

True Grit: Anne Coe's Western Art Odyssey A Fifty-Year Retrospective

For fifty years, fourth-generation Arizonan Anne Coe (b. 1949) has created colorful and often whimsical paintings and works on paper that reveal a passion for the West with all its stereotypes, icons, and ironies. Just as importantly, she has created decades of powerful works that take a critical or revisionist stance, examining the clash of nature and society, asserting the cowgirl into the Western narrative, and addressing pressing environmental issues that are now known by such monikers as climate change and global warming. For trailblazing efforts in her approach to art of the American West and her masterful grasp of technique and artistic tenacity, it is fitting that the Museum of Arizona Artists (MOAZA) has selected Coe as its inaugural artist for an online solo exhibition in anticipation of a future, physical space.

Coe's family history goes beyond her deep roots in North America. The Coe side of the family came from Essex, a county in the east of England, and settled in Virginia in 1694.¹ And Scottish heritage from her mother's side of the family is a point of pride for the artist; in the 1970s, she adopted Glencoe, Scotland, as her symbolic homeland because of its beauty and association with the family name.² Clarence H. Ellis, Coe's great-grandfather (Coe's paternal grandmother's father) settled in Arizona with his family in the 1880s and worked as a Presbyterian missionary doctor to the Tohono O'odham tribe.³ He traveled by horse and buggy all over the state to attend to Indigenous peoples' medical needs. Coe recalls a time when she met one of Doctor Ellis's nurses, who shared that when Ellis died, many of his Indigenous patients over his long career came to his funeral as well as several subsequent family funerals. Later, Coe's older sister Kathryn became an anthropologist and educator, continuing a family

connection to Indigenous people. To Coe, the missionary side of her family gave her an inspired discipline and compassion to fight for righteous causes.

Coe's American family history is based in the West. At the turn of the twentieth century, her maternal grandfather, Frances Ernest Jackson, worked for the railroad and had been living in Oklahoma until he contracted tuberculosis. Having recently married his nurse Lizzie, the couple moved to Arizona in 1912 to aid in his recovery. They settled in a tent sanitarium in an area called Dreamy Draw, east of Sunnyslope.⁴ There, Frances began to write poetry and filled journals about his life, later to be discovered by Coe, who read them all and kept them dear.⁵ Frances and Lizzie moved to nearby Phoenix, where Anne's mother Mary was born, but sadly, Frances died eight years later, leaving Lizzie to support the family. Anne's father, Percy, grew up near Maryvale, just west of Phoenix, on the family's farm with a big two-story farmhouse surrounded by cottonwood trees.

Mary and Percy met when they attended the University of Arizona in the late 1930s. As Coe observes, "I'm the result of creativity and discipline."⁶ Mary studied English literature and drama, and Percy studied civil engineering. The two married and had a son, John (Jack) Ellis, followed by her sister Kathryn, and then a year and a half later Anne was born in 1949 at the Basic Magnesium Hospital in Henderson, Nevada. At that time, Percy was hired by the Bureau of Reclamation as a civil engineer to work on Boulder Dam, later named Hoover Dam. Percy's job was challenging, though, and he bristled at the restrictions of government bureaucracy, so he left his position shortly thereafter. In 1955, Percy bought a 500-acre farm, thirty miles outside of Yuma, Arizona, in the Sonoran Desert near a little town called Wellton. His parents bought the neighboring property, living in an area surrounded by vast fields and tamarisk trees.⁷ With

irrigation ditches supplying water to their patches of desert, the two families were able to grow alfalfa and cotton.

As a child, Coe would swim in the canals that irrigated the crops and enjoyed acres of space to play in nature. She also adopted Fuzzy, the dog owned by the prior occupants of the farm. “Nature was in my blood,” Coe said recalling her time there. “I just wanted to be outside.”⁸ Although just a child, occasionally she was enlisted to drive the tractor and work with her father as a “rodman” to get the fields level. For entertainment, Coe made imaginary horses with a saddle on a fence and played with handmade dolls of imaginary animals created by her mother, which would later inform her menagerie of anthropomorphic characters in her art. In addition, her mother and father read stories out loud to the young girl, so her imagination was ignited at an early age.

