

## Galleries

# Sue Coe: More Than Just PC

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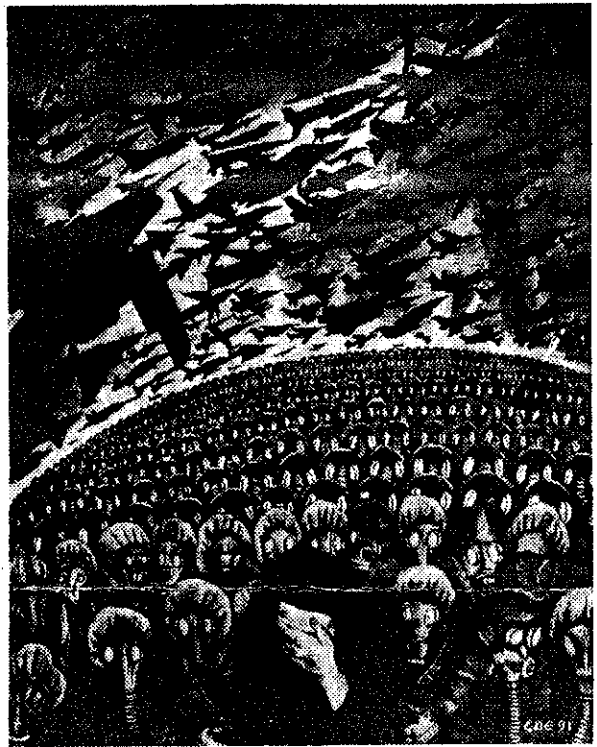
Tortured conscience, political mayhem, rampant sexism—and a very prominent signature. These are, and always have been, earmarks of the work of longtime Washington art star Sue Coe.

Coe is a modern doomsayer in the tradition of Hieronymus Bosch, but one who operates in a graphic, cartoonlike style more reminiscent of Leon Golub or Ben Shahn. Her preferred subject? Well, the title of her one-person retrospective at Brody's Gallery tells it all: "Political Document of a Decade"—namely, a pictorial history of Reagan's '80s. The works are all about America as empire-builder and international bully, politicians as butchers and incorrigible usurers. They are about perceived U.S. atrocities in Panama, in Nicaragua and on Wall Street; the evil that American men do.

Okay, so right up front one is bound to say that Coe's visual protests are a bit too vociferous, her relentlessly graphic depictions of violence and male-ego-as-phallus a tad too contrived and predictable. However, what saves this artist from being summarily chucked into the "all art is political" postmodern angst bin and written off as just another angry "politically correct" person is the fact that she has an almost flawless command of pictorial composition as "stage," and a riveting sense of action and dramatic illumination.

You've got to hand it to her: Coe can do with graphite, collage and a sparing bit of brilliant red on a modest-size piece of paper what many lesser, if equally earnest, draftsmen can't accomplish in 10 years on a wall-size surface with all the colors of the rainbow. And she can do it with a little 4-by-6 inch aquatint too. Or take a look at the semi-pornographic oil painting on unstretched canvas, "The John Walker." Better yet, any of her powerful little etchings in the series "The Tail that Wagged the Dog." It's strong stuff in terms of content, but it's also strong on purely aesthetic grounds.

In Coe's scornful eye, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan become demonic—literally. They sprout horns and spew vaporously from bottles, or haunt spectrally the darkling hells of her violent little worlds. Bobby Sands, the Irish patriot who starved himself to death in a Belfast prison, gets the sympathy due a martyr, while in one truly perspicacious rendering dated 1986 and titled "Traffic Violation," a man is beaten viciously by the police à la Rodney King in the now-infamous L.A. videotape. The scene is cast in the best Goya or Caravaggio manner: rendered in stark chiaroscuro, a lurid light seeming to emanate from the victim himself, his attackers' becoming ominous silhouettes in its greenish glare. The image is positively cinematic.



Sue Coe's "War."

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