TERENCE COVENTRY

HANDS ON

Tom Flynn

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Newman's Sitting Couple
2003
Painted Ferro-concrete
Unique
194cm high

TERENCE COVENTRY

It is early June, and Terence Coventry is guiding me along the winding coastal path from Coverack in West Cornwall towards the Lizard – the southernmost tip of Britain. This is tough, stubborn country of blue elvin and gorse, crags and gullies and where, looking out from the cliff-top at certain times of day, the horizon disappears, sea and sky eliding into a boundless haze of grey. A small boat bobs on the water in the cove below, two 'bassing' poles jutting from the bow. Coventry pauses and catches his breath as his pointer and labrador, Merlin and Willow, go barrelling past us. He points out across the cliffs with his stick, drawing my attention to a delta-shaped flock of gannets tracking past the headland. He has been walking this stretch of the Cornish coast for fifty years and is alert to every fleeting event, be it a peregrine falcon wheeling overhead, a red-billed chough landing on a nearby field, or a pair of rare orange heath fritillary butterflies flitting through the sea pinks that grow along the coastal path.

Coventry and his wife Winifred have spent their lives farming in Coverack, breeding pigs and forging a living out of the land for themselves and their two sons, James and Richard. Coventry arrived in Cornwall in 1960 as a young man with no financial backing or farming experience, armed only with a rugged self-reliance and a fierce determination to survive. He not only survived, but after meeting his wife Win, he thrived, building one of the most successful pig-farming businesses in the West Country and initiating changes to farm practice that endured for decades. How a twenty-year old erstwhile art student from the West Midlands became a prosperous Cornish pig farmer and landowner is an engaging narrative in itself. Still more compelling, however, is the coda to that story – how Terence Coventry the pig-farmer rediscovered his true identity as Terence Coventry the artist and in so doing became one of Britain's most respected sculptors.

Up on the cliff, Coventry beckons me towards Black Head, a ragged promontory from where, looking south, the tail of the Lizard Peninsula can be seen snaking out to sea from the mainland. He approaches a vast boulder and runs one of his enormous gnarled hands across it as he would one of his sculptures. Names have been inscribed into the rock, each inch-high letter meticulously seriffed. The ancient script is faint but still discernible beneath accumulated layers of flaking moss and lichen – a palimpsest gradually being worn away by wind and rain. Coventry explains how two hundred years ago this place was a look-out post for the Cornish 'huers' – local folk positioned at intervals along the coast whose task was to spot the incoming pilchard shoals upon which many Cornish and Devon communities depended for survival through the harsh winter months. On spotting a shoal, the huers cried, 'Hevva! Hevva!' and employed a primitive semaphore to alert the fishermen in the bays below who would ready their seine nets, stretching them between several boats to form a large circle. This gave rise to the Cornish drinking song, a verse of which goes thus:

It's always declared
Betwixt the two poles
There's nothing like pilchards
For saving of souls

Coventry has been keenly sensitive to these local traditions ever since arriving in Cornwall in the late 1950s to do his National Service, although ultimately it was pigs rather than pilchards that saved his soul. The huers' cryptic hieroglyphics on the Black Head boulder represent a bewitching material link to an earlier era, but they may have captured Coventry's imagination for another reason.

When Coventry was a young student at Stourbridge School of Art in the mid-'fifties, one of his tutors was the sculptor Keith Leonard (1921-1993) who later went to work as an assistant to Barbara Hepworth, working on, among other projects, the bronze Meridian outside State House in the Strand, London. One day, Leonard came into the class and announced to the students that he intended to teach them lettering. The news of this compulsory course hardly




Huer Stone
Black Head
Lizard Peninsula

set pulses racing, as Coventry recalls: "Lettering? I wanted to chuck paint around, draw bare ladies, and that sort of thing."[1]

Leonard proceeded to show the class a series of photographs of Trajan's Column, drawing their attention to the subtle weighting and sloping of the letters that encircled the monument. He asked for suggestions as to the possible significance of this detail. A deafening silence descended until Coventry spoke up. "The letters are marching," he said. "You're almost not aware of it, but the lettering is on the move, it's marching…marching around the column." Leonard was delighted. "All modern lettering has emerged from this," he said. Coventry remembers it as a moment of revelation: "I felt as if I had been given a new set of eyes, a way of identifying the subtleties and their effect on the entity. It was not just the lettering; it was an ability to see form in a different way. I felt elated, as if I'd been shown

a major thing, so small but so very important."[2] He insists that the insight he gained that day has never left him and that he continues to use it in his work, albeit occasionally without realising it.

In a sense, those two moments represent the bookends of Coventry's artistic career – at one end the script he saw marching around Trajan's Column while a student; at the other, the strange pilchard-spotters' graffiti he found inscribed on a Cornish cliff-top barely a mile from his Coverack home and sculpture park. In between those two events stand a pig-farm and decades of working the land. Yet even those gruelling endeavours were to prove decisive in the evolution of Coventry's creative vision.

Stourbridge studentship

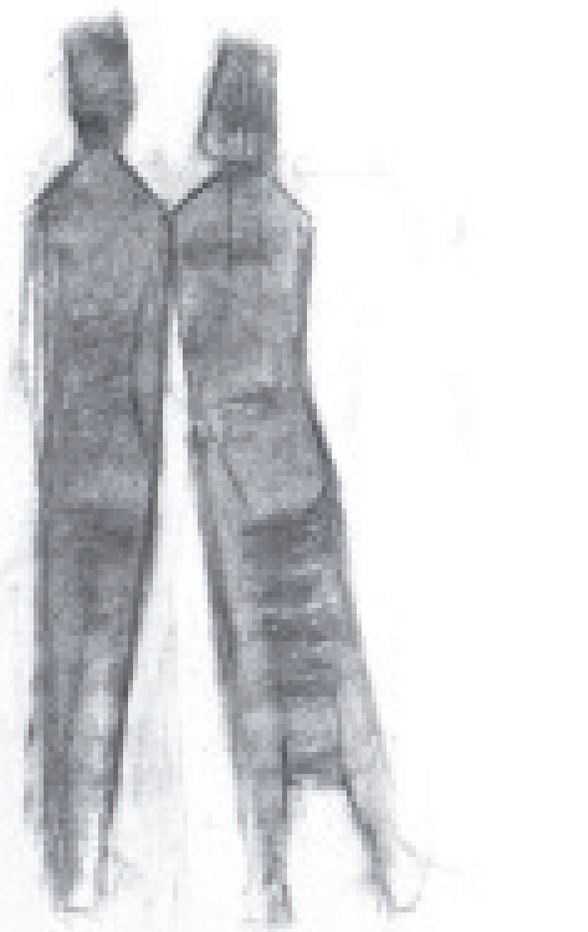
Terence Coventry was born in Birmingham in 1938 into a striving middle-class family. His Irish-born mother was a competent painter who encouraged her son's artistic inclinations. His father, a Cambridge-educated engineer, witnessed his family engineering business go bust in the Great Depression and for a short time scraped a living as a bus-driver and a petrol salesman. After the Depression ended he became an advertising executive for ICI. Determined that their son would benefit from a public school education, Coventry's parents scrimped and saved to secure him a place as a boarder at the prestigious Kings School in Worcester. The school's early history can be traced back to Worcester's medieval Benedictine monastery, which was re-organised by Henry VIII in 1541. Following the Reformation, the school was considered one of the leading educational institutions in the West of England, seeking to "communicate the lustre of grammar learning to the youth both of England and Wales."

Among the school's revered alumni in the early seventeenth-century was one Francis Potter – "a learned divine, who possessed a good talent for painting and drawing."[3] By 1947, when the nine year-old Terence Coventry entered its portals, Kings School had come to view such artistic talents with an indifference bordering on contempt. Coventry remembers his Worcester schooldays as "the most dreadful experience, marked by the viciousness of the teachers, and the prefects and monitors who were allowed to dish out corporal punishment…it was like Tom Brown's Schooldays all over again...a hundred years out of date."

Coventry's abundant talent for painting and drawing – which had afforded his early forebears a place in the school pantheon – became, in 1947, the target of school-wide derision. "I was made to suffer for it" he recalls. At the end of every year the school's houses were joined together and prizes distributed. Coventry consistently won the art prize but was made to feel that it was of no value and contributed nothing to the honour of either house or school. He cried himself to sleep every night and while at home on his fourteenth birthday refused to go back.