While Percy was busy with farming, Mary taught grade school at nearby Wellton and worked in the school office. With only one class per grade and ten students per class, each student got undivided attention and learned many subjects. Coe became valedictorian of her small elementary school class and felt a kinship with her fellow students. She also took a home economics class taught by her mother.

In 1958 Coe’s father, along with fellow university alumnus Bill Van Loo, started their own engineering business, Coe & Van Loo Consultants, Inc. (CVL), in and near Yuma, Arizona. A year later, when Phoenix Home Builder Allied Construction Company hired Coe & Van Loo to design its first master-planned community in the Phoenix area, the company relocated and opened an office in downtown Phoenix. Among Coe & Van Loo’s many achievements were designing Big Surf, a popular water attraction in Tempe, Arizona from 1969 to 2022 that boasted the first wave pool in the United States, and irrigation projects in Saudi Arabia. Anne had only

attended Antelope Union High School in Wellton for half a year before relocating. The transition from a rural high school where everyone knew each other to an urban high school in a metropolitan area was daunting for Anne, and she no longer thrived at school. As Coe recalls, “I went to Camelback High School in Phoenix for one year and it almost destroyed my personality.”⁹ When the family home was finally built and completed Anne transferred to Arcadia High, a school known for its art program and location in an upscale middle-class neighborhood known as Arcadia. Once settled into her new school, Coe began to take art classes and focused her interests on figurative ceramics sculpture.

After graduating high school in 1963, Coe’s life was about to change. She became pregnant and was sent to a home for unwed mothers called St. Ann’s Convent in Los Angeles. There she gave birth to a daughter and reluctantly allowed them to place her for adoption, a practice common for young women before the widespread use of birth control pills. Though years later she reunited with her daughter, the experience had a profound effect on Coe, and issues of loss and longing became a subtext for her art.

Upon her return to Phoenix, she took various classes, worked in doctors’ offices, and was employed for a short stint at Cessna at their Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport office (both her father and brother had pilots’ licenses, and her father’s company owned its own plane). Coe loved to fly and even took a few flying lessons, and soon learned that the easiest path to travel was to become a stewardess (now called a “flight attendant”). She worked at Western Airlines for one year, then took her hiring package free ticket and quit her job so she could move to Europe, living in Germany and Greece and touring museums and historic landmarks for a year before returning home to Arizona. European art and culture had an intense effect on Coe and her plans. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to be a writer or an artist, but one thing she did know; she wanted to be

connected to the arts. “I couldn’t be just a regular person,” Coe said, “I couldn’t be a secretary.”¹⁰

When Coe returned to Arizona, she entered Arizona State University (ASU) in Tempe, where she majored in art and in 1970 graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Soon after graduation, she married and moved to Puerto Rico, where her new husband had taken a position as a math professor at the University of Puerto Rico in San Juan. During that time, she studied art and Spanish at the university and taught at the Lab School in San Germán, Puerto Rico. Divorcing her husband in 1974, she returned once again to Tempe, Arizona and enrolled in the Master of Fine Arts program in art at ASU. She began her studies in the painting department though found it too restrictive, so she switched to drawing. Coe was inspired to become a professional artist by Muriel Magenta, one of her art professors and an early feminist who started the Women Image Now group and brought in noted nationally prominent artists such as Miriam Schapiro, Diane Burko, and Judy Chicago as speakers. Their work, too, informed Coe’s content. Not only did Coe begin to use the figures of animals as surrogates and metaphors, but she also included religious symbolism and allegory to discuss pivotal times in her life.

