

Sue Coe

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Sue Coe is one of the clearest and most convincing political artists around. Her masterful drawing skills are married to a searing intelligence unafraid to gaze long and hard at issues most people, art world citizens included, would prefer to give a cursory nod to before pressing on to less disturbing activities.

She is not interested in the post-modern strategies of cute, clever, witty, ironic, ambiguous or any of the other methods that allow everyone to stay one or two or three steps outside of what is being considered. Her techniques instead wrap the issues around us so we can't help but feel the warm, frightened, outraged, cruel or compassionate heart at the center of everyone involved. Our interview took place over the phone in early March as she prepared for her next installment of illustrations for the New Yorker magazine.

Dianne V. Lawrence: What is your definition of politics?

Sue Coe: The muscle that cloaks the skeleton of economics.

DVL: What is your definition of morality?

SC: The skin that covers the muscles. I'm not sure there is a universal definition of morality. The dominant culture defines the mores. Do we have, as humans, an internal moral compass? I think so ... but true north ... the big pull of power and money, has a tendency to mute other directions.

DVL: I was reading Porkopolis [Sue's expose on the slaughterhouse industry]. There are horrendous stories. Baby pigs being castrated while conscious and without any protection against the pain. Pigs strung upside down while conscious and then stung by an electrical prod before their throats were slit. Some accidentally dropped from their shackles to crash-land on their head. There's the story about a slaughter man that in order to deal with a cow who refuses to go into the slaughter pen will stab the cow's eyes to blind it and then its anus to get it to move forward. Another man refers to pigs as stupid because they don't want to go

into the slaughter pens. These are a few of the horrors and cruel indignities the animals are subjected to and what you kept going back to witness in order to create your images. I would imagine it would take Herculean strength and commitment. How do you keep from being overwhelmed with despair, pain and anger?

SC: Although these emotions are very real, it's not useful to be drowned in them. Emotion is not the entire truth. We live in a death and life stream and it's how we balance our contributions to the struggles. At some point in my life if I saw an animal with a broken leg, or an eye gouged out at a stockyard, I would be obsessed with the suffering of that animal...like a tooth that has broken, my tongue straying to the jagged edge, a reminder over and over of the suffering. How did that help the animal? I learned that the attachment to the emotion of suffering had a similar route to the attachment to the concept of happiness. Real compassion is where our actions lessen the suffering and cruelty. If we are going to be long distance runners, we pace ourselves.

DVL: What response did you get from the slaughter industry?

SC: It varied ... from the workers themselves, many responses. Surprisingly dominant was agreement with the conditions I portrayed. In fact, I could do Dead Meat the sequel, based on information I have subsequently been given. One young man gave me a series of photos from a slaughterhouse where he worked that were terrible, just terrible. I find that people in this type of work want to talk about what they do. They want to debate it, they are mostly alienated from it, they become automatons. The slaughter industry is not different from any other. It steals the workers' labor, for little pay, and in the end there is blood money. From owners of meat packing plants I got justification, "We feed the world," "create jobs." etc.

DVL: You've gazed long and unflinchingly at humanity's seemingly infinite capacity to not only ignore the suffering of others but to even exercise a great amount of creativity in creating it. Money, greed and fear are some of the motivators. Do you suspect any other factors?

SC: We are a social species and need the approval support of the tribe. Our behavior is learned. We collude with

ideologies that are not in the best interest of our species' survival. Our culture also stresses resolving conflict with force, not imagination. I spent last summer with macaque monkeys. We could learn a lot from their conflict resolution.

DVL: You've achieved success in the top tiers of the art world, an arena that likes its politics clothed in less confrontational outfits.

SC: Thank you for saying so, although I am certainly not in the top or even middle tiers. I do make a living wage, but that is from the illustration work I do.

DVL: Do you feel your work has any effect on the dealers, collectors or curators that have handled it? Any testaments or conversions?