Life Drawing
1950's
Pencil
19cm h x 19cm w

NEXT PAGE
Monumental Horse
& Attendant
2004
Ferroconcrete
Unique
300cm High



Standing Couple
(detail)
2012
Charcoal
59.5cm h x 84cm w

His parents, who had sacrificed so much to pay the fees for the elite Kings School, now sought an educational alternative for their rebellious son. By a stroke of luck, they were friends with the principal of a local technical college who was in turn an acquaintance of the principal of Stourbridge School of Art. After a few words in the right place, Coventry took up a place on the Intermediate Arts and Crafts course at Stourbridge in 1954 — two years earlier than he was properly entitled to attend. He had finally found his niche.

I felt I'd arrived in some sort of paradise and was two years younger than any of the others. But it was like water off a duck's back. I loved it and couldn't believe I'd been given the opportunity. There was still an academic element to it ... you were expected to be able to read and write properly and do elementary mathematics, but to be in an environment where what you were trying to do was being nurtured and guided by people, it was incredible.

In the mid-1950s, art education was still being treated with an academic seriousness that has long since disappeared from art school foundation and degree courses. Among the disciplines expected of students on the Stourbridge course were drawing, painting, art history, and anatomy, and sculpture was also available. Students spent half a day every week on anatomy alone, life-drawing and drawing plaster casts of cadavers and skeletons until they could name every muscle and every bone in the body. Among the drawing tutors at Stourbridge was Gordon Tattersfield (1928-1968) whom Coventry remembers as an excellent draughtsman who was always concerned with the shape of an object. "He would do a little sketch to point something out, then smudge it into oblivion with his sleeve so you no longer had it there to consult." It was not unusual for Tattersfield to place his hands over a section of a student's drawing and ask, "Do you really think that looks like a lower leg?" to which the answer was often in the negative. "Well then you can do better!" was the stock rejoinder. It seemed unfair to Coventry at the time, but today he is only too happy to acknowledge the long-term benefit: "By God, it

made you draw; it really did."

Drawing remains a vital part of Coventry's broader creative project and in a sense underpins everything he does. Out of the rigorous academic training he received at Stourbridge he developed a highly personal sculptural sensibility that lends his drawings a dynamism similar to that which animates his three-dimensional figures in steel and bronze. He is nothing if not adaptable and as his hands have weakened over the years – mainly from decades of vigorous farm labour – so his drawing has taken on an expressive energy.

The tutors at Stourbridge in the 1950s were young and talented and only too happy to work alongside their charges, socializing with them over coffees at the local Italian café. Nevertheless, students were required to conform. Realising that he was privileged to be there, Coventry was smart enough to take advantage of the opportunity and applied himself to the tasks at hand. Although he was primarily a painter at this point, influenced mainly by the Kitchen Sink School of painters that included John Bratby, Derrick Greaves, Edward Middleditch and Jack Smith, he was also making sculpture under the tutelage of Keith Leonard, a quiet man whom he liked and respected. The St Ives-based painter Ben Nicholson once described Leonard as "the most unassuming person I've met yet, and is only ambitious in the very best sense."[4]

Leonard had trained at the Slade School in London under Professor Alfred Horace Gerrard (1899-1998), an experience that taught him the importance of building sculptural mass outwards from the armature, a lesson he was to pass on to Coventry. In 1953, Leonard worked in Paris under the Russian-born Cubist sculptor Ossip Zadkine (1890-1967) who favoured carving from huge wooden blocks.[5] At around this time Leonard also entered the 'Monument to the Unknown Political Prisoner' competition, launched in 1952, at which the British sculptor Reg Butler was awarded first prize in 1953.

After leaving Barbara Hepworth's Trewyn Studios where he worked as an assistant in the late 1950s, Leonard went on to experiment with a variety of materials including plaster and fibreglass. Coventry would himself experiment

Avian Form I
1993
Resin
Unique
44.5cm high

with wood, plaster and fibreglass as he revived his sculptural career in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Leonard was the most significant influence on Coventry during the Stourbridge years and not merely for having alerted him and his fellow students to the significance of Roman lettering. Coventry remembers him as an encouraging figure in the background who gave him a free hand in the sculpture department. "He would say, 'Let it hang loose. Don't be restricted...don't bring the constraints of the anatomy lesson into this section. Do what you're comfortable with.'"

Like many of his contemporaries at that time, Coventry's early sculptural efforts were under the spell of the towering figure of Henry Moore. At Stourbridge Coventry did "semi-abstract family groups", although not the pierced forms that Moore was making. He was interested in the manipulation of one object against another. This may have been what intrigued Leonard, who admiringly told his student, "You don't realise what you've done."

Standing Hound
2004
Bronze
Edition of 7
75cm high

RIGHT
Hound II
2000
Bronze
Edition of 7
75cm high

Dog
2012
Charcoal
59.5cm h x 84cm w

Those words continued to inspire Coventry during the blossoming of his later career as he sought finally to realise what he was capable of doing. It is likely that Coventry also benefited from his tutor's approach to line, articulated in the belief that, as Leonard put it, a "changing angle of direction...evokes certain qualities." This harmonises with Coventry's own firmly-held conviction that the lines and planes on his sculpture need to travel off at angles that guide the eye through the work. On one occasion he was asked what he was trying to achieve with the edges that had been so clearly defined on his Standing Hound (2004) and why they seemed to be vanishing and then reappearing. He explained,

I'm trying to create a rhythm through it, a route for your eye. It's a subtle message. The whole structure is opening and closing but the eye is being asked to travel, to make that journey...so you're aware that a huge tension is being created. You don't know that your eye is doing that. It's a sort of subliminal thing.

Small Standing Dog I
2012
Bronze
Edition of 10
29.5cm high

RIGHT
Lying Hound
2003
Bronze
Edition of 7
52cm high

Boar I
1998
Bronze
Edition of 9
24cm high

It sounds like an echo of his Trajan's Column epiphany. He is adept at prompting that 'subliminal thing' in the viewer – a tendency to read form in particular ways. He seeks to impart what he calls "a very strong directive sense" to his sculpture and acknowledges its importance in contributing to the work's impact. It is a noticeable element in most of his sculpture but particularly emphatic in the powerful Boar II (1999) and the series of big bulls made around 2005-06. "It's very manipulative, in a way, with that forward thrust going through it, but it's a way of expressing some sort of movement."

Aware that his parents were unable to fund his passage through art school, Coventry sought other ways to keep body and soul together at Stourbridge. A fellow student at that time was the potter, Lawson E. Rudge, who went on to establish a family ceramics business producing winsome commercial collectables. At the weekends, Coventry and Rudge helped their ceramics tutor nurture a small industry making low-cost ceramic ashtrays, milk jugs and other souvenir objects which were farmed out to gift-shop retailers. It was a straightforward 'cookie-cutter' process, knocking out fifty ashtrays on a Saturday morning, all thrown to a template. Coventry recalls getting "nine pence each for them" which, at a time when petrol was just "two bob a gallon," at least fuelled the old banger in which he was getting around at that time.

On completing the Stourbridge course, students generally took one of three established routes. If they didn't achieve their National Design Diploma (NDD) and thereby win places at London colleges – "the crowning of your student career" – there were two lesser alternatives. The preferred second option was to take an Art Teachers' Diploma (ATD) in Birmingham or elsewhere or, thirdly, find a job as a designer in a carpet factory. Many students took the ATD route.

The more capable and talented, meanwhile, were encouraged to apply to one of the two most prestigious London art schools at that time – the Slade School or the Royal College of Art – and to use their final year preparing work to present to their college of choice. Coventry recalls

Turning Bull
1996
Bronze
Edition of 5
33cm high

how Stourbridge painting students in the year ahead of him purposely honed their painting styles to ape that of Sir William Coldstream, professor at the Slade. On the other hand, those with their sights set on the Royal College took to ventriloquizing the impastoed social realism of Carel Weight, who had become head of painting at the Royal College in 1957. Such approaches were widely considered a guaranteed passport to entry. The young Coventry looked with dismay on this shallow mimesis and instead sought "to paint like Coventry does." That strategy had already paid off during his time at Stourbridge where his obvious talents frequently won him the college's annual painting prize. The apparent ease with which he breezed through these opportunities occasionally triggered the muted resentment of his peers, and never more so than when his work was accepted for the annual Young Contemporaries exhibition in London.

Since its establishment in 1949, the Young Contemporaries show had become an influential way for art students to show their work and Coventry took it seriously. At Stourbridge he applied himself with determination, cycling fourteen miles to the college each day to be there by nine, working a full session until half-past four, and after a short break continuing from half past six until nine, before cycling the fourteen miles home again. It paid off when he was not only accepted for the Young Contemporaries show, but on another occasion collected a prize to boot. At that time in the late 1950s, Royal College students were a dominant presence at the Young Contemporaries exhibitions and so the college became Coventry's target institution. Armed with his NDD and with a bunch of awards under his arm, he applied and was accepted.

