

PAINTING HERSELF INTO A CORNER

By Martha Sherrill

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Sue Coe has blue eyes and a snaggle-toothed smile and a sweet kind of underground charm. She's not a hypocrite, just a good old-fashioned Marxist-Leninist who's worried about becoming a hypocrite. She wants to stay in "the struggle" even though it's hard, and even though some of her comrades, inevitably, believe she's sold out. What an embarrassment -- having her paintings and drawings exhibited at the Hirshhorn Museum, that glistening shrine full of capitalist treasures! And in The New Yorker magazine ... how bourgeois!

But she hasn't sold out, she swears. Almost on sight, you believe her. Dressed in layers of black clothes fading to gray, a beret planted on her dark stringy hair, Coe trudges around the Hirshhorn the day before her show opens, with a puzzled and slightly guilty look. What is the proper attitude for an entirely successful -- also known as "hot" -- leftist illustrator?

"I'm trying to be happy about all this," she says.

And how does she think her paintings look here?

"This is a mausoleum! On the newspaper page, they're alive. But here, surrounded by all this deadness, they hang like corpses!"

The show's curator, Frank Gettings, sits quietly in a chair next to the artist. A lovely scholarly type in tweeds, he smiles to himself a great deal. It's impossible not to like Coe, but you also don't want to start disagreeing with her. Particularly after you've seen her work. Let's put it this way: It's as though there are two Sues -- Sweet Sue, who giggles and laughs, and Evil Sue, up all night painting pictures of people vomiting blood and slaughtering pigs.

Her works hang in a small, echoey space on the Hirshhorn's third floor. There are only 12 paintings and drawings on view, but that's enough to get the flavor of her oeuvre, her sensibility, her mission. It's also enough to make you want to run from the room. Centered on the far wall is a large painting of a gang rape that took place in New Bedford, Mass., some years ago (which inspired the Jodie Foster movie "The Accused"). It's called "Woman Walks Into Bar -- Is Raped by 4 Men on the Pool Table -- While 20 Watch."

Cigarette butts have been extinguished, apparently, on the victim's chest. She has blood on her mouth. Her legs are splaved -- held by a rapist -- in the most brutal way. Men on the sidelines are watching, looking

Coe's work has been splashed across the pages of so many publications in the last few years -- the New York Times, The New Yorker, the Village Voice -- that people want to see it up close. But maybe not this close. Killing and suffering are things we usually want to escape when we find ourselves walking inside an art museum. But in the Hirshhorn's remarkable show, Gettings offers us no peace or quiet. Coe's work is deliberately disgusting.

"I have to agree with psychologists when they talk about society and social healing," Coe says. "You have to feel very, very bad before you are going to feel better."

Walking down to the staff cafeteria with Gettings and museum publicist Sidney Lawrence, Coe grimaces and laughs at the same time. There is a sense of earnestness and hesitation about her -- the question of whether she is selling out still hangs in the air. She pleads: "Please don't say I'm full of doubts. I want to appear strong and certain."

But she's not, of course. Coe is too smart and too inquisitive for certainty. Even when discussing the history of art, she wavers. Abstract art is mute, finished, irrelevant. It has no politics. "When you go into figurative art," she says, "you open yourself up to political debate -- that's why it's threatening, why it was closed off, why abstract art emerged: as a way to close off the debate."

Social realism should replace all the overrated art, she argues, replace all the sickening examples of capitalist hoarding, the booty of Third World suffering ... except, well, maybe there are some Mark Rothkos and a couple of Jackson Pollocks that she doesn't want to see dismissed -- or thrown in the trash. "Hey," she says, "let's not get carried away."

Coe, 43, wears a bit of lipstick, and gold loop earrings. She's a vegetarian, but has a pale-healthy glow with ruddy patches on her cheeks. At home in New York, she's got two pet rats. "They are my only happiness," she says, and then, as though sorry to have seemed so gushy, adds: "I've got a couple dead ones in my freezer too. I'm still looking for a proper burial ground."

