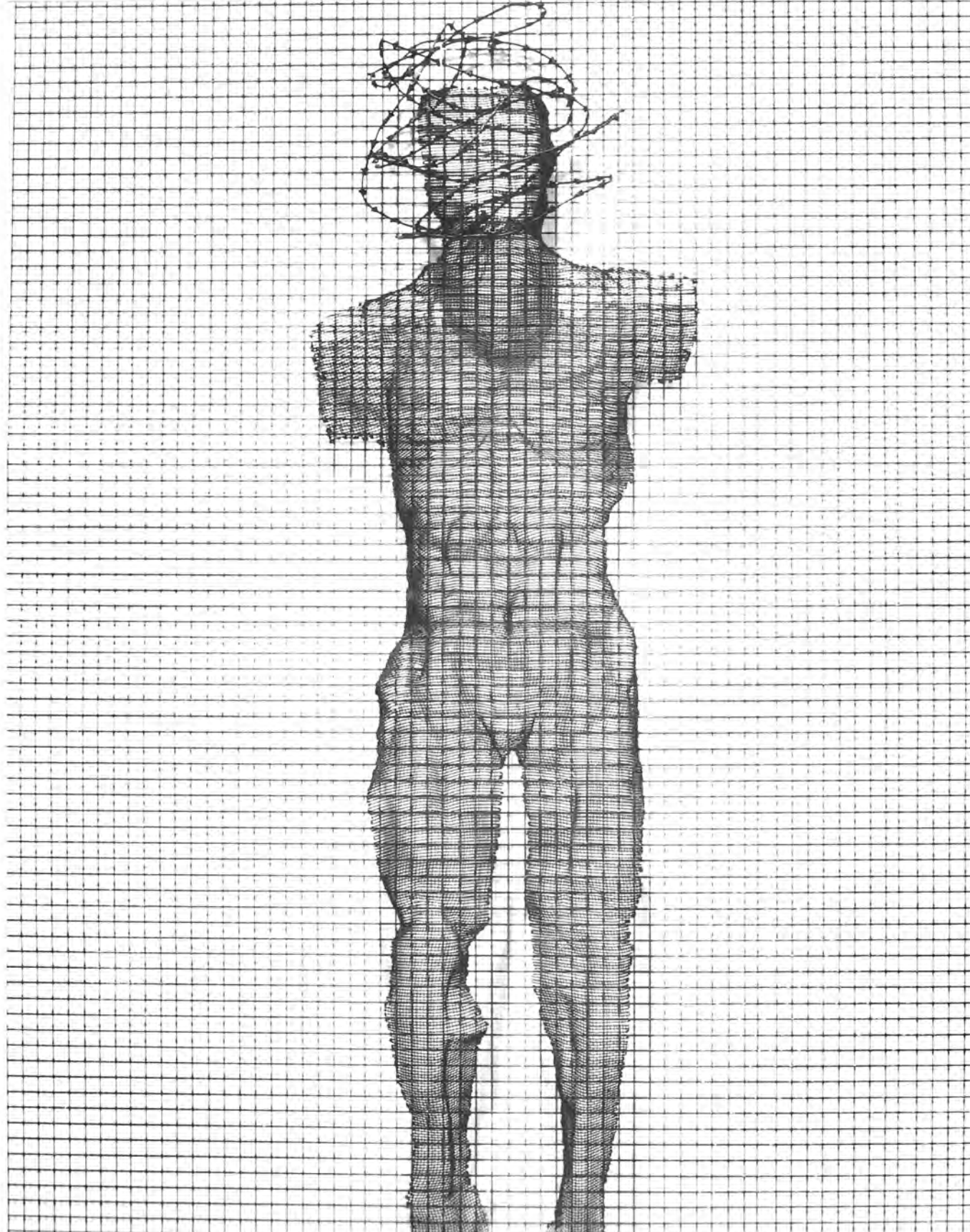
RESTLERS 1987 steel and rubber 139 x 243 x 17 cm



