

*Bob Coon's latest sculptures were inspired by two angry ladies named Frances & Jeanne.*

## THE MESSAGE IN THE METAL

BY WILLI MILLER



*Quetzalcoatl's Declination, painted aluminum, 12 feet in height*

Bob Coon's affinity for metal could easily be considered a preordained destiny. The Vero Beach sculptor, whose large, dramatic pieces have been seen in shows and museums around the country, was born and grew up just outside Bessemer City, a small textile community in North Carolina. That's Bessemer as in Bessemer furnace. Bob says he has been involved with melting metal all his life, but only recently discovered that his great-grandfather was a traveling Bessemer furnace builder.

Although he didn't know it at the time, Bob's small-town childhood was the bedrock on which he would build his career as a sculptor. Left to his own devices in a neighborhood short of children his age, the world he played in came from his imagination. If he imagined aliens and space ships, he gathered wood, tools and paint and made himself a ray gun. "Basically, I grew up making the things I saw in my imagination," he explains. Decades later, he has reversed the procedure, taking the materials he has at hand, imagining a scenario and making a sculpture from that scenario.

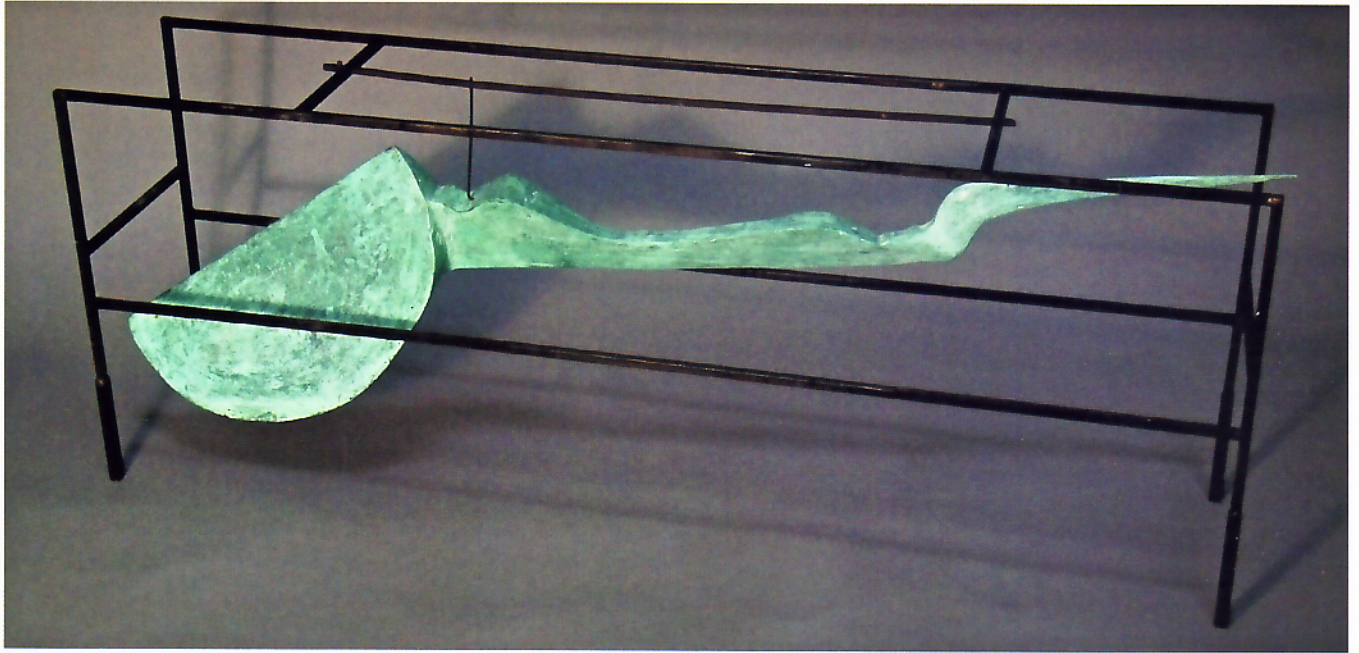
Although the pieces Bob is best known for are three-dimensional, his bachelor in Fine Arts degree from the University of Georgia was in drawing and painting. He doesn't hesitate to admit that when he first decided to study art, it meant painting "because I didn't know there was anything else."





