



Images inside the nightmare

THE INVITATION to Sue Coe's show was a reproduction of one of her works. But I was unprepared for the gruesome impact of these brutal scenes from life', writes Nigel Pollitt.

BOBBY SANDS lies on a hospital bed. His wraith-like, emaciated corpse is drawn softly. The drip is still attached to his arm. But he is, literally, ghastly. Beside him a grim likeness of Margaret Thatcher swirls from the background ether, like a genie. Not a comic presence, her hands drip blood, like the hands of the bishop who blesses one of two British soldiers. Large and decidedly wooden, in bloodied khaki they stand, awkward sentries to this hideous tableau. They are drawn with the earnest, naive precision of soldiers in war comics — a faintly wry contrast with the body of Bobby Sands. Completing the scene, a nineteenth-century Irish politician flies across like a confused elf, trailing a flaming union jack. And at the top, insistent in red and black lettering, is the headline 'Bobby Sands'. Underneath in scrawl: 'Ein morder ist ein morder ist ein morder' (a murder is a...)

Throughout these drawings, made with graphite, paint and things collaged from colour supplements, there are messages to be read. Words and symbols abound, making connections. The bishop in *Bobby Sands* has a swastika and a dollar sign in his mitre. Photomontage, by bringing together disparate images, makes its point in the same way. It's not surprising to find out that John Heartfield, whose photomontage work was an uncompromising attack on Nazi Germany, is an enormous influence on Sue Coe. But she says she isn't trying to make any universal political statements. 'If I wanted to do that, I'd be a politician'. Looking at her work is not a question of decoding images to extract a political line she feels. It's about presenting the contradictions she sees around her. 'Someone can get mugged in the same room at

the same time as someone is putting on their make-up.'

But there are themes in her work. Violent men are everywhere, and money is never far behind. In *The Threepenny Opera* skyscraper banks loom up behind a scene of callousness,

violence, misery and degradation. You can buy what you want so long as you have a gun, a knife or a credit-card. Sometimes I felt this reliance on these basic forces didn't work. *Belfast* is an orgy of violence. Dogs of war, red throated, are the cornerstone of a civil war that looks little bigger than a street fight. In *England is a Bitch* Lady Di sucks off Charles whilst the streets are rioting. I was worried to see that women were always victims, coerced. Elsewhere there were images that will stay with me for a long time. In *Subway* (Sue has lived in New York for several years) a man dies, knifed and bleeding in the arms of his attackers. Across the dingy platform a B-movie poster of Ronald Reagan smiles wincingly — caught in a bright shaft of light. Reagan's stage. The comment is eloquent and profound. *Hard Rains* is a perfect copy of a deposition of Christ. Except that the apostles are wearing radiation suits and the sick pallor of the victim is contamination, not crucifixion.

Many of these paintings have appeared as illustrations in American, German and some English magazines. They are definitely not for the bedroom wall, unless you have a very high pain threshold.

One question this work raises is, how negative and critical can you be before that criticism backfires into morbid reflection? For me there's an answer to be found in *The Last Dance*. A bear is baited in the middle of a nightmare circus. A newspaper headline is held up by a frantic, naked woman. 'Blast rocks nuke missile'. The scene is sickening, terrifying. But isn't that where we are? Right now I'd like to hang this picture, a surreal comment on the nuclear race, on the wall of England's war cabinet.

Sue Coe, graphite drawings with tempera and collage; Moira Kelly Gallery, 97 Essex Road, London N1. 01-359 6429. Until June 19.

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