

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Caroline Coon

Inspired by feminism and the politics of sexual liberation, Caroline Coon's unique paintings contest binary notions of gender and oppressive patriarchal values. Her works cover a variety of subjects including sex workers, beachgoers, intersex people, still lives, football players and urban landscapes. All are united by Coon's unwavering rebellion against the status quo.

Coon is a trailblazer of London's counterculture. She has campaigned for women's rights since the 1960s; co-founded Release in 1967, a legal-advice agency for young people charged with the possession of drugs that continues today; and was central to London's nascent punk scene, managing The Clash from 1978 to 1980.

Coon studied Fine Art at Central Saint Martins in the mid-1960s, opting for a medium and subject deemed unfashionable at the time – figurative painting. Her distinctive style is characterised by crisp-edged lines, bright colours and hyperrealism redolent of Paul Cadmus and Tamara de Lempicka.

In a recent review in The Art Newspaper, Louisa Buck writes: "Only now in her seventies is the importance of Coon's paintings being acknowledged... It seems that at last the self-styled 'great offender' is getting the favourable attention she richly deserves—and now on her own terms."

In the spirit of her activism, Coon's art breaks down social taboos and in turn challenges ideas of what a female artist should be. In her ongoing 'Brothel Series', Coon offers a rare perspective on the sex industry – drawing inspiration from her own experience as a sex worker – by depicting prostitutes through a feminist lens. Referring to canonical painters such as Manet, Degas and Picasso who historically painted such scenes, Coon says: "Those people were both the artists and the whore-fuckers. Well, I was the artist and also the whore." In these works, she destabilises the hierarchy between sex workers and their paying male customers, whilst also reclaiming a space traditionally depicted and inhabited by male artists.

Works from the 'Urban Landscape' series focus on Coon's local environment and her love of London. Quotidian scenes of daily life – roadways, shoppers, commuters, social housing, canals and pram-pushing mothers – are peppered with subtle allusions to London's darker underbelly. These paintings were the subject of the artist's first solo exhibition, 'Caroline Coon: Love of Place', at Stephen Friedman Gallery in September 2022. The gallery recently presented a significant body of beach themed works for the Kabinett sector of Art Basel Miami Beach 2023.

In 2018, at the age of 73, Coon had her first ever solo show at The Gallery Liverpool titled: 'The Great Offender'. This was followed by a solo exhibition at TRAMPS in London (2019) curated by Peter Doig and Parinaz Magadassi. Her work featured in the group exhibition 'Mixing It Up: Painting Today' at the Hayward Gallery, London (2021) and is also highlighted in 'Women in Revolt!', which is currently touring from Tate Britain, London (2023). Two paintings by Coon were recently added to Tate's permanent collection.