Morbid beyond belief, dark beyond words, it may not surprise you to learn that Coe is English. She grew up outside Birmingham in a working-class family, and moved to New York from London 21 years ago, after studying illustration and commercial art at the Royal Academy. "I never planned to be a political artist," she explains. "If you were a woman in art school {in the late '60s}, you were expected to be an illustrator of children's books. And I made every attempt to make my portfolio suitable to that kind of work."

Her first New York Times assignment in 1973 was to illustrate something for the food page -- a recipe for duck soup -- but the work was rejected. "I drew a duck being prepared for cooking," says Coe, "but they complained it looked like Nazi Germany, like a duck execution."

Nowadays, she generates most of her own assignments -- recently choosing to draw images of Somalia, skinheads, Malcolm X and AIDS victims. She covered the trial in Liverpool of two young boys who murdered

a toddler, which resulted in a seven-page spread of drawings for The New Yorker. Up next, there'll be a series on sweatshops. "I've become more of a visual journalist," Coe says. "And I choose content that has been passed over. I waited until AIDS wasn't really news, when interest in it was dwindling. That's when I got curious -- and I felt that some depth was missing in the coverage."

She prefers newspapers to magazines as a place for her work. "I love the immediacy, the urgency, and the way everything is a little smudgy." And she's aware of "the danger" of having things appear in mass-market periodicals, she says, bound in the same issues as luscious advertisements for Absolut Vodka and Calvin Klein's Escape.

Is she being used?

"It's a pact with the Devil," she replies. "Those magazines don't do anything for me, personally, but I am interested in revealing what has been concealed, and in putting things of a certain content out for people to see. ... Ultimately, though, I think a free pamphlet, or a Xerox, has a greater effect, has more power to inspire the people who are activists -- who are really out there doing something."

As Coe eats a lettuce-and-tomato sandwich on toasted whole-wheat, a docent who looks as if she could be a member of the Chevy Chase Club -- full-blown capitalist -- approaches the table.

"I have one of your pieces," she says. "The one with the Exxon Valdez in the corner?"

Coe nods happily. She produces as many prints as possible -- as many as the plates will allow before wearing out -- that sell for \$20 and \$30. This is in the spirit of the heyday of socialism, of mass-produced incendiary posters, of revolutionary pamphlets. "That's what prints used to be!" she says.

But ... look who's buying hers!

"Actually, they could use some of them around here," Coe says, while looking at the walls of the cafeteria.

"Not your slaughterhouse images, I hope," Gettings adds quietly.

"Well," Coe replies, " 'twould keep people from ordering the hamburgers."

Next, she raises the subject of cannibalism. Her table companions, still biting into their sandwiches, hunch further over and begin discussing some recent movies -- starting with Peter Greenaway's "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover," which apparently ends up with a roasted man laid out on a banquet table. Talk moves to Jeffrey Dahmer, and to "The Silence of the Lambs." A trend!

But why?

"The interest in cannibalism," says Coe, "is to psychically prepare us for genetic engineering."

Gettings and Lawrence nod politely.

"And," she adds, "for eventually eating each other."

Ah-hah.

Soon enough -- just after Coe has announced that the difference between a Republican and a Democrat is "the difference between a cold and the flu" -- a museum photographer appears to ask Coe if she'll let her picture be taken.

Turns out the People's Weekly World, a Communist tabloid in New York, needs a photograph to run with its story about the exhibition.

"This is sooooo incredible!" Coe exclaims. "I can't believe it!"

They want her. They still want her -- despite the dreaded New Yorker and the decadent Hirshhorn. It's a sign, really. Coe is one of them.

She sighs. Her face turns dark red, then she hides it with her hands. "You can't imagine! I can't believe! Oh, my heart is beating," she says while flushing yet again.

"It's ... "

The ultimate compliment?

"It is! You can't possibly realize ..."

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