



COON
2003

Caroline Coon
THE GREAT OFFENDER



London and New York: Tramps Gallery, 2019

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Great Offender and Realist Criminal
by Maria Elena Buszek

Artist, writer and activist Caroline Coon is one of the towering “disappeared” women of her generation; like so many, she was a catalyst and witness to some of the most important moments of art, music, and politics, only to see her participation muted and marginalized, and her male contemporaries canonized. And so, it is exciting—in the wake of reassessments of punk history on the 40th anniversary of its (much-debated) birth in summer of 1976—for her reputation as a foundational figure at the advent of London punk to have come roaring back into view. Much has been said about her groundbreaking journalism for *Melody Maker* magazine (no less an expert than John “Rotten” Lydon to this day credits her with coining the term “punk rock” in the UK) and as the one-time manager of The Clash.

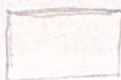
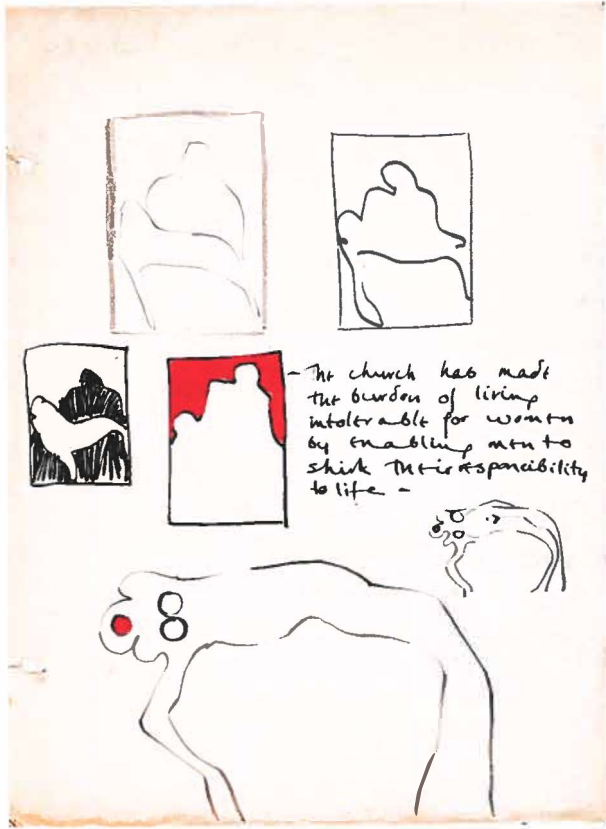
However, Coon’s history as a feminist painter and activist remains under-analysed. Where it has been addressed, focus has been on the controversies that have often surrounded her life and work—and while these responses have their roots in her willingness to speak truth to power, they have overshadowed the woman and the work itself. As such, it is long past due for Coon’s work to be understood and respected as both part of the broader western Feminist Art Movement from which she emerged in the late 1960s, as well as on its own terms for her stubbornly unique vision that has continued into the 21st century.

Coon first emerged into the public eye as part of the “Swinging London” counter-culture that preceded punk in the 1960s, which shaped her enthusiasm for and perspectives on this later scene. The eldest child and only girl born to a land-owning family in Kent—in her words, an “unwanted, unloved girl child subject to physical, psychological and sexual abuse”—Coon was sent to boarding school at age 5, where she studied with and felt “loved and nurtured” by the dance teachers at the Legat School of Ballet.¹ While her statuesque height forced the realization that a career as a professional ballerina would be impossible, she credits the mostly Russian faculty with instilling in her from a very young age a deep knowledge of “the costs and consequences to art and artists who depended on the political establishment and ideology in which they lived, created and, too often, from which they had to flee.”²

She carried this fundamental understanding of the political risks and responsibilities of the artist into her study of visual art, after she left her family home (and was duly disowned) at 16, supporting herself as a model in London. After years of developing her portfolio, she was accepted into the painting program at the prestigious Central School of Art (today, Central St. Martin’s School of Art and Design), where she arrived at the precise moment that the “High Modernist” curricula of professors hired in the years around World War II were giving way to an emergent generation of Pop artists whose return to representation and narrative was viewed by orthodox Modernists as regressive. Coon was among them, rejecting the ever-narrowing mandates of



The artist age 8 with Moria Shearer at the Royal Festival Hall 31 December, 1953



Sketch for *Pieta 1*, 1964
 Sketch for *Pieta*, 1964
 Sketch for *Laundrette*, 1964

internationally-influential critics such as Clement Greenberg, whose writings on what he argued was the inevitable abstraction and medium-centric “self-criticality” of visual art’s evolution had called the tune for the art world’s status quo since at least the 1940s. Her insistence upon pursuing figurative art, as well as battles with the oppressively sexist hierarchies of the period’s art-school leadership led her to abandon the Central School studios to paint in her basement flat. But, after bringing her work to campus for an end-of-term critique, it caught the attention of a young tutor: Derek Boshier. Boshier recognized and appreciated Coon’s rebellious return to the figure, storytelling, and allegory—rooted not just in an interest in everyday life, current events, and pop culture, but also art history.³ Through Boshier, Coon was introduced to the theater agent and political activist Clive Goodwin and, subsequently, Goodwin’s wife Pauline Boty, who with Boshier was recognized as a founder of the British Pop movement. Coon had connected with London’s Pop Art scene at its apex.