*Hurricane Debris Series Projectile Contained, mixed media metallic foil, styrene sheet, twigs Approximately 12x14x16 inches*





*Containment Series 004, painted bronze, approximately 32x8x12 inches*

Once exposed to sculpture, however, his thoughts became “less painterly” and he began to add the third dimension to his creations.

When he went on to the University of Massachusetts for his master’s degree, he chose sculpture for a major, with a minor in printmaking. Since then, he has preferred making art that’s real and has presence—pieces “you have to walk around because they’re in your way.”

For Bob, a painting is symbolism rather than a real object. In his mind, he says, all painting is abstract because it isn’t the actual thing in the painting, but a symbol for that thing. For him, a sculpture is real, and his nature calls him to make that real thing rather than a symbol for it.

Bob tends to create in series, with each new piece inspired by the things that were happening around him while he was working on the previous piece. They begin as sketches—“small, quick marks”—sometimes two dozen variations on one idea before an object begins to take shape in his mind. He sketches in pen and ink for the most part, occasionally adding color with colored pencils. Then he makes a bigger drawing on better paper with colored pencil before picking up the first piece of metal.

He admits that the finished sculpture might not look much like his sketches. He considers the drawings concrete thoughts, not blueprints to be followed meticulously. Those thoughts must be noted the moment they come into



*Bob Coon's sculptures begin as pen-and-ink sketches*





Bob Coon at work on a new creation in his studio at the Museum of Art

his head, Bob says, because if he doesn't record them immediately, they go away. He notices shapes in clouds and the landscape around him but never tries to duplicate them, simply pulling the elements into his creative mind and storing them for use in his future work.

In September 2004, unexpected changes in the Treasure Coast landscape created by hurricanes Frances and Jeanne led Bob from the "Containment" series he had been working on to the series that has taken up most of his time since. He will talk about the differences in the two series, but not until he points out the similarities.

Before the hurricanes, he says, his work juxtaposed flowing curves and organic shapes against geometrics. "Part of what was important to me was the negative space inside the geometry—the empty part, not the metal that was there," he explains. But as he began to look at his altered, post-hurricane surroundings, the artist's eye that had captured images of clouds and other familiar shapes in nature were drawn to the wild arrangements created by the storms' fury.

In his mind, the debris that had blown up into the trees near Disney's Vero Beach Resort had formed pieces of sculpture as handsome as the aluminum, wood and bronze he had recently been working on.

"The Hurricane Debris series came to me in a logical progression from the pieces in my Containment series. In many cases it was a human-made, carefully shaped object that was now precariously perched within a natural thing, or was mangled and about to fall out of that natural thing," he explains.





*Hurricane Debris Series Eyewall, steel, aluminum and wood, 7 feet high*

"That quality is what I saw after the hurricanes. I do believe it was a natural progression."

Most of Bob's materials for the extensive Hurricane Debris series were picked from the enormous mounds of rubble left in the wake of the storms, but in some cases, objects now balanced within the broken twigs and mangled scraps he had collected were metal shapes he created in the sculpture studio at the Vero Beach Museum of Art—in effect, continuing the Containment series but from a different perspective.

The sculptor says he might have one more piece of

sculpture to make in the Debris series, which was begun after the hurricane damage to his home and studio had been dealt with. Then again, maybe he won't, because he wouldn't have the actual debris he would need. He emphatically states that his one great desire is never to have a reason to create a Hurricane Debris series, Pt. II!

Bob always has several pieces in progress simultaneously, so the year after the hurricanes the Containment group of sculptures was moving forward, giving him relief from contemplating the ravages of the storms. And while all of that was progressing, he began another, as yet unnamed, series. There's a twinkle in his eye when he says he knows he will never have enough years in his lifetime to make all of the pieces he sees in his mind.



*Hurricane Debris FEMA Pick-up, mixed media steel, aluminum, twigs, shingles 6 feet high*





*Hurricane Debris Series 005, mixed media, 8x8x8 inches*

It isn't difficult to identify Bob Coon's home near the Environmental Learning Center. It's the one with the huge, blue sculpture pointing skyward, inspired by the silhouette of a mountain range off the Blue Ridge Parkway, which had been exhibited at the North Carolina state arboretum. The vibrant colors of much of his work are the same kind of paint that Piper Aircraft puts on its planes, Bob explains. He often tints clearcoat with his own dry pigments, the same kind of pigments that would have been used by the great masters of paint-

ing. But he might just as easily choose to buy a gallon of Corvette yellow or Ford truck red, he says. He's been told that he would be a curator's nightmare because no one would ever be able to find the color needed to touch up his pieces. On the piece in front of his house he used clearcoat with phthalo blue, a transparent color that lets the metal show through the paint.

