

Commitment to the Struggle: The Art of Sue Coe

David Winton Bell Gallery
Brown University
64 College Street
Providence, RI
September 7 to October 27

Review by Michael Cochran

In the traditions of Goya, Daumier and Kathe Kollwitz, Sue Coe's seventy drawings and prints at the David Winton Bell Gallery at Brown University in Providence expose the horrible realities of life that most of us try to ignore. This writer/artist/activist pulls no punches as she thrusts the issues of sweatshop conditions, slaughterhouses, war, laboratory testing and AIDS right before our faces. The work in the exhibition, which is titled *Commitment to the Struggle: The Art of Sue Coe*, spans twenty years and is a testimonial to her lifetime commitment to human and animal rights or "liberation," as Coe states.

Born in Britain, Coe moved to the United States in 1972 and began work as an illustrator for the op-ed page of The New York Times. Her drawings have since been published in The New Yorker, Time, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, Mother Jones, National Lampoon and Artforum, among others.

Politics were an integral part of everyday life for Coe as she was growing up in the UK. "I became an illustrator in the first instance to earn a living...then I saw the possibility of injecting content into the medium," she says. Since 1986 Coe has increasingly devoted her energies to the protection of animals in industry, from factory farming to medical research and genetic engineering. Her dedication to animal rights began early; she grew up in a house adjacent to a slaughterhouse, with all of its associated sights and smells. From 1986 to 1972 she visited slaughterhouses in the U.S., Canada and England, gaining access to stockyard operations through associates who worked in the meat industry. Although the owners didn't allow cameras or videos, they apparently considered Coe's sketchbook harmless. Her research resulted in a series she calls *Porkopolis* – the slang term for Cincinnati, the first centralized meat processing center in the U.S. Published in 1996 under the book title *Dead Meat*, the series provides a dark, detailed look at the American meat industry. In his review in Vegan magazine, Erik Marcus states that, "*Dead Meat* is unrelentingly grim. By turning realistic and morbidly surreal, Coe's drawings capture pain and inhumanity in a way that simply cannot be expressed through writing."

At the Bell Gallery, pencil-drawn images from *Dead Meat* that appear gruesome hang next to images like *Scientists Find a Cure for Empathy* that are ripe with humor, satire and sarcasm, notes gallery director Jo-Ann Conklin. In *Arms Merchants*, a watercolor from her sketchbook, Coe takes on the military industrial complex when representatives of Boeing and G.E. toast champagne glasses as the human race wanders naively to the brink of disaster. "I am extremely critical of illogical economic systems that put profit

over any and all other considerations, especially life,” Coe states in an interview in MediaReader Quarterly. “We live lives that are increasingly alienated from any reality, which makes it easier for the meat industry, or any other industry that puts profit before life, to pull the wool over our eyes.” “The reality is, if we continue to poison, pollute and multiply, we will cease to exist as a species...”

Compelling and heroic are words to describe the work in this exhibition but the greatest power that exists in the work lies just beneath the surface. It has the ability to reach within each of us to enable us to change our direction, if we let it. Coe holds up the mirror for each of us to see where we're heading. The rest is up to us.