

David Bryknie

Cover
"Little Truncus" 1984
Sculpture in painted steel wire mesh on luan base
21 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 6" / 55.2 x 24.8 x 15 cm

For an artist enraptured by the figure, the great problem of the human image is how to make it. How to realize its likeness in terms that will allow it the free-standing independence of art. The problem of drawing is not only how to get it right but how to make the rightness something more than a subsidiary dependency of what is drawn.

David Begbie was always attached to the figure image. When I knew him as a graduate student from Cheltenham he was already a fine draughtsman, drawing or etching bodily structure with an intensity that was inseparable from expressive distortion. He has now emerged into a balanced and convincing naturalness because he has discovered *how to make it*.

He has invented a technique that presents his subject with classical directness undistorted. Yet it possesses the deceptive magic of visual art. The paradoxical feat is achieved by moulding the torso, which is his subject, out of steel mesh. 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.

Where the net curves away towards the contour and beyond it and recedes obliquely from the gaze the superimposed intersections of the mesh generate dazzling moiré patterns. Suddenly we *feel* the modelling. We grasp the wholeness of the shape in light. 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.

Sir Lawrence Gowing

The voyage of every artist is one of self-discovery. David Begbie, now twenty-eight years old, found his predestined way about seven years ago and then, as he admits, it happened by accident. He began his studies in a foundation course at Winchester with the general intention of becoming a painter; then at Cheltenham, taking classes in sculpture and painting, one day he started playing around with a section of wire mesh.

He shaped it into the outline of a human face and after a short time modelling the material he found he was getting very interesting effects where the contours became mirrored – concave in one way, convex in the other. From that moment on his course was set. Whether the artist be Phidias or Giacometti, Donatello or Henry Moore or the anonymous paleolithic carver of the Venus of Lespugue, the most memorable statues of all time have been conceived in the human image and what came to intrigue Begbie early on was the fact that many masterpieces of the classical Greek period such as the Venus of Milo and the Winged Victory of Samothrace have been long admired despite their mutilated condition, the spectator willingly imagining the missing parts. Thus many of his figures in wire mesh bear *Truncus* in the title and fundamentally this is what they are – truncated bodies and torsos. Like lopped tree trunks, they are based on nude models either as drawn or as remembered poses. Headless, armless, legless, each torso is more than a clinical reconstruction, though the artist did benefit from a study of anatomy while at the Slade, conveniently adjacent to the medical school of University College Hospital. From their origins in naturalistic appearance these shells of metal strands undergo a sensitive intuitive projection through the modeller's hands.

The earliest modern sculptor he has looked at with affinity is Rodin, mainly for his gift of instilling expression into the human body, even in details such as a foot or a hand, giving it the breathing identity of a total form. Like Rodin, Begbie is primarily a modeller rather than a carver, though he has carved wood and welded scrap iron into individual concepts of humanity.

While much of his output to date has been of freestanding figures, each is different. In some the sex is explicit, in others it takes on hermaphroditic suggestions. He likes to invest a certain sensual quality into his figures and sometimes a teasing ambiguity about their sex. In most works there is an element of mystery, latent even in the most figurative bodies.