The artist in her studio with Marsha Hunt in 1966

Coon’s friendship with Boty was as fortuitous as it was short-lived: Boty died of leukemia shortly afterward, at the age of 28 in 1966, and would herself enter the realm of “the disappeared” until her work and relevance were reasserted by feminist art historians and curators some thirty years later. Like Coon, Boty had insisted on the need for a woman’s perspective on the cultural icons, analyses, and appetites of Pop Art’s men—just as they did, Boty painted Elvis and Marilyn, but also Jean-Paul Belmondo as a tasty pin-up, and girly-mag centerfolds as anything but. She was especially interested in how women’s desire and desirability merited representation and respect—a perspective cut tragically short by her premature death. However, Goodwin gave Boty’s paints to Coon—what she took as an inheritance, and honor, and a challenge:

He believed in me, I think. Whenever things got really tough, I could rely on the promise I made to myself after Boty died, to carry on where she left off. In a way, I’ve pulled through many a psychological and financial crisis and kept on painting in her honour.⁴

But, in the short term, Swinging London found a way to intervene — albeit, productively. While still a student, appalled by the random and often racist nature of drug laws in England, Coon co-founded the (today, still-running) legal defense agency Release to assist those arrested on drug charges of their rights and recovery options. The organization first gained fame in the

RELEASE

50A PRINCEDALE ROAD
LONDON W 11

Facts from 'Judges' Rules and Administrative Directions to the Police 1964:

1. You are entitled to telephone your friends or your solicitor. (7 a)
2. You need never make any statement unless you wish to do so. 11
3. You should not be harassed by the police to make a statement. (e)
4. Reasonable arrangements should be made for your comfort and refreshment. 3

EMERGENCY (24 hours)
01-603 8654

OFFICE for general enquiries
(10 am to 6 pm weekdays, late nights
Mondays and Thursdays 10 pm.)

01-229 7753

If you are arrested, you are advised:

1. To insist on telephoning the emergency number on this card for assistance.
2. To make no statements.
3. Not to discuss the matter with which you are charged.
4. To request that any property taken from you is packaged and sealed in your presence.
5. To be polite to police officers.

The first Bust Card in the world.

The first Release 'know your rights' Bust Card was published in 1967, a few weeks after Release opened, in time to be distributed free at the 'Legalise Pot Rally' in Hyde Park, July 1967. Caroline Coon and Rufus Harris gave out all the cards — they were instantly popular and successful — and they were immediately reprinted, eventually with the RELEASE logo designed by Caroline Coon. Since 1967 — the Summer of Love — the Release Bust Card, updated as Stop and Search procedures and drug law has changed, has been continuously distributed from the Release Office. In 2014 the RELEASE BUST Card featured in the 'Making Worlds' section of the *Disobedient Objects* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

feminist analysis to the history and influence of critical perspectives like Greenberg's, and the then-current rise of figurative art after Pop in her 1973 essay "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law." Here, Nochlin documents patriarchal and classist distaste for realism since the Renaissance and, in contrast, political revolutionaries' embrace of "the real." Nochlin noted ways in which Modernist theory had tyrannically imposed the notion that "abstraction is the law and that realism is the criminal," but suggested that a new generation of realist outlaws had emerged to redeem "lower orders of class and experience through a style that evolved along with the demand for greater political and social democracy."⁷

music world by coming to the aid of those in the Beatles' and Rolling Stones' circles, as well as enjoying financial support from these and other bands in the scene from which they all emerged. Perhaps more importantly to her creative evolution, Coon's counter-cultural connections also led her to the emergent Women's Liberation movement at this moment when civil rights, free speech, anti-war, sexual liberation and rock-and-roll circles often intersected with feminism. Coon was drawn to all these subjects — not just as an

artist, but increasingly as an activist. Barely out of her teens, Coon was photographed by David Bailey and filmed by Ken Russel, lauded (and vilified) in the British press for her beauty, audacity, and activism as "Caroline Swoon," and described by Germaine Greer in her 1970 dedication of *The Female Eunuch* as a woman "who has done great things with gentleness and humility, who assaulted the authorities with valorous love and cannot be defeated."⁵

Feminists at the start of this new decade must have felt invincible, indeed.