Entrance into the Royal College of Art ought to have been an opportunity to continue down the happy and promising path Coventry had embarked upon at Stourbridge, but several factors conspired against that outcome. The first was that as a self-confessed "country boy" now incarcerated in student digs off the Tottenham Court Road – "an absolutely dreadful hole" – Coventry found London a depressing, inhospitable place to live. More importantly, despite having been accepted for his

Standing Bull III
2008
Bronze
Edition of 10
39cm high

RIGHT
Hendrika
1991
Bronze
Edition of 10
28cm high

painting talents, he arrived at Exhibition Road in 1959 with an aspiration to make sculpture, to engage more fully with "the sheer pleasure of that natural process" awakened by Leonard. This ambition was punctured when he wandered into the sculpture department one day and was immediately challenged by the head of sculpture, Bernard Meadows (1915-2005). Meadows quickly made it very clear that painters were not welcome in his studio.

Coventry withdrew, his pride aflame. Within a week or two he was on a train back to Worcestershire having vowed to put "the art thing" behind him, resigned to take up his National Service and let fate take its turn thereafter.

Although he was unaware of it at the time, his later artistic career almost certainly benefited from the life lessons he had just learned and those he was to experience in the coming eighteen months. A pattern was emerging in the culture of the mid-'fifties, expressed by Robin Darwin, Principal of the Royal College of Art from 1948-1967 (and who, coincidentally, had introduced calligraphy into the college curriculum in 1953). Speaking of that generation, Darwin wrote in 1959:

Students were older than they are now, the sequence of their education had been interrupted by war or National Service; they had known experiences and discharged responsibilities far outside the orbit of their interests, and returning to them they were primarily concerned in the rediscovery of themselves as individuals. As artists they were less self-confident, but in all other ways they were more mature. [6]

Darwin was probably referring to the generation of Chadwick, Butler, Armitage and their contemporaries, but his words have some relevance to Coventry's experience too. Coventry's individualism at this moment was not in doubt, but it would be some time yet before he would properly rediscover himself as an artist. First there was the interruption of National Service to which Darwin referred; there was square-bashing to do...and there was hockey to be played.

Standing Bull II
2001
Bronze
Edition of 10
44cm high

Gannet Head
2004
Painted Ferro-concrete
Unique
205cm high

From Hartland to heartland

National Service postings during the Cold War era were an arbitrary affair – you went where you were told to go. It was Coventry's small good fortune that on deciding to join the RAF he was posted to Hartland Point in North Devon. Hartland had become a radar station in 1942 and later formed part of 'Chain Home Low' – a string of radar stations designed to detect incoming low-flying aircraft. Given that he could have ended up at RAF Kinross in the barren wilds of the north east of Scotland, the posting to north Devon was a relatively acceptable outcome for Coventry. His family had often holidayed in Cornwall when he was a child and he nursed happy memories of being by the sea. Back then, his father had bought a big old army bell-tent which the family used to pitch alongside other families at a little farm above Coverack. While his parents enjoyed convivial social gatherings over gin and tonic with the adults, Coventry and his younger brother Tim headed for the beach, swam, fished, and fiddled around with boats. Now for a young adult in an RAF uniform, things were somewhat different. After eight weeks of training to be a radar operator – a task he insists he was hopelessly ill-equipped for – he headed for Hartland Point, at least pleased to be within reachable distance of some of the old family haunts. Little did he know it at the time, but behind the scenes his West Country National Service posting was a result of an elaborate subterfuge.

As a young man, Coventry had been a more than competent tennis player, accepted onto the LTA training scheme and even playing at junior Wimbledon – an achievement that appeared on his service record. He was also pretty handy with a hockey stick, having played for Worcestershire as a youth. These sporting accomplishments had not gone unnoticed by the top brass of the West Country RAF. The Cold War may have been intensifying and a Soviet nuclear threat looming on the horizon, but Coventry's superiors evidently had more serious adversaries to contend with. No sooner had he arrived at Hartland Point when he was summoned to see the Commanding Officer at the parent Coastal Command station at Chivenor, thirty miles up the Devon coast. The encounter, as recalled by Coventry, is reminiscent of a scene from Beyond the Fringe:

I went over there and this guy got up and shook hands and I was sort of "Yes, sir, no sir," and he said, "Sit down Coventry. Like a cup of coffee, what?" And I thought, 'What the hell's going on here?' And he said, "Now I want to talk about hockey. We've got the best hockey team in the Royal Air Force. Now I've got it right, haven't I? You are the right wing?" I said, "Yes sir, I am a right wing." He said, "Absolutely ideal!"

From there on in, Coventry spent barely one week in three at Hartland; the rest of his time was taken up with touring air stations in the British Isles playing for the Fighter Command hockey team based at Chivenor, nine of whose other members were Indian or Pakistani sportsmen who had enlisted not to fight the Cold War but to play hockey for the RAF.

It was while at Hartland that Coventry met his future wife Winifred, or Win to her friends, the daughter of a West Country farming family. Her father, almost pathologically suspicious of the motives of young RAF servicemen, immediately took against his daughter's suitor, seeing the young airman as a danger to her honour. He also happened to be a drinking partner of the adjutant at Coventry's station and began plotting to break up the relationship. "He did his damnedest to get me re-posted elsewhere," Coventry recalls, "but of course his efforts all failed because of the hockey thing."

Coventry may have been gainfully deployed down the right wing of the hockey pitch, but as the 1960s dawned it became clear that most other National Service personnel were sitting around with little or nothing to do. After eighteen months of his two-year service, Coventry and his colleagues were de-mobbed. He stowed his hockey stick, took up with Win and set his sights on farming.

Having a past family attachment to the West Cornwall coast around Coverack, Coventry decided to settle there. He knew the son of a local farmer whose family found him digs in the village and he soon secured himself a job as a farmhand. Meanwhile Win, who had left home, took a variety of jobs, including nannying and flower-picking,

Seated Woman
2007
Painted Ferro-concrete
Unique
144cm high

NEXT PAGE
Boar II
1999
Bronze
Edition of 5
100cm high

Monumental
Sitting Boar
2005
Bronze
Edition of 5
112cm high

as she and Terence set out to build a future. Times were tough and money was tight, but it was around this time that Coventry began to see the potential of pig farming:

We grafted together because we knew we had nothing... and I mean absolutely nothing, basically. We were well aware that if we were to get anywhere we'd only get it by putting our heads down and just hoping. We were generating a small income, Win by flower-picking and other things and me by trying to build up a farming enterprise. It seemed that pigs were the reasonable thing because the cash flow was easier. A pig from the time it was mated would produce babies in sixteen weeks and so there was a workable cash-flow.

They started off with four gilts – young females – and it developed from there to a maximum of 400 breeding sows. In those early days they were running the business from a converted ex-WD building with an adjoining three-acre field in which the stock could run around. Before long, and to the surprise of the indigenous Cornish farming community – most of whom had dismissed him as a northern arriviste with aspirations beyond his station and abilities – Coventry had reinvented himself as a successful pig breeder.

At that time he was taking his weaners to Helston market, the main commercial station for the farming community where livestock was auctioned. He quickly became aware that the weaner/pig market was being controlled by three farmers who had formed a 'ring'. The members of an auction 'ring' seek to depress the price of a commodity by agreeing not to bid against each other. After the war the ring became a significant problem at country auctions of antiques and fine art where prominent dealers, often from London and other large cities, coaxed or bullied members of the local provincial trade to join the conspiracy. Protagonists were rewarded for their abstinence with cash incentives, while the leader shared the real spoils. The impact on the market was significant, particularly for sellers of goods who saw their returns diminish as a result of what was strictly an illegal practice. In November 1964, a Sunday Times Insight team exposed an antiques ring when a cabal

of London dealers rigged a sale of fine English furniture at Locke & England's auction rooms in Leamington Spa. The repercussions were immediate as the British Antique Dealers' Association (BADA) outlawed rings and the Board of Trade launched inquiries.

At almost the same moment, Terence Coventry was confronted with an identical issue at the Helston farmers' market, although unlike the vendors of furniture at Leamington Spa, there was no Sunday Times investigative team on hand to help. Salvation did appear, however, in the guise of a 'fieldsman' from the frozen food company, Walls. He told Coventry of how Home Counties and East Anglian pig breeders were forming themselves into experimental collectives to establish what were known as 'weaner groups'. The members of these groups pooled resources, using their combined strength to benefit from economies of scale, thereby building a legitimate market in 'heavy hogs' – pigs that produced the high quality meat that Walls could buy and process.

