

Casting a Critical Eye, From the Slaughterhouse to the White House

The artist Sue Coe proudly labels her own work propaganda, whether she's taking on factory farming or current events.



By Hilarie M. Sheets

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This article is part of our latest Fine Arts & Exhibits special report, which focuses on how art endures and inspires, even in the darkest of times.

Months before the 2016 presidential election, Sue Coe used her printmaking tools to create “It Can Happen Here,” a linocut caricature of Donald J. Trump as a howling tornado tearing the United States Constitution in two. “I watched Brexit,” said the 69-year-old artist, who was born in Britain and who has been based in New York for almost 50 years. “I knew he was going to get elected.”

Ms. Coe has been prescient about a lot of things in her searing social-political art. Her work can feel like a punch in the face or a call to action — or both.

“Sue Coe: It Can Happen Here,” a four-decade retrospective on view at Galerie St. Etienne in New York through Dec. 30, chronicles this country from the Reagan era to the time of Trump, all through the artist’s Marxist worldview. The show includes new prints made since quarantine in which she’s channeled her rage at the administration and its handling of the coronavirus.

Ms. Coe recently visited the gallery, on leave from her rural cabin in Deposit, N.Y., where she’s lived for 25 years.

“My plague obsession started with the meat industry,” she said. Since the 1980s, the artist has produced series and books documenting the conditions of animals and workers in slaughterhouses and warning of the industry’s link to both global warming and pandemics.

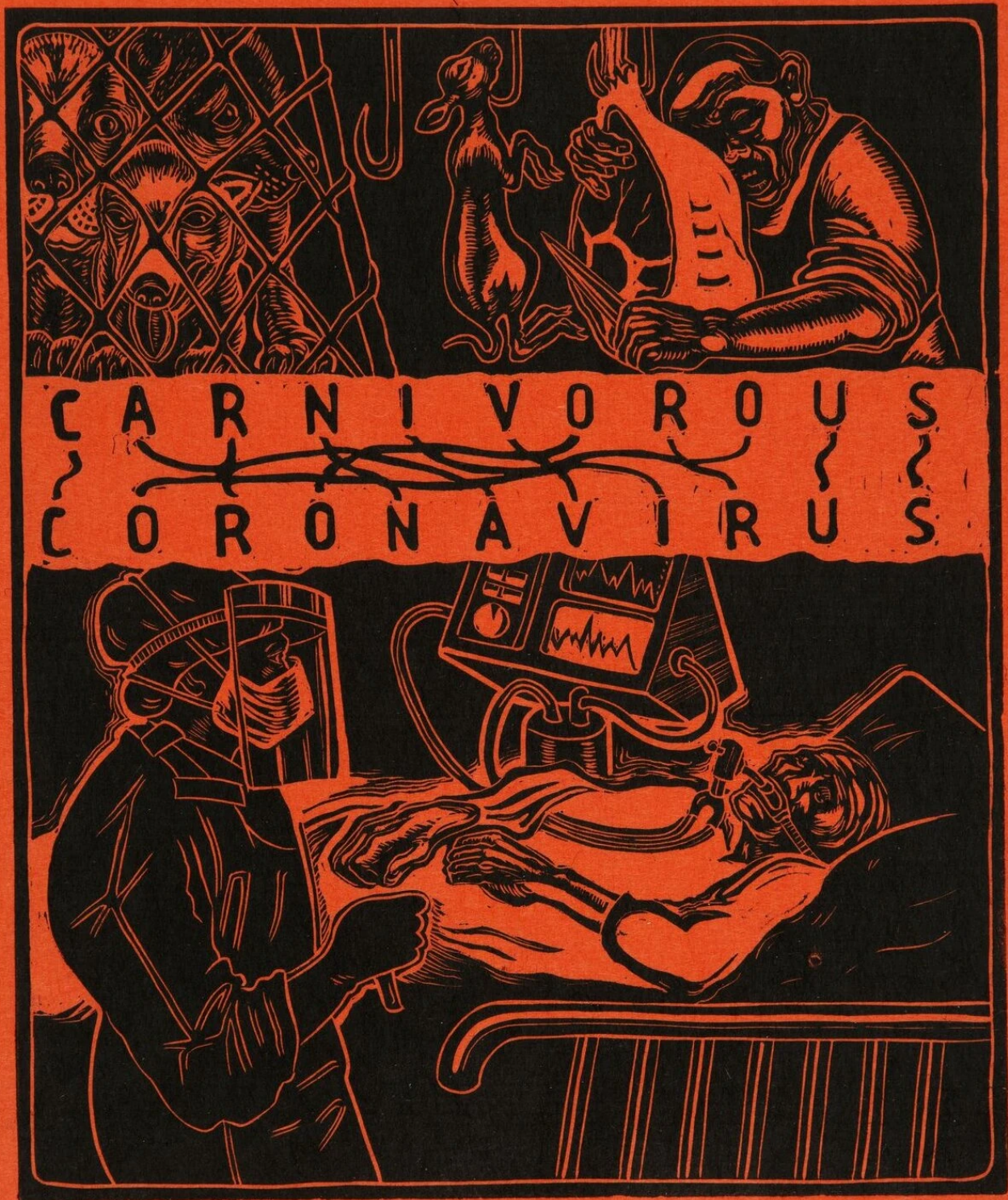
“Factory farming and zoonotic viruses are one and the same,” Ms. Coe said. “This is the last great social justice movement.”

