

ART

SPEAKING OUT

Sue Coe is a painter. But she sees her role as taking aim with a weapon that 'should be made as familiar as the post.' She means art, says CYNTHIA ROSE, who chatted with her.

'Take art away from our culture—take art away from people and they'll die. That's what differentiates us from animals,' says Sue Coe, whose current exhibition 'Drums in the Night', embraces a whole culture's confluence of experiences.

The paintings deal with both explicit politics (subjects like El Salvador, the economy, Bobby Sands) and the implicit, 'unspoken' politics of the emotions: drug addictions, perspectives on sexuality and the needs for romance and solace. They are executed through a laborious, labyrinth-like process where a rich surface of pencil, pale tints, graffiti, slogans and cut-outs is carefully orchestrated. Almost all the scenes are urban (Coe, raised and trained in Britain, has been based in New York for almost a decade now).

'Constable painted landscapes, and they were the landscapes of his time,' she says. 'I paint the landscape of my time as I see it.' One critic wanted me to ask Coe where she felt the hope for better conditions and the strength to fight oppression could be found in her works; they struck him with such force he felt they could be taken as 'scene after scene from a circus of mindless violence.'

'It's the question which preoccupies me the most,' replies Coe. 'It's difficult because you can't inject optimism; I think the hope should come out of the conflict—and it is conflict, not violence I try to represent—although I certainly don't feel I've done it satisfactorily yet.'

'Like—Bobby Sands... I show him rising out of himself because, although he had nothing—he didn't even have clothes—he had himself. He had his name, and that name is now known in households all over the world.'

Coe says she has been 'shocked and terrified' by the current situation in Britain, which she last

visited at Christmas. 'Einstein said nationalism is a childhood disease, like measles—something you grow out of.' She shakes her head with its curly fringe and long black plaits.

'Take my sister, who works at Greenham Common,' says Sue, who joined the women's Peace Camp protest herself upon arrival. 'She's just a sweet little kid, who organises peace marches. Yet her phone is tapped and they could just take her away one day and, frankly, no one would know. There are so many people who could just disappear if they speak out—look at what nearly happened in the Official Secrets Case.'

'It's the duty of everyone who has access to the media in any form to speak out now, themselves, and protect lives like those of my sister. They have to talk about explicit political issues; otherwise it will be like the Weimar. If they aren't concerned by now, they should be.'

Sue herself stays plugged in to all the levels of politics and life that she can—from prison and street politics to the clubs, bars and movies of her Manhattan neighbourhood. She has an insatiable curiosity ('Tell me why the Last Poets are making no money and people still care about the Rolling Stones? I honestly can't figure it out'). And she has an equally insatiable love for her fellow citizenry, whatever the conditions they must endure. This compassion shines forth from the faces she draws, which float incandescent above the bleakness and indignities of their circumstances.

'I work so hard on those faces,' says Sue Coe, 'because they're so important. All of them are beautiful faces—that's where my optimism lies.'

'Drums in the Night' is a shared exhibition which features also the work of Manhattan night-cab driver Steven Murray. It is at the Moira Kelly Fine Art Gallery, 97 Essex Rd, N1 until June 19 (359 6429).

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