SC: The gallery that represents my work has a reputation for courage in the face of art world corruption, specifically in attempting to retrieve stolen Nazi art and defying an artificial "day-trader" approach to the marketing of art and the artist, but let me tell you an anecdote. Sometime in the last 18 months, the Museum of Modern Art had a show of new acquisitions. They were given a piece of mine

by a collector named Elaine Danheisser. I had done a large painting of a rape on a pool table. It was the first visual response to the New Bedford rape and was commissioned by a magazine. This large painting came from the illustration.

It was a key piece of work for me. It was a painting of complete unadulterated rage. It makes men tremble.

So I was invited to the opening, and against my better judgment I actually spent some money on a new black T-shirt. I mean I know that MoMA is a condo for the rich and I know hanging there means less than nothing or that they just garroted you, but there was this feather-like twitching in my brain that this was special. So I went with a friend and I went into the painting section, which of course was flashing light boxes and color Xeroxes of genitals and stuff ... and no Sue Coe painting. I look around in the other sections thinking "removed already, even at the opening" or more likely they forgot it. As I was leaving, there was the painting in the hallway, a tiny dark hallway so narrow even smaller than the apartment I did the painting in, and I laughed. It couldn't have been more insulting to me, or my work. It told me

my place in the scheme of things ... is the corridor on the way out! It would have been really worrying to have been placed in the painting room.

DVL: Are you ever going to do an expose on the underbelly of the art world? Images of the Art Market feeding off the blood of artists who are then cast aside in favor of younger fatter ones. Artists getting older without dental or health coverage. There's a lot of material there.

SC: You are giving me ideas, however, the dealers and collectors I have are not those. They are usually other activists, sometimes doctors or lawyers who believe in social change or an activist who can afford a \$30 print. Most of the curators, gallery workers, dealers I meet in the art world love art, work for little or no pay, work in small museums across the country opening up spaces and art for people. I was just at the Walker Art Institute and they have a stunning program for local teens. I know curators who risk their jobs every time they do a show with content. The type of work I do does not have the economic incentive to attract the corrupt dealers in museums. We have raised thousands and thousands of

dollars for different causes by selling inexpensive prints. With a little thought it can be done.

DVL: What problems do you see?

SC: Many artists and galleries deny the reality of a "business" relationship, which causes many problems. They have unrealistic expectations of each other. More and more cultural workers are generating their own capital and manipulating it themselves. Art colleges are lacking in the training of young artists to deal with issues of copyright and contracts. The new specter in the art world is not the galleries and collectors but the auction houses, work-for-hire contracts and electronic image houses that can sell and violate artists' intellectual copyright. Artists who deal with social content are economically censored because it is not recognized as a business.

It's very hard to continue on year after year when there is little or no money. In the 30s and 40s, a large percentage of the population supported socially progressive ideas, film noir, social realism in painting, and then along came the attempted removal of these cultural influences by

the Cold War mentality. Social realism in painting now is often dismissed as illustration and not taken seriously. Social conditions are just as difficult as they were in the 30s, so why is there not more imagery dealing with these issues?

We have greater hunger and poverty worldwide than ever before. One species being exterminated every eight hours, the list goes on, and what was the big media event this year? An issue that doesn't really affect anyone but her [Monica Lewinsky] and Clinton's family. What are the films being celebrated by the Oscars, and who's being given a Lifetime Achievement Award?

DVL: Which artists do you admire?

SC: Many, many artists. Many folk artists and cartoonists. The intensity and weight of Komar and Melamid. There are three who have a special place who are essential goodness. You need a dose every day. Kathe Kollwitz, Crazy Cats George Harriman and performance artist Rachel Rosenthal. They all have mole ability, to dig and dig all in the dark and then up comes this incredible mountain of something. I like mole-type artists. People

are amazed at these hills and mountains, but the mole artists don't wait around ... they dig.

DVL: Other than political art what kind of work do you enjoy?