A poignant example of Coe’s feminist perspective on traditional themes can be seen in [*Annunciation \(Self-Portrait\), 1975*](#). In this painting, Coe alludes to her teen pregnancy by using the religious allegory of the Annunciation. In the traditional story, the winged angel Gabriel, represented by a dove, appears before the Virgin Mary to announce that she will bear the son of God. In Coe’s painting, she places herself in the role of the Virgin Mary, dressed in white with her red curly hair flowing, her eyes cast directly to the viewer, commanding the viewers’ attention to her circumstance. Here, Gabriel is portrayed as an ominous vulture swooping in rather than a dove—perhaps to recall the male-dominated system and trauma associated with

giving up a child. Hyenas resting at her feet also denote symbolism. As writer Amy Abrams states, “In Coe’s portrait, her hand reaching to the hyenas represents her continued commitment to nourishing the core aspects of her persona—her bold spirit, as well as her strength. In the face of her loss, she would remain full of life and devoted to her art.”¹¹

Another 1975 painting, *Self-Portrait (with Wolf)* focuses on the artist with her signature scarlet mane of curly long hair, wearing a provocative red dress in three different oblique poses against a gridded background, as if she is glancing downward at her reflection in a pool of clear water at her feet. A wolf is at her side like a totem animal, asserting her strong and independent spirit. Later in the 1980s, Coe raised a real wolf as a pet, named Virginia Wolf or Woofers, that was given to her as a gift from a friend who “found and traded weird things.”¹² Such experiences reaffirmed her deep sense of bonding with animals both in the wild and in her care. Coe would continue to develop such allegorical and symbolic references through parables, literalization, irony, and the animal kingdom throughout her artistic career.

During her time at university, Coe worked as a production assistant at KAET TV, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) affiliate, and then later as a director and producer, causing her to ponder whether she should pursue a career in television. But the more she thought about the stress of the job, and the potential to move to Los Angeles, the more she appreciated her time in the studio and kept to her path. In 1977, one of the series she worked on was “Art Break,” a popular television show that involved short interviews with artists and actors from outside the area, like Dale Chihuly, and regional artists, like R. C. Gorman and Merrill Mahaffey. This experience granted her easy access to the top galleries in Scottsdale and emerging artists in the art community. It was during this time that Anne’s father Percy died unexpectedly while on a sailing trip in the Galapagos Islands. Coe found it ironic that she got a phone call from her

brother about her father's passing while working on a documentary for PBS, sitting in an open, ancient grave that had been destroyed by grave hunters.¹³ They were both on adventures but his had ended and hers was just beginning.

When PBS cancelled "Art Break," Coe concentrated on her thesis exhibition—a group of small, collaged works on paper inspired by illuminated manuscripts and her interest in the environment, such as *Death and Transfiguration*, and *Ordeal by Water*, both created in 1980. The series entitled "Annie Armadillo" focuses on large installation work, such as *Altar to the Birth of Annie* and *Altar to the Sacred Armadillo*, 1980. Anne had an affinity for this peculiar animal ever since an eccentric uncle from Texas sent her one along with two pups when she was a child.¹⁴ Some of her thesis works, reminiscent of altarpieces she had seen in Europe, were created as a tribute to her family and the rural life she left behind as a teenager, while others reveal the use of animals to serve as totems or alter-egos. She also created small altarpieces housed in little hinged metal boxes that had once held breath mints, often giving these to friends who were going through a rough time. Adorned with family photos, eccentric found objects, plastic animals, and doilies, these artworks were devotional, albeit amusing assemblages with a folk-art flair. However, it would not take long for Coe to realize that such small, ephemeral works could not sustain her as a professional artist and as she concluded her thesis work, she began to plan the next phase of her career.