The year after *The Female Eunuch* was published, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin published her soon-to-be-legendary critique of the fallacious, self-answering question "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"⁶ This paradigm-shattering essay demonstrated how both institutions and constructions of "genius" in western culture have been gerrymandered throughout recorded history to benefit white men. Two years later, Nochlin lent a similar

(from top) The artist, as Director of Release, with George Harrison in the Release office, 1969.

The artist modelling a Kansai Yamamoto jumpsuit in 1971.

The artist as Annie Miller, and Oliver Reed as Rossetti, in Dante's Inferno directed by Ken Russell, 1967.



The artist, who was a witness for the defence, leading the 'Free the Oz Three!' protest outside the Old Bailey just after Richard Neville, Felix Dennis and Jim Anderson had been found 'Guilty' at the end of the OZ Obscenity Trial 1971. In the award winning 1991 TV film, *The Trials of Oz*, directed by Tony Palmer, Caroline Coon was played by Jemma Redgrave.

Nochlin's work has been profoundly influential to both art history and practice in the decades since, and Coon cites her as a lodestar. Typically for art students of her generation, Coon notes, "I went through college without being told such a thing as a [great] woman artist existed."⁸ Nochlin's rigorous scholarship not only verified the institutional sexism that produced this state of affairs, but in tandem with her work as a curator would also help other feminist art historians usher in decades of "rediscovery" of excellent, often influential women artists whose histories this sexism had buried. (Regardless, these women wouldn't be included in art history textbooks for another decade or so — H.W. Janson's still-assigned *History of Art*, for example, wouldn't name a single woman artist until its 1986 edition.) Many of the historically-deemed "second-rate" women artists Nochlin's research helped add to art history, as well as her feminist analysis of realist art, would undergird Coon's art in the decades that followed.

But, again, life intervened as Coon's painting practice was set on the backburner when in the '70s, unable to sell her paintings, she began to support herself as a writer — where, she realized, the same kind of work feminists like Nochlin were doing in the art world was just as necessary and possible in the music world. Writing for the UK weeklies, she published articles on and interviews with women artists from Yoko Ono to Joan Armatrading, where her sophisticated understanding of the gender politics in pop music was frequently on display. Her writing for *Melody Maker* represented some of the earliest reportage on punk, in which her feminist positions were apparent as she pressed the Slits, the Damned and the Buzzcocks on their own positions on gender and sexuality, and lambasted bands like the Stranglers for their overt misogyny. Many of these articles and interviews were compiled into one of the first, and still most important firsthand accounts of British punk, *1988: The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion*, published in 1978. That same year, she began managing The Clash (overseeing their break from infamously controlling impresario Bernard Rhodes) until 1980.

The styles and critical spirit of movements like Dada and New Objectivity — which Coon's generation of art-school students helped bring back into vogue, *contra* the Greenbergian Modernist "trajectory" that sought to erase them — was reflected in the aesthetics of punk that



fueled further experiments of "realist criminals" in the decade. Coon's graphic design for and photographs in this era — including that on the cover of The Clash's first single, "White Riot" — have since become iconic. Around this same time, she also turned her training in visual art into the often-uncredited costume design and technical advising for the film *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains!* The 1982 film (originally called *All Washed Up*,



The artist, as The Clash manager, with Paul Simonon, Bo Diddley and Joe Strummer on the Pearl Harbour Tour, USA, 1979.

The Slits, Viv Albertine, Ari Up, Tessa Pollitt and Palmolive. On tour in 1977.

The Clash, Paul Simonon, Joe Strummer and Mick Jones, in their studio, 1976. The image became the cover of their first single 'White Riot', 1977.

written by Oscar-winning screenwriter Nancy Dowd), about an all-woman punk band who find their feminism and rouse an army of female fans with their politically-charged songs and media presence, became a cult classic. Never given a theatrical release, the film enjoyed a second life on cable television later in the decade, and encounters with late-night broadcasts and bootlegged VHS tapes of *The Fabulous Stains!* are often cited by Riot Grrrls in the 1990s as an influence upon their organized efforts to revive the feminist spirit of the original punk movement, which the film helped them realize had been removed from the masculinist histories handed down to them.⁹