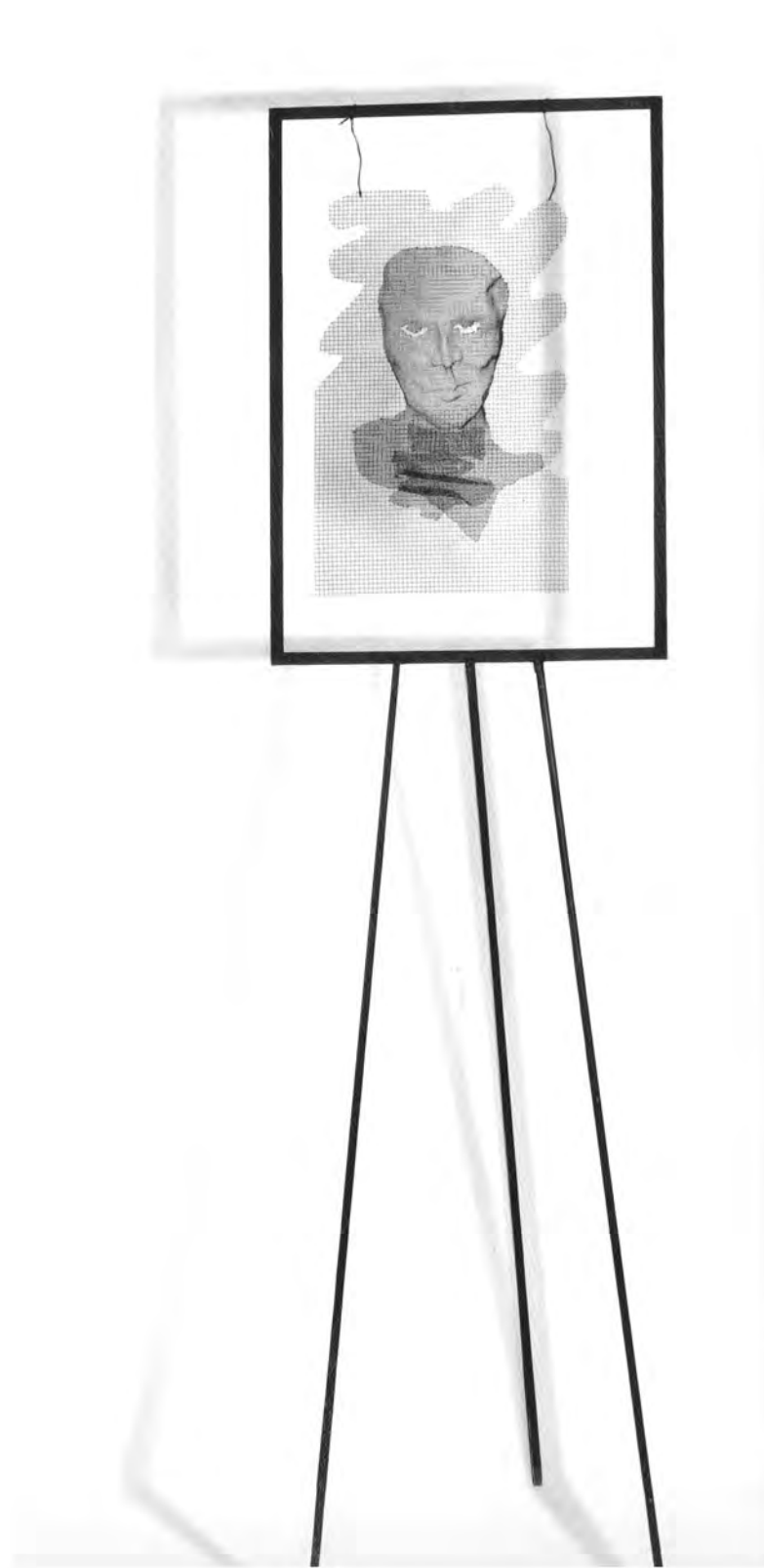
RESTLERS 1987 steel and rubber 139 x 243 x 17 cm



