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Caroline Coon: In the Arena

by Valentina Bin • 22.01.2021

Instagram is perhaps the most likely place to discover Caroline Coon – and not just due to gallery closures. In 1970s Britain, Coon was an influential photographer-journalist and a promoter of the nascent punk scene. As an activist, she was committed to the decriminalisation of sex work and drugs, and for a while she even managed The Clash. Although plenty of discourse exists about Coon as a counterculture icon, there are few articles about her as an artist. It took nearly fifty years for her to receive her first solo exhibition *Caroline Coon: The Great Offender* at The Gallery Liverpool in 2018. The following year Tramps, London, offered her a second, which retained the same rebellious title. *In the Arena*, her current solo exhibition at J Hammond Projects, London, showcases eight paintings made between 1990 and 2020 that are inspired by competitive sport – in particular football. It is presented by *OOF*, a biannual magazine that explores the intersection between art and ‘the beautiful game’ **FIG.1** **FIG.2**.

Were it not for the artist’s signature and date of creation, it would be difficult to establish a temporal succession between these paintings. Coon’s technique has barely changed over the last three decades, nor has the geometric marshalling of her meticulous compositions. Each painting is a laborious process that takes months to complete. The persistent, historical lack of interest in her work has at least meant less pressure to meet commercial demands, allowing her freedom to employ the time-consuming process that is most congenial to her. Her works are rife with recurring mannerisms and motifs: elongated, stylised shadows and limber figures with tensing, graphic muscles, as though Boccioni’s *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) got stuck in a kind of golden ratio spider web **FIG.3**. Coon’s football teams are mixed in every sense: breasts, penis and an impeccable red manicure are often depicted on the same player. As Coon noted to *OOF* magazine: ‘You do little visual tweaks – lipstick, eyeliner, musculature – and it immediately blurs the binary.’¹



Fig. 1 Installation view of *Caroline Coon: In The Arena* at J Hammond Projects, London, 2021. (Courtesy J Hammond Projects, London).

In this series of works, the action is concentrated in the foreground, while the background hosts either a faraway horizon or an oval stadium, more reminiscent of a fishbowl than a stage. The position of the players' bodies is determined by the space they inhabit, fluctuating in a mellifluous synergy with the curvaceous design of the arena **FIG.4**. This configuration brings to mind an essay by Ursula K. Le Guin – short but vigorous in scope – titled 'The carrier bag theory of fiction'. Written in 1986, it was inspired by evolutionary theories that suggest the first invented 'cultural device' must have been a vessel, 'a thing that holds something else', rather than a spear or tool that the primordial hominid used to hunt and kill.² As Le Guin points out: 'what's the use of digging up a lot of potatoes if you have nothing to lug the ones you can't eat home in'.³ This notion generates a different metaphor for storytelling, one not relegated to the male 'killer story' – the linear 'Ascent of Man the Hero'. Instead, it allows for exploration of 'the container for the thing contained': a sack, a bag, a basket or, in the work of Coon, a womb-shaped arena.⁴

Le Guin believed that the 'carrier bag theory' of evolution is more akin to life than that of the killer story: 'it is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality'.⁵ Although there might be fighting in these stories, it is not the objective: 'conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as carrier bag/belly/box/medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterised either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis, but continuous process'.⁶ In Coon's depictions of contest, her matches have no defined outcomes, teams or roles; even the sport her figures are engaged in often remains undisclosed. Tattooed like retrofuturistic Celtic warriors, and wearing a variety of head

pieces, they resemble players rather than fighters, acrobats rather than gladiators FIG.5. There are no goals, and often, no balls. The womb-arena seemingly operates in full-fluidity: a genderfucked salad of genitals, breasts and moustaches. They play through an array of moods and expressions – elation, ecstasy, determination and surprise: a spectrum of life only highlighted by the homogeneity of the figures in the audience, who are indistinct from one another and reminiscent of Greek theatre masks FIG.6. If, as Le Guin writes, a story is a vessel rather than a spear, then a painting can be an arena rather than a war scene, where losers and winners perpetually float and shift.

With all of Coon’s floating and shifting, this review should have ended differently. It was set to culminate in both a denunciation of the relegation to the bench of women artists in the twentieth century and the reduction of a lifetime of overlooked creative work to the commodified narrative of a seventy-six-year-old artist-activist who has amassed dozens of unseen paintings in her basement. Coon’s work promised a world of equality through difference: a bright world inhabited by gender non-conforming people, who were not lone heroes but team players. Some of these sentiments are still there, but profoundly more complicated.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Caroline Coon: In The Arena* at J Hammond Projects, London, 2021. (Courtesy J Hammond Projects, London).