But Coon was exhausted by the many hats she had worn in the hippie era and on the punk scene, and more than ready to return to her studio practice. As she put it: "I have remained interested in how such youth movements evolve into the mainstream. However, I was only too happy in the 1980s to focus on my own work. [...] I loved the 1980s. Then I was just a punter, a consumer with no responsibility to musicians."¹⁰ As such, Coon returned to painting with passion and singular dedication. She returned to her figurative paintings, which often juxtaposed art-historical themes and compositions with the people and places of contemporary life. As she had been in art school, she was particularly drawn to the nude—especially the elusive, modern male nude. But now her work was imbued with the pleasures and punishments Coon had experienced as a maturing, sexually-liberated woman in the ensuing decades, increasingly emboldened to represent her desire explicitly. Yet the optimism regarding women's liberation that had marked her generation's work at the start of the 1970s had been replaced in society by what Coon calls an "often violent, misogynist backlash against women [that] ramped up" by the decade's end.¹¹ This backlash was also marked by the rise of conservative politics, resulting in the subsequent decade's Reagan and Thatcher eras, replacing the collective spirit of the '70s in both the music and art scenes with a "me-first" individualist ethos that marked the superstar system of the '80s.¹²

In so many ways, Coon was also catching up on how the art world had evolved in her absence. While she had been putting her feminist imprimatur on the music world, feminist artists had been fighting similar battles—both with the broader art world and one another. Just as Coon had been experimenting with ways in which realism and sexuality could express her

feminist politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, artists like Sylvia Sleigh, Joan Semmel, and Betty Tompkins were simultaneously working out similar ideas in their own realist paintings. In particular, Welsh-born Sleigh most closely reflected Coon's education, experience, and goals. After studying at Brighton School of Art and exhibiting her work in and around London, Sleigh married British critic and curator Lawrence Alloway, whose writing helped define (indeed, arguably named) Pop Art.¹³ In 1961, Sleigh moved with Alloway to New York City (where he had accepted a curatorial post at the Guggenheim) and was drawn to the Women's Lib movement, whose ideas led her to Nochlin's writing and a formula in which she began to flip the script on ways in which binary gender was represented in art history by recreating tropes of the nude, but with men as models and muses, and women as artists.¹⁴ In her work, men's art and bodies are treated lovingly, even as women's lack of agency in art's history is critiqued. Curator Francesco Manacorda recently summarized Sleigh's approach: "at a time when feminist discourse was emerging, this was designed to highlight social and historical gender inequalities on the level of what is or is not deemed to be an acceptable representation." And, much as Coon's references to popular subjects and audiences had done in her own work, Manacorda notes that Sleigh's slightly stylized forms and compositions and art historical quotations are "never directed at the connoisseur, but [are] rather used as a tool to induce through the viewer's memory of famous paintings some estrangement effect — what Brecht called 'distantiation' — in order to show that what we perceive as natural is, in fact, an ideologically charged convention."¹⁵

Also in New York, Semmel's and Tompkins' more startlingly photo-realistic and overtly-sexualized paintings were breaking with the art-historical conventions of the nude that Sleigh's work addressed. Semmel's work comprised mostly monumental, heterosexual nude couples in coital or post-coital bliss, but rendered from a perspective of the artist/viewer looking (from the neck down) at both bodies, positioned as if looking down at their own. The male- and female-sexed bodies occupy an equal portion of the composition, literally on the same plane; the viewer is thus not "told" which figure to identify with or sexualize. To borrow a title from Semmel's series, the work stresses "*Intimacy/Autonomy*" as neither mutually exclusive nor sexed. Tompkins' work also used strategic crops as part of its message — but, in her case, scenes of heterosexual penetration from hardcore pornography were so tightly-cropped that they, at first, almost appear as abstractions, painted in so meticulously realist a manner as to be truly shocking when the image "reveals" itself. Like Semmel, Tompkins was interested in both affirming the sexual desire and pleasure of women, but critiquing the limited imagination and objectifying gaze of porn by rendering men's and women's genitalia in these sexual acts as "equal."

Embroided as she was in the particularities of UK politics and, eventually, throwing herself into the music scene, Coon says: "I didn't know these artists existed! For reasons that we are familiar with, in the UK they were not exhibited or written about. I felt, for many reasons, that working on the figure, especially the very forbidden and controversial male nude, I was working on my own."¹⁶ Had she known about these like-minded artists, she would have discovered the ways in which — also like Coon — they were forced to not only defend their art in the face of the sexist American art world, but against criticism by fellow feminists, who viewed their work as pandering to the newly-christened "male gaze." From their references to male artists' work to their unabashed love and use of the nude and explicit sexual imagery, these artists fought on many fronts to

articulate their feminist aims. In 1973, artist Anita Steckel founded the Fight Censorship group in New York City in order to band together and create a discourse around feminist artists who sought to claim such strategies as part of their practice: besides Semmel and Tompkins, the group also claimed luminaries like as Louise Bourgeois and Hannah Wilke. Regardless, in the ensuing decades most of the emerging artists of this group found their stars wane as the controversies around their work and feminist politics lost them exhibitions, collectors, and places in the art press — even confiscated by authorities as obscene.¹⁷