ICON 1987 214 X 120 X 8 cm



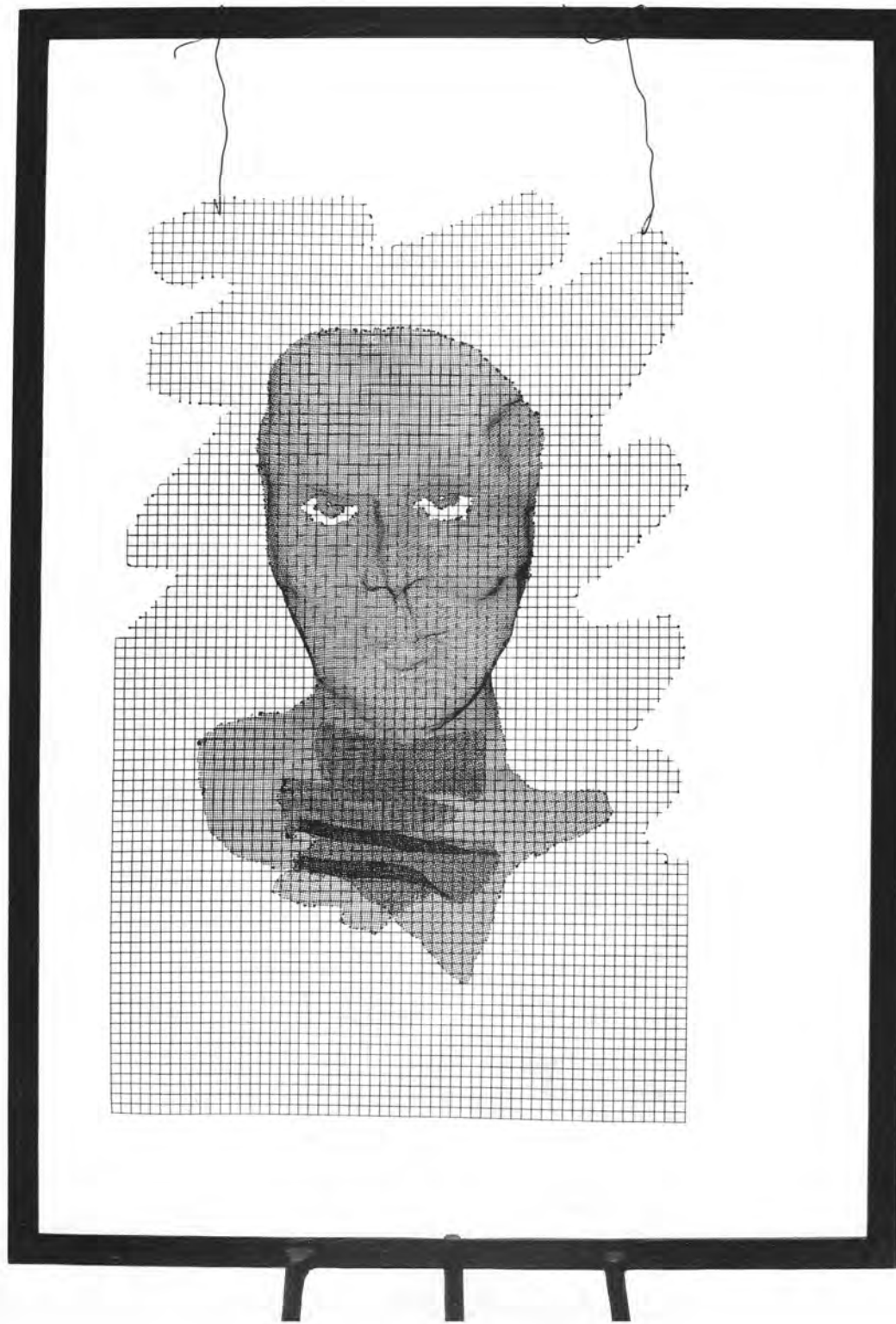