The discovery on the artist’s website of a 2016 commentary on Caitlyn Jenner’s transition and subsequent appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair* abruptly changed the playing field.⁷ As we have seen in recent years, outdated political views on transfeminism are rife among the holders of a certain legacy of second wave feminism, especially in the UK.⁸ Coon’s writing was in fact prompted by the public backlash to Germaine Greer’s statements that transgender women are ‘not women’.⁹ Still, Coon’s vitriol here

is startling. Her arguments are spurious and contradictory: transitioning from male to female is an enforcement of the patriarchal gender binary; transgender women are damaging to women's liberation because Jan Morris liked to wear pearls and tweeds; and gender transition is a 'gross commercial exploitation of feminist gender equality struggle' because of the role of cosmetic surgery and Jenner's appearance on the cover of *Vanity Fair* – which of course no respectable cisgendered feminist would ever do.¹⁰ What makes Coon's invective particularly troubling is the inexplicable lack of empathy from someone who spent a lifetime advocating for people that society left on the margins. Although she expresses a 'concern' for Jenner's mental health, this distressingly takes the form of invalidation amid continuous misgendering. It does nothing to discourage her from defining Jenner's *Vanity Fair* cover as 'crude, charmless, unstylish, hideous, mutilated and tragic [...] a vile lie [...] a blood-soaked spectacle [of] a deeply disturbed person'.¹¹



Fig. 3 *A Sweet Lob from 25 Yards*, by Caroline Coon. 2009. Oil on canvas, 153 by 122 cm. (Courtesy J Hammond Projects, London; exh. J Hammond Projects, London).

Coon's long perseverance and modus operandi highlights her clarity of vision despite her struggle for recognition in a patriarchal society. However, her refusal to acknowledge trans identities casts an uncomfortable light on a body of work that would have otherwise been interpreted – and indeed has been in recent press – as a beacon of queer joy and acceptance, an expression of orderly communality.¹² Coon's dogmatic and discriminatory words transform the Arena series into overt propaganda for a trans-exclusionary, anti-binary dystopia: a world where gender is an ideological construct to be obeyed, rather than a vessel that contains multitudes.

Le Guin's carrier bag theory is an invitation to pay attention to untold, subdued stories that have eluded the patriarchal canon, that can hold both action and observation. These are stories in which a vessel can become a weapon, where people can fight out of love, and it is often difficult to determine right from wrong, as the best intentions can bring dangerous impulses to light. In this review, orphaned of its straightforward plot, the referee is at an impasse, caught between two opposing outcomes: witnessing this exhibition as a layered vessel of beauty and contradictions that can thrive beyond its author's intentions, or as a killing fable.



Fig. 4 *Crouch Touch Pause Engage*, by Caroline Coon. 2013. Oil on canvas, 122 by 153 cm. (Courtesy J Hammond Projects, London; exh. J Hammond Projects, London).



Fig. 5 *A Fast Rucking Game*, by Caroline Coon. 2009. Oil on canvas, 122 by 153 cm. (Courtesy J Hammond Projects, London; exh. J Hammond Projects, London).



Fig. 6 *Rugged Defensive Play*, by Caroline Coon. 2020. Oil on canvas, 122 by 153 cm. (Courtesy J Hammond Projects, London; exh. J Hammond Projects, London).

Exhibition details

Caroline Coon: In the Arena

J Hammond Projects, London

10th December 2020–6th February 2021

Footnotes

- 1** Caroline Coon quoted in E.Frankel: 'Feature: Caroline Coon', *OOO* 6 (2020), p.51.
- 2** U.K. Le Guin: 'The carrier bag theory of fiction', 1986, available at theanarchistlibrary.org/library/ursula-k-le-guin-the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction, accessed 15th January 2020.
- 3** *Ibid.*
- 4** *Ibid.*
- 5** *Ibid.*
- 6** *Ibid.*
- 7** See C. Coon: 'February – March 2016: To be almost a woman is a good way to conquer women', available at www.carolinecoon.com/news.htm, accessed 20th January 2021.
- 8** See H. Ewens: 'Inside the Great British TERF war', *VICE*, 16th June 2020, available at www.vice.com/en/article/889qe5/trans-rights-uk-debate-terfs, accessed 21st January 2021.
- 9** See Germaine Greer interviewed by Kirsty Walk for BBC in October 2015, available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-34625512, accessed 20th January 2021.
- 10** *Op. cit.* (note 6)
- 11** *Ibid.*
- 12** See E. Frankel: 'Caroline Coon review', *Time Out*, available at www.timeout.com/london/art/caroline-coon-review, accessed 21st January 2021; and K. Jhala, J. Da Silva and M. Carrigan: 'Three exhibitions to see in London this weekend', *The Art Newspaper*, 4th December 2020, available at www.theartnewspaper.com/review/exhibitions-london-caroline-coon-jennifer-packer-serpentine-lynette-viadam-boakye-tate, accessed 21st January 2021.

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