

ART IN REVIEW

Sue Coe: ‘Mad as Hell!: New Work (and Some Classics)’

By Holland Cotter

May 31, 2012

Galerie St. Etienne

24 West 57th Street

Manhattan

Through July 3

Neo-Expressionist painting had a strong but short-lived surge in the East Village of the early 1980s, falling out of favor partly because its political content too often felt decorative rather than deep. Sue Coe’s art was carried by the wave, but by then she had already been working, with singular skill and focus, in an Expressionist mode for a decade, and has continued to do so since.

She began in the 1970s, just out of school in London, as a freelance news illustrator for The New York Times, among other publications. But finding mainstream media too tame for her politics, she started working on her own. In 1983 she had her first New York gallery show and published a book (with Holly Metz), “How to Commit Suicide in South Africa,” a pictorial indictment not only of apartheid but also of a capitalist system that, in her view, kept racism in place. The work from that time — part collage, part painting, indebted as much to Goya as to Käthe Kollwitz — was graphically vivid and, polemically, intensely on-message; some of it is on view in this gallery survey.

The intensity has, if anything, sharpened over the years, even as her style and content have changed. Collage is now all but gone; graphite drawing has become her primary medium, and a very direct one. Her chief target for some time has been the meat industry, which she turns into an all-encompassing symbol of enslavement, exploitation and cruelty. If this is not an issue of consequence to you, Ms. Coe’s work will look cartoonish and overwrought. If,

however, you're at all on her wavelength, this is powerful stuff. In these politically blasé art-world days, a few outspoken artists — Thomas Hirschhorn, Ai Weiwei — are acceptable, even fashionable. Ms. Coe, in her unfashionable way, should be considered in their company.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 25 of the New York edition with the headline: Sue Coe: 'Mad as Hell!': New Work (and Some Classics)'