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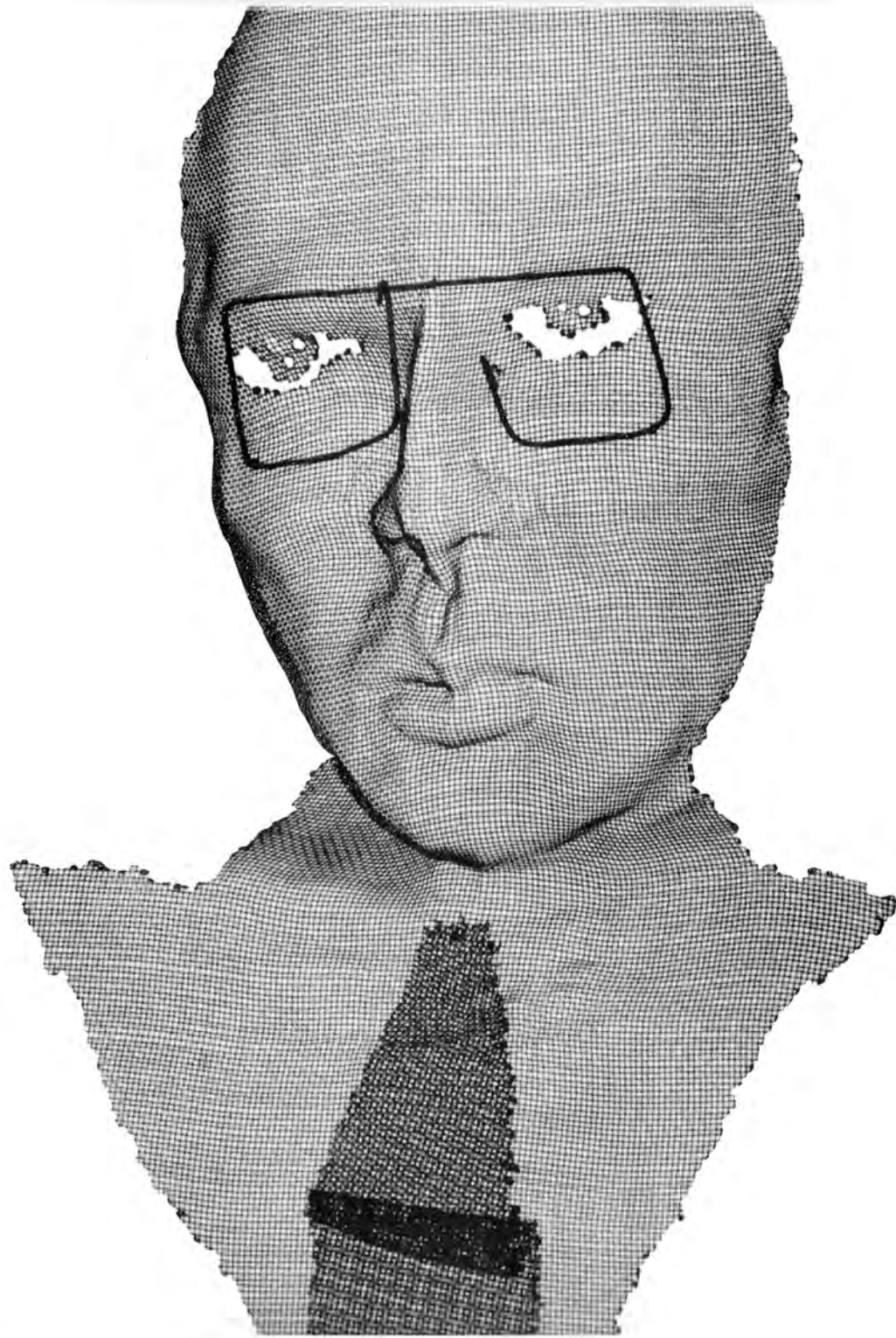