SC: Any art with animals and nature. Paintings on black velvet, painted statues in TV Guide for \$9.95 a month. Any of those posters in starving artist frame shops. I have greedy tourist eyes when it comes to art. Signed paintings, movie titles, comics, murals and graffiti, painted cups and saucers, paintings by street artists on shirts and cardboards. Any artist working with etchings and lithos. Critter folk art, quilts, painted furniture, any illustrations in magazines, ancient and modern, anything that slows down time.

DVL: Have you ever been tempted to make work that had nothing to do with issues?

SC: No, the motor that drives this engine is content. I doubt if I would be an artist for the fun of it. It's too painful and labor-intensive. Plus I earn a living as a commercial artist, so it's very much work.

DVL: What's your current project?

SC: The Rise and Fall
of a Vivisector.

DVL: What kind of music
do you listen to?

SC: Don't ever listen to music.

DVL: What do you do to relax?

SC: Have not relaxed yet. I
think that comes with death.
Maybe I should listen to music.

DVL: Do you have any specific
spiritual practices or beliefs?

SC: I've searched all religions
for any that cherish animals,
women and gays in a way that
does not make us Satan's pawn.
It's slim pickings in the world
of religion. If animals believed
in religion, the devil would
look like a human being. I
don't know if this is a spiritual
practice, but whenever I have a
strong emotion I attempt to go
underneath it and find the root,
turn it over, examine it. Try
to look at it clearly and then
find the discipline to do the
most constructive thing. This
is very hard as we are taking
a very damaged organ in this
society, the mind, and using it
to examine itself. I attended a
Dalai Lama teaching, didn't
understand most of it and
kept thinking of the rumor
that he had scarfed down a

McDonald's. But they had
built this wooden platform
for him with cushions on it
surrounded by fresh flowers. It
was very lovely. He climbed up
the stairs to this platform and
then jumped up and down on
the platform to see if it would
hold his weight. That dispelled
any thoughts of levitation
or "Goddety." Then at the
question-and-answer session he
was asked what would he do
if faced with a horde of killers
with machetes. He answered,
"Run". What would he do
if the end of the millennium
turned bad. "Run." How would
he answer if hunters with guns
were chasing an animal and
ask him for directions? He
would lie and tell them the
other direction. He was so
ordinary he was extraordinary

DVL: What is your overall
feeling about humanity?

SC: Perception. There are all
these tiny particles traveling
through our bodies. They have
come millions of miles and
will continue on for millions
of miles. They are very real
and can be measured, but we
cannot see them. Our vision is
subjective. We look through
the distorted lens of our own
unique experiences, each
imagining our isolated world to
be the only one. My best friend

who was a writer/poet, works
with kids in the prison system.
She also lives in a rough
neighborhood where cars are
regularly vandalized, houses
broken into, car alarms and
sirens all night long. Year after
year, she rants against those
evil kids with their slack eyes
and faces. How they are fuck
ups and she'd like to tear their
heads off. Then on the turn of a
dime she talks about her kids,
the juvies in the prison system
and how they are starved for
attention, love, anything. How
they flourish in her poetry class
and how she loves them. And
you know what? They are the
same kids! So my perception
is what a wonderful brain we
humans have to contain these
two contradictory views, that
they are able to live together
jostling for a resolution
that cannot be resolved.

DVL: What is the hardest and the
simplest thing someone can do
to change things for the better?

SC: There is a real story of
women and death camps.
They are standing in line to
be gassed. One woman does a
flirtatious dance for the guards.
While he's diverted the other
women in line managed to
kill a significant number of
Nazis. The witnesses were
asked to name names of the

women but they did not. All the women were tortured and then garroted. Something like that would be the hardest thing. The easiest to change, is to control what you put in your mouth. If you eat a plant-based diet and remove animal products, you can save millions of animals unbelievable suffering, save the forests, save indigenous people who need the trees and their own land that are now being sacrificed for short-term grazing by the beef barons. You would save in health costs. It's stunning how some people have all these plans for social change but cannot change the simplest thing about themselves.