

# SUE COE'S INFERNO

Working in the gap between illustration and high art, she forces us to confront the realities of oppression and despair

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By Susan Gill

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It is a measure of Sue Coe's single-minded determination that when she first came to New York from London in 1972, at the age of 21, she immediately landed a job working as an illustrator for the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*. Now 35 and in full command of her art and her career, Coe is receiving international recognition for a distinctive kind of work that bridges the gap between illustration and high art. Her paintings and drawings on the life of Malcolm X were shown at P.S. 1 in Long Island City last year. Currently, her exhibition "Police State" is touring the country. Next month, Coe will participate in the survey "Process & Project: The Making of a Contemporary Masterwork" at the Edith C. Blum Art Institute of Bard College, along with such contemporaries as Robert Longo and T.O.D.T. and such established older artists as Louise Bourgeois, Leon Golub, and Alex Katz. In January she will be included in the Museum of Modern Art's "Committed to Print" show, a major overview of political art in America since the '60s.

Coe's work is fueled by her commitment to social and political causes. Her subjects may be as close to home as a beggar she sees in her local subway station or as far away as the victims of apartheid in South Africa. Her scathing work has covered the Ku Klux Klan, vivisection, rape, Greenham Common in England (the site of an ongoing antinuclear demonstration), and the Brixton riots in London, among other subjects. Although she exhibits in galleries and museums, Coe finds it essential to continue contributing to the popular press, where her work can be seen by as broad an audience as possible. She contributes regularly to a wide range of publications, from *The New York Times* and the *Times* of London to *New Musical Express*, *Discover* magazine, and *Mother Jones*.

Coe is one of the most important social-protest artists working today in the long tradition of those who have recorded man's savagery. Her unique style incorporates many aspects of past art: the atmospheric quality and incisiveness of Goya; the pathos of Käthe Kollwitz; the sharp angularity of Max Beckmann; the collage technique of John Heartfield; the chilling skeletal forms of Posada and Orozco. They have all been

The unflinching gaze: "Simply maintaining your commitment to the struggle is a victory."





**Pinochet 1973, 1987, mixed media and collage on paper, 97½ by 154 inches. Coe's next book will be on Chile—the overthrow of the Allende government, and the violent regime of dictator Augusto Pinochet.**

given new life in her searing portrayals of contemporary life.

Over the past 15 years, Coe has developed a complex body of work in which a variety of styles is visible. She has created political caricatures of such figures as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, but her greatest strength lies in a form of art that critic Donald Kuspit calls “a new genre, somewhere between political cartoon and history painting.” A good example is *They Are in Such a Rush* (1987), in which frenzied figures rush past a lame Vietnam vet on their way to catch a subway. “The picture,” says Coe, “is about people who are anxious to go into the next war, the war in Central America, while they’ve completely forgotten their responsibilities to the vets of the last war.” On the other side of the crowd are three posters, including one of a 1965 *Newsweek* cover featuring General William Westmoreland, senior military commander in Vietnam, and an expressionistic poster with a macabre face and skull right out of Weimar Republic Germany. The message reads, “Real Men Join The Army.”

“If I particularly like a figure, I’ll use it again and again. So what you think is a photograph is a recycled print,” says Coe. The figures are created out of various collaged drawings that she combines and recombines until they achieve the effect the artist is after. Both the disjunction in scale among the figures and the varied drawing methods result in a jarring sense of dislocation that functions as the ideal vehicle for Coe’s subject matter.

Coe’s ability to sustain work of violent intensity, which is at the root of her power as an artist, may be in part the result of her earliest childhood experiences. Born in Tamworth, Staffordshire, in 1952, Coe grew up in postwar London. “My sister and I walked to school through areas that had

been totally blitzed during the war,” says the artist. “This was an endless source of fascination for us. There were buildings in which you could see parts of houses that were totally intact. You could see the wallpaper and the fireplaces and the mantels and the little ornaments on the mantel shelves, three stories up. You could see the family portraits still hanging there. There were also a lot of bomb shelters which we would sneak into. I feel that my first political consciousness came with that early knowledge of bombed houses, bomb shelters, and family members talking about the buzz bombs.”

Coe’s mother, who worked in a doll factory, was also an amateur painter and obviously inspired her young daughter. “I remember drawing war scenes when I was four or five,” Coe says. She attended the Chelsea School of Art when she was 16; three years later she was accepted at the Royal College of Art in London. The artist has vivid memories of the three years she spent there. “During the early ’70s the Labour government was in power, and they encouraged education for working-class students at the Royal College. I got in for free—otherwise I couldn’t possibly have gone.”

The Royal College was a breeding ground for rebellion, which, in the mid-’70s, meant punk. “We shaved our heads and wore brooches made of raw liver. We incorporated razor blades and blood into our paintings,” Coe recalls. “The art schools in England have always been hotbeds. The kids who go to the art schools are usually the misfits of society. They gravitate to art school because they’re left alone there. The genius of the British art-school system is that the kids are given wonderful equipment to use and are left on their own. If you want to talk to a professor, you go ’round to the pub. Out of this system came wonderful industrial design and rock music.”

