

Exploring the Revolutionary Art of Caroline Coon

In her 2019 short film, *I AM A WHORE*, Caroline Coon performs a denunciation of misogynist culture in homage to Christine Keeler, the young woman at the centre of the Profumo affair in 1963, in which she was scapegoated and demonised as a ‘whore’ and a fallen woman. Commissioned by Fionn Wilson for the exhibition ‘Dear Christine... a Tribute to Christine Keeler’, the film features Caroline sitting behind a bucket of red paint, delivering a monologue as she calmly smears the paint over her white dress. Explaining that the concept of ‘whore’ is itself so problematic because of its role in dividing women into ‘whores’ and ‘good women’, Coon underlines the impossibility of ever being ‘good enough’ as a woman, and the idea of a ‘whore’ as a fallacy intended only to oppress.

Women are demonised in this particular way, this idea of potentially or actually being a whore, Coon argues, as if to anticipate a supposedly innate form of ‘female’ immorality. Women must always try that bit harder not to fall, not to fail, society tells us, because they – we – are more prone to moral weakness than men. But it is untrue, of course, as Coon powerfully communicates, and no amount of ‘trying to be good’ will protect us from assault, violence, or murder. The idea that women are innately ‘bad’ and ‘weak’ – all of us potential whores – exists simply to excuse the actions of men against women. If we are all deserving of punishment, for this inherent weakness, then these men are justified in what they do. The threat of being called a whore is ultimately a way of shaming and terrorising women into submission.

So what is there to do? Coon does not only protest this state of affairs, she also provides a vision of a better world, in which to be a whore is not to be ashamed, and not to be demonised. Legalise sex work, she says; do not punish women needlessly. Collapse the false moral high ground, and stop resisting the ‘whore’, and the division it entrenches. ‘We must change the culture’, she says, and it starts here. To be a whore is to be human,

after all.

This short film, so powerful and to the point, is typical of Coon's longstanding, interrelated practices of art and activism, and her particular form of sharp, articulated subversion. Her paintings, meanwhile, which reclaim female sexuality and unapologetically present the female gaze, and a feminist vision of a world in which gender binaries are collapsed and discarded, are triumphant and liberating. Though she was not given a solo show until 2018, Caroline Coon's body of work, created over fifty years, is testament to a dedicated and multi-faceted practice that fuses lived experience and political insight. Coon draws on decades of perseverance in speaking truth to power, and revealing the delusions and power systems so many of us live under, and often perpetuate.

'Revealing the deceptions and lies of the patriarchy is integral to my work,' Coon tells me, as we sit drinking coffee in her light-filled studio, which is part of her house in Ladbroke Grove, looking out onto a vast garden. Caroline is warm and strikingly beautiful, wearing all white, as she does in her film. 'I'm very aware and conscious of my White class privilege and the duty I have to put it to use,' she explains, as we discuss her desire to expose corruption. 'In my family, which was aspiring to be aristocratic, upper class, rulers of the world, with moral values – behind the scenes every single moral rule was being broken, on us children – in terms of violence and sexual abuse – and we were being groomed to lie about it in public. The higher up in the class system, the more you have to keep those secrets.'

This desire to expose and remedy injustice, from such a young age, has fuelled Coon's work and remains its central focus. Indeed, her persistence and dedication to painting, especially, was drawn from finding refuge in the arts very early on, when she was sent to a Russian ballet school in Kent. 'I was determined to be different, so my parents sent me away, and I was put in boarding school at the age of five.' This turned out to be a blessing, and gave Coon an entrance into an entirely different way of living and thinking about the world. 'I was put into this other arena, of

artists and dancers,' she explained, still sitting with a striking, balletic poise. 'So from an early age, I had this contrast between the patriarchal family home with the lies, and this other arena, where women worked as artists, and got paid for it. So intellectually, I had these contrasting worlds with which to feed into what I was going to become as an adult.'

This education in ballet (Coon later went on to the Royal Ballet School) was the beginning of her artistic practice, still evident in the ways in which she approaches the figure in her painting, and her sense of poise and space in her performance art. It also nurtured a magnificent work ethic alongside a vivacious creative spirit, and a sense of expansiveness and physicality in her paintings. 'The Bolshoi Ballet theatre in Moscow is three times the size of Covent Garden,' Coon points out, 'so they can almost gallop horses across the stage. As a child, our teachers would take us to rehearsals as part of our training. We saw how Russian dancers had to modify their technique otherwise they would do one *grand jeté* and end up in the orchestra pit. Because of the huge stage these dancers were used to, their technique had to be broad and expansive. From this I learned how any creative style can be dependent on context and place.'

