

DIRECTIONS

SUE COE

MARCH 17-JUNE 19, 1994



U.S. Military Successfully Bombs a Mental Hospital in Grenada, 1984.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

AN ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT PERSPECTIVE informs the work of Sue Coe. In exposing what she defines as negative aspects of social reality, she expresses support for those she sees as victims of oppression. Her exaggerated spatial compositions, somber lighting, and bold contrasts of line and color convey her rage against perceived social inequities. The forceful vitality and unrelenting focus of her pictures compel us to confront issues of universal concern.

Sue Coe was born in 1951 to a working-class family in Tamworth, England, near Birmingham. Dating to the eighth century, Tamworth is known for a breed of pigs adapted to produce high-grade bacon. The pungent sounds and smells of the neighborhood slaughterhouses are among Coe's earliest memories.

Attracted by art but faced with the prospect of earning a living, she decided to pursue a career in commercial art. With government financial support, she studied illustration at the Royal College of Art in London. Coe remembers that although she "received no training whatsoever" during her years at art school, she did enjoy access to materials and equipment as well as to an excellent library.¹ She also recalls that the supportive atmosphere at the college permitted artists to freely express themselves: "We shaved our heads and . . . incorporated razor blades and blood in our paintings."²

In 1972 Coe moved to New York, where she began to draw illustrations on commission for the *New York Times* and other publications. During her early years in New York she became familiar with the work of the Berlin Dadaists and New Realists—John Heartfield, George Grosz, Otto Dix, and others. Their revolutionary fervor advanced the development of her own activist attitude.

Coe describes herself as "a regular, common person who has an intense curiosity about how the economic crime of capitalism . . . impacts on people. Art stems from conflict. When we have true civilization, art will stem from challenge." Identifying her work as "gutter journalism," Coe manipulates images to locate what she perceives to be society's hidden truths. She considers herself a journalist rather than an artist: "I do all my work for reproduction, for the masses, for the millions of people who read newspapers and magazines, not for just the few who come to art galleries." Conveying a message more immediate than the printed word, her drawings and paintings speak directly to the viewer. Not solely illustrations of brutality, her images stand as icons of protest. Coe examines wide-ranging abuses of power: economic oppression, sexual exploitation, and cruelty toward animals.

In her role as artist-journalist, Sue Coe often produces illustrations for the *New York Times* editorial-opinion section. Some appear in the newspaper's Russian-language edition sold in Moscow. *The West against the Rest*, 1993, accompanied a column entitled "The Coming Clash of Civilizations." Coe comments on the article: "Countries break apart into smaller ethnic or economic states. Long ago capitalism encouraged ethnic and territorial rivalry. That time is repeated today."

The issue of apartheid prompted Coe to make many works investigating the politics of race in South Africa. In *We Come Grimacing into Your Paradise*, 1982, the viewer witnesses a scene of perverse madness. A male figure, splayed on a torture table, represents the South African homeland. Under his translucent skin appear insects denoting social and moral decay. Five sadistic monsters, one marked with a dollar and a pound sign on his palms and a masked head on his chest, besiege the victim. The frightening surrealism of this dark portrait brings alive the physical substance of often-overlooked news headlines. When she made this picture, Coe was also thinking about Nazi Germany and "how Fascists court violence against people who cannot defend themselves."

Coe's concern for the oppressed extends to victims of rape. In *Woman Walks into Bar—Is Raped by 4 Men on the Pool Table—While 20 Watch*, 1983, the artist comments on the rape of a twenty-one-year-old woman in a New Bedford, Massachusetts, tavern. Scanning the scene from overhead, the picture's perspective spotlights all those present: the victim, the rapists, and the male observers. Wearing a sign with the words "I'm blind, help me to see," a man, pointing at the scene, underscores the moral impotence of the participants and voyeurs. Another product of human oppression and poverty is portrayed in *New York 1985: Car Hookers Age 13*, 1985 (colorplate), which examines the dark side of Manhattan street life. The tangible results of the social matrix governing child prostitution are depicted: poverty, drugs, and violence. Steam rising from a utility-hole cover forms ghostly apparitions warning of what Coe sees as the "condemned, throwaway children who litter the streets of America."

