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ART

SUE COE's current show at the Galerie St. Etienne, with its hard-boiled, Chicago-style title, "Porkopolis—Animals and Industry," will not disappoint those who have come to expect a direct hit of anti-authoritarian artillery from this artist. For Coe, who is British-born and working class, the enemy has always been clear and always big. But neither the exhibition's strong title nor a prior knowledge of the artist's righteous missions—against apartheid, against police-state tactics anywhere—necessarily prepares one for the sheer expressive power and virtuosic technique with which Coe has tackled the American meat-processing industry.

"Porkopolis"—a huge body of work encompassing everything from paintings on paper to broadsides—is the result of two years' field research, and carries the shock of firsthand observation. In one piece, "Outside Detroit Slaughterhouse, 8 AM" (watercolor with gouache, graphite, and printer's ink), the artist makes her presence graphically explicit—but we do not need to be told. Coe stops just short of anthropomorphism when depicting porcine features, and therein resides the operative simile as well as the extended metaphor of "Porkopolis." The pigs' snouts that protrude from stacked crates in "Detroit Slaughterhouse" rhyme ever so naturally with the "snout" of a nearby truck driver, visible in his rearview mirror, while the nightmarish swirls and claustrophobic panic of "CO₂ Chamber" form as piercing and horrifically refreshed an image of holocaust as any to be seen. A leitmotiv of whitish vapors—cigarette smoke, chimney fumes, hogs' breath, ghostly presences—seeps through the show.

Coe is masterly: from Dickensian bombast through the graphic sign-language invective of John Heartfield and the beastly caricatures of George Grosz to the deceptively sensual tones of depravity of Honoré Daumier, she knows every rhetorical trick in the book.