Once again, it would take decades for the work of these women to resurface. When it did, it would resonate with Coon, who in the meantime had returned to painting with no knowledge of these women's work, yet was independently drawn to the very same themes. Like Sleigh, Coon returned again and again to art history and the nude — often, the male nude — as her muses. In particular, both Sleigh and Coon shared an affinity for the descriptive realism and often decadent sexual displays of the Baroque, Romantic, and Realist eras, as well as lovingly-sensuous depictions of real men in their lives. Coon, however, was additionally drawn to the work of artists in the years between the World Wars, associated with the Dada, Surrealist, New Objectivity, and Art Deco movements — no doubt, because these Modern movements laid the groundwork for the anti-war, feminist, and gay liberation movements that Coon experienced first-hand decades later. Not coincidentally, these movements counted women and queer artists among their founders.

These subjects and influences are immediately apparent in Coon's work from the 1980s. *Mr. Olympia* of 1983 is a re-thinking of Edouard Manet's *succès de scandale* of the Salon of 1865, replacing the audacious figure of Manet's model — artist, musician, and purported prostitute, Victorine Meurent — with a clearly contemporary man of African origin, and a delectable, oiled,



Mr Olympia, 1983, oil on canvas 92 × 122cm

muscular physique in this famously “inviting,” but guarded boudoir scene. In the place of Meurent’s oft-ignored, modestly-attired Black attendant — modeled for Manet by a woman named Laure, who can be seen in several of his paintings wearing a Caribbean-style headwrap¹⁸ — Coon paints a blonde, nude white woman, who offers *Mr. Olympia* a bouquet of flowers with an appreciative gaze at the semi-erect penis he cradles in his hand. Like Manet’s original — itself derived from the 16th century *Venus of Urbino* by Titian — there is a sexual charge to this otherwise classically-composed scene, derived from the clearly contemporary figures. Also similar to Manet’s original is the playful air of complicity between the two figures — although, in Coon’s piece, by switching the races of the figures and making the figures male and female, she deflates the sexist and colonialist assumptions of 19th century France inherent in Manet’s set-up, and by painting both the male model and female attendant as nudes, creates both a sense of equality and shared eroticism.

Art-historical erotics take a very different turn in Coon’s 1985 painting *Between Parades* (p. 56/57) riffing on another canonical French painting: Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ *Turkish Bath* of 1862. But, where Ingres’ languid fantasy of the Orientalist harem is all clear light on a bathhouse interior stuffed with layers and layers of nubile women’s naked flesh, Coon’s *Between Parades* is a “harem” of a much more contemporary and lurid sort. Here, bored, dressed-up women laze, read, primp, snack, and conspire petulantly under the queasy yellow light of two visible ceiling lamps, waiting to be called to join the “parade” of escorts from which johns one floor down will select their evening’s date. The scene is straight from Coon’s description of the upstairs quarters at Coronettes: an escort agency where Coon worked when, having decided to go all-in on reviving her practice as a painter, but struggling to keep her home and studio during the tumultuous economy of the early 1980s, she again worked in the sex industry, giving her the time and money to do both. Coon’s account in her book *Laid Bare Diary: 1983-1984*, captures the experience in all its complex detail, and is seemingly summarized in *Between Parades*. Besides the “dirty mushroom coloured carpet,” “tall piece of mirror glass slanted dangerously against one wall,” magazines, ashtrays, and hair rollers of the Coronettes waiting room, we also see the compassion and camaraderie, anxiety and despair of the women who chose this work — many, knowing first-hand about worse job options for women — that *Between Parades* captures.¹⁹

Significantly, Coon’s “real” harem is not just an appropriation, but a *reappropriation* of Ingres’ material, seeing as his late-life, Orientalist “bath” paintings were themselves derived not from his own experience, but from the writing of English writer and proto-feminist, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. In her *Letters from Turkey*, published in 1837, the book does indeed describe the Turkish baths she visited during her husband’s time as ambassador in Constantinople; however, these are not the pornographic fantasies represented by Ingres. Rather, her analyses of the relative freedoms that women in the Ottoman Empire enjoyed in a segregated society (which was, in truth, not terribly unlike England’s) often critiqued western sexism through her comparisons between Turkish and English women’s lives.²⁰ Coon confiscates Ingres not just for herself, but also returns his own source material to Lady Montagu — who witnessed the reality, not the fantasy of this subject — and in so doing, Coon updates her critique of “polite” western society’s treatment of women.

