

John Schuerman's Essay about the exhibition: *ALL THIS IS TRUE: The Art of Sue Coe and Warrington Colescott*.

All This Is True

Sue Coe and Warrington Colescott

"If you attack, do it with skill."¹ –Warrington Colescott

Am I a good person? Are we (humans) collectively good? Political artists Sue Coe and Warrington Colescott create powerful work that raises such questions and elicits relevant concerns from viewers. In this exhibit they take us on a difficult tour of some of the darker practices of human societies as well as the casualties. Though the line between good and bad is not always clear, they show us that some practices cause a lot of suffering. In so doing they challenge us to change, and thus to change the world we live in.

Sue Coe's art is graphic, intense, and spares no horror. Her topics include the atrocities of war, slaughterhouses, AIDS, and imperialism. She depicts things we'd rather not face or think about: the suffering we inflict upon one another, the cruelty of the slaughterhouse, and our destruction of the environment. Sustained exposure to her artwork can leave the viewer feeling emotionally beat up and a little nauseous. It is tough art to take in, but as Coe is quick to point out, "it's not even close to real life, what they (sufferers) experience."

Warrington Colescott's art is also graphic and intense. In addition, his work includes elements of absurdity, which provide a counterbalance to the tragedy; the effect is that our minds flit back and forth between the two, as with an optical illusion. It is this trick of perception that he exploits, keeping us entertained while at the same time magnifying the ghastliness. Like Coe, his primary topic is the variety of ways humans have abused their power, but his socio-political commentary is infused with orgiastic fantasies and dark comedy. Hussies, drugs, and guns permeate the decadent power structures he addresses, from Hitler's regime to the Supreme Court. He tells us what we already know: it's a crazy world.

Both artists address and are motivated by ethics at the practical level of what actually happens in society. They study the news, they discover systemic disturbing practices that never make the news, and they draw what they see. Art made in this way is both topical and historical, marking a moment in time. The artists' viewpoints are opinionated: their art consists of personal, political statements about what they see and have seen. Perhaps they internalize the darkness so they can translate it into art. They know that their quest to inspire better behavior starts in hell.

¹ Warrington Colescott, in the exhibition catalog for *Cabaret, Comedy and Satire*, Milwaukee Art Museum, 2010

Coe's empathic concern is for the sufferer. Her art depicts the brute cruelty of oppressors and the raw suffering of victims. Evil is more or less one-dimensional, pervasive, and all-powerful. It is shown as machine-like, systematic, and soul-less, in meting out punishment. The victims are often the multitude, or in today's terminology, the 99%. In *Sharpeville*, police-creatures systematically shoot peaceful demonstrators. It hurts to look. Coe believes it hurts us more not to look.

In contrast, Colescott's focus is on the depraved lives of the oppressors and their elite cliques. In *The Death of Hitler*, the subjects are caught up in their own madness, gluttonously eating, drinking, sexing, and being poisoned by it all. In their world it is always carnival time. They are jokers we can laugh at and tyrants we can despise. They are caught up in their own web of craziness, so we feel sorry for them too.

War is examined by both artists. Colescott's War is hedonistic. It is led by military and political figures drunk on power. In one series, military leaders drink breastmilk from a huge male general with massive breasts. The seat of power is male, seeded with sexual compulsion driving the frenzy to make war, not love. Colescott experienced war firsthand, serving in WWII at the front lines in the battle of Okinawa. He says that he found the power structures of war supremely deserving of satire.

Coe's war comes from above. Bombs and missiles rain down on soldiers and civilians. *Bomb Shelter* is the simplest, most powerful statement: a missile falls from the sky and a mother uses her body to cover her child – maternally and uselessly.

Both artists react to conservative swings in the Supreme Court. Colescott's *Supper with the Supremes* is a Romanesque orgy – the judges overstuff themselves amidst dancing girls, people practicing sadomasochism, and knights with weapons. Coe's Supreme Court is stark. Caricatures of the judge's faces are set atop raven bodies, which sit on the limb of a tree from which coat hangers and bodies dangle; the tree roots flow into swastikas. She is critiquing the tyranny of conservatism – the aim to eliminate women's rights to safe and legal abortions and the general spread of conservative doctrines favoring white male dominance.

A number of the drawings and prints in this exhibit were made in response to the political conservatism of the early 1990's. Coe's *Supreme Court*, *Bush Aids*, and *The Road to the Whitehouse*, as well as a number of drawings by Colescott, all were catalyzed by events from this period. Some of Colescott's works were originally commissioned and published by *The Progressive* magazine, headquartered in Madison, WI. In my recent interview with him, Colescott said, "the editor gave me carte blanche. He loved it when I got tough responses" (from the magazine's readers), and "he egged me on." Edwin Noel was *The Progressive's* editor at the time, and it was this sort of

“push” that enabled Colescott to get more and more irreverent and outlandish with his artwork.

At one point in my conversation with Coe I referred to her artwork as political. She insightfully and politely interjected: “we need to reframe what we mean by political art. The *most* political is something that doesn’t reflect reality. That works for the right, enables the dominant power structure to put profit before people. Silence works for them. ‘High art’, the art of ambiguity is safe to be marketed and (therefore) is political. Art without content, movies without content are what’s really political.” Of course her work *is* political too. But her point is interesting: what is the (political) effect of art that completely bypasses the overtly political and ethical; what is the broader political effect when the artworld highlights the abstract and conceptual art, which is disengaged from the social-political sphere? Good question.

While the fine art world has embraced abstraction and other forms of conceptual art, Coe and Colescott have stayed the course of graphic, emotional, representational narrative. It is not hard to see the line of influences, including Hieronymus Bosch, Francisco Goya, and the German Expressionists. Goya’s Tragedy of War series was retold by Otto Dix in the 1930’s and then again by Sue Coe in 2000. She also references Chaiim Soutine’s paintings of dead animals in her nonstop exploration of the horrors of the meat processing industry. Of course no artist is an island within his or her own time either. Colescott’s influence includes the writer Jerome Rothenberg. His poem, *War* is the basis for at least three works in this exhibit. It seems a safe bet that William Burroughs and Hunter S. Thompson informed some of the theater of decadence in Colescott’s work. The influence of contemporary political artists such as Ralph Steadman or Stephen Kroninger is also visible in the work of both artists.

Ultimately, the matter at hand is truth. Coe and Colescott are driven to find and relay hidden, important truths. Colescott told me his drawings were “representative of the power structure at the time. I think it’s pretty accurate.” Coe also emphasizes the truth-telling focus of her artwork, and in particular, the level of truth that comes from depicting what one has actually witnessed. She told me, “I don’t see enough witnessing work. With a sketchbook and a pencil you can have a huge impact.”