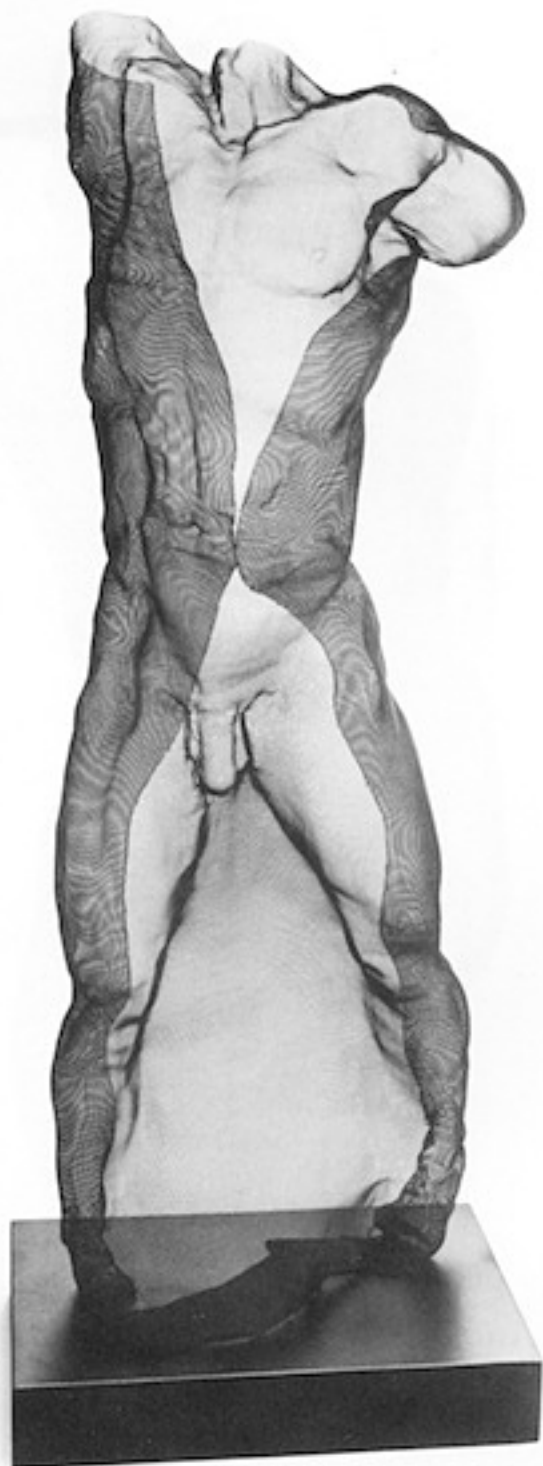
Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Begbie's art lies in its potential. Up to now the upright stance has been most common and when I asked him why there were so few reclining figures he showed me one in progress that, in its curved posture and rhythmic manipulation of the mesh, implied a vital erotic invitation.

Another fresh direction is an extension of the terms of the image as in a figure with a head; titled "Girl", one of them in its coquettish pose is as sexually provocative as anything Schiele ever drew.

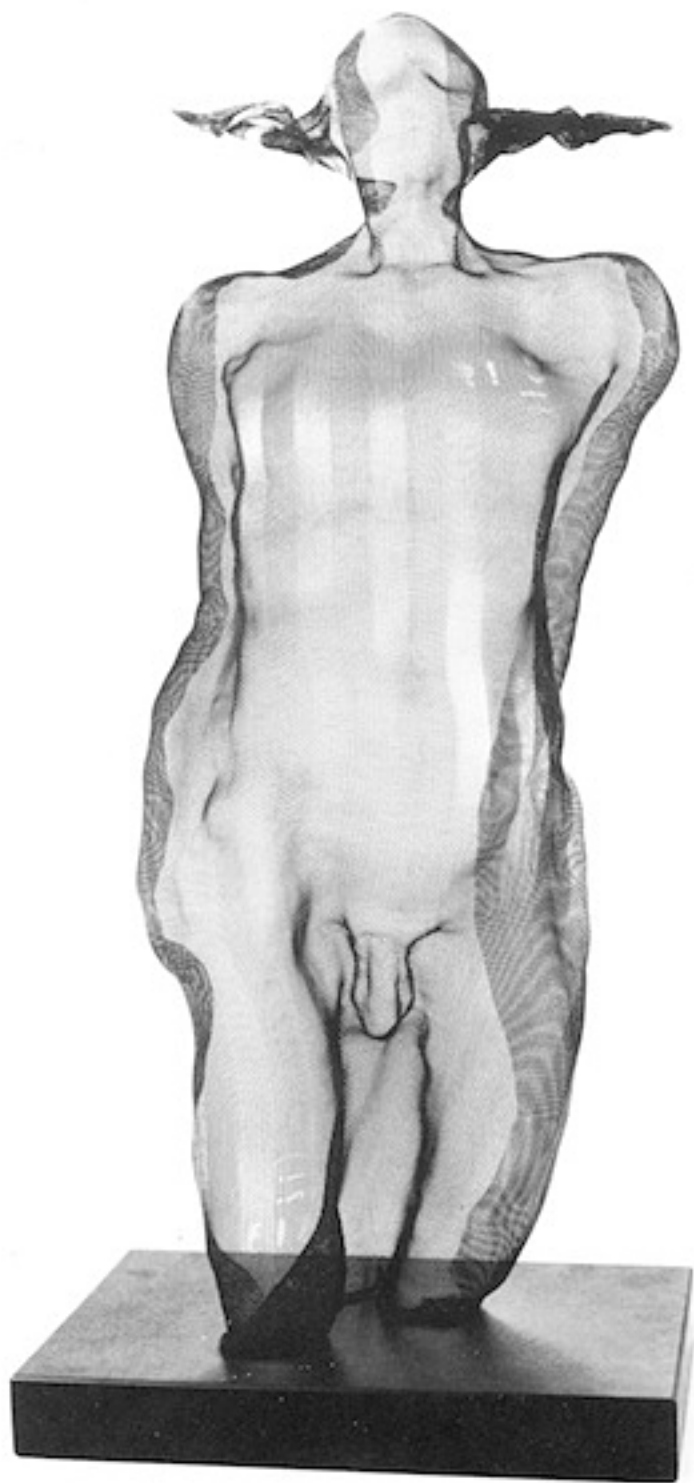
This combined variety of two- and three-dimensional projection in space gives Begbie's works their tremendous power of involvement. Wherever they stand they demand attention, their placing imposes a catalytic force in their immediate environment. Whoever has one of his see-through figures must accept that the personal ambiance is now infiltrated by a numinous, almost surreal presence, impossible to ignore.