Between Parades is part of Coon’s ongoing *Brothel Series* — tremendously important not only to her support of the decriminalization of sex work, but additionally intertwined with her dedication

to the power of the “realist outlaw.” Like the work of her contemporary from the 1970s UK punk scene, artist and musician Cosey Fanni Tutti (born Christine Newby) of Throbbing Gristle and Chris and Cosey, Coon’s *Brothel Series* additionally asserts the creative, intellectual potential of feminist sexual expression — in life, as in art, and even (maybe especially) when it transgresses societal rules. Cosey’s work with the COUM Transmissions collective, from which her better-known bands emerged, included the exhibition of photographs appropriated directly from her bills-paying work in commercial and pornographic magazines, reframed as a stealth performance and conceptual-art project in the infamous *Prostitution* exhibition at London’s Institute for Contemporary Arts in 1976. The series has commanded respect for how it drew attention to sex work *as work* but also, as Cosey put it in her recent autobiography, her effort “to understand all the complex nuances and trial it imposed upon everyone in that business, including the target market [...] exploiting the sex industry for my own purposes, to subvert and use it in my own art.”²¹ So, too, has Coon’s *Brothel Series* endeavored to capture these “complex nuances” of her own experiences in the sex industry — albeit in the allegorical style and meticulously crafted objects reflective of her very different artistic practice. Moreover, drawing attention to the bravado with which Modernist painters like Manet, Edgar Degas, and Pablo Picasso depicted brothels as symbolic of their shocking approaches to representation (and in ways that burnished their “bad boy” appeal to both their contemporaries and art historians), Coon says: “Those people were both the artists and the whore-fuckers. Well, I was the artist and also the whore.”²²

In *The Brothel Series*, “the whore” illustrates the range of Coon’s own picaresque adventures, from violence to tenderness. *Choosing: Before the Parade* (1998) (p. 59) shows *Between Parades*’ counterparts, in the form of business-suited white men — drunkenly disheveled, elegantly put-together, and the sheepish and desperate in-between — waiting to select the “girls” that begin to stream through the door. In *He Undresses in Another Hotel Room* (2002) (p. 63), Coon herself watches a hulking, muscular john awkwardly disrobe, with a look somewhere between wariness and curiosity. In *World Hotel Room* (1998) (p. 60/61), a glamorous prostitute prepares for work in the bathroom as her client waits anxiously, money on the bed, for her to get started — the luxury suite as anonymous and universal as the john. Her “urban landscapes” from the series are perhaps the most evocative: street scenes of recognizable London neighborhoods, but recalling the fever-dreamscapes of the Surrealist painter Paul Delvaux, in which Coon’s urbanites similarly wander as if sleepwalking, unaware of the buried back-alleys, come-ons, transactions, and escapes in their midst. Most recently, Coon has expanded the series into performance with the piece *I AM WHORE* (2019), in which she further distills her lifetime of experiences fighting for women’s liberation into a devastating monologue on the literal life-or-death consequences that surround women’s sexuality.²³

The blurring of autobiography and allegory that we see in *The Brothel Series* landscapes reflects an overarching strategy of Coon’s work to collate, distill, and meticulously organize the drama and struggles of everyday life in the manner of another “realist outlaw,” Charles Baudelaire, who famously called for “the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains.”²⁴ While her works of the 1960s demonstrated her facility with a photorealistic, “hard-edged” Pop style, in the decades since she has rather chosen a highly stylized, often distorted naturalism quite similar to the figures of Art Deco painter Tamara de Lempicka, organized in highly symmetrical compositions and backgrounds that recall the work of “New Objectivity” painters of

the interwar period, such as Christian Schad and Gluck—all of whose “queering” of their social realities Coon has proudly claimed as an influence.²⁵ In *Glastonbury* (2002) (p. 33), she transforms a group of festival revelers into a *tableaux vivant* lifted directly from Diego Velazquez’s *Los Borrachos*. In *The Birth of SheHe* (1988) a hermaphroditic god/dess springs to life from a seashell in the manner of Botticelli’s *Venus* before a landscape of Modernist council flats. And friends like punk filmmaker and DJ Don Letts (1990) and translator Verena Schiessle (1991) are transformed into saints and deities in the styles of Caravaggio and Schad (respectively), but with personal, modern twists. (Letts, for example, posed as Caravaggio’s come-hither Uffizi *Bacchus*, wears his dreads up not in a turban, but a leopard-print tam, and offers his viewers not a glass of wine, but a spliff and a glass of Babycham.) In her more recent portrait honoring the passing of Christine Keeler, Coon’s combination of art histories is even more expansive: in this composition, derived from Pauline Boty’s lost Keeler portrait *Scandal ’63*, Coon embellishes the original with additional symbolism that turns the notorious Swinging London “It Girl” into a *Dolorosa* figure, bringing comfort and forgiveness to the “whores” who, like Keeler, serve as scapegoats for men’s desire and sexual violence. Like the subjects she derives from all her art-historical heroes—as well as pop-cultural ones like Keeler, Dusty Springfield, and Valerie Solanas—Coon’s goal, in her painting, is to dare suggest all these ordinary, extraordinary humans contain the same spark of “eternity” that Baudelaire saw in the Realists he championed in his own time.