By growing up seeing male and female bodies together in a way that was, in the 1950s, quite unusual, there was also an early normalisation of gender fluidity, and a sense of gender as performed. 'We were very used to being physical with one another... The whole training was performing different parts – male, female, snowflakes, witches, wizards... Theatre has always been gender fluid in that sense.' Coon grew up with exposure to these two very different influences regarding what masculinity could be, therefore. In ballet school she learnt that the body was a form of artistic expression, and that expression could be malleable, transformative and joyful. At home, meanwhile, she learnt that the body could be a battlefield, a way to become divided, abused and subordinated, and ultimately to be forced into submission in a wider patriarchal structure. When she moved to London at sixteen, as 'Swinging London' erupted, and with it the sexual revolution, she discovered new ways to break free.

Having grown too tall for ballet, Coon worked as a model initially and enrolled in Central Saint Martins. (She later studied philosophy, sociology and economics at Brunel University). During this period, Coon first

became involved in political activism – from feminism to drug law reform – determined to protest the damaging norms of the establishment. ‘The hippy movement was absolutely trying to break down the rigidity of post-war masculinity and domestic roles,’ Coon explains, ‘with the long hair, the velvet, the flowing fabrics... Everything was unisex. But what was interesting was how quickly the establishment shut that gender fluidity down.’

Coon saw first hand the injustice of drug laws at the time, too, and in particular the disproportionate punishment of young black men. She set up the drugs reform charity Release in 1967 to offer legal support to young people in trouble with the police – including, in those early days, John Lennon and George Harrison – who then became valued donors. Years later, in the seventies, Coon immersed herself into the punk scene, whilst working as a music journalist for the legendary *Melody Maker*, as well as other magazines, where she interviewed musicians such as Yoko Ono, Joan Armatrading, the Slits, the Damned and the Buzzcocks about gender and sexuality, giving a platform to radical new ideas and political positions. ‘The shocking way that punk women changed the face of femininity for all time was wonderful... but the misogynist pushback against that was ferocious.’

Coon also created artwork for record sleeves at this time, including her iconic photograph of The Clash, whom she also managed at one point, for their debut single ‘White Riot’. Featuring the band with their backs turned and hands up against a wall, this image was later used by Release for a campaign against stop and search legislation, publicising the injustice that Black youths are eight times more likely to be searched than White youths. At every point, and across art, activism and music, Coon has used her position and voice to challenge social injustice – in particular the oppression of women and other marginalized groups – and she has allied herself, in doing so, with the most outspoken and revolutionary of her generation.

All of these political, social and aesthetic influences and experiences have

clearly enriched Coon's painting throughout her life, which possess lasting impact and originality. Railing against the establishment, Coon marked out her own path with a solid sense of adventure and courage, subversion and wit. It was through painting, crucially, that Coon found a way to speak truth to power, committing to her subversive representation of the female experience, alongside her lifelong elevation of dismissed and erased female voices in the art world.

Discovering the work of pop artist Pauline Boty whilst at Central Saint Martins, through her tutor Derek Boshier's friendship with Boty's husband (the theatre agent and political activist Clive Goodwin), Coon became her champion and ally. Although a founder of the British Pop Art movement, Boty had been typically overlooked by her male peers and the art establishment in general. Tragically, Pauline died in 1966 at only twenty-eight, from leukemia. In the aftermath of her death, her husband gave Coon Boty's oil paints as an inheritance, and with this gesture, Coon vowed to 'carry on where she left off' and to paint 'in her honour'. Coon used these paints, in the first instance, to create a homage to Boty's well-known work, *Bum*, with a full-frontal painting titled *Cunt*. The outrage, the determination and the revolution would live on, this work announced; these oil paints were a baton between one victorious, vivacious female painter and another, in a moving gesture of solidarity and love in spite of erasure and even death itself.

Coon went on to paint for the next fifty years, and she paints now, at the age of seventy-six, working from her studio in Ladbroke Grove. She shows me some canvases – women swimming, entangled in water lilies, the sun bearing down on them through the water; women falling into long grasses and thistles in *Sheltering* (1991); *George Best with Heart and Dog Roses* (2006), a joyful tribute to Pauline Boty's style; and in *Pieta*, a feminist reversal of the iconic patriarchal Christian blood-sacrifice myth. There are many penises, too, stylized and erect across various canvases, sometimes taking up their own; there is a sense of worship and also playfulness in these, a kind of theatre. In her neighbourhood street scenes and exquisite still lives of flowers, meanwhile, Coon captures the joy of life with her unique stylized aesthetic, reminiscent of the work of Tamara de Lempicka, seeming silky and delicate – voluminous, though the layers of paint are