Coventry toured a number of these operations in Surrey and East Anglia and was impressed with the cleanliness of the farms and the quality of their produce. Inspired, he returned to Cornwall and put all his energies into building a similar alliance in the West Country pig industry. In no time at all, 400 Cornish farmers had signed up to what became the Cornish Pig Producers Association, an operation underwritten by a government grant from the Ministry of Agriculture. The ring had been busted.

Coventry found himself something of an overnight celebrity and was soon conscripted onto the public-speaking circuit – touring the country to spread the message. Although uncomfortable in the role, he embarked on the roadshow, gripping and grinning, and making speeches about the benefits of collaborative farming. The situation was made more stressful by the fact that Win, who was accompanying him, was heavily pregnant at the time. Their efforts paid off, however. Soon the pig-breeders of Gloucestershire followed Cornwall's example and in due course the grain farmers caught on too, building central depots and collectively-owned grain-drying systems that gave them greater leverage with the brewing industry.

Verso
2000
Bronze
Edition of 5
89cm high

Sitting Boar
2005
Bronze
Edition of 10
27cm high

NEXT PAGE
Three Jackdaws on Chimney
2007
Painted Ferro-concrete & steel
Unique
220cm high

In retrospect these changes might be seen as early intimations of what would later become known as 'horizontal integration', but at the time they were identified as simple market logic.

Coventry's tireless proselytizing for this new industrial collective would doubtless have raised warm applause from his former Cold War adversaries in the Soviet Union, but it met with chilly animosity from members of the once-dominant West Country livestock ring who cut him dead whenever they encountered him in Helston. The nail in their coffin came when the Devon branch of the National Farmers' Union applied to join the collective, at a stroke transforming the project into what Coventry describes as "a massive operation".

Coordinating the new regional association eventually began to exert an onerous pressure on Coventry's own farming enterprise and a year or two later he decided to reverse out of the role. The cooperative continued to flourish for another ten or twelve years, but by then Coventry's pig-farming business at Coverack had expanded significantly and he no longer needed to avail himself of its collective benefits. He had moved on.

Largely thanks to its remote location, Coventry's operation came to be considered the best disease-free pig stock in the region and he began to think about expanding. When the next-door farm suddenly became available in 1981, Coventry seized the chance, not only to increase his livestock but also to grow the food for the pigs. The adjacent property included more land and a substantial number of buildings that could be used for grain storage. After Coventry had acquired the farm at a favourable price, the business grew from four to 150 acres. He now set about teaching himself cereal farming – further indication of his readiness to overcome new challenges.

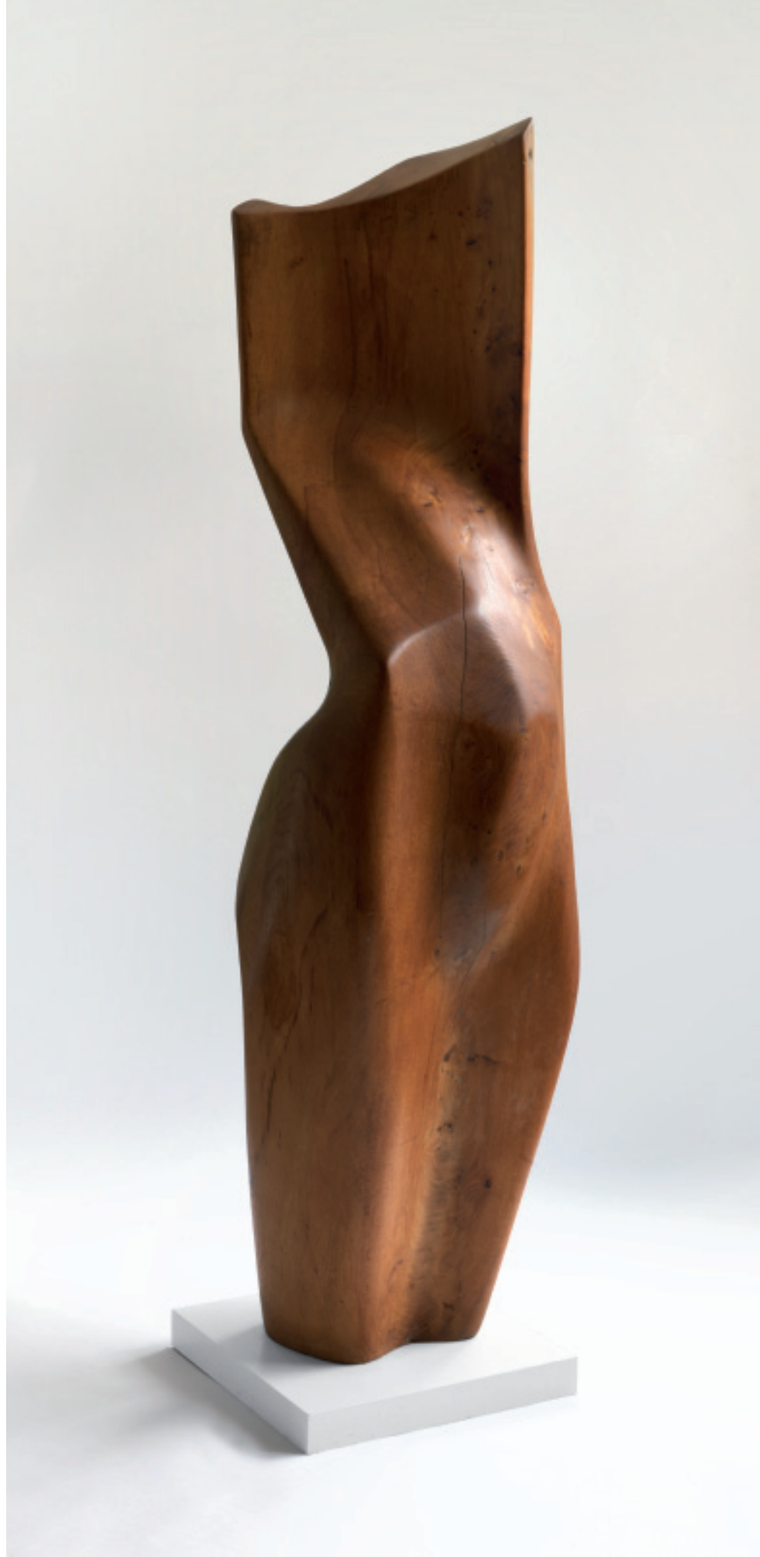
One of the first things he discovered while surveying the new tract of land was the trunk of a huge fallen elm, a victim of Dutch Elm Disease. This was to prove a key moment in the reawakening of his sculptural ambitions although it would be some time before the implications became clear. At first he did what most farmers would do – he fetched a chainsaw. Having cut the elm into 8ft lengths,

he stored them in one of the newly acquired workshops. He soon found himself staring at them every time he went in there and gradually something dawned on him. Twenty-five years later he admits that his first thought fell back on the well-worn Michelangelo myth of the figure immured within – "I thought, 'These great hunks of timber cannot be used for firewood. There is something inside that needs to be discovered.'" One weekend when he was less busy than usual he returned with the chainsaw and got stuck in. "I was just attacking this bloody great tree trunk, walking around it, hacking bits off, and slowly something evolved. I realised it was going to be a female torso." He then bought some gouge-shaped chisels and hacked more bits off. "I wasn't too sure of what I was doing; I was just sort of going into it to see how I could make it different...make it not a tree trunk...but I knew there was something in it...it looked like it could be something if I took a bit more off it. And so it revealed itself."

The torso that emerged was the first thing Coventry had made since leaving Stourbridge almost thirty years earlier. The symbolism is hard to deny. In a sense it was not only a female figure that he liberated from the fallen elm that day but his own creative instincts too – instincts that had lain dormant since Bernard Meadows banished him from the Royal College sculpture studio in the late 1950s. He now had another problem to contend with – how to balance his innate desire to sculpt with the pressing need to run the farm business. For now, the pigs won out over the art:

I knew broadly what was going on in the art world and I was aware of the different movements and absorbed a little information, but I also knew it was dangerous to go there. I could not risk being side-tracked. Win and I were both absolutely committed to the success of the farming enterprise...of making something from absolutely nothing.