The Birth of SheHe, 1988, oil on canvas 122 × 152cm



Don Letts, *Film-maker and Musician*, 1990, oil on canvas
122 x 92cm (Private Collection)

Alas, like all the feminist artists of her generation named above, what little attention her painting has received has largely revolved around this very daring, rather than the work itself. When in 1995 *Mr. Olympia* was selected, then pulled from publication in an educational catalogue on “the nude” by the Tate Liverpool, she was derided in the press thereafter as “the penis painter.” Representatives of the Tate tripped over themselves to explain this absurd decision — *of course*, they said, they had exhibited Allan Jones’ S/M furniture-women, and would happily show Jeff Koons’ pornographic *Made in Heaven* series. Coon was, naturally, unfazed and unrepentant. Reminding the museum of Sir Jacob Epstein’s homoerotic 1941 sculpture of *Jacob and the Angel* in their own collection: “If that isn’t a display of male genitalia, I’m not sure what is.”²⁶ Her attitude was much like Anita Steckel’s fantastic comeback on behalf of the Fight Censorship group in 1973, a decade before *Mr. Olympia* was painted:

If the erect penis is not ‘wholesome’ enough to go into museums — it should not be considered ‘wholesome’ enough to go into women. And if the erect penis is ‘wholesome’ enough to go into women, then it is more than ‘wholesome’ enough to go into the greatest art museums.²⁷

But, as it had been with the artists of the FC group, the damage was done. Even her decade-long series of charming, stylized flower paintings — square-formatted in homage to Gluck, and the one genre in which women, from Rachel Ruysch to Georgia O’Keeffe, are embraced as masters in art’s history — were suspiciously scrutinized for evidence of sexual innuendo. As Coon tells it, she was literally told: “No, I can’t exhibit your paintings. You can’t have cocks on office walls.”²⁸

And, yet, thankfully — regardless of the neglect, purposeful or benign — all these women persevered. Coon went back to what she had always done since the 1960’s basement days of the Central School of Art, went back to her studio and kept researching, kept working, kept protesting, and kept putting her work out there... even though the “office walls” (or the Tate, for that matter) were not ready. And, like her sisters — Sleigh, Semmel, Tompkins, Steckel, and so many others, dubbed the “Black-Sheep Feminists” in a 2016 exhibition of the same name²⁹ — it seems perseverance has paid off. The holistic, complex feminism that all of these women practiced for decades has slowly, steadily crept into the progressive movement — much as *The Fabulous Stains* has! — so that by the early 21st century, what seemed such an offensive, unruly activism suddenly appears eminently reasonable post-Riot Grrrl, Everyday Sexism and #MeToo. No doubt, ageism

(previous page) The CUNST ART Art-errorist THORNS began in 1996 as a series of graphics, texts and actions with a “personal vision” that deliberately avoid drawing attention to the individuals behind them, lest they obscure the idea — in particular ideas that spring from personal convictions but where the focus is on societies’ betterment. As Monika Parrinder wrote (‘The Myth of Genius’ EYE Vol 10 winter 2000 p54): ‘The contemporary feminist collective Cunst Art works on this theory — their work is similar in spirit to the Atelier Populaire, who self-produced impromptu posters during the May 1968 revolution in Paris.’ Thorn No6 was a protest against the plight of sexually abused children ‘Because of Establishment tolerance, ignorance and denial’. Thorn No16 was to ‘STOP TURNER PRIZE SEXISM’ — it included a hoax Press Release fax to the media purporting to be from Channel 4 announcing the cancellation of the live TV broadcast prize giving. The THORNS are hand painted in watercolour or acrylic on A2 cartridge paper, photocopied at A5 and sent, with text, as hard copies to all and sundry in the mail. There are 60 Thorns so far.

also has much to do with this late-career recognition. As was recently stated by Marilyn Minter — yet another punk feminist painter “rediscovered” in the last few years — with equal parts humor and resignation, “the art world loves bad boys and old ladies.”³⁰ But it was not art world’s mainstream that began the long overdue reassessment of Coon’s work. It was committed, prescient outliers Martin Green and James Lawler. They curated her first solo exhibition at The Gallery Liverpool in 2018. This led to Tramps in London and New York, exhibitions instigating the same kinds of conversations on gender politics and society that her music writing did four decades ago. Now Caroline Coon, Britain’s lost “Black Sheep Feminist” and “realist outlaw,” can be lauded for the part she has played shepherding in our current era of feminist art.

