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Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH

SUE COE

Elephants We Must

Never Forget

Galerie St. Etienne

24 West 57th Street, Manhattan

Through Dec. 20

The muckraking painter Sue Coe sees people's inhumanity to animals as but a prelude to their inhumanity to one another. For more than 20 years she has directed her graphic ire at the barbaric practices of the meat industry, portraying the horrific conditions under which chickens, pigs, sheep and cows are raised and slaughtered. Her images combine elements of political cartoons, Expressionism and illustration and are often hard to take.

Her current show is especially so. It is concerned with elephants -- much larger animals of great sensitivity and intelligence that tend to be mistreated in much smaller numbers. Primarily in lithographs, large gouaches and oil paintings, these works depict the often excruciating deaths suffered by these animals, in circus fires and train accidents and in brutal executions (after killing trainers who mistreated them). All the images are based on cases documented by photographs or news clippings that are also on view; most but not all date from the 19th century or the early years of the 20th.

Lengthy handwritten captions specify the details of already gruesome images. In "Mary" a circus elephant who killed her trainer is hung with chains from a crane, but only after her leg was clumsily broken; an enormous crowd looks on, as at a lynching. "Bridgeport Fire" portrays the burning of a large barn of animals owned by the Barnum & Bailey Circus while circus employees stood by doing nothing.

Several small oil paintings are not tied to specific events, but depict routine shootings and tusk

harvests. They are painted with a verve and color that are new to Ms. Coe's work, which is about the only good news that can be taken away from this painful show. ROBERTA SMITH

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