One new linocut titled “Carnivorous/Coronavirus” connects the identical letters in the two words with blood-red tentacles and pairs a poignant factory scene with a bedside hospital view. Another, titled “Doctor MAGA (or Dr. Maga),” references a 16th-century image of an enrobed plague doctor with a long beaklike mask and gloves as claws, casting President Trump in this chilling garb, presiding over a vast sea of frightened faces in medical masks.



Sue Coe 2020

“Doctor MAGA (or Dr. Maga),” 2020. Sue Coe



Sue Coe 2020

"Carnivorous/Coronavirus," 2020. Sue Coe

Such images have been spilling from her with urgency. Ms. Coe has long considered her work to be a blend of visual journalism and propaganda, with this series tending strongly to the latter. “It’s a good word to me — it means to propagate ideas,” said Ms. Coe, who has taken cues from Russian propaganda posters. “This art is like eating a can of cold baked beans. It’s basic nutrients. It’s triage.”

Sixteen of the recent linocuts are published in “American Fascism Now,” a \$10 pamphlet similar to the cheap antifascist chapbooks produced by John Heartfield, an artist in Nazi-era Germany. All the prints are available through Galerie St. Etienne at relatively accessible prices, starting at \$250. The large paintings top out at \$30,000, a modest price by art-world standards.

Even though her work has been collected by major institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “it’s is not art-world art,” said Jane Kallir, the director of Galerie St. Etienne. Ms. Kallir noted that the artist had constantly argued against raising her prices.

“Sue wants her work to reach people who are being affected by the political and economic problems she addresses, not try to sanitize it as art,” Ms. Kallir said. Ms. Coe has a huge following with colleges and universities, where she frequently has exhibitions and speaks to students, many of whom are receptive to her evangelical messaging on eating meat and climate change.

“I make vegans,” Ms. Coe said. “That’s my role in life.”



“This art is like eating a can of cold baked beans. It’s basic nutrients. It’s triage.” Rahim Fortune for The New York Times

She grew up in the suburbs of London, amid the ruins of World War II, next to a hog factory farm and a slaughterhouse lit up 24 hours a day. When she asked her parents about what transpired there, they wouldn't discuss her fears.

Ms. Coe received a scholarship to study illustration at the Chelsea College of Art in London, then went on to study at the Royal College of Art. She moved to New York City in 1972 with \$100 and got her first freelance job at The New York Times, illustrating an article on how to make roast duck.

"I drew the duck as a revolutionary going to the guillotine," recalled Ms. Coe, whose art director was shocked at what she turned in but didn't have time to reassign. While the artist was not yet a full-fledged animal activist, "I knew to do that job from the duck's point of view," she said.