1. Maria Elena Buszek, "An Interview with Caroline Coon: The Great Offender," *Punk & Post-Punk Journal* 8, no. 1 (March 2019): 140.
2. Buszek, "An Interview with Caroline Coon," 140.
3. For Boshier's own story about his mentorship of and friendship with Coon, see Derek Boshier, 'National life stories: Artists' lives', The British Library: Sounds oral history: <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oralhistory/Art/021MCo466Xo262XX-0033Vo>.
4. Buszek, "An Interview with Caroline Coon," 146.
5. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970). As is her wont, Greer subtly jabbed at her friend Coon (similarly to another woman to whom the book is dedicated, writer Lillian 'mother of rock' Roxon) in this same dedication, with the suggestion that she "danced, but badly, painted but badly"— an exercise in the kind of undermining of other women that has become a more visible and problematic part of Greer's feminist legacy in the decades since.
6. See Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *Artnews* 69, no. 9 (January 1971): 22-39
7. Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," *Art in America* (September and October 1973).
8. Tim Jonez, "Caroline Coon: 'Even at 13, I knew I couldn't be respectable' — A hero of the counterculture since the 1960s, Caroline Coon talks about managing The Clash, her days as a sex worker — and making paintings that were too explicit for the Tate" *The Guardian*, Art and Design section (May 2, 2018): 10.
9. See Aaron Hills, "Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains! The bizarre story behind the greatest rock movie you've never seen," *Spin* (28 August 2008): <https://www.spin.com/2008/08/ladies-and-gentlemen-fabulous-stains/>; and Marc Edward Hueck, "Ladies And Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains": A neglected punk satire saved by Night Flight!" *Nightflight.com* (1 August 2016): <http://nightflight.com/ladies-and-gentlemen-the-fabulous-stains-a-neglected-punk-satire-saved-by-night-flight/>
10. Buszek, "An Interview with Caroline Coon," 146.
11. Caroline Coon, email correspondence with the author (4 January 2018).
12. For a first-hand perspective on this shift in the music industry, one is hard-pressed to come up with a better book than Dave Rimmer, *Like Punk Never Happened: Culture Club and the New Pop* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1985). For a scholarly history of this moment, see Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics, and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
13. Alloway's essay "The Arts and Mass Media" is often credited as the first time in which the term "Pop Art" was used: see Lawrence Alloway, "The Arts and Mass Media," *Architectural Design & Construction* 28, no. 2 (February 1958): 84-85.
14. Linda Nochlin returned the favor, writing favorably about Sleight's work in, "Some Women Realists: Painters of the Figure," *Arts* 48, no. 8 (May 1974), 32.
15. Francesco Manacorda, "The Emotional Gaze," *Tate Etc.*, Issue 27 (Spring 2013): 52.
16. Caroline Coon, e-mail to the author (20 March 2019).
17. Art historian Richard Meyer's comprehensive history of the Fight Censorship group, and the marginalization of its artists can be read in "Hard Targets: Male Bodies, Feminist Art, and the Force of Censorship in the 1970s," in the *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* catalogue (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007): 362-383.
18. See Denise Murrell, *Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).
19. Caroline Coon, *Laid Bare Diary: 1983-1984* (London: Cunst Art, 2016): 126.
20. See Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, edited by Teresa Heffernan and Daniel O'Quinn. (Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press, 2013).
21. Cosey Fanni Tutti, *Art Sex Music* (London: Faber & Faber 2017): 172.
22. Jonez, "Caroline Coon: 'Even at 13, I knew I couldn't be respectable,'" 10
23. Commissioned by artist Fionn Wilson for 'Dear Christine... (a Tribute to Christine Keeler)', a group exhibition, Vane, Newcastle upon Tyne (1-29 June 2019), Elysium, Swansea (5 October-9 November 2019) Arthouse1, London (2-29 February 2020).
24. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1965): 5.
25. See Buszek, "An Interview with Caroline Coon," 147.
26. Rosie Millard, "Are the days of the nude numbered?; Political correctness is threatening the nude painting," *The Independent* (April 23, 1995): 22.
27. Anita Steckel, "Fight Censorship" press release, 1973; quoted in Meyer, "Hard Targets," 366.
28. Caroline Coon, e-mail to the author (11 April 2019).
29. *Black Sheep Feminism: The Art of Sexual Politics*, curated by Alison Gingeras, Dallas Contemporary (17 January-20 March, 2016). See also Gingeras' piece on the exhibition in "Black Sheep Feminist Artists," *Artnews* (June 2015).
30. Cait Munro, "Marilyn Minter On Glamour, Diane Arbus, and Why Envy is the Worst Emotion," *Artnet* (17 September 2015): <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/marilyn-minter-interview-330297>