COURTESY GALLERY PAULE ANGLIM



**"I'm not in the art world," Coe says, "I'm here." ABOVE Shelter for Homeless Women, Washington, D.C., 1987, mixed media on paper, 57 by 51 inches. RIGHT Pool Hall, 1986, graphite on paper, 60 by 48 inches.**



COLLECTION OF EDWARD CAUDURO

Coe moved to New York because there were not enough outlets for her art in her own country. She lives and works in a walk-up apartment in an old, ethnically mixed area of Manhattan's East 80s. One enters the tiny apartment through a dark room used as both kitchen and bedroom, where the artist's cat, Mauser, lies contentedly on the bed. Entering the living/work room, one is immediately struck by the graphic work that crowds the walls. There are prints by the American artists William Gropper, Boardman Robinson, Robert Minor, and Rockwell Kent. Framed covers from the journal *Die Pleite*, done by George Grosz in 1919, hang on the wall, as do prints by Goya, Beckmann, and Daumier. The artist uses an empty wall, an easel, and a small table for her work. A small TV is set in the fireplace, and a blurry black-and-white picture is flickering on the screen. Flanking the fireplace are bookcases that contain many art books and several shelves devoted to Thomas Mann, whom Coe admires in part for his "accurate descriptions of the decline of the German bourgeoisie." Between the two windows in the back wall of the apartment is a mahogany cabinet that Coe recently purchased for her collection of books on Goya.

In progress on this particular day in March is a drawing of Chile's dictator, Augusto Pinochet. "I'm working on my next book, which is about Chile and the overthrow of the Allende government," says Coe, who is seated on the floor, her clear blue eyes peering out from behind her long brown bangs, her silky braids touching the floor. She smokes almost continuously. When asked a question, she usually takes a few puffs on her cigarette, spends a moment or two thinking, and then gives a deliberate and carefully worded response. She shows me two powerful drawings depicting incidents that took place after the fall of Allende. They

involve the mistreatment of ordinary Chilean citizens and the mass murder of Allende's sympathizers by Pinochet's military regime.

Coe's treatment of such politically controversial topics underscores her artistic achievement. Her work reaches beyond the working-class audience for which it was first intended. Pieces have been purchased by the Edward R. Broida Trust in Los Angeles, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and the Arts Council of Great Britain. Her unexpected success within the establishment that her art so vigorously criticizes has been problematic for Coe. She strongly resists being part of an "art-star circuit" and says she must keep herself in continual check. She is constantly reassessing her work, its presentation, and its publication.

Through her work, Coe meets many politically aware people—for instance, a Chilean refugee who was struck by the accuracy of Coe's Chilean drawings, which he saw in San Francisco, and a professor of African studies who came to speak to the artist after seeing her recent exhibition in Richmond, Virginia. She has an ongoing dialogue with political activists, community leaders, and working-class people—a very different network from the art professionals surrounding most well-known New York artists.

Coe maintains her connection to social causes through the vigilant observation of realities that most New Yorkers try to ignore. When walking down the street, the artist is particularly sensitive to what she sees—from the muggings and beatings she has witnessed to the misery of the homeless. "When I go down to get a cup of coffee," she said in a 1984 interview in the *East Village Eye*, "there are six people sleeping out in my doorway who are dying of malnutrition. Am I supposed to step over that and pretend I'm in the art world? I'm not in the art world, I'm here."



**Coe at the easel:** When she first came to New York in 1972, at the age of 21, she landed a job as an illustrator for the Op-Ed page of *The New York Times*.

Coe's commitment to the printed page is one of the ways she fulfills what she sees as her mission: the dissemination of information for the purpose of social change. The book produced in conjunction with "Police State" exemplifies the emphasis on content that is central to Coe's art. It is composed of 23 16-by-11-inch pages, each with an image on the front and a related text on the back. The text, written by Coe's sister, Mandy, a political activist, does not describe the work, but gives specific information about the subject depicted.

For example, a painfully graphic representation of five women crouching on the floor of a bathroom in New York's

on in 1977.] When I found out more about how many people had died in detention, many of them young idealists, I became enraged. Holly and I wanted to make a record of all the people who died in detention who supposedly committed suicide. We both believe that if people know the facts, they'll change the system. When divestment became an issue on college campuses, students read the book. It became an organizing tool, which is our highest ideal of how the book could be used."

The full range of Coe's art, from her visionary expressionism to her realism, can be seen in the book. Her visionary side is strikingly revealed in the drawing *South Africa*, which appears as the book's centerfold. The central image is a black woman whose hands are tied and who is flanked by two men wearing horned dog-skull masks and brandishing whips. At right, President Reagan holds the rope that binds the woman's hands, while a black man in the foreground shoots at Reagan. An androgynous shaman, in a headdress, representing the power of Africa, stands behind bars, light emanating symbolically from his cell, while a naked prisoner in the foreground falls to the ground. Blood-red streaks cover the falling man's body. The title of the work appears at the top as a collage of individual letters taken from newspapers, a device used by Coe since the mid-'70s. The newspaper photograph that inspired the work, showing two men about to beat a helpless woman, is collaged at the lower right corner.