The business continued to thrive and soon Coventry was working alongside his son James who had graduated from agricultural college. James volunteered to take over the pig concern while his father managed the arable



Torso
1985
Elm
Unique
152cm high

Spiralling Rooks
1992
Bronze
Edition of 9
65cm high

farming that provided the animal feed. Although ostensibly unrelated to art, driving a tractor up and down a field became an extension of Coventry's creative urge, adding to a subliminal store of influences that would later find material form in his sculpture. Through his daily interactions with the natural world, he developed an acute awareness of animal behaviour – the way a hound stands proud with its tail jutting out as another animal approaches; the way crows and other corvids alight on a field or flock around freshly turned clods of earth to harvest worms; the quizzical turn of an owl's head; the arc of a goat's back as it flexes its haunches: inspiration was everywhere. In this regard, Coventry falls into a long tradition of artists who have combined a sensitivity to the natural world with a muscular approach to materials. One of the most obvious points of reference is the American modernist sculptor David Smith (1906-1965) who, like Coventry, chose to establish himself in an environment far removed from cultural distractions where he could absorb the textures and events of the natural world. He summarised this in a rhapsodic account of a typical moment on his estate in Bolton Landing in upstate New York:

I still–to think, to conceive, need to live in nature so that I am part of nature. You know what I like to see. I saw the most beautiful sight. I saw–found an eagle the other day. The eagle was apparently trying to rob the hawk's nest. I saw the hawk dart down under the eagle, fly over his head and hit at him, so the hawk drove the eagle miles out of sight...I don't know, I like that. I like trees. I like the mountains. I like the winds...I like 40 below zero in blizzards whirrrling [sic] past my windows. I feel like I'm living. I think better. I need to live in nature. [7]

Smith transposed those experiences into extraordinary works such as his steel Cockfight of 1945, which conjures a sense of frenetic movement from static form. Coventry possesses a comparable ability to carry his experiences of "living in nature" into his workshop and to instill it into his welded steel compositions. His own experience of watching birds in flight is remarkably similar to Smith's:

At this time of the year the buzzards are mating and doing these display flights where they're just spiralling and spiralling and spiralling and they go so high that you can't actually see them, they just vanish. It's the way that those airborne forms can relate to each other and open out that I find so fascinating.[8]

The facility with which Coventry manages to transfer the thrill of witnessing such displays into his sculpture can be seen in the revolving work in steel entitled Circling Buzzards (2008), currently situated in his sculpture park overlooking the coastal slope of Mears Cove. It generally requires a strong gale to get this delicate composition "spiralling and spiralling", so one assumes its bearings were working overtime through the 'summer' of 2012.

Iron and steel have been part of the language of modern sculpture since the Spanish artist Julio Gonzalez (1876-1942) taught his fellow countryman Picasso to weld – a technique that Gonzalez was the first to describe as 'drawing in space.'[9] David Smith continued that tradition, learning to weld while working in the American locomotive industry. Coventry taught himself to work with steel after picking up an old Oxford welder in a sale and persuading a blacksmith friend to show him a few rudiments.

Although his main motive at that time was to fix broken farm machinery, it served Coventry well when he later turned back to making sculpture. In doing so he linked himself to the school of British post-war artists that included Lynn Chadwick, Reg Butler, and Kenneth Armitage, for whom the welding technique allowed a certain creative independence and the sense of having made something with one's own hands. [10]

A recent Coventry composition – Wing Forms (2012) – has a similar sense of whirling movement to David Smith's fighting cocks, while the piece entitled Steel Bird VII illustrates Coventry's intuitive feeling for animal vitality. Here a series of abstract elements and simple planar surfaces have been conjoined in such a way as to capture the essence of movement, a split second of suspended animation in which the bird has either just landed or is about to take off.

Circling Buzzards
2008
Powder-coated Steel
Unique
349cm high

Cormorant II
Maquette
2011
Bronze
Edition of 10
46cm high

Cormorant I
Maquette
2011
Bronze
Edition of 10
46cm high

It represents a remarkable ability to translate visual experience into material form with elegant formal economy.

His early excursions into wooden sculpture – originally motivated by a reluctance to turn good trees into firewood – should not be taken as a sign that Coventry had lost interest in the pig business, which continued through the 1990s. However, the broader context of the farming industry was to have a material impact on how he subsequently returned to sculpture. For the time being he continued merely to experiment with making things and it was a conversation with his dentist that triggered the next phase of his artistic activities.

Much of Coventry's approach to life and work is about problem-solving. It informs his attitude to materials and to getting from where he is to where he feels he needs to be. His dentist had heard he'd been sculpting and asked what materials he was using. On hearing that problems had arisen with the wood cracking, his dentist suggested he try plaster. Coventry was already familiar with the material, having used pottery plaster at Stourbridge for making slip moulds in the sculpture department and for

LEFT
Wing Forms
2012
Corten Steel
Unique
217 cm high

Steel Bird VII
2010
Powder-coated
Steel
Unique
78cm high

building mass onto an armature. His dentist offered to procure him a small quantity of dental plaster and a week or so later Coventry picked it up and returned to his studio to experiment. He was already well-equipped to engage with the processes involved, having acquired enough skill with a welding torch from years of mending farm machinery (the economics of farming dictated that when something broke, you repaired it instead of replacing it). Now he set about building armatures and working outwards using a dense grade of dental plaster. It worked, but the material dried to such a hardness that it became difficult to work. Coventry mentioned this to his brother Tim who at that time was Chief Executive of Performance Sailcraft, the Laser racing sail-boat company. Tim suggested he try fibreglass and put him in touch with a boat-builder in Falmouth whose technicians in turn showed Coventry some of the processes involved. Convinced he could adapt them to his own needs and having been forewarned of the genuine dangers of working with this volatile substance, he ordered the necessary materials from a Bristol fibreglass wholesaler and set about experimenting back at his Coverack farm workshop. He very quickly learned that without extraction fans it was an unworkable material. He began working outdoors, even eschewing the recommended face mask on the grounds that it kept misting up and impeding his ability to work close up. At this point his local GP stepped in. "This has got to stop," he told Coventry. "You're going to kill yourself."

The doctor's timely intervention had two positive outcomes. It initiated an enduring friendship between doctor (now retired) and his former patient, which continues to this day, and it prompted Coventry into seeking less life-threatening sculptural techniques. By now he had a small archive of works in wood, dental plaster and fibreglass, which together represented a meaningful step in the evolution of a personal sculptural language. Now he set his sights on the biggest challenge of all.

Flying Wings
1998-99
Bronze
Unique
64.5cm high

Man Releasing Bird
2011
Bronze
Edition of 10
54cm high

Bronze casting by telephone

As EU subsidies and other Brussels-imposed regulations began to bite, British farmers found it increasingly difficult to compete, particularly with newly emerging markets making their presence felt. From the mid-1990s, prices for barley and wheat rocketed as Chinese demand rose. These were core commodities for the producers of animal feed, but as pork prices failed to rise accordingly, the industry began to look like a sure-fire way of losing large tranches of the bank's money. The situation became more critical as bankruptcies among farmers multiplied and businesses began moving to Eastern Europe where labour was cheap and livestock welfare issues were virtually non-existent. By 2000, Coventry had begun to review the Coverack enterprise and together he, Win and son James finally made the decision to wind up the business and dispose of some of the farmland in order to concentrate their attentions elsewhere. James later re-trained as an electrician and went into business on his own.

Already familiar with agricultural machinery, Coventry taught himself to drive swing-shovels, backhoe loaders and track excavators. His days were now occupied with earth-moving, concrete-crushing and road-building to prepare the farmland for sale to developers. He hired labour to demolish the farm buildings and disposed of the scrap metal. Three months later, in September 2003, he was finally free to pick up where he had left off in 1959. He was 65 and the urge to make things was stronger than ever.

Despite the impressive body of work he has produced in the last fifteen years, Coventry still refuses to see himself as a sculptor, much less an artist. Instead he prefers to locate himself in the tradition of the artisan craftsman. His studio is not a studio, he insists, but a workshop and indeed to enter it is to enter the realm of the blacksmith. He also has a lovely, sunlit, south-facing room in the house where he draws and which conforms more to the traditional idea of an artist's studio (Pangolin have rightly encouraged him to see his exquisite drawings as more than just throwaway designs that can be left pinned and scattered, Giacometti-like, around his workshop, getting dog-eared and damaged).