After graduating in 1980 with a Master of Fine Arts cum laude, Coe started to paint full-time, creating highly patterned and colorful works on paper in a Magic Realist style depicting animals as the protagonists. When Arizona landscape painter Merrill Mahaffey, who had been the subject of one of Coe's public television features, saw her work about nature and transformation he introduced her to Suzanne Brown, his art dealer, and the owner of Suzanne

Brown Gallery in Scottsdale. Brown advised Coe to make her paintings larger and to consider works on canvas. Coe's subsequent change in scale and medium opened a new realm of thematic possibilities. Soon Coe, too, was represented by Brown and exhibiting in museum shows in the desert Southwest including the Scottsdale Center for the Arts (now Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art), Tucson Museum of Art, and the Orange Center for Contemporary Art in Santa Ana, California, among others.

Shortly after meeting Western Pop artist Billy Schenck at a New Year's Eve party in 1980, Coe became his partner, muse, and model. In turn, Schenck became a significant mentor to Coe, instilling in her both a strong work ethic and business fortitude regarding a career as an artist. Schenck was represented by Elaine Horwitch Galleries, considered a formidable competitor of Suzanne Brown Gallery and one of the top galleries in the Southwest. With their respective works on the cutting edge of a new contemporary western art genre, Coe and Schenck quickly became a power couple, often influencing each other in their use of color, humor, and social commentary.¹⁵

While the commercial aspect of art was an integral aspect of her life, Coe also participated in workshops, lectures, and residencies that furthered her personal and professional growth. She was an Artist in Residence in Yuma, Arizona, for the Arizona Commission on the Arts in 1981, and attended a residency in Shonto, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation in 1983. Each program only deepened her interest in connecting her art to "real life" and issues affecting her environment.

During the early 1980s, Coe lived with Schenck in Apache Junction, AZ, a city located near the Superstition Mountains and on the outskirts of metropolitan Phoenix. In her new environment her paintings became more assertive, wickedly humorous, and larger in scope and

scale. She began to look at the world through cinematic eyes at the quaint-yet-kitsch life she created for herself in a remote Apache Junction trailer park. In one such painting, [*Escape from Dreamland Villa, 1982*](#), Coe depicts a comical coyote seated in a vintage pink Cadillac convertible complete with large fins as it roars away from a turquoise and white motorhome. With so many of Coe's works tinged on autobiography, the scene suggests childhood memories of animals and humans sharing uneasy desert terrain. At the same time, nostalgia for her childhood conflicts with the adult awareness of what overdevelopment can do to the desert.

A classic example of Coe's adept melding of humor and wisdom can be seen in [*Counter Culture \[sic\], 1980*](#), a display showing two black bears that have invaded a 1950s-era diner, complete with vinyl-covered swivel stools and a Formica countertop. Commenting on the disastrous results when humans continually overdevelop raw nature and encroach on the habitat of wildlife, Coe presents the slobbering bears as running amok in the empty diner. A lively palette and loose painterly style portray the bears cavorting around, all the while coffee cups and plates of hamburgers, French fries, doughnuts, cherry pies, and ketchup crash to the ground. Over the decades, scores of Coe's such works rely on the concept of the double entendre or whimsical references to fairy tales using plays on words and humor to create an entertaining yet sobering narrative about society's disregard for the natural world.

In the early 1980s, many of Coe's works were inspired by a childhood fascination with science fiction as depicted in the movies and in comic books. As Coe reflects, "My world opened up artistically. I began to paint mutant Gila monsters and coyotes, road hazards, cars, and trailer parks. Metaphorically, these animals are human beings."¹⁶ Her forwardness soon paid off and Coe became emblematic of the bold cowgirl artist. With a productive output and freedom to explore varying themes on her terms she was included in many exhibitions that highlighted a

Southwest Pop sensibility, including the 1982 Arizona Biennial at the Tucson Museum of Art and the 17th Southwestern Invitational at the Yuma Art Center in 1983 among them. Through her sprightly colors, imaginative silliness of her subjects, and punning titles, Coe playfully reminds the viewer – with coyotes beaming up to alien spaceships, Gila monsters smashing dams and crush cars, and bears and badgers wreaking havoc in Southwest-style homes -- that the presence of these animals in the desert comes with a cost to wildlife and nature in general.¹⁷ .