Bob would be hard pressed to estimate how long it might take him to complete one of his sculptures because he is always working on more than one. He does count on mak-





Figurescape III, painted aluminum, 9x6x9 feet

ing one of the larger, very labor-intensive pieces each year plus an additional three smaller pieces. The time he has available depends on the number of classes he has on his teaching schedule at the Vero Beach Museum of Art, which has been his base of operations since its doors opened in 1986 as the Center for the Arts.

Bob recalls that Jane Howard, a teacher at Indian River Community College, told him that the center, still under construction, was in need of a sculptor. The day she told him was the last day for applications to be submitted, but he managed to get his in on time, was accepted and became the artist-in-residence for several years before funding for the position ran out.

"A selfish artist" is how Bob describes himself. "I love when people like my art but I don't make it for them. I want to do it my way. Frankly, every time I have had someone see a sculpture in process and then it becomes a commission, I'm not as happy with the outcome because I've relinquished control. Unfortunately, I haven't had anyone yet say, 'I want you to make me one and I

don't care what it looks like.'"

Shadowing Bob in the sculpture studio at the museum is not like watching Demi Moore and Patrick Swayze in the famous sculpting scene in the movie *Ghost*. Creating sculpture in metal is hot, hard, dirty work, but Bob lives for it. The electric arc welder he uses sends out heat the strength of the sun, he says. "The heat is awful!" His work clothes are leather gloves and apron, a full face mask, and maybe leather leggings and foot covers.

He likes to begin a large piece by creating it on a small scale out of thin plastic or cardboard. He knows that if he can cut, fold and bend that material, then he can do it in sheet metal. This way he resolves any potential construction problems before they pop up in the studio.

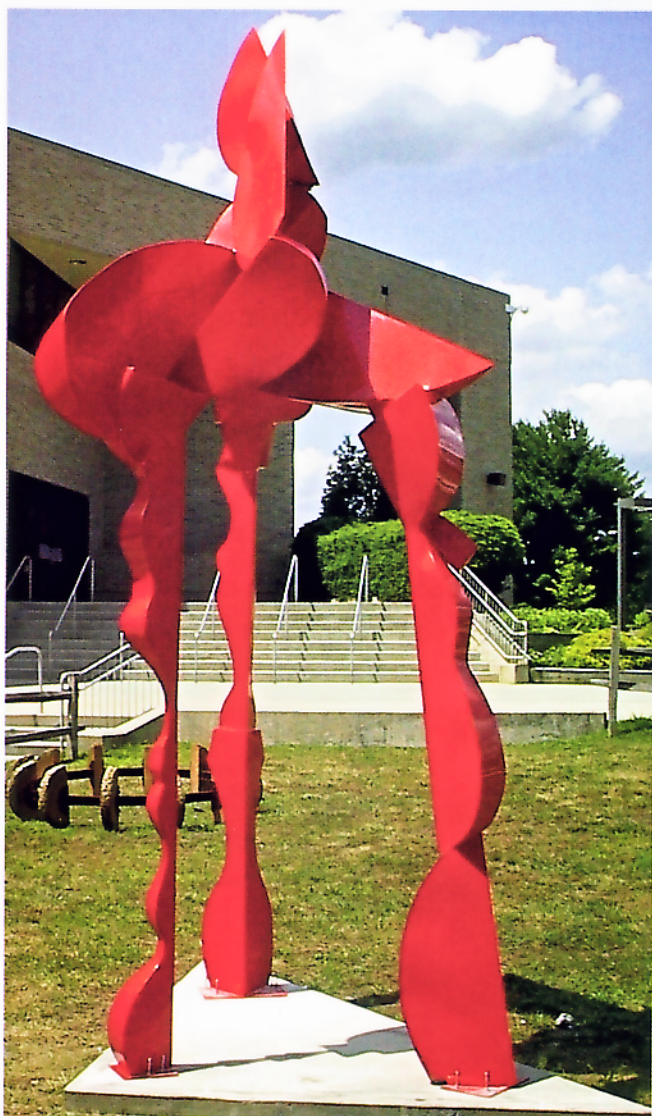
Most of his work these days is made from 4-foot by 12-foot sheets of aluminum. Bob's starting point is cutting the sheet into more manageable 4-foot by 6-foot pieces, then using an electric shear to cut out the pieces he later will bend and weld at the museum's studio.

