

The New York Times

'The Tragedy of War'

Galerie St. Étienne
24 West 57th Street
Manhattan
Through Jan. 6

An etching series, "The Tragedy of War" by the social-protest artist Sue Coe, serves as the centerpiece of this searing show, accompanied by prints and drawings from older hands like Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, Max Beckmann and George Grosz.

Ms. Coe sees the visual arts as more expressive than movies or television in conveying the horrors of war, and the print medium as reaching a wider audience than painting. She began her series with the bombing of Kosovo and finished it as the Middle East went ballistic. The blunt, mostly black-and-white imagery, obviously cued by Goya and as theatrically overstated as war itself, leaves no atrocity unvisited, from the rape of a child by soldiers as her agonized parents watch to lines of refugees marching through indifferent streets.

Mockery and symbolism also inform her work, as in "Arms Merchants," a big drawing in which sinister, ogre-ish men celebrate a deal as a cosmic pyre burns before them, and "War Street," depicting a horse-mounted skeleton dragging behind it a bull and a bear. Ms. Coe, one of the few contemporary artists to engage the theme of war so exhaustively and directly, is by no means the best or most subtle of draftsmen. But then here is not the subtlest of subjects.

The show has much other material, some of it quite well known. Not the least of its treasures are the complete cycle of Jacques Callot's "Miseries and Misfortunes of War" (1633), 18 mini-etchings that deal in detail with the barbaric invasion of Lorraine by the French in that year, and eight etchings from Goya's famous Philippic "Disasters of War" (1810-15), spurred by the French takeover of Spain in 1808 but a bitter indictment of inhumanity, with or without war.

This exhibition is not the easiest spectacle around, especially at the dawn of a new millennium, but alas it is all too timely.

GRACE GLUECK