Among the unique themes that Coe explored is a nocturnal fantasy entitled [*Rendezvous \[sic\] at Rosita's, 1983*](#), where frisky behavior is about to take place at a Southwest roadhouse, inspired by the cheap motels that operated on the outskirts of the Wellton from her childhood. In this painting, four coyotes with teeth bared and spewing drool are about to disembark a vintage pickup truck for Rosita's, a honkytonk filled with tricked-out cowgirls and cowboys. Nearby, in a pink 1959 Cadillac Eldorado with its top-down and sporting the license plate "MDR" (the acronym for Coe's imaginary Mad Dog Ranch, two more coyotes clamor to enter the fun. This painting is playful, joyous, and revealing of Coe's life at the time, both personally and professionally. The ranch reference is seen again in [*Mad Dog Ranch Roundup, 1983*](#). In this dynamic painting, Coe portrays herself as a punk cowgirl in sunglasses and a black hat, racing down a dusty road in a blue vintage Cadillac convertible toward the entry arch to the Mad Dog Ranch. Riding with her is a pack of sidekick coyotes, and as she turns to the rear of the car, she attempts to lasso another pack of coyotes who trail them. In each of these magic realist paintings, animals are her surrogates, portrayed as mischievous, trickster creatures with who to be reckoned.

Coe's menagerie of animals--lizards, armadillos, coyotes, wolves, and bears expanded to include fishes, flamingos, and island scenes, in part reflecting on her years in Puerto Rico and a

trip to Hawaii. Still relying on wordplay to establish the scene, she created the lively [*On the Road to Mandalay Where the Flying Fishes Play, 1983*](#), a light-hearted painting that expresses the pure joy of a day on the beach in a tropical setting. Using her signature faux framing illusion developed during graduate school, Coe encloses her seascape in a pattern of dark green foliage against a pink background. In a turquoise sea, several highly patterned flying fish leap into the air while a row of swaying coconut palms line the beach as if watching the water show.

Revealing of Coe's acerbic wit, in 1983 she painted [*An Otherwise Quiet Day in the Bermuda Triangle*](#), in which a throng of coyotes frolic in the surf or sunbathe on colorful beach blankets while, in the distance, three large water tornadoes appear to be sweeping up various sea life from the ocean, including sharks, whales, octopi, and the occasional sailboat. During this time, she also created [*Flamingo Phile, 1984*](#), which became part of the Betty Barber-Hughes and Jerry D. Barber collection, later to become the Jerre Lynn Vanier collection. Set within a yellow and black-patterned frame, three pink flamingos wade through water in single file across the tropical scene, as if marching across a stage. The implausibility of the composition appears in the line of palm trees in the distance. Shadows from the palms are cast parallel to the trees rather than at a raking angle on the beach as if the sky is a theatrical backdrop rather than a scene in nature. Such absurd visual and character conundrums became the mainstay of her work over the decades.

An ardent environmentalist since the 1970s, Coe was acutely aware of how Phoenix was succumbing to urban sprawl and she began to comment on the negative consequences of land development and wasteful energy practices with "mutant Gila monsters," as she put it, as her protagonists. Comically playful and deadly serious, Coe sends messages about humankind's out-of-control energy needs amid a fragile ecosystem. For example, in [*Migrating Mutants, 1983*](#), she

portrays four of these orange and black-speckled beasts in a gargantuan scale. Exposing rows of sharp, pointed teeth and long, pink tongues, the gigantic lizards roar with laughter as they lumber through the pristine desert, smashing power lines and saguaro cacti on their trek through the landscape. In a later rendition of this series, [*Another Western Water Project, 1989*](#), a steady stream of motor homes, vintage trucks, and cars climb up a steep single-lane road to the top of a dam in the Sonoran Desert dotted with colorful cacti. What would be remote wilderness is made into a tourist destination by the human-made lake made by