David Begbie's taut skins of wire mesh enclose the eternal spirits of classical sculpture, intimately refreshed by his contemporary technical inventiveness, shadows of elusive moving substance, linear spatial diagrams of shimmering solidity.

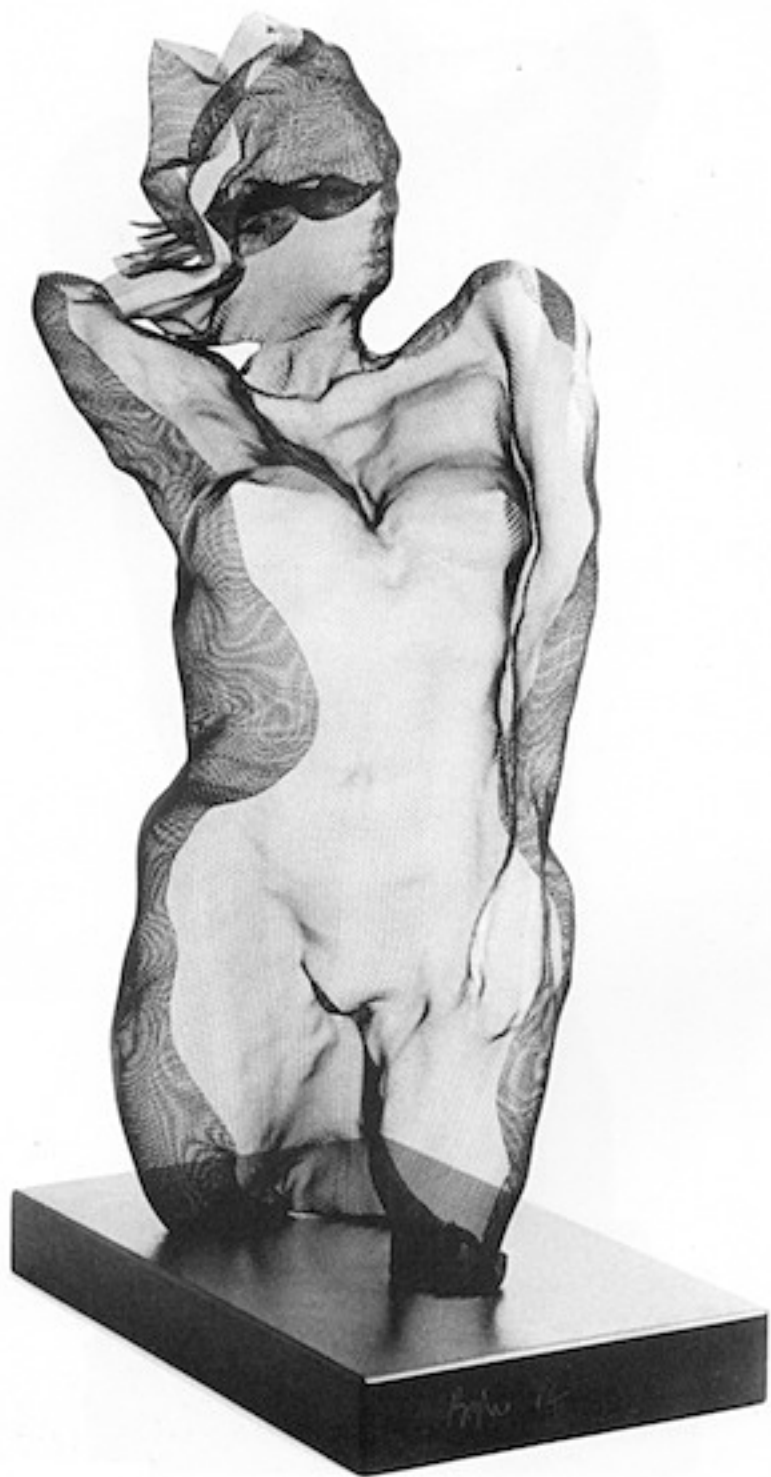
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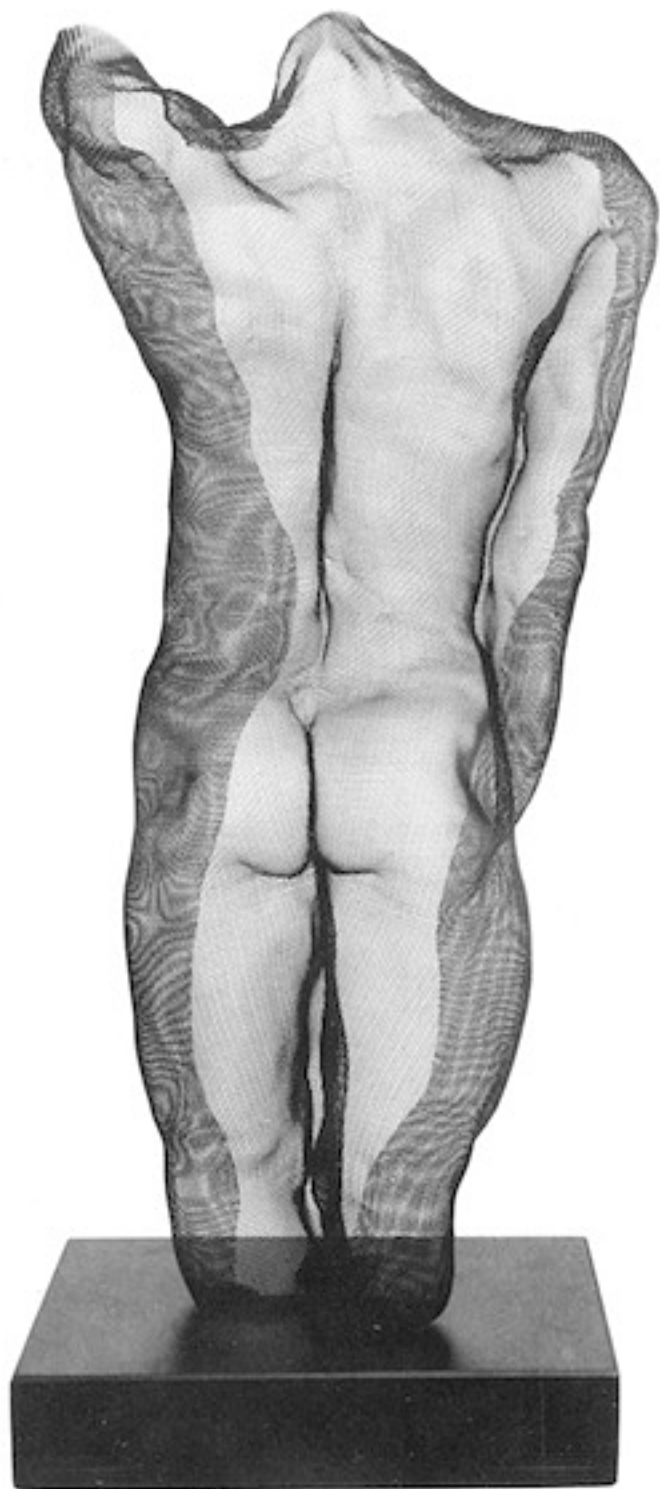
"Restless Male" 1984
Sculpture in painted steel wire mesh on luan base
41" x 16" x 11" / 104 x 40.5 x 28 cm