In *U.S. Military Successfully Bombs a Mental Hospital in Grenada*, 1984 (cover), Coe describes her response to the American-led invasion of a Caribbean island in 1983. The dramatic composition brings together bleak images of destruction and mayhem. Flames silhouette a somber head-like figure with a window-eye and gate-mouth. Surmounting the scene, the shrouded form directs our attention to the cavern below in which people huddle



Wheel of Fortune, 1989. Brody's Gallery, Washington, D.C. Photograph courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

together. For Coe, the crowned man with bent torso and outspread limbs portrays "a type of patient who [thinks of himself] as the classic archetype of a mad king who feels invulnerable to destruction." Another view of military conflict is depicted in *War*, 1991, which comments on America's involvement in the Persian Gulf crisis. In a powerful formal arrangement, components of destruction and helplessness fill the picture frame.

In his autobiography civil-rights leader Malcolm X reminisces about living in Detroit and attending religious services near hog-slaughtering pens: "the squealing of hogs being slaughtered filtered into our Wednesday and Friday meetings."³ Although the artist does not often employ irony in her work, the viewer cannot ignore the association in *Malcolm X and the*

Slaughterhouse, 1985, between the messianic figure of Malcolm X, the slaughterhouse workers in the background, and the leader's own murder. Coe discounts any obvious relation between this work and her later series "Porkopolis": "What I am trying to do . . . is to make something extraordinary out of . . . ordinary connections in history."

Since 1988 Coe has produced more than one hundred drawings for the series "Porkopolis." In these pictures she represents neglect and cruelty as commonplace occurrences in the slaughtering of animals by the American meat-packing industry. Stark images of brutality replace the baroque depictions of her earlier drawings. Three works from this group draw from her experience working on "Porkopolis." *Wheel of Fortune*, 1989



Judas Sheep, 1990. Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

(ill.), depicts a hog hoist, a device used to raise animal carcasses. The viewer's attention is drawn to the perimeter of the wheel, where clusters of white-clad workers perform their bloody tasks. Coe's operatic spatial organization recalls the eighteenth-century architectural renderings of imaginary prisons ("Carceri d'invenzione") by G. B. Piranesi. Coe says that *Slaughterhouse, Tucson*, 1989, describes "one of the first slaughterhouses I went to. It was very small. The animals were outside in one-hundred-degree heat without water for several days." In *Judas Sheep*, 1990 (ill.), two animals lure others into a bloody shed. To develop their trust in humans, slaughterhouse workers treat the "Judas" like pets but eventually they kill them.

Several aspects of the Clarence Thomas nomination hearings for the Supreme Court fascinated Coe. In *Think You America (Anita Hill)*, 1991, Coe analyzes the body language exhibited by members of the Senate Judiciary Committee: "They kept touching each other, as though bonding together. Their different political ideologies did not matter at all. So it's that I am capturing, not Anita Hill. I think the rest of the country was also watching the males in the background. This whole thing reminded me of a witch hunt. . . . We know why witches were burnt. They knew the Bible, they could read, they had knowledge, they threatened the priest class—the ruling class—and had to be disposed of."

Homeless Woman Dressed in Garbage Bags, 1992, represents "the sign of humanity on our streets: a woman



New York 1985: *Car Hookers Age 13*, 1985. Speyer Family Collection.

who had no clothing except garbage bags." Coe reduces the composition to starkly contrasting strokes of black and white, effectively rendering a memorable image of misery and deprivation.

While her images offer no solution to social problems, Sue Coe believes that greed and injustice speak for themselves and that individuals, and not institutions, will one day produce a world of freedom and justice.

Frank Gettings
Curator of Prints and Drawing

Notes

All works are copyright Sue Coe. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations by Sue Coe are from an interview with the author, New York, October 8, 1993.

1. Claude Marks, ed., *World Artists, 1980-1990: An H. W. Wilson Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Wilson, 1991), p. 105.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964; New York: Ballantine, 1992), 224.