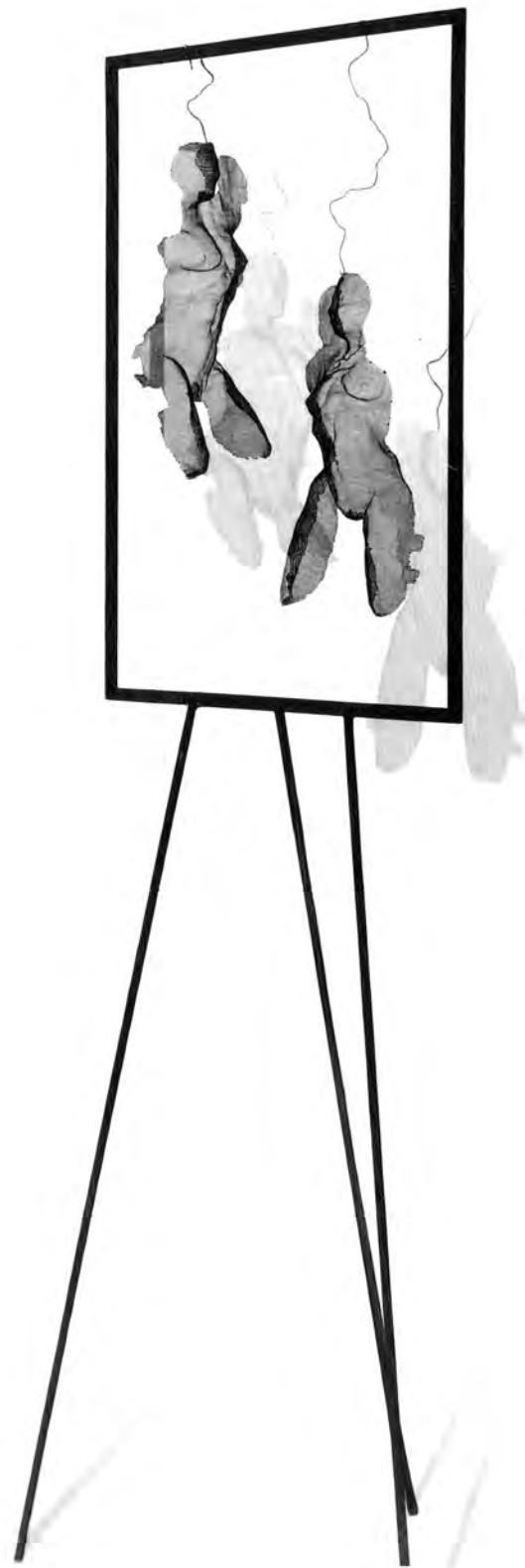
EASEL1987 205 X 56 X 64 cm



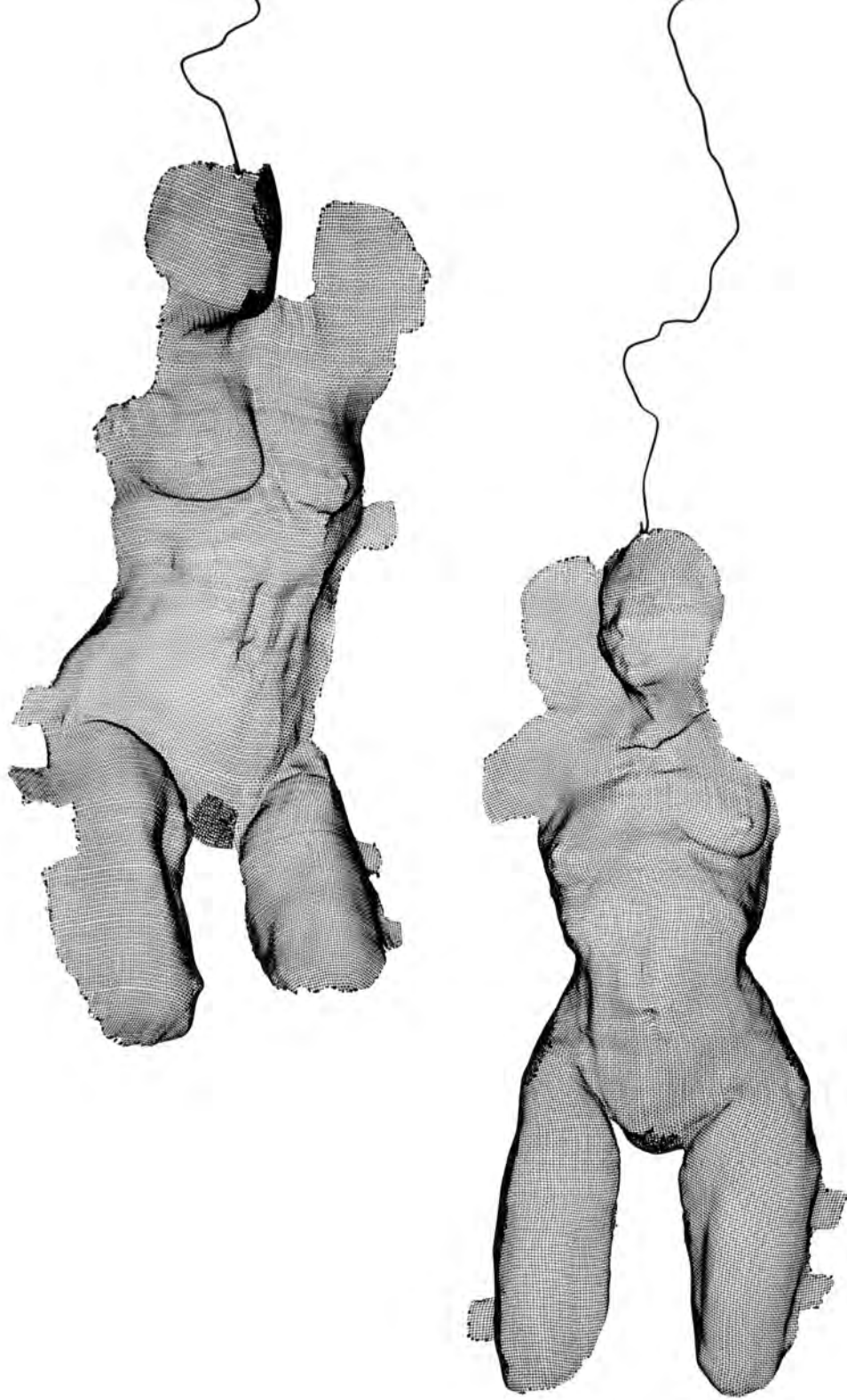
PORTRAIT 1987 Steel and wood 117 x 68 x 53 cm