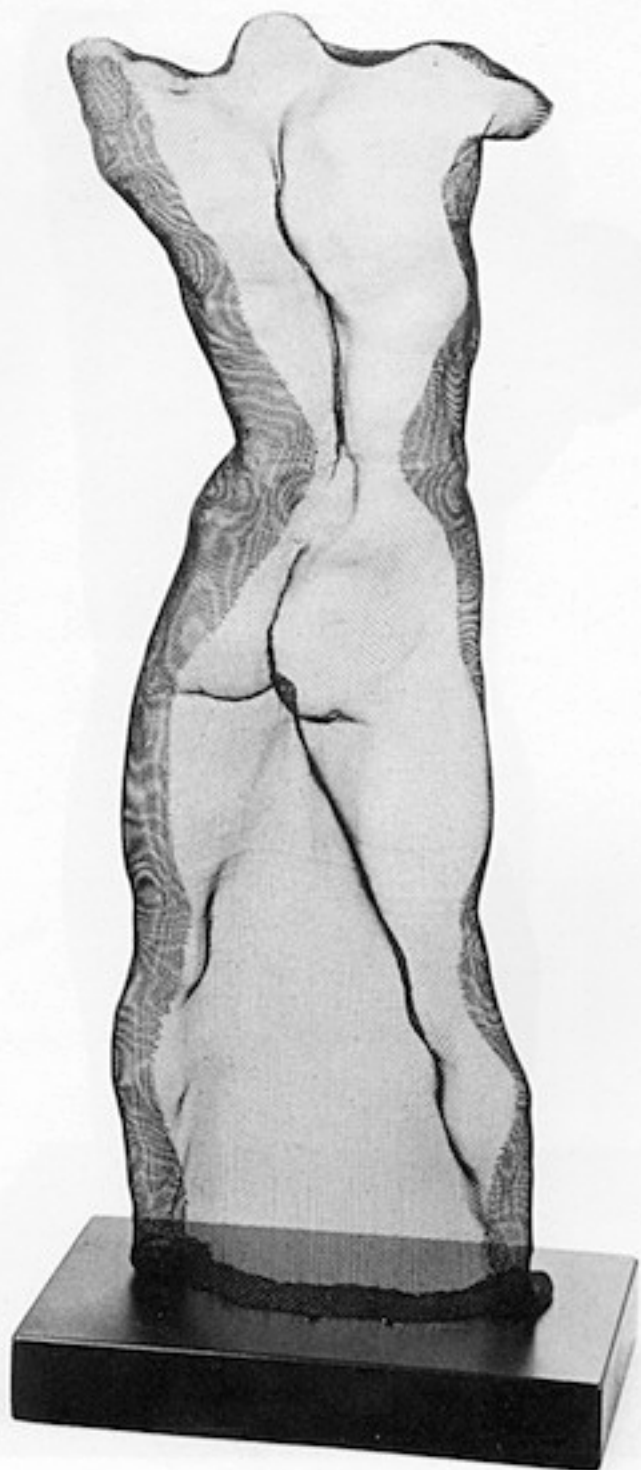
"Sleeper" 1983
Sculpture in black and white painted steel wire mesh on luan base
31½" x 14" x 9½" / 80 x 35.5 x 24 cm