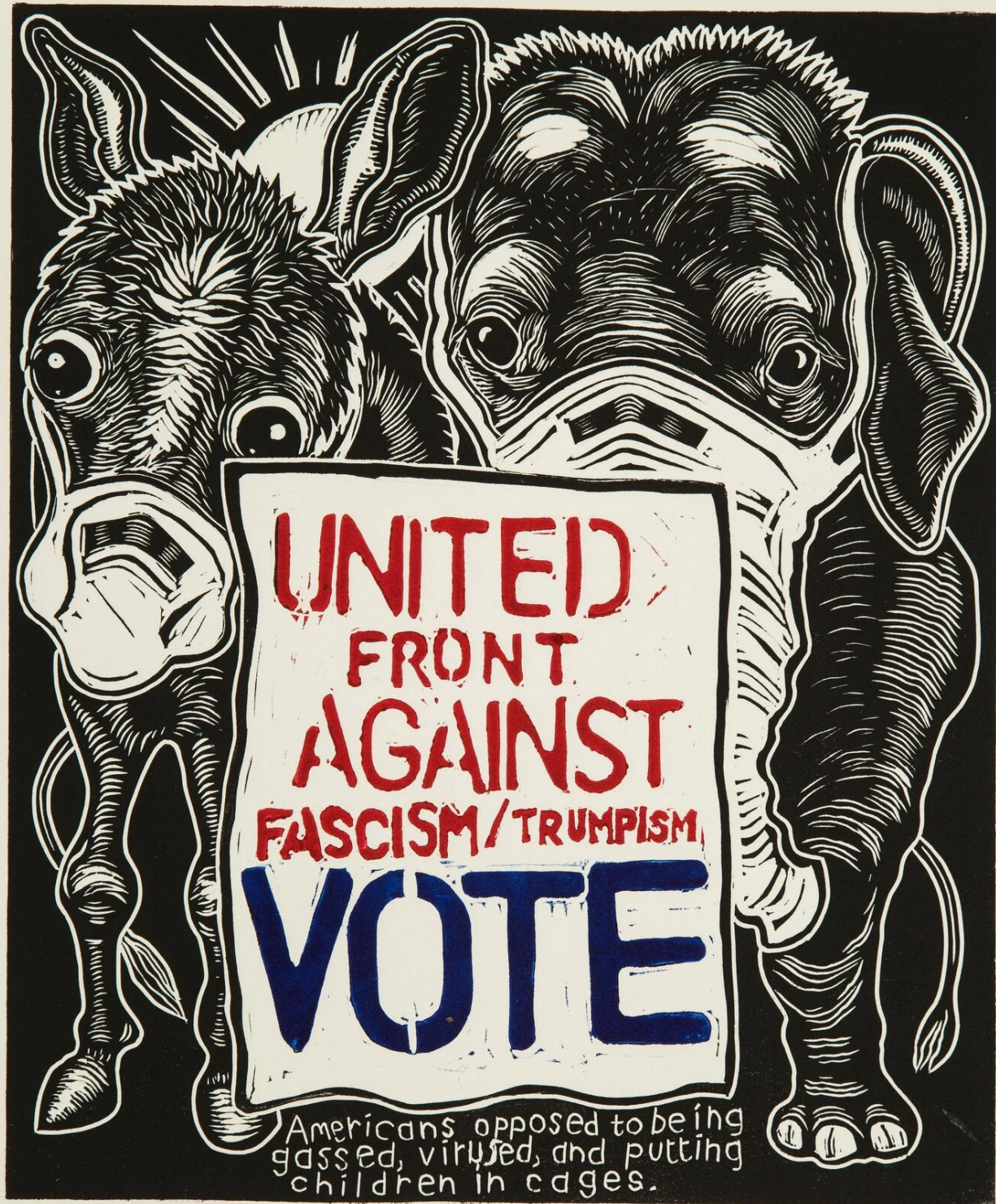
She continued working on print assignments, slipping edgy work through the editorial process and forging a style influenced by British caricature (also a touchstone for Francisco de Goya) and German expressionists such as Käthe Kollwitz, George Grosz and Otto Dix.

Ms. Coe's personal artistic breakthrough came in 1983, when she received an assignment to illustrate a story in a local magazine about a gang rape in New Bedford, Mass. (The movie "The Accused" was based on the story.) The illustration she turned in was censored by the magazine, cut in half before publication without her permission.

In her tiny apartment on the Upper East Side, Ms. Coe reworked a version of the illustration in paint on a 7-by-9-foot canvas, ripping up the original drawing and including the pieces as collage in the larger composition.

"That's the one where it came together," she said. "That, for an artist, happens once every decade." She added that she never thought anyone would buy it.

"Woman Walks into Bar — Is Raped by Four Men on the Pool Table — While 20 Watch" was shown in the first of two commercially successful solo gallery shows for Ms. Coe at the PPOW gallery and purchased by the influential collectors Werner and Elaine Dannheisser, who donated it to the Museum of Modern Art. Ms. Coe later left PPOW because "she didn't want to be the rising star of the East Village," said Wendy Olsoff, the gallery's co-founder — who credits the artist's vision with influencing the gallery's politically oriented direction to this day.



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Sue Coe 2020

"United Against Fascism," 2020. Sue Coe

The seminal painting was part of the 2018 exhibition “Sue Coe: Graphic Resistance” at MoMA PS1. The exhibition also included drawings made by Ms. Coe of homeless people, immigrants, prostitutes and the inside of slaughterhouses — people she had observed and places she had infiltrated, equipped only with her sketchbook and pencil. “It’s direct witnessing without reducing or making this anything other than the truth I saw exactly,” Ms. Coe said.

“Sue’s always been good at understanding who and what has lived at the margins of visibility and compassion,” said Peter Eleey, the former chief curator at MoMA PS1 who organized the show. “In her mind, mechanized industrial slaughter had a relation to Europe in the 1940s. Those kinds of equations between animal life and human life are profoundly uncomfortable for us to consider.”

In a new print on view at Galerie St. Etienne, Ms. Coe spells out her call for action. A donkey and an elephant, stand-ins for the opposing political parties, look sad and vulnerable while wearing protective medical masks. Together, they present a sign: “United Front Against Fascism/Trumpism VOTE.” A rider below reads: “Americans opposed to being gassed, virused and putting children in cages.”

Of the sympathetic representation that places Democrats and Republicans in the same boat, Ms. Coe conceded that it might be seen as optimistic, even sweet.

“It’s OK,” she said. “We can be sweet sometimes.”

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