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Sue Coe

The term 'illustrative' has always been pejorative when applied to an original artwork. It is frequently used against the work of women artists and generally connotes either the sickly tweeness of children's books or the crass, slick graphics of advertising. 'Fine artists' who turn to 'commercial art' are regarded as selling their soul to the devil, although exceptions are made for those who work for the correct ideological cause, particularly if they are ill- or un-paid. It is a treacherous course for a young painter to try and make a living through selling his or her work for mass reproduction, attain a critical reputation as an artist and, somewhere along the line, retain integrity. Even if this is undertaken with the serious intention of affecting, in particular ways, the great media-consuming public, the artist is inevitably hampered by the constraints and compromises involved in meeting specific criteria and deadlines.

Sue Coe has managed to negotiate these problems more successfully and thoughtfully than most. After leaving the RCA in 1972 she settled permanently in New York on the grounds that there were more opportunities there for work than in London. With a firmly-developed style and subject matter in her portfolio, she immediately obtained work and has made a living from it ever since. Her subject matter, informed by deeply-held beliefs, is concerned with conflict, division and urban violence, conveyed by careful and well-understood styles, materials and techniques which belie their rough-and-ready appearance.

The work has appeared in papers as varied as the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *New Scientist*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone*, *New Musical Express*, *Ms.*, and *Mother Jones*. Coe insists that such catholicism is acceptable on the grounds that she always works to a specific article or short story and that her work is so individualistic that inappropriate commissions are rarely offered, nor would she accept them. When faced with political censorship, such as the *NY Times*'s recent attempt to remove portraits of Reagan from a piece of art-work, Coe both contested and stopped the change. Such stringency would be a problem in the com-

mercial field were the artist less determined, the work less powerful and the subject matter of less consuming universal interest.

Coe draws on popular radical concerns as well as more immediately from the rich and bizarre street life of New York and her position as a young working woman. Shafts of theatrical sunlight fall on the emaciated body of Bobby Sands in a work made for the German satirical magazine *Red Action Pardon*. The prison cell is full of characters from the political stage — Mrs T. with pearls and bloodstained hands, the Pope in Nazi salute, fully-armed British paras, flag-burning children and the dead man's mother. Above Sands's jagged cut-out name, the German title screams, 'A murder is a murder is a murder'. Other works deal with issues like police treatment of blacks in South Africa, El Salvador, nuclear proliferation and drug trafficking. Coe does not separate the personal from the wider political spectrum. She includes herself in the depiction of a subway mugging she recently witnessed, cowering un-seeing behind a pillar whilst the black faces of other passengers and a poster face of Reagan look on. In *Defend Yourself to Death*, she draws together issues of women and violence, in particular hand guns. Through powerful and grim imagery she suggests that under patriarchal capitalism, the virgin/whore syndrome is upheld under the guise of male protection, symbolised by the phallic hand gun, and as such is so

overwhelming as to make real male/female relationships impossible.

A fragmented, despairing world finds its equivalents in the use of hasty black paint, ice-cold detailed pencil drawing, magazine images, poison-pen cut-out letters and graffiti collaged together. The blacks, whites and greys always used by Coe and so attuned to the needs of reproduction are only broken in these 'originals' by the occasional spatter of blood-red paint. Influences from Grosz, Beckmann and pre-war Berlin are juxtaposed with equally vicious punk new-image idioms. The spikey, disjointed nihilism of both the images and the materials used are contrived to work in a way which is particularly acceptable and affective on a generation which has lost faith in the idea of an authentic personal statement.

After a piece in the *NME* where Coe's work has appeared, Moira Kelly's gallery was filled with its admirers, many of whom had never been in a gallery and from my eavesdropping had little time for 'Art'. If illustration or being illustrative is about getting more people to look and think about meaningful and relevant images, either in mass reproduction or in the gallery context — and offers an antidote to the current wave of vacuous angst-ridden expressionism based on style and not content — then Coe's work, whatever you choose to call it, is more valuable than most contemporary art offerings.

Monica Petzal

Sue Coe, works in pencil and collage, Moira Kelly Gallery, London, May 20-June 19.