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Tamworth (Staffordshire), England, February 21, 1951. Attended Royal College of Art, London, 1970-73. Lives and works in New York.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 1979 *All Over Manhattan*, Thumb Gallery, London.
- 1982 *Sue Coe*, Moira Kelly Fine Art, London.
- 1983 *Paintings and Drawings by Sue Coe*, PPOW Gallery, New York.
- 1985 *Sue Coe*, PPOW Gallery, New York.
- 1986 *Sue Coe X*, Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago.
- 1987 *Sue Coe: Police State*, Anderson Gallery/School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, and tour.
- 1988 *New Works: Sue Coe*, City Gallery of Contemporary Art, Raleigh, N.C.
- 1989 *Sue Coe: Perkopolis—Animals and Industry*, Galerie St. Etienne, New York, and tour.
- 1991 *Sue Coe. Retrospective: Political Document of a Decade*, Galerie St. Etienne, New York, and Brody's Gallery, Washington D.C.
- 1993 *Perkopolis: Sue Coe's Jungle*, Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Mass.
- Sue Coe: Current Events, Prints and Drawings*, Maryland Art Place, Baltimore.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1980 *Women's Images of Men*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and tour.
- 1981 *Images of Labor*, 1199 Gallery, Local 1199 Hospital & Health Care Employees Union, AFL-CIO, New York, and tour.
- 1984 *The Human Condition: SFMMA Biennial III*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
- 1986 *Seventy-fifth American Exhibition*, Art Institute of Chicago.
- 1987 *Atant-garde in the Eighties*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- Morality Tales: History Painting in the 1980s*, Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, New York, and tour.
- 1988 *Committed to Print*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- 1989 *A Different War: Vietnam in Art*, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, Bellingham, Washington, and tour.
- 1990 *Documentations: Sue Coe: Perkopolis; Paul Marcas: The Story of Yonsee*, Brody's Gallery, Washington D.C.
- 1991 *Art of Advocacy*, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn.
- Artists of Conscience*, Alternative Museum, New York.
- 1992 *Malcolm X: Man, Ideal, Icon*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, and tour.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barter, Judith, and Anne Mochon. *Perkopolis: Sue Coe's Jungle*. Exhibition catalog. Amherst, Mass.: Trustees of Amherst College, 1993.
- Coe, Mandy. *Sue Coe: Police State*. Exhibition catalog. Essays by Donald Kuspit and Marilyn Zeitlin. Richmond, Va.: Anderson Gallery/School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1987.
- Coe, Sue. "Liverpool's Children." *The New Yorker*, December 13, 1993, pp. 102-7. Illustrations with text.
- _____. *Paintings and Drawings*. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow 1985.
- _____. *X*. New York: Raw Books and Graphics, 1986.
- _____, and Holly Metz. *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*. New York: Raw Books and Graphics, 1983.
- Gill, Susan. "Sue Coe's Inferno." *Art News* 86 (October 1987): 110-15.
- Kuspit, Donald B. "Sue Coe." *Artforum* 24 (September 1985): 129.
- Yau, John. "Sue Coe." *Flash Art* 128 (May-June 1986): 46-47.

CHECKLIST

- We Come Grinning into Your Paradise*, 1982. Mixed-media collage; 128.9 x 177 cm (50 3/4 x 70 in.). Daniel Jacobs and Derek Mason Collection.
- Woman Walks into Bar—Is Raped by 4 Men on the Pool Table—While 20 Watch*, 1983. Mixed-media collage; 232.4 x 287 cm (91 1/2 x 113 in.). Elaine and Werner Dannheisser.
- U.S. Military Successfully Bombs a Mental Hospital in Grenada*, 1984. Oil on paper; 111.7 x 95.2 cm (44 x 37 1/2 in.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Van Day Traax Fund (1985.157.1).
- Malcolm X and the Slaughterhouse*, 1985. Oil and collage on paper; 167.3 x 139.7 cm (65 7/8 x 55 1/4 in.). Don Hanson Collection.
- New York 1985: Car Hookers Age 13*, 1985. Mixed-media collage; 243.8 x 304.9 cm (96 x 120 in.). Speyer Family Collection.
- Slaughterhouse*, Tucson, 1989. Mixed-media collage; 246.4 x 198.1 cm (97 x 78 in.). Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.
- Wheel of Fortune*, 1989. Mixed-media collage; 148.3 x 141.3 cm (58 3/4 x 55 1/2 in.). Brody's Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- Judas Sleep*, 1990. Mixed-media collage; 76.2 x 101.6 cm (30 x 40 in.). Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.
- War*, 1991. Graphite and watercolor on paper; 57 x 46.5 cm (22 1/2 x 18 1/4 in.). Aaron M. and Charlotte Fine.
- Thank You America (Anita Hill)*, 1991. Graphite and gouache on paper; 101.6 x 76.2 cm (40 x 30 in.). Private collection, Philadelphia.
- Homeless Woman Dressed in Garbage Bags*, 1992. Graphite and wash on paper; 74 x 58.7 cm (29 1/8 x 23 1/8 in.). Private collection; courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.
- The West against the Rest*, 1993. Ink on paper; image: 56.8 x 7.6 cm (22 3/8 x 3 in.). Courtesy Galerie St. Etienne, New York.

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