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COMMENT: The many faces of Norman Cornish

As the University Gallery prepares to open its doors to a new exhibition of work by the late Norman Cornish, Gallery Director and agent, Mara-Helen Wood, discusses the famous artist's life and work.

In 1959, Lew Lewenhak, producer of the Tyne Tees TV documentary 'The Burning Question' commissioned Norman Cornish to produce "lots of drawings of working men's heads" for the programme which was scheduled to be networked nationally.

Norman recalls that he made many trips to the local pubs and clubs to find and draw ‘interesting’ heads. “I remember saying to my wife Sarah, ‘well, I’m a bit tired, but I suppose that I’ll have to go along to the pub and get on with my work.’ I was rather fond of a pint and Sarah would look up at me and reply with a touch of humour... ‘oh yes, it must be awful for you.’”

Brown Ale apart, the task came naturally to him. As he explained in the recent indispensable publication ‘The Lost World of Norman Cornish’, he didn’t deliberately set out to make a social record, he was “simply attracted to humanity”. So here they all are, living again in dozens of drawings that were discovered fifty-five years later amongst many other sketches and studies in his Spennymoor studio. Percy Smith in the ‘Wheatsheaf’, Charlie in the ‘Albert’, Mink in the ‘Raglan’ and Dougy Berriman in the ‘Bridge’ are united once more with Little Bobby Bell, Tosser Angus, Chore, Yorky, Charlie and many other canny lads.

In the latter years of his career Cornish recognised that his world had changed. “The local collieries have gone ... together with the pit road,” he said, and so had the people and the way of life that the pits had sustained. ‘The Lost World’ theme, however, prompts several questions, the most interesting being whether Norman’s achievement could ever be repeated? Probably not, is the answer. It would need a remarkably talented figure working 30 years in a lethally dangerous environment, the support and camaraderie below ground and above of his ‘marras’ as well as that of a close-knit community. No, definitely not, Norman was a one-off.

NORMAN CORNISH (1919 – 2014): The Many Faces of Cornish runs from 7 November – 23 January 2015 at the University Gallery.

The Gallery is open Monday to Thursday 10am – 5pm, Friday and Saturday 10am – 4pm. Closed Sundays, Bank Holidays and from 25 December 2014 to 2 January 2015. Admission is free. www.universitygallery.co.uk

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