Pennsylvania Station is accompanied by the following text: "In the U.S.A. two to three million people have no homes; they sleep in doorways, cars, tents, and emergency shelters." The facts are quoted from a study of unsheltered women made by the Birch Center for Policy Research. The plates are enclosed in a jacket, which is folded in thirds. The inside of the jacket contains two critical essays and bibliographical information about Coe's art.

Coe's first book, on which she collaborated with the journalist Holly Metz, was the highly successful *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa*, published by Raw Books and Graphics in New York. The book ran through two printings, with approximately 10,000 copies distributed in the U.S. and England. Says Coe, "I first got involved with South Africa when I read about Steve Biko in 1976. [Biko founded the South African Students Organization in 1968. He died in prison



**South Africa, 1982, graphite and mixed collage on paper, 38 by 52 inches.** "When I found out how many people died in detention," Coe says, "I became enraged."

age three black men back into a barbed-wire fence as they try to pull a slain friend away from pointing rifles, the tips of which are visible at right. Another victim lies at the slain man's feet. Here Coe shows the shattering effects of racism in the poignant faces of the four shocked and sorrowful men.

After the South Africa book," Coe explains, "I wanted to do something about America, about racism here, and not just as something exotic and far away." The result was the series of drawings and paintings about Malcolm X that was exhibited at P.S. 1. Coe sees the Muslim leader as a revolutionary hero whose background was really like that of many other blacks in urban America. She read every available book on the man, as well as F.B.I. records. She visited places connected with Malcolm, including the Audubon Ballroom, where he was assassinated in February 1965. Coe's enormous body of work contains depictions of events in the black leader's life, from his early years to his assassination. There are also Goyaesque representations of J. Edgar Hoover's witch hunts and the Ku Klux Klan, and satirical caricatures of Reagan and the money sharks of Wall Street.

Many of these images are reproduced in Coe's 1986 book *X*, which also contains poems by Coe and a text, "Concurrent Events," written by journalist Judith Moore. The text is a chronology beginning in 1955, the year Malcolm became a Muslim, and ending with his death. Facts about Malcolm's life are interwoven with the history of the American civil-rights movement, events in South Africa and Vietnam, and the development of American pop culture. With Moore's satirical and highly readable text and the color plates, *X* stands on its own as an independent work of art.

One month after the closing of the Malcolm X exhibition at P.S. 1, Coe's show "Police State" opened at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, Virginia. (It will travel through next April to seven locations around the country.) The show, which is something of a mini-retrospective, includes over 30 works created from 1982 to 1986 and features a room showing Coe's illustrations for the Op-Ed pages of *The New York Times*.

Among the works is an image that caused a minor scandal when it was exhibited in England in 1984. *England Is a Bitch* (1982) depicts a riot in Brixton. In the foreground are two fierce policemen, one using a club, the other setting off tear gas. The picture contains several newspaper photos, including at center a shot of policemen crowded together

with riot gear and a picture of prisoners being led away. There are headlines as well, reading "Neo-Nazis Accused in London Riots" and "British cops kill youth as royalty live it up." At right is an image of Prince Charles and Princess Diana engaged in a sexual act.

The scandal, which was prompted by an exhibition called "Power Plays" at the Ferens Gallery in Hull, England, was avidly reported on by the local Yorkshire press. It involved both this controversial piece and the 1976 *Rape of Rosa Velez*, which was Coe's first painting about this subject. She has created a number of works depicting rape, most notably *Woman Walks into a Bar, Is Raped by Four Men on a Pool Table, While 20 Watch* (1983), based on the widely reported incident in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

When she shows slides of these pictures during lectures at colleges and universities around the country, there is an immediate response. "What's interesting about the rape paintings," she says, "is that wherever they're shown, women come up to me and tell me their own experience, and so, in a way, the work opens up a line of communication and offers a catharsis."

Coe is particularly sensitive to the plight of women. She has depicted heroic women in her drawings of Greenham Common, the site of a U.S. missile base that women have been protesting since 1981. She has also created images of women who are victims of abuse and poverty.

One of her most compelling works to date, *Shelter for Homeless Women—Washington, D.C.* (1987), was inspired by the large armory in the nation's capital that houses hundreds of women. Coe effectively combines drawing and painting,

using graphite, raw sienna, green, rose, and muted yellow to create a nightmare image of an inferno. In a dark, cavernous room, women sit or lie on beds lined up in rows, while in the distant background many more await entry, huddled together in a pitch-black void.

While Coe has brilliantly rendered the face of despair, her work grows out of the positive belief that if she exposes injustices, they will eventually be corrected. How does she maintain such idealism in the face of today's harsh realities? Coe replies: "When you are in touch with the people and feel you are part of their struggle, you realize that simply maintaining your commitment to the struggle is a victory. That's why, if you want to be a progressive person, you must be satisfied with tiny, tiny victories—not major ones." ■

Susan Gill is a critic and writer living in New York.



**Pinochet: Back to the good old days, women must wear skirts, 1987, mixed media on paper. London's Royal College of Art, where Coe studied, was a breeding ground for rebellion.**