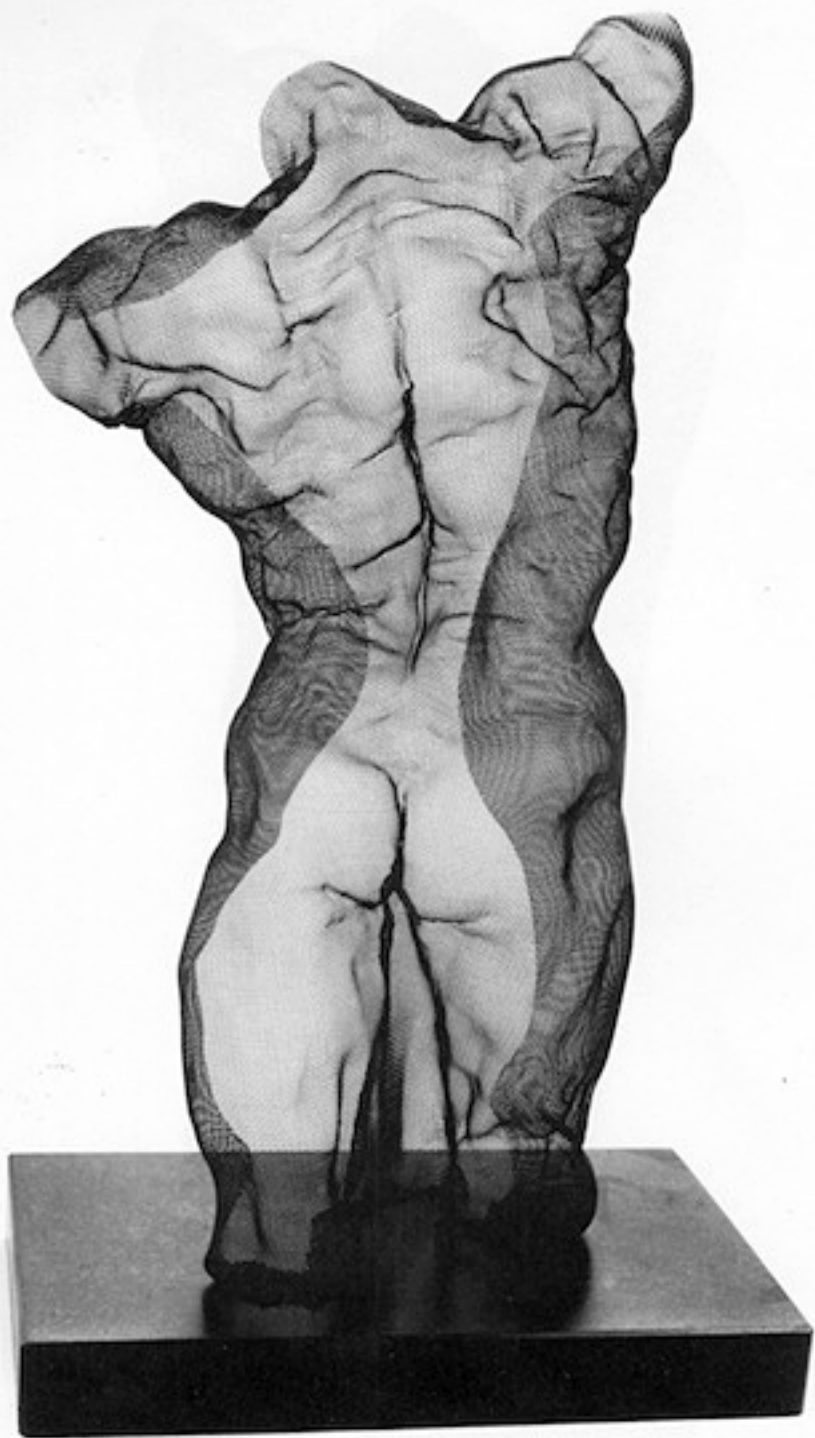
"Girl" 1984
Sculpture in black and white painted steel wire mesh on luan base
26" x 12" x 7½" / 66 x 30.6 x 19 cm



