

ARTIST VIGNETTE

ANNE COE

by Todd Wilkinson



Finding refuge in a lattice of cacti, lizards and diamond-back rattlesnakes, the coyote pants expectorately while on the horizon swarms of jets are buzzing the heavens and smog is settling heavy over the urban skyline.

Given a choice, most of us would prefer a seat with rattlers and lobos as a substitute to the apocalyptic sunset falling upon civilization. Once again, Anne Coe is playing tricks with our mind. And, silly us, we're laughing right along with her.

Coe's vision is hardly idyllic, nor is it conservative, conventional or safe. In the crazy, mixed up world she conveys, there are no humans

left. The wildlife is us.

"At some point in recent history, the roles of habitat were switched," Coe explains. "The cities used to be our sanctuaries, and the wilderness was a place that seemed unforgiving and hardly livable. But as we've gotten rid of wilderness, a horrible thought has struck civilization. The cities are the places where God doesn't live, and we go to the wilderness to find peace and solace and sanctity."

In North America today, a growing number of artists are returning to the comic allegories found in animals as a means of connecting with a human audience. Coe is among a distinguished group that includes the likes of cartoonist Gary Larson and illustrator-painter Monty Dolack.

The initiation for this Arizona native came through an evolution of personal dogma that began as a child. "It started out with self-portraits, where I used animals as representations of what I was thinking, but then I got more involved with animals and wildlife issues and less involved in myself," she says. "The epiphany of change came when I watched what had happened around our ranch."

Near the family ranch in the desert, Kofa National Wildlife Refuge was surrounded on three and a half sides by military gunnery ranges - Luke Air Force Gunnery Range and the Army-operated Yuma Proving Ground. "Think of it," she explains. "It's an oxymoron to have a wildlife preserve with an arbitrary border engulfed by a gunnery range."

Coe saw airplanes swooping, ammunition flying, and animals running for their lives. She got involved with protecting the critters using the loudest voice she had: Art. "I don't know how you can separate your profession from your beliefs," she says passionately, from her studio on the edge of the Sonoran Desert. "I walk out into the desert and look at my paintings. The land is a part of me, and I'm a part of the land and animals. I don't see how you can paint anything but who you are. The environment is a paradox of strength and fragility."

A learned student of animal anatomy and physiology, Coe received both her bachelor of art and masters in fine art from Arizona State University in Tempe and spent

a year at the Universidad de Puerto Rico studying art and Spanish. Gifted with a provocative sense of design and composition, her acrylic adventures are embroidered with a galaxy of shapes. Although she is adept at all mediums, her signature is the luminous hues of acrylic. She may juxtapose a cobalt blue sky with the sensuous pink found on a desert cactus blossom. "There are brilliant colors in nature," she says. "I use the colors and pump them up a few steps."

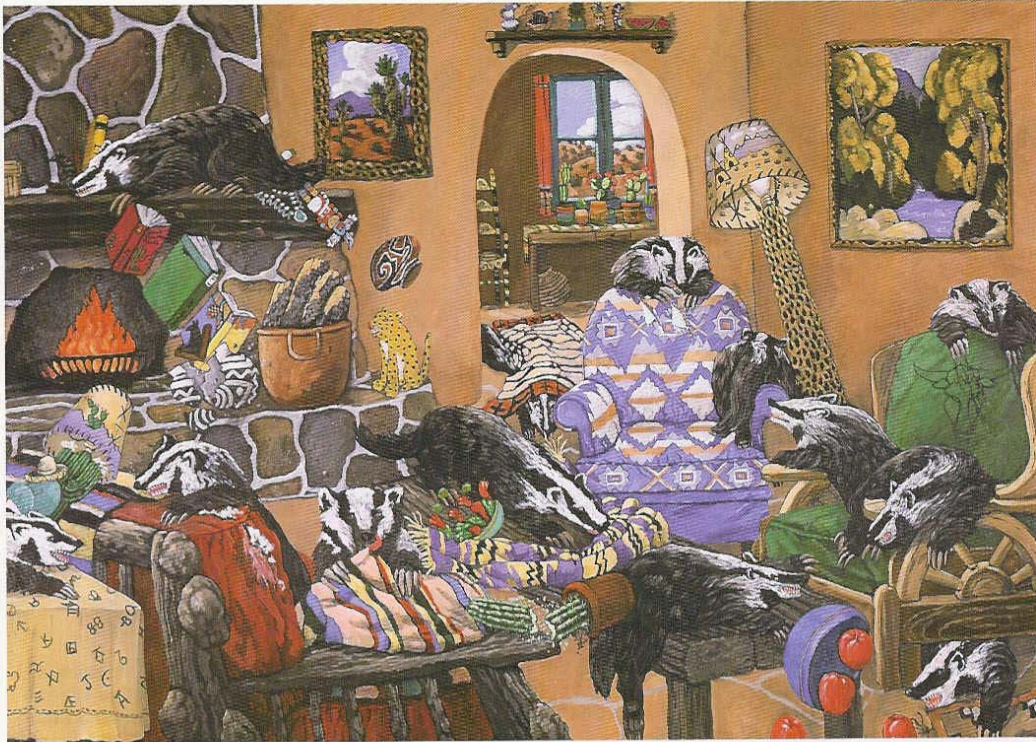
Where traditional painters of wildlife subjects have avoided environmental issues, ostensibly over fear of losing potential customers, Coe has boldly confronted the public in earnest and has been recognized with artistic respect, not to mention the loyal allegiance of buyers. Her original works sell the same day they are delivered to galleries, and the mainstream conservation community in the West courts her potent images, putting them on posters, T-shirts and calendars with the certainty that they will raise money and awareness.

Commencing 1992 by participating in the *Arizona Wildlife Exhibition* at the Mesa Southwest Museum, she turns her attention this spring to a landmark solo show at the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, May 1 through June 6, and then unveils more new works July 24 through August 11 at the Horwitch Gallery in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

"She has a very strong market both nationally and regionally," says Julie Sasse of Elaine Horwitch Galleries, which deals Coe originals in Scottsdale, Santa Fe, Sedona and Palm Springs. "Anne's work has been popular with many different facets - the collectors, the museums and the general public. Her following is widespread."

By all stretches of the imagination, Coe has made an impact though her résumé contains details that might appear intellectually incompatible. For example, one would not expect that Coe, a critic of Reaganomics, would be handed a personal invitation from First Lady Nancy Reagan to paint Easter eggs in 1982 for the annual White House Easter Egg Invitational in Washington, D.C.

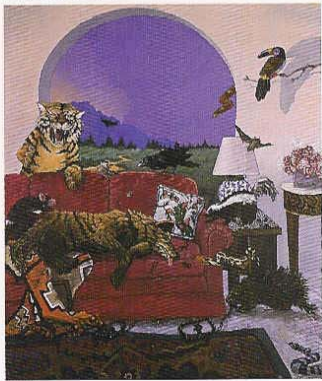
Am I pulling your leg? Not a chance.



We Don't Need No Stinkin' Badgers, acrylic, 50" x 70"

As one of the few American artists chosen that year to participate, Coe was asked to paint a wooden egg that appeared in the White House. Her elliptical creation, depicting – in her words – “some lizards and prickly pears,” is now housed in the Smithsonian. Of the

When Good Dogs Have Bad Dreams, acrylic, 50" x 42"



experience, Coe reminisces: “As artists, we get asked to do a lot of strange things. But it was fun.”

It is a commentary that also might be applied to Coe’s art. Strange, perhaps, but in this case the strangeness emerging on canvas is no more bizarre than the strange treatment we humans have reaped upon the land supporting us. As if Coe were raising a mirror to the viewers’ faces, they see – through a looking glass of stark, dark humor – the outline of reality. Gila monsters running herd over skyscrapers as if it were a rip-off of Japanese King Kong and Godzilla films; hoodlum coyotes invading a home of middle-class house cats; coyotes soaking in sun along a tropical beach; and coyotes being lassoed from the back of a Chevy on the Mad Dog Ranch.

The solo effort in Scottsdale is titled *The Seven Deadly Sins* and will feature massive canvases that measure 70 inches by 90 inches, and wildlife expression is the predominant theme. What are the seven sins that Coe has identified?

In alphabetical order they are Envy, Gluttony, Greed, Lust, Pride, Sloth and Wrath.

Seven Sins comes on the heels of two dozen other audaciously successful showings whose names exude the mood. There was, to name two, 1989’s *Harleys and Indians* show at the Horwitch Gallery in Palm Springs and 1988’s *Dog Meets Dog* at Anne Reed Gallery in Sun Valley, Idaho. Further, for the more staid, there have been group shows with animal themes at galleries in ten states and four foreign countries.

Coe subscribes to the theory that pretty pictures don’t inspire people to get involved with conservation causes, but thoughtful Scud missiles dropped on their funny bone can. “I’m anathema to the wildlife traditionalists because I don’t paint utopian scenes of nature,” she says. “The traditional painters are very valid in following their ancestral imperative. I use traditional technique, but I try to bring a new edge to it.”

Coe often approaches caricature and cartoons with her expressionistic style though she never consummates the relationship with either style of lampoon. "I walk a very thin line here," she says. "I feel I've never crossed it, but I've come real close."

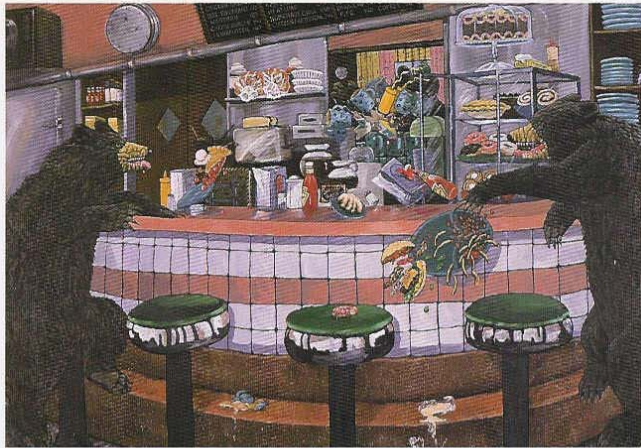
Even if there are classic wildlife painters who don't take Coe seriously, there are scores more who do. Her

work is collected coast to coast and found in such divergent places as the Smithsonian; the Centro de Arte Moderna in Guadalajara, Mexico; the Museum of North Dakota in Grand Forks; the Columbus Museum of Art and Sciences in Columbus, Georgia; Arizona State University; and the McDonald's (yes, the hamburger chain) Corporate Art Collection in Oakbrook, Illinois. Her pieces also have found their way into two dozen lectures on environmental art, video formats at several museums and in major motion pictures including *And God Created Woman* directed by Roger Vadim, and Warner Brothers' 1976 production of *A Star is Born*.

The irony of Coe's conspicuousness is this. Purists of wildlife art, who disdain her op-art-like taste, are constantly struggling for respect from fine art critics. Some of these same critics in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago recognize Coe as, ahem, a fine Southwest artist. When judging her outrageous statements, it is important to consider that Coe's commentary is not aimed at the future or the past, it is the vernacular of today.

"Anne is best known for her coyotes, but she has done pieces with badgers, bears and jungle animals," says Sasse. "You could view it as anthropomorphic, but it's her way of saying these beings have spirits and personalities. A lot of artists who paint Southwest animals are flat and sharp-edged. Anne isn't."

Yes, Anne Coe has guts, though they ache every day she steps



Counter Culture, acrylic, 50" x 70"

outside in the Sonoran desert and sees what the fallout of development, as manifested in the savings and loan crisis, has produced. Miles upon miles of previously pristine desert have been bulldozed to make room for track homes and mobile home retirement villages that were never built.

"As a child, I found solace in the desert, and I came back to it as an adult," she says. "By painting it day after day, I've come to realize how delicate and resilient it is. But at the same time, all you need is to have one off-road vehicle tear across the sand and fragile plant communities, and it's scarred forever. It won't come back in a billion years. As much as I hate a downturn in the economy and the recession, I welcome the reprieve and being able to step back and say no more track homes on the desert landscape."

As a lobbyist toting a long list of issues, Coe lately has been pouring her energy into reintroduction of the Mexican wolf into the United States border country. Only 40 or so of the legendary canids are thought to be alive, all of them in captive breeding programs. She further is seeking Wild and Scenic River protection for several Arizona Rivers to prevent them from being victimized by water brokers.

Late in 1991, Coe formed Artists for the Earth, a loose-knit coalition of painters, sculptors, writers, musicians and performing artists to support environmental protection by using their craft. She also is a

member of another group known as Six-Six, comprised of six environmentalists and six multiple-use advocates who have come together to establish a dialogue to promote land uses that are compatible with wildlife habitat. Some of the ideas for conflict resolution have developed through the abstruseness of her art and how people respond to it.

"Her work is powerful," Sasse says. "It's a combination of being painterly and sending a message, but doing it with a velvet hammer. She's telling you something but not pushing you through an emotional ringer."

There have been futile attempts by some people to tag Coe's style with a label. Magic Realism is one, but Coe says Andrew Wyeth is a magic realist, and her work doesn't convey the same feelings as his. Maniacal Absurdism is another. During the height of the Cold War when the Southwest became a testing ground for nuclear and conventional weapons, the desert and its wildlife took a beating. In retrospect, contemplating how naively people gathered in bleachers to observe explosions or to witness bombing runs (not having any idea, of course, they were exposing themselves to carcinogenic doses of fallout), Coe says such scenes are so horrible the only rational way for humans to respond is through laughter, to poke fun at how preposterous the destruction can be.

The same concepts guide her approach to environmental issues. "You don't want to just entertain, period," she says. "I am enough of a pedant that I want to teach. To me, art has a very definite social reason for being which is to communicate and effect change." ■

Artwork courtesy of Anne Coe, Apache Junction, Arizona.