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Albuquerque  
(Jonson Gallery)

**COHORTS: WORKS ABOUT AIDS**  
BY SUE COE AND ERIC AVERY

**VISUAL POLITICS: PRINTS, PHOTOGRAPHS**  
AND SOCIETY, 1800 TO THE PRESENT

JONSON GALLERY, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO  
1909 LAS LOMAS NE, ALBUQUERQUE

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO ART MUSEUM  
CENTRAL AND CORNELL NE, ALBUQUERQUE

*If you remove your bloody nuclear device from my garden then I will find time to paint the flowers.*  
—Sue Coe, *The Dark Ages*

Sue Coe's work is the magnet that drew me to the two exhibitions and conference coordinated with the publication of *Hot Off the Press* at the University of New Mexico. Coe is a ferocious artist in the worthy lineage of Brueghel, Daumier, Goya, Silwitz, Grosz, WPA, and Siqueiros. Looking through my Sue Coe file I found a gallery broadside from a 1985 solo exhibition at the P.P.O.W. gallery in New York City. On the cover is her well-known *President Raygun Takes a Hot Bath* with the former commander in chief's carefully coiffed head crudely collaged atop a hard-guy body sporting "\$" tattoos. Our most-popular-ever Hollywood president had a smile plastered on his mug no matter what horrors were being perpetrated by the likes of Oliver North. In this image Reagan sits submerged in a tub of blood, his scrawny knees and a centrally placed erect missile breach the viscous surface.

Since then I've bought Coe's Malcolm X book and a print from her six-year animal rights series about the systematic torture and slaughter of fellow beings for our dining pleasure. Her images have shaken me and haunted me, and in my experience they are relentless. Coe never backs off. Of course, the only reason it is so powerful is that she makes very good art. While her large paintings are bought by major collectors and museums, she has always made sure that people with shallow pockets can own her fierce images. She prints editions of photo-etchings from drawings that sell from \$35 to \$90, or, you can acquire one of her works in *Rolling Stone*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, or any number of union magazines.

*Cohorts: Works About AIDS by Sue Coe and Eric Avery* is a small, joint exhibition at the Jonson Gallery that includes etchings, photoengravings and drawings by Coe, and an installation by Eric Avery, artist and medical doctor. The show is based upon their experience in the AIDS ward of the university hospital in Galveston, Texas, where Avery has developed an in-house AIDS service team.

Of Sue Coe's 10 prints and five large drawings, seven are portraits of dying individuals and the rest are hospital genre scenes at Galveston's Infectious Disease Clinic. Folded into her insistent rage there is also hovering sweetness and delicate reverence in these documents of desiccation. The patients are prone, still, ravaged. The waiting room aches in horrifying silence interrupted by coughing. The doctors gather round the bedside. Families are afraid, confused. Words are scrawled on the images like fragile roots. She records tender succor: "Sue, the cleaner volunteered to work The Dedicated Care Unit, she is very popular with the patients because she listens, and has a very beautiful spirit." In the ephemeral *Tony* his hair is aflame, his bony hands exquisitely drawn: The words personalize, specify, and ground the image of this man, to this place, in this condition: "Age 26, white gay/T-cell count 34—generalized weakness, diarrhea. Temp 39.5. Diagnosed December '93—Lost 40 lbs in one month—a quarter of his body weight."

Eric Avery is from a medical family in Galveston, and for the past 30 years printmaking and doctoring have spiraled through his life like a double helix: art school and medical school; Lower East Side Printmaking Workshop and New York State Psychiatric Institute; Indonesian and Somali camps and a studio in San Ignacio; Amnesty International work at detention centers on the border of Mexico and award-winning prints in national exhibitions; and, currently the AIDS ward in his hometown and an installation of graphic wallpaper at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. For this installation Avery has suspended an enclosure made from sheets of rice paper printed with wobbling cells. Inside and around this privacy screen hang fuzzy handmade paper viruses that look like they have been shaped with a spaghetti strainer. This installation distills a physician's understanding of microscopic life translating it into the truly monstrous of this plague. For the opening the gallery became a clinic and staff terrace.

*Heartland Hate Summit*, a more traditional graphic print by Avery of Ku Klux Klansmen and riot patrols and swastikas, is the bonus included within the *Hot Off the Press: Prints and Politics* publication. *Hot Off the Press* is the fifteenth volume of *The Tamarind Papers*, an irregular journal that began in 1974 with technical writings for printers and has grown into this hefty volume. Included are 11 articles: two that are technical (on waterless lithography), and nine that examine social and political printmaking. The articles range from political caricature during the French Revolution, to the American League Against War and Fascism 1936 Calendar, to conversations with Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, Avery, and UNM Professor Patrick Nagatani. A well-attended *Hot Off the Press* conference on Thursday, October 13 featured presentations by scholarly contributors Clinton Adams, Tamarind director emeritus; collector Reba White Williams; Deborah Wye, curator, MoMA; and artists Coe and Avery. Sue Coe detonated the decorum of the academic conference. Gasps, laughter and weeping were audible. Sue Coe is definitely not on Prozac: She was utterly alive, articulate, courageous, and completely present. In a non-stop Liverpool lit her commentary slid from the Dark Ages of trans-national capitalism, justice if you can afford it, the criminalization of the poor, the inability for the human brain to comprehend genocide, and her three comforts—*Star Trek* conventions, her pet rats, and suicide. She wasn't interested in questions from the audience about art. Life was the important thing and the economic conditions. She wanted to hear from the audience about GATT, NAFTA, and unions.

If you missed Sue Coe and Eric Avery this time I recommend you seize any future opportunities. They describe our pathologies with great honesty tempered by their own humor and humility. The big snafu here was that Sue Coe's work is not featured in *Hot Off the Press* publication. Coe is not only a prolific and tireless artist, she also writes well and is a contagious speaker. So how did this happen? Although the prints exhibited at the Jonson are part of the permanent collection, future generations will have to do some digging to find that she was the burning core of these coordinated events.



Sue Coe, *Thomas from AIDS Suite*, etching, edition of 40, 13 x 9", 1994  
Courtesy of Galerie St. Etienne

MALIN WILSON