Woman with Bird
2011
Steel
Unique
28cm high

RIGHT
Joyrider II
2009
Bronze
Edition of 10
53cm high

In one corner of his workshop is a stack of corten steel sheets; in the middle of the floor is a forge Coventry has recently welded from scratch to his own design. He makes everything himself, even the tools with which he makes the tools to make his work. His approach is concentrated around a simple core principle of problem-solving, or aiming to achieve what he calls "a rightness," a concept that cannot be clearly articulated but which he intuitively recognizes when it appears – "There are no guidelines, there is no book, but you just know it." On the rare occasions when the rightness fails to appear, he is unafraid of discarding a project. "You know when you're so off track that you can't bring it round, so you destroy it, destroy everything that's not right."

Coventry is also driven by a blunt determination to assert himself on his world and in so doing to contradict those people he has encountered in his career who have had the temerity to cast doubt on his convictions. It may have started with the philistine house masters at Kings School in Worcester; it happened again when Bernard Meadows blocked his passage into the Royal College sculpture department; it almost certainly emerged when Cornish farmers scorned his youthful attempts to establish a farming concern; and then he met Lynn Chadwick and was taken aback when the older man advised him to stick to pig-farming.

That counsel came as a blow to Coventry, but did nothing to deter him. Chadwick had been one of the previous generation of artists from whom Coventry drew many of his creative coordinates, Reg Butler being another. Butler's work had what Coventry describes as "a sort of magical element" that he could never quite pin down. "I can usually dissect someone's work and get to the root of it and understand what the steps were to make it. I could do that with Chadwick because I understood his process right from the word go, but I couldn't do that with Butler."

The Italian sculptors Giacomo Manzu (1908-1991) and Marino Marini (1901-1980) were further sources of inspiration, particularly Marini. He describes the effect of looking at Marini's work as "that sort of 'hairs on the back of the neck' thing":

Woman with Bull II
2011
Steel
Unique
47cm high

The bravery that he had to actually attack things with an angle grinder and leave gouges and marks in them. They're the really special people that make me tingle and who actually put me firmly in my place so that I may think I'm pretty competent, but I ain't that good. Well, in my eyes I'm not. One is humbled before that work because there is an alchemy to it that can't be dissected; I can't pull it to pieces and it's to do with that elusive presence. They have that...somehow they have that presence. I mean, how do you combine an element of presence into an artwork?

Coventry's admiration for the work of Chadwick, Butler, Manzu and Marini ultimately led him to the conclusion that he ought to try casting his work in bronze. His first excursions

LEFT
Walkies
2009
Bronze
Edition of 10
33.5cm high

Steel Rider
2011
Steel
Unique
50cm high

into that process came in the late-1980s when a London gallery expressed interest in including one of his Horse and Rider works in their summer exhibition if he could get it cast in bronze. Needing to move fast, he rang around in search of a foundry. Bristol University put him in touch with Rungwe Kingdon and Claude Koenig, founding directors of Pangolin Editions, the foundry in Chalford, Stroud. A relatively small operation at that time, Pangolin were too busy to take it on, so Claude Koenig recommended a foundry in Gloucestershire who consented. A short time later the work was completed. When Coventry got it home he realised it was deficient in one key aspect – it would not stand up. He called the foundry back and they offered him some professional advice – "Hit it with a hammer." When that expert approach failed to deliver the result he required – he was in the car one day and could hear the sculpture "fizzing" on the back seat – Coventry got back in touch with Pangolin and pleaded with them to make a fresh casting. This time they agreed.

The bronze that emerged from Pangolin was altogether successful, but when Rungwe Kingdon volunteered to patinate it as well, Coventry declined the offer, keen to have a go at that part of the process himself. After all, he had a farm workshop, he had tools, he had a makeshift furnace, and above all he had the steely resolve to tackle yet another practical problem. The outcome, however, was not quite as he had envisaged – "It was a ghastly fluorescent blue." Frustrated, he decided to eat humble pie and telephoned Claude and Rungwe again. What followed was something akin to a correspondence course in lost-wax bronze casting and patination techniques, all conducted over the telephone between Coverack and Stroud. At one end of the line were Kingdon and Koenig, asking what colour flame he was burning; at the other end was Coventry, madly dashing between the phone in the study and his workshop (this was in the days before mobile phones). Finally, Kingdon and Koenig decided to head down to Cornwall to deliver a hands-on tutorial. What they found there astonished them.

Riders
1989
Bronze
Edition of 7
63cm high

Rider I
1998
Bronze
Edition of 10
63cm high

Kingdon has described Coventry's work as "an intensely personal art, practical and unpretentious, honest and imbued with great integrity." He and Koenig realised they had stumbled upon an artist of extraordinary talent. From that moment a deep personal friendship and rewarding professional collaboration quickly developed between the two couples. In the ensuing weeks, months and years, the relationship blossomed into one of mutual trust and respect. Coventry insists that none of his subsequent success would have occurred without the Pangolin founders, for at that time he was working way beyond the perimeter fence of the art world, outside its geographical boundaries, and far away from its social scene and its professional interactions. Kingdon and Koenig provided not only practical help and moral encouragement, but showed a determination to share their enthusiasm for Coventry's natural talent with a multitude of others in their international network. Out of Coverack in the ensuing years came a wealth of small and large-scale sculpture, some requiring casting as editions, other pieces emerging as unique works in steel. From Pangolin came a long and deep expertise in bronze casting and patination and a foundry and gallery in Chalford, Stroud that had become internationally renowned as a focal point for the making and appreciation of sculpture. Kingdon and Koenig subsequently went on to open a smart London gallery in Kings Place, Kings Cross, a minute's walk from St Pancras International rail terminal, which allows the work of Coventry and others to be enjoyed by an even wider audience of discerning collectors.

One of Coventry's first excursions into large-scale sculpture came in 1996 and could not have been realised without the collaboration of Kingdon, Koenig and the Pangolin team. At the bidding of his doctor friend, Coventry undertook to create a monument to mark the 500th anniversary of the Cornish Rebellion of 1497. This was the occasion when 15,000 Cornishmen marched 500 miles to London to protest against the taxes being levied on an already impoverished Cornwall by King Henry VII to fund his war against Scotland. The rebellion was instigated by the

Cornish blacksmith Michael Joseph An Gof of the village of St. Keverne, just a few miles from Coverack. The blacksmith's disobedient stand quickly inspired Thomas Flamank, a Bodmin lawyer, who drummed up similar support among the labourers and tin miners in his own community. When the Crown refused to alleviate the taxes and instead expanded them further, the two men and their legion of followers set off for London on a peaceful march to present their case to the King. On arrival in Blackheath, South London, they were confronted by the King's army and at the ensuing battle of Deptford Bridge they were quickly overwhelmed. The two leaders were arrested and sent to the Tower. On 27 June 1497, An Gof and Flamank were hanged, drawn and quartered on Tyburn Hill for their part in the uprising.

Coventry's response to the brief was to design a large-scale bronze featuring Michael Joseph and Thomas Flamank standing side by side, each with an attribute of their respective professions. Pangolin cast the bronze in which Flamank is shown clutching a rolled-up legal brief, while Michael Joseph the blacksmith rests one foot on an anvil, his arm raised in a gesture of exhortation to his followers. Phrased in Coventry's characteristically abstract sculptural language, it is an elegant solution to a delicate subject. A native of St. Keverne, Michael Joseph An Gof is held in almost God-like esteem by the local villagers and indeed by the broader Cornish nationalist movement in the form of the Mebyon Kernow party (Cornish for 'Sons of Cornwall') who argue for devolution in the form of a Cornish Assembly.

Coventry's monument became something of a *cause célèbre*, igniting fierce passions within the local community over the most suitable place to position the statue in St. Keverne. The work now stands at the entrance to the village, raised on a block of local blue elvin, a location that affords the An Gof Singers and other local people the opportunity to assemble annually to sing, say prayers, and honour their two local heroes. As Coventry himself told the Helston newspaper at the time, "Public sculpture always causes an outrage initially, but once installed becomes accepted and loved as part of people's heritage." His monument to An Gof has been warmly embraced by the Cornish people.

An Gof
1996
Bronze
Unique
244cm high

NEXT PAGE
Monumental Avian Form
2001
Ferroconcrete
Unique
290cm high

Female Torso
1995
Epoxy resin
Unique
186cm high

Swallow Form
2008
Powdercoated
Steel
Unique
284cm high

Moreover it provides another emphatic response to those who dismissed him as a farmer turned sculptor.

The An Gof commission was a significant milestone in Coventry's career transformation and gave him the confidence to press on with his steel work. After demolishing the farm buildings and selling the land and livestock, he had a workshop built adjacent to his home. He also retained three fields between his house and Coverack Cove, which he subsequently turned into a sculpture park. This might be seen as his equivalent of David Smith's Bolton Landing estate in upstate New York – a place in which his sculpture could be enjoyed against the backdrop of nature.