The pieces are tack-welded until they're in just the right configuration. At that point, the die is cast and the final welding begins. To the inexperienced eye, this rough-welded piece seems an impossible distance from a finished Bob Coon sculpture, but the end is in sight. Bob grinds the welds before giving the piece the acid bath that shows him a mental picture of the finished work. After a coat of an epoxy primer, it's ready for painting—and then an exhibition. Five or six of these large pieces rotate through exhibits at any given time. Not long ago, several of them returned—unharmful, he reports with a smile—from a two-year traveling exhibit.

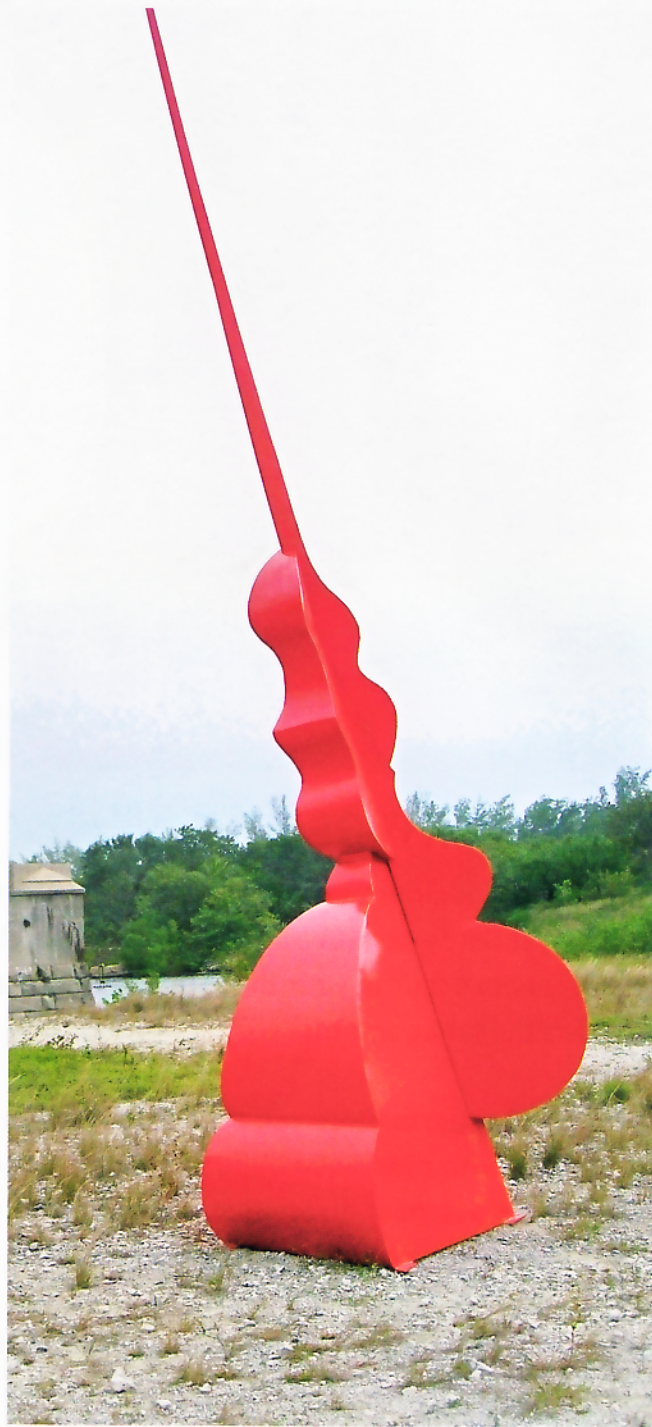




*My Big Red 2 in the studio before assembly.*



*My Big Red, painted aluminum, 15 feet high*



*My Big Red 2, painted aluminum, 12.5 feet high*

Officially, Bob Coon is retired and says he soon will have to stop making the big pieces on his own. He's very sure, though, that he won't do that until he absolutely has to. It's just his nature. ☘