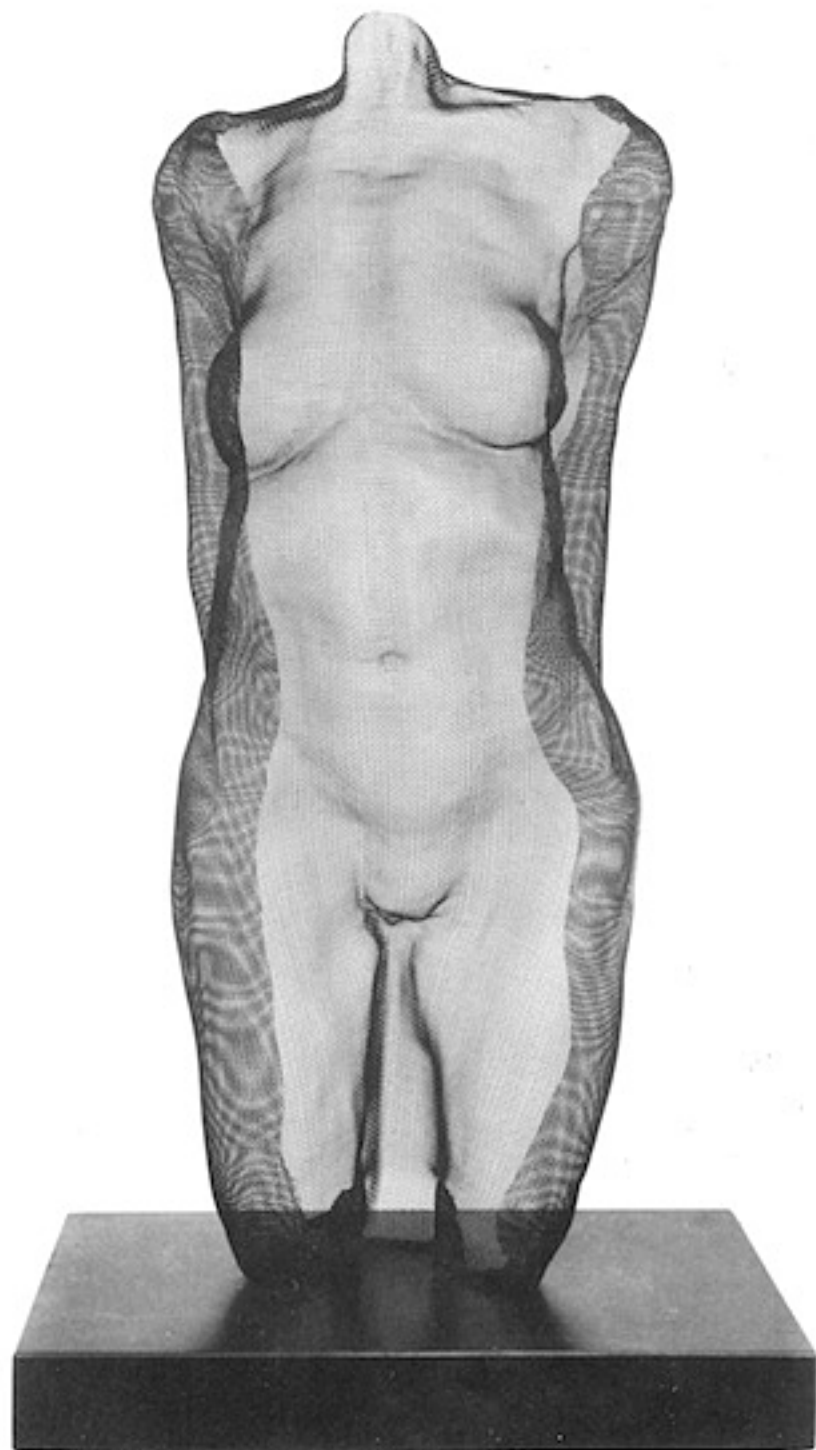
"Quiet Back" 1984
Sculpture in painted steel wire mesh on luan base
22½" x 10½" x 7" / 57 x 26.5 x 17.8 cm



"Long Black Back" 1983
Sculpture in painted steel wire mesh on luan base
28½" x 12" x 7½" / 72.5 x 30.5 x 19 cm



"Strong Back" 1984
Sculpture in painted steel wire mesh on luan base
22½" x 10½" x 7½" / 57 x 25.5 x 19 cm