The Coverack sculpture park began in response to a functional need to store large-scale sculptures. It soon became so popular with coastal ramblers and people holidaying nearby that Coventry started laying it out more carefully, taking time to position the works and providing information to visitors. It is an excellent environment in which to study his approach to form and materials and at most times of the year contains around 30 sculptures, including his numerous works inspired by birds in flight – wheeling gulls, jackdaws peering into chimneys, spiralling buzzards. It is also home to many works in steel or those he made during his early experiments with ferroconcrete built over a steel armature. In a very real sense it represents an archive of Coventry's work to date for it even includes a faithful recreation in epoxy resin of the female torso he carved from the fallen elm back in 1985.

One of the first works made using the concrete process was Avian Form, now widely regarded as a pivotal moment in Coventry's career as a sculptor. When encountered in the twilight hours, silhouetted against the horizon, it casts a powerful, minatory spell over the Coverack fields. One suspects it is not entirely coincidental that Coventry – a former radar operator recruited to watch for alien incursions into British waters – should have produced a semi-abstract figure with all the brooding power of the 'Watcher' theme explored earlier by Lynn Chadwick and other members of the Cold-War generation. Avian Form can be seen in a range of sizes and materials in the sculpture park, including

a monumental version in corten steel dating from 2011. A diminutive early concrete version of Avian Form also greets visitors arriving at the entrance to Coventry's home. Its small scale notwithstanding, it loses none of the unsettling alertness of its larger cousin; an even smaller version in bronze was exhibited at the Peggy Guggenheim Museum in Venice.

Among the most popular works in the park are the human figure sculptures, including an atmospherically-positioned figure of Pomona who stands, symbolic apple in hand, within her own sheltered glade. She is surely a highly personal cubistic homage to Marino Marini, whose Pomona of 1945 is also in the gardens of the Guggenheim Museum in Venice. Here in Coverack, the goddess of fertility seems to be gazing serenely into the surrounding foliage as if awaiting the arrival of a suitor.

Something of the spirit of Chadwick and Marini seems also to have found its way into the Vital Man series. The beautiful charcoal drawings related to these bronzes betray a preoccupation with sculptural structure wherein the form is distilled down to an arrangement of ghostly vibrations on the paper that seem to be dematerializing as we look. The corresponding bronzes appear to flex and stretch, but unlike Chadwick, the trace of whose armatures were often emphatically left visible on the exterior of the work, Coventry encloses and finishes his figures and thereby achieves a much greater suppleness and formal elegance. The hatched lines of the drawings now reappear as geometrically scarified surfaces that direct the eye, reinforcing a sense of the body's internal musculature. It is hard not to see in these works the reverberations of Coventry's own responses to Marini's fallen horses and riders following a visit to the Marini Museum in Florence:

It was an outstanding moment for both of us. There was a little round alcove there about fifteen feet in diameter with an archway going into it and in the middle of it was one of the extreme riders and the horse is almost vertical and the rider was sliding off the back and... God! This was like an electric shock to both of us...it was just incredible. There weren't words to describe it. We were just speechless.

Avian Form
2011
Corten Steel
Unique
183cm high

NEXT PAGE
Pomona
2005
Ferroconcrete
Unique
237cm high

Coventry was often told that if he was to succeed he would need to forge his own sculptural grammar, his own recognizable style. He was generally scornful of such market-driven notions, but it is instructive that despite his obvious admiration for the tortured drama of Marini Agonistes, those heart-stopping exemplars never overpowered his own voice. All artists draw on earlier precedents, but few emerge with what Alan Bowness once described as "an extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation and original thought."[11] Coventry has that capacity in abundance.

Among those recognising Coventry's creative imagination was David Cornwell, better known as the novelist John le Carré, himself a resident of Cornwall. Having found their way to Gallery Pangolin, the Pangolin Editions gallery in Gloucestershire, Cornwell and his wife Jane immediately identified with Coventry's work and became avid collectors. Only later did they discover that the artist was their near neighbour in the West Country and soon the two couples became friends. Fascinated by Coventry's life journey and his successful revival of his artistic gifts, Cornwell wrote about him in an article in The Times in 2007, in which he recalled first encountering the work at Gallery Pangolin: "Perhaps I had unconsciously recognised, from my own cliff, the same raucous, swirling forms of bird, beast and cloud. Here was a sculptor who knew his characters from life, I had felt. He abstracted from them, he refined them, and he made us smile and nod and say, 'That's right'."[12] Given the importance Coventry himself attaches to identifying a 'rightness' or 'wrongness' in the works he makes, this endorsement meant a great deal. The Times article had an immediate impact on Coventry's profile, increasing the international demand for his work. The Cornwells remain major supporters, recently commissioning the large Balanced Man for their Cornish residence. Coventry insists that without the generous support of the Cornwells and the expert guidance of Rungwe Kingdon and Claude Koenig he would still be working in relative isolation in his Coverack workshop, the wider world blissfully ignorant of his endeavours.

Balanced Man
2011
Bronze
Edition of 5
245 cm high

As his international reputation grows, Coventry continues to attract local attention in the West Country, and not only through his admired An Gof commission. The British photographer Steve Russell once photographed Coventry in his studio, showing him with his arms folded, nonchalantly leaning against a massive plaster and steel maquette of a bull. His relaxed posture contrasts with the taut, thrusting power of the beast behind him. On encountering bulls in art, the stock tendency is often to glance back to Picasso, the master of the tauromachia. Picasso's identification with the bull was forged in the sun-baked corridas of his native Spain. Coventry's comes from the gale-battered coastal fields of West Cornwall and as such has its own singular power, as Russell's photograph makes clear. Standing ten feet high at the shoulder, the bull generated something of a fan-club among the blacksmiths frequenting the local metal-treatment works where Coventry has his steel sculptures powder-coated. Situated just outside Falmouth, the plant is also close to the local art school. One day the manager called him up and said, "You've got to come over here and sort out this bloody mess." Coventry said, "What bloody mess?" "I've got loads of students outside here looking at your bull and this is supposed to be a work place!"

A version of the bull was eventually acquired as a monument to the last British matador to perish in a Spanish bullring, surely a testament to Coventry's innate feeling for communicating the brute power of a noble animal. Looking again at Russell's photograph, few images better communicate the logic of Coventry's sculptural vision. His sculpture reminds us that we perceive the world first and foremost through its surfaces exposed to light. When those surfaces are fashioned into simple planes and experienced through touch, they reinforce our cognitive assumptions about mass, volume, weight and so on, which have always been the core preoccupations of 'real' sculptors.

One senses it was the primal, vital qualities of the three-dimensional world that directed Coventry down the corridors of Exhibition Road in the late 1950s towards the Royal College's sculpture department.

Standing Couple
2012
Bronze
Edition of 10
31cm high

NEXT PAGE
Terence Coventry in his studio with Standing Bull III
2006

Banished from that quest, it took him all of forty years to retrace his steps back into the labyrinth in which he belonged and where the bull was awaiting him. It was a journey worth making and one of which we are all now reaping the rewards.

Tom Flynn

Watcher
2005
Painted Ferro-concrete
Unique
200cm high

Predator
1983
Elm
Unique
59cm high

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PERSONAL INSIGHTS

'When I initially found my language I found it much easier to make animalia or birdforms by simplifying them and working in a more linear way than I did with the human form. I found it much more difficult to treat the human form in the same way and made several attempts which I thought were totally unsatisfactory. The turning point was thanks to Michelangelo's 'The Dying Slave' which I have a small copy of. I took it into my workshop and tried to translate it using the same treatment of form that I'd been using with animals. It was never cast or actually finished but somehow it unlocked something and I became much more able to deal with the human form.'

Woman on Bench
2011
Bronze
Edition of 10
28.5cm high

RIGHT
Undressing Woman
1998
Bronze
Edition of 10
60cm high

‘I have a habit of working in series so if I zero in on a subject matter I’ll often need to work it out in a series of two, three or even four versions in different sizes and then I’ll move onto something else.’