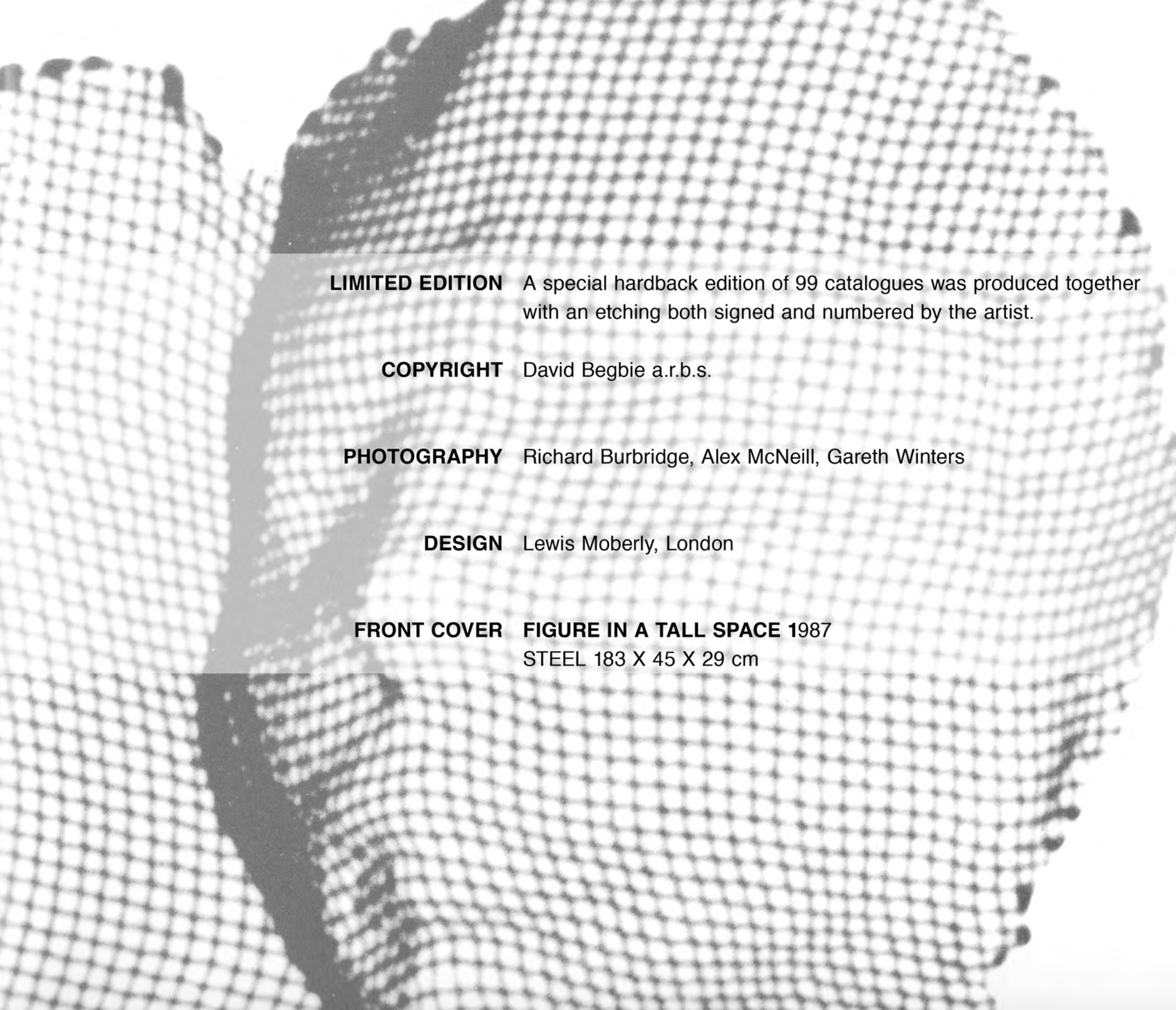


EASEL 1987 203 x 55 x 62 cm



EASEL 1987 203 x 55 x 62 cm





LIMITED EDITION A special hardback edition of 99 catalogues was produced together with an etching both signed and numbered by the artist.

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PHOTOGRAPHY Richard Burbridge, Alex McNeill, Gareth Winters

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FRONT COVER **FIGURE IN A TALL SPACE 1987**
STEEL 183 X 45 X 29 cm