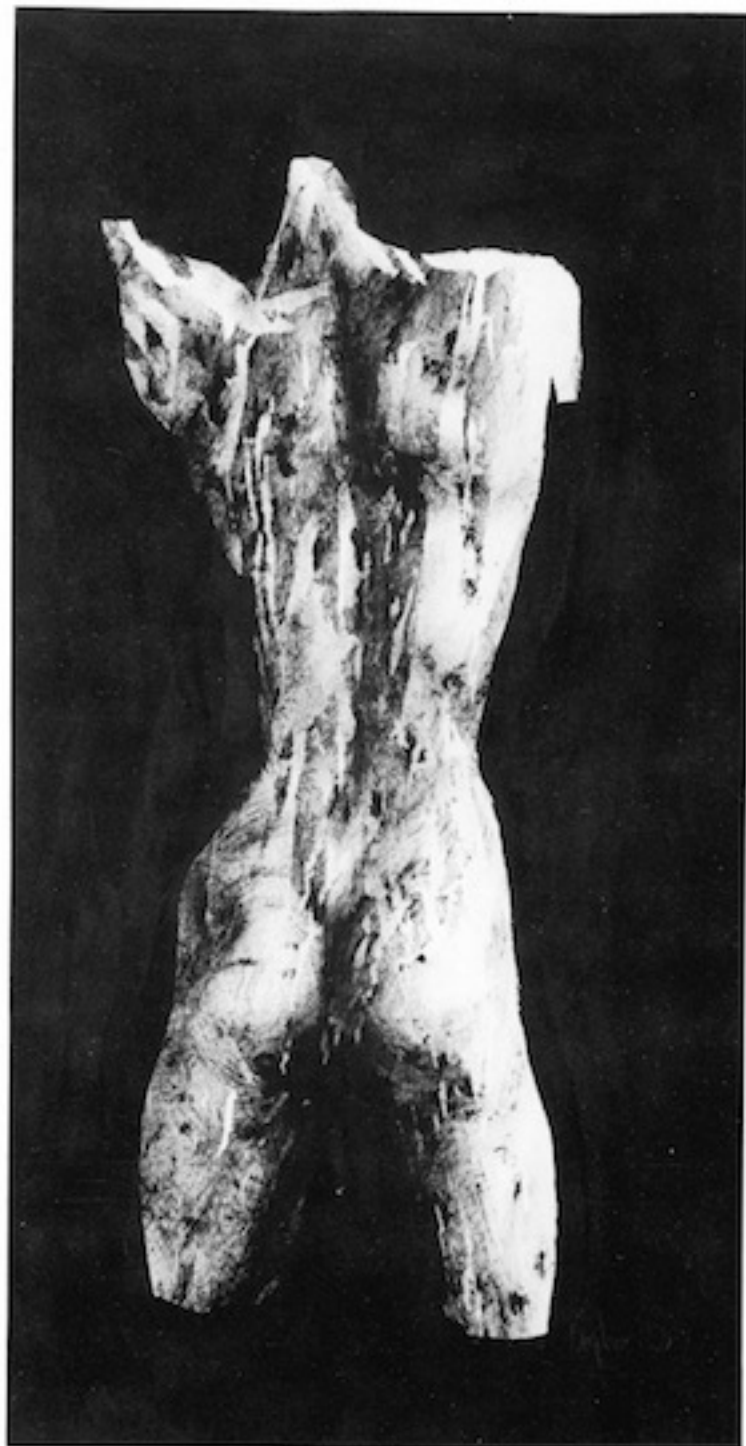
"Quiet Girl" 1983
Sculpture in painted steel wire mesh on luan base
26" x 14" x 9½" / 66 x 58.4 x 24 cm



"Anatom" 1984
Drawing, charcoal on paper
30½" x 22½" / 77.4 x 57 cm



"Slim Truncus" 1984
Charcoal collage on paper
30½" x 22½" / 77.4 x 57 cm



"Black Back" 1983
27½" x 14" / 69.8 x 35.6 cm
Drawing, Indian ink on paper

David Begbie

Brompton Gallery 1984

www.davidbegbie.com