Crouching Figure
2011
Bronze
Edition of 20
8cm high

RIGHT
Swimmer
2000
Bronze
Edition of 10
50cm high

NEXT PAGE
Talking Couple
2008
Bronze
Edition of 10
32cm high

LEFT
Monumental Vital
Man VI
2008
Bronze
Edition of 5
208cm high

Vital Man III
2008
Bronze
Edition of 10
21cm high

Couple II Maquette
2006
Bronze
Edition of 10
27cm high

RIGHT
Couple III
2011
Bronze
Edition of 10
29cm high

'...the surface texture on the plasters is not haphazard. The way the surface texture is manipulated is definitely deliberate and through experience I've learnt that I can alter the viewer's perception of the form by the way that texture is applied. I can accentuate or flatten out a form by its texture and I spend as much time on the final surface texture of a plaster work as I do on the making - it's a very deliberate process and its very important to me personally. I've got no idea how important it is to the viewer but I'm not concerned with that. I'm concerned with my response to what I'm doing and how satisfied I am with it.'

LEFT
Couple I
2007
Bronze
Edition of 5
66cm high

Vital Man V
2007
Bronze
Edition of 10
30.5cm high

PROFILE

Terence Coventry was born in 1938. He grew up in Birmingham and studied at Stourbridge School of Art and the Royal College, London.

Rooted in a strong figurative tradition, his sculpture exists in spite of any vagaries or trends in the art world. His is an intensely personal art, practical and unpretentious, honest and imbued with great integrity. Coventry's work explores animals familiar to us: birds, bulls and boars, images drawn from his long association with the land and its occupants. These are not idealised portraits of champion show animals nor nostalgic images from a rural past; his sculpture celebrates our interdependence with the animal world and that makes his subjects relevant to us. We recognise and feel connected to them.

Coventry exhibits widely and regularly in prestigious major exhibitions as well as solo shows. His sculptures are held in public and private collections both in Britain and internationally.

LEFT
Goat I
2004
Bronze
Edition of 5
158cm high

Goat II
2006
Bronze
Edition of 5
88cm high

LEFT
Horse Head I
Maquette
2006
Bronze
Edition of 10
49cm high

Horse Head II
Maquette
2006
Bronze
Edition of 10
49cm high

Selected Exhibitions

2012
'Hands On' Solo exhibition, Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Sculptors' Drawings and Works on Paper' Pangolin London, Kings Place, London.
'Best in Show' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Sculptors' Prints and Drawings' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.

2011
'Sculpture at Lords Wood' in collaboration with Messum's, London.
'Terence Coventry' Solo exhibition, Pangolin London, Kings Place, London.
'Sculptors' Prints and Drawings' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Ten Years of British Sculpture' Harold Martin Botanic Gardens, Leicester University.
'Fresh Air' Quenington Sculpture Trust, Glos.

2010
'Crucible - the Sculpture Show of the Decade' Gloucester Cathedral.
'Abstract and Nature' Hatfield House, Herts.
'Head, Hands and Heart' Harold Martin Botanic Gardens, University of Leicester.
'Stirred for a Bird' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Sculptors' Prints and Drawings' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.

2009
'Terence Coventry : Sculpture Prints and Drawings' Solo exhibition, Pangolin London, Kings Place, London.
'Sculptors' Prints and Drawings' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.

2008
'Coventry Comes to Wells' Solo exhibition, The Bishop's Palace, Wells.
'Sterling Stuff II' Pangolin London, Kings Place, London.

2007
'Autumn Show' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Fresh Air' Quenington Sculpture Trust, Glos.

2006
'Terence Coventry : Sculpture, Prints and Drawings' Solo exhibition, Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Terence Coventry Monumental Bronzes' Solo exhibition, Nature in Art Museum, Gloucester.
'Animals and Birds' Jubilee Park, Canary Wharf, London.

Avian Form III
1995
Bronze
Edition of 10
40cm high

2005 *'Out of the Melting Pot'* Dexia Banque, Luxemburg.
'Body Language' Gallery Pangolin, Glos.

2004 *'Mixed Exhibition'* New Craftsman Gallery, St Ives.
'Sterling Stuff' Sigurjon Olafsson Museum, Reykjavik.

2003 *'In Retrospect'* Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Synergy' UBS, Mayfair, London.
'Sterling Stuff' Royal Academy, London.

2002 *'Sterling Stuff'* Gallery Pangolin, Glos.
'Thinking Big' The Peggy Guggenheim Museum, Venice.
'Mixed Exhibition' Fowey River Gallery, Cornwall.

2001 *'Fresh Air'* Quenington Sculpture Trust, Glos.
'Mixed Exhibition' Maltby Contemporary Art, Winchester.

2000 *'Sculpture 2000'* Milton Keynes General Hospital.
'Terence Coventry - Recent Sculpture' Solo exhibition, Gallery Pangolin, Glos.

Raven
2008
Bronze
Edition of 10
32.5cm high

Owl
2002
Sterling Silver
Edition of 10
14cm high

RIGHT
Jackdaw
2008
Sterling Silver
Edition of 10
18.5cm high

NEXT PAGE
Jackdaws on
Chimney
2006
Bronze & stainless
steel
Edition of 10
49cm high

Selected Public and Private Collections

2011	*'Balanced Man'* 245cm high bronze, privately commissioned.
2010	*'Owl II'* 160cm high bronze purchased for John and Margaret Trail Collection, Wembley, Australia
2008	*'Boar II'* 100cm high bronze purchased for John and Margaret Trail Collection, Wembley, Australia.
2003	*'Boar II'* 100cm high bronze purchased for Descordes Sculpture Park, Arles, France.
2002	*'Boar II'* 100cm high bronze purchased for Peter and Nancy Schiffer Collection, Pennsylvania, USA.
2000	*'Monumental Avian Form'* 133cm high bronze, Sculpture at Goodwood, Sussex.
1999	*'Charging Bull'* 183cm high bronze, privately commissioned. *'Monumental Avian Form'* 133cm high bronze purchased for Lord Peter Carrington's Collection.
1997	*'Unicorn'* 160cm high bronze, privately commissioned.
1996	*'An Gof'* 244cm high bronze, St Keverne, Cornwall.
1983	*'Predator'* 59cm high elm carving, Nature in Art Museum, Twigworth, Glos.

LEFT
Tree of Jackdaws
2011
Bronze & stainless
steel
Edition of 10
75.5cm high

Choughs
2006
Bronze & stainless
steel
Edition of 10
60cm high

Publications

'King's Cross, A Sense of Place'
Angela Inglis with Nigel Buckner, Matador 2012
ISBN: 978 1 78088 331 1

'Sculpture at Canary Wharf: A Decade of Exhibitions'
Theresa Bergne, Ann Elliott, Sally Williams
The Canary Wharf Group 2011
ISBN: 9780956364814

'Crucible'
Nicholas Bury, Rungwe Kingdon
Chapter of Gloucester Cathedral 2010
ISBN: 9780903770095

'Modern British Sculpture'
Guy Portelli, Schiffer Publishing Ltd 2005
ISBN: 0 7643 2111 0

'Bronze Sculpture - Casting and Patination - Mud Fire Metal'
Steve Hurst, Schiffer Publishing Ltd 2005
ISBN: 0 7643 2164 1

'Sculpture at Goodwood - British Contemporary Sculpture 02/03'
Sculpture at Goodwood 2003
ISBN: 0 9537794 1 6

'A Vision for Twenty First Century British Sculpture'
Sculpture at Goodwood 2002
ISBN: 0 9537794 2 4

'Concepts for Twenty First Century British Sculpture; Thinging Big'
Sculpture at Goodwood 2002
ISBN: 0 9537794 3 2

'The Alchemy of Sculpture'
Tony Birks-Hay, Marston House 1998 and 2004
ISBN: 1 899296 07 7 (Hardback) 1 899296 20 4 (Paperback)

Corten Owl
2012
Corten Steel
Unique
67.5cm high

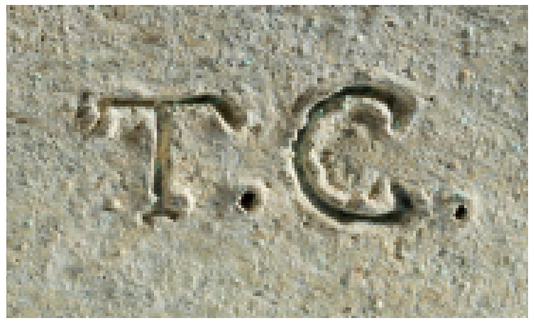
Related Articles:

'Natural Born Sculptor'
John le Carré
The Times 07.04.2007

'Pig farmer ploughs a new furrow in sculpture'
Lindsay Poulton, Michael Tait
Guardian Online 06.01.2010

Corten Bird II
2011
Corten Steel
Unique
141cm high

NEXT PAGE
Corten Bird I
2011
Corten Steel
Unique
86cm high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