

SUE COE

P.P.O.W.

"WE come grinning into your paradise." One of Coe's recent works is titled with these words, which are written in letters of various typefaces and glued—ransom-note style—to the painting's surface. Ranged below are a troop of craven CIA agents, who display pointed ears and teeth; one has a dead mercenary's head where his heart should be. A thoroughly brutalized victim lies naked on their operating table. It is hard, Coe seems to say, to find images base enough to describe the evil of our intelligence agency and its many counterparts.

Such is the urgency of her need to indict those who commit crimes against humanity that Coe cannot be bothered to observe standard esthetic protocol. Thus her seemingly haphazard use of freehand and printed captions, of heavily stylized, expressive imagery and controlled, accomplished draftsmanship; thus too her work's shameless theatricality and the sheer plenitude of each painting. Her rage—at racism and sexism, poverty and nuclear brinkmanship, at "Raygun" and Thatcher and the regime in South Africa—sometimes finds expression in hyperbole. It also occasionally issues forth in quotations of her acknowledged artistic heroes and heroines: Käthe Kollwitz, Otto Dix, George Grosz, the Mexican muralists, Goya, Daumier, Brueghel and the entire fleet of WPA employees; judging from some aspects of Coe's figuration, Francis Bacon should be added to this list.

But as deliberately uneven, dark and desperate as her work is, Coe is a formidable rhetorician. Among her most effective and consistently applied devices is the suggestion of human bestiality. In images and phrases sharp as scalpels—and equally subtle—she describes people both behaving like animals and metamorphosing into them. Conversely, the plight of contemporary society's all too often victimized animals is expressed anthropomorphically: "If animals believed in God," one caption reads, "then the devil would look like a human being."

Degradation takes many guises, not a few of which Coe addresses. Her diversity is in fact an ideological choice, for she is not interested in broadcasting her particular

New York Reviews



Sue Coe, *We Come Grinning into Your Paradise*, 1982, mixed media and collage on paper, 50 1/2 by 70 inches, P.P.O.W.

signature. She aims for wide public address as much as discerning appreciation, and has so far been enviably successful on both counts. And deservedly so; her drawings speak as clearly on the op-ed pages of *The New York Times* as they do on a gallery's walls. Wherever it appears, Coe's work is as provocative as its subjects demand.

—Nancy Princenthal