

# ART : Slaughter of the Soul : Sue Coe's images of horror in the meat industry indict a dark consciousness that she sees at the core of man's cruelty to man

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By KRISTINE McKENNA Aug. 4, 1991 12 AM PT

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Ask British artist Sue Coe questions about her technique or the critical analysis her work has received from the art world and she dismisses them with a wave of her hand. "I couldn't care less about whether people call my work cartooning, drawing, painting or whatever," she declares. "I don't read art magazines and have no interest in painterly issues. My work is an opportunity to present information."

A social protest artist in the tradition of Goya, Kathe Kollwitz, George Grosz, John Heartfield, Otto Dix and Diego Rivera, Coe takes little pleasure in the fact that her work is making waves in the art world on purely aesthetic grounds, because she aims to do much more than garner glowing reviews. Blithely ignoring the avant-garde's current vogue for art with multiple meanings, her work is unswervingly single-minded and clear in its intent--which is to bring about real social change.

The glowing reviews have, however, poured in. She's been described by critic Donald Kuspit as "the greatest living practitioner of confrontational, revolutionary art," lauded by Arts Magazine's Linda F. McGreevy as "an artist who refuses to avoid painful issues and is relentlessly engaged in policing the state" and hailed by Artnews critic Nancy Princenthal as "a formidable rhetorician who creates images and phrases sharp as scalpels."

It's hard to imagine that anyone could see Coe's show at the Santa Monica Museum (through Aug. 18) without feeling the cut of her images. The exhibition, titled "Porkopolis," features 60 works from an ongoing series documenting the American meat industry. Inspired by Upton Sinclair's 1906 book on the subject, "The Jungle," Coe has been working on "Porkopolis" for six years and plans to continue with it until 1994, when the work will be published as a book. Like Kollwitz, Coe believes deeply in the power of the print media, and "Porkopolis" will be her fifth book (previous volumes include a visual essay on apartheid and an homage to Malcolm X). After completing "Porkopolis," Coe plans to do a series on immigrant labor in America.

"Porkopolis" marks something of a departure for Coe in that it's her first series based on firsthand experience. Since beginning it in 1985 she's visited 15 slaughterhouses--and one of the major challenges posed by this work is figuring out how to penetrate the tight web of security that surrounds the meat industry. "I recently wrote to 50 slaughterhouses in the New York area," Coe says, "and out of 50 I'll maybe get into two."

## ADVERTISING

It's best for business that consumers have as little knowledge as possible about what goes into keeping supermarket freezers stocked with meat, so it's unlikely they'd assist with "Porkopolis," which reveals what goes on in horrifyingly graphic terms.

Coe shows us the intricacies of biotechnology and gene splicing, animals being dosed with massive amounts of growth hormones and antibiotics, how creatures too injured to walk into the slaughterhouse are dealt with, the de-beaking machines used on chickens and countless other gruesome procedures. "Every slaughterhouse I've visited has been different," says Coe, who's been a vegetarian since 1983. "Some are union, some aren't, some are big, some are small--I remember a particularly grisly one where they had a Doors album blasting while they slaughtered the animals. But I've never seen one that was humane."

In Coe's view, the systematized cruelty that governs this industry represents human consciousness at ground zero and has implications that stretch far beyond the issue of meat. "Humankind's cruelty to itself devolves from its cruelty to what are perceived as lower life forms," she observes, and this belief is at the heart of her work. She points no accusing finger at the workers employed by the slaughterhouses because she feels that they too are victims of an economic system gone berserk.

"Humans are sweet, dear creatures born with few instincts," she says. "Most of what we do is learned, and that's why we must be very careful about the structure of society. We're just like the animals in the slaughterhouse in that society has the capacity to force us into modes of behavior that go completely against our very essence as living beings."

Coe has developed a darkly beautiful visual style well matched to the content of her art. Her work, executed in graphite, gouache and collage on paper, combines elements of political cartooning, the social realist style popularized by the WPA artists and German Expressionism. Her palette is unrelentingly dark (she makes lavish use of chiaroscuro) and largely monochromatic; using only the most judicious bits of red, she telegraphs a sense of bloodiness and psychic violence. The structure of her work pivots on sharply angled perspectives and centrifugal, spiraling compositions that underscore the confusion and panic of the animals. Whereas previous bodies of work incorporated texts of mismatched lettering crudely patched together in the manner of a ransom note, the explanations written on the margins of these images are rendered in a script that's quiet, understated and somehow grief-stricken.

"I don't want the work to be accusatory or for the workers to seem like 'the Other,' because we are all them," says Coe. "I want the work to be intimate and humble, and to achieve that you can't use shock tactics. I don't use gallons of blood in this work and don't want it to scream--it's more a weeping. I want the work to be rooted in grief rather than rage."

Briefly in town from New York, where she's lived since 1972, Coe is a surprisingly upbeat woman in light of the grave seriousness of her work. Arriving for a meeting at the museum toting her slaughterhouse sketchbook and a series of photos she shot on the killing floor, the 39-year-old artist lights the first of a series of cigarettes and announces that she took up smoking on her arrival in L.A. a few days earlier. A direct, open woman who laughs easily and often, she declares: "I'm an optimist--how could I do this work if I wasn't? If I wasn't an optimist, I'd deny it existed, because I wouldn't think it could be changed. But I think it will change--it is changing."

Coe knows a thing or two about change, since she herself has undergone a metamorphosis. The artist, one of two girls born into a working-class family in Tamworth, England, recalls: "My father worked in an office--I still don't know what he did there--and my mother had a series of odd jobs. I grew up in a house where we were very conscious of our class background, but my family wasn't at all political. But in a way, any child who grew up in London in the '50s had a political awareness, because we were surrounded by the ruins of World War II."

Citing the English comic strip "Rupert" as the first piece of art that made an impression on her, she recalls the Profumo scandal that rocked England in 1963 as triggering the awakening of her political consciousness.

"I was 12 at the time and the Profumo affair made me aware that governments are not only capable of, but prone to, corruption," she says.

"My family didn't encourage me to be involved in art at all," she continues. "When I was 15 I got a job packing Mars Bars into boxes on an assembly line, and after that I planned to become a shorthand typist. After that I was supposed to get married--that was basically what girls did in the world I lived in. But for some reason I just couldn't do it. I'd been drawing since I was little but never saw any future in it, then somehow I discovered I could go to art school on a scholarship. By some fluke I got into the Chelsea School of Art when I was 16--and believe me, that was a heavenly moment.

"I was doing graphic design then, and there was no political content in my work," says Coe, who went on to three years at the Royal College of Art after graduating from the Chelsea School. "Then when I was 19, they were going to close the schools because of the Vietnam War and I became involved in protesting the war. That was my first political involvement."

Thus was born the committed political activist Coe is today. Asked what she sees as the relationship between art and politics, she declares, "All art is political. As to what I think of the politics of things like hard-edge painting, I'll quote Dante here, who said in 1265 that 'the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in times of great moral crisis maintain their neutrality.' That's what I think of hard-edge painting."

In 1972, Coe moved to New York and immediately landed a job doing illustrations for the Op-Ed section of the New York Times. Despite the fact that Coe's images are fiercely confrontational and politically radical, there's always been a big demand for her work, which has appeared in numerous publications, including the Nation, Time, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, the Village Voice, Esquire and Mother Jones.

Her appearance in the gallery world didn't come until 1979, when she had her first one-person show at the Thumb Gallery in London. Her solo debut in the United States was at New York's P.P.O.W. Gallery in 1983; that same year, she published her book on apartheid, "How to Commit Suicide in South Africa," which sold out two printings. Before immersing herself in "Porkopolis" (for which she was awarded a \$15,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant), Coe did bodies of work on rape, racism, the Ku Klux Klan, the overthrow of the Allende government in Chile, the Reagan and Thatcher administrations and nuclear warfare.

Coe has no interest in talking about the past this day, however, as she pushes her sketchbook across the table and begins flipping through it.

"I was covered with blood and flies, and bits of organs were falling on me as I was doing these sketches," she says softly. "Obviously your first impulse is to rescue the animals, but you can't because there are millions of them. I could weep for these animals, and I could weep for the workers too. The system forces all of us to alienate ourselves, and for these workers that's taken to a terrible extreme. They're asked to view their job as if they're assembling cars, and they do it because they must. I've heard many of them express revulsion for the work.

"This cruelty is a result of the inefficiency of capitalism, which I consider the most destructive force on Earth because it's speeded up the world's production to an unmanageable degree. Increased production also led to the demise of 600,000 American family farms. Small farms had maybe 30 hogs, and the family that worked the farm looked after them. We now have superfarms with thousands of animals, and we're mass-producing something that wasn't intended for that. The animals get no care at all, yet each one is alive and suffers pain. This kind of suffering and waste can't continue, because our economic system is breaking down and we no longer have the luxury of allowing it to continue.

"I've seen changes in the industry in the time I've been observing it," adds Coe, who spends a third of her time participating in protest actions and researching this subject. "I work for an organization called Farm Sanctuary that staged a demonstration at the biggest stockyard in America, which is in Minnesota. We got them to refuse to accept 'downers,' which are animals that are so injured in being transported to the slaughterhouse that they have to be dragged in with chains. This pressures farmers to take better care of them in transport.

"If you've ever seen a cow that's unable to get up being dragged on a road in chains--it's a horrifying sight because their bones come through their skin. A downed animal is supposed to be put out of its misery, but the law says that even if an animal's guts are hanging out, as

long as it can stand, the workers can't intervene. The workers don't want to see this suffering, but there's nothing they can do because these aren't their animals."

Like all of Coe's work, "Porkopolis" (which was the nickname given to Cincinnati when it was the largest producer and slaughterer of hogs in the United States) documents what happens to society when the aggressive aspect of our collective consciousness--the drive to conquer and dominate--is taken to a pathological extreme.

"The slaughterhouse is governed by the same disassociated machismo that drives war," Coe says. "Men are trained from the time they're boys that they can't cry, so if any of these men showed any weakness on the killing floor, they'd be called sissies. A lot of the workers speak Spanish, and when the animals come in they say, '*Matala*,' which means 'kill her.' Regardless of the sex of the animal, they say, 'Kill *her*,' and they call the animals 'girl' and 'baby' as they shoot them through the brain."

As the conversation winds to a close, Coe asks about the Holocaust Museum, which is the one thing in L.A. she wants to see before rushing back to New York. "I can't afford to be away from my work for long," says Coe, who derives the bulk of her income from editorial illustrations and the sale of prints. ("I sell hundreds of those a year," she says.)

"I can't afford a studio," she continues, "and that's why my large works are made of several small sections pieced together. I do the work in a tiny apartment on the Upper East Side, where I live. I'm not at all financially successful. The art audience is no more socially conscious or responsible than the rest of society, and if you think big corporations buy this work, you're wrong. People who are sympathetic with my work are usually people without money, so I'm lucky if I sell three pieces a year--I made \$14,500 from my last show. But I feel successful because there are people who are receptive to the ideas in my work and I believe this work is important. I feel I *have* to be there to see what happens on the killing floor because being a witness is a more healing process than denying it exists.

"The most difficult aspect of this work is living with the memories of the things I've seen," she concludes. "They float in front of me at the oddest times--I'll be sitting somewhere, maybe having a coffee in a cafe, and a scene will materialize in my head. I'll see a creature who made eye contact with me and looked at me with trust just moments before it was slaughtered. Those memories never go away."

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