Caroline Coon, Choosing: Before the Parade, 1998. Oil on canvas, 122 x 152cm



Caroline Coon, Christine Keeler: Anger, Blame, Shame, Grief, Ruin, 2019. Oil on canvas, 122 x 92cm



Caroline Coon, The English Lake, 2013. Oil on canvas, 107 x 138cm



Caroline Coon, Between Parades, 1985. Oil on canvas, 122 x 152cm

subtle and light. Elsewhere, Coon creates overtly political work, against war and torture, which are brilliantly detailed and accomplished, and clear in their message.

Across Coon's work, there is a fusion of femininity and hyper-masculinity, which reclaims female sexuality and liberates masculinity from a limiting and stale patriarchal structure. In her Brothel Series, for instance, she presents the lives of sex workers and their male clients through a feminist frame, to subvert the portrayal and creative ownership of prostitution by male artists for centuries. Drawing from experience, for Coon was a sex worker herself for a period in the 1980s (which Coon recounted in her illustrated memoir *Laid Bare*), these paintings illuminate the experience of prostitution rather than merely the objectification and fetishisation of it. Again, it is crucial to Coon that she reclaims female sexuality and experience, showing the female gaze and overturning patriarchal assumptions and biases.

Given that the Euros are playing when we meet, two paintings stand out – included in her exhibition 'In The Arena' at J Hammond Projects – in which Coon depicts the sporting arena as a microcosm of society at large, with she/he football players wearing make-up against rows of mask-like supporters. As she explains:

Gazing at sport and masculinity, for me, is a critique of feminist theory from the seventies which completely ignored the lesbian female gaze, and the heterosexual female gaze. In the seventies, at that very crucial moment for feminism, a lot of women artists were painting and reclaiming women from the male gaze. To me, painting nude women could also perpetuate a trope of female flesh in the public domain. What I wanted to put forward – in my heterosexual mode – was my love of the male body. My female gaze at men was reclaiming female sexuality at a time when some feminists thought all sexuality put women in such danger that it best be smothered. But I love the male physical form, and I protest the way male nudity is so often hidden from us for this reason: if men are attracted to male nudity they risk the 'stain' of homosexuality.

By exposing and reveling in the homoeroticism implicit in the spectacle of football that is generally denied and repressed, Coon exposes the performance of masculinity for what it is. She reveals the harmfulness of such pretense – in having an arena where hyper-masculinity is so privileged that men cannot be gay, without life-changing and often career-ending consequences:

Football is brilliantly homoerotic... It's also a public performance of pretense. Patriarchy lies about sex. The whole patriarchal structure is based on this lie: the repression of male sexuality and, by displacement, a repression of female sexuality, too. In the male football game, far be it for men to be anything other than competitive, rigidly strong and straight. But in the women's football game and out on the fringes of society there are very brave people disobeying the rules. This narrative, these sexual cross-currents, are played out in my paintings.

Coon is also one of these people, and though she is brilliantly accomplished and impressive, her dedication to revealing the pretensions of our society has not been without difficulty and resistance. After inviting her to contribute to a catalogue for example, Tate Liverpool decided not to show Coon's painting *Mr Olympia* – a feminist reversal of Manet's iconic *Olympia* – for the hypocritical reason that its subject had a semi-erect penis. That it has taken so long for such an accomplished painter to be given a solo show, furthermore, and to receive attention and praise, is symptomatic of an artworld and wider culture that has persistently resisted her insights, her vigorous protest, and her unapologetic expression of the female gaze.

And yet, she has not given up. With recent exhibitions at TRAMPS gallery and Carl Freedman Gallery, and the upcoming group exhibition 'Mixing It Up: Painting Today' at Hayward Gallery, Coon's magnificent paintings are finally getting the attention they deserve. With that recognition, we can be more optimistic that culture may also change, however incrementally, and the pretense of patriarchal performance may be dismantled, liberating all those caught up in it, and harmed by it.

At the centre of Coon's work is a desire for social justice, joy and

humanity in a world that is so often violent, brutal and cold. Her paintings create a space in which veils of deception are lifted and people are liberated, in which women are heard and men are seen beyond the structures and conventions we are all so familiar with. She draws on the most colourful and searching aspects of life and celebrates all we can be, and the myriad alternative and ways of being typically concealed and undermined. Her dedicated practice and her astounding body of work is testament to her spirited and serious determination as an artist and activist, and her inspiring optimism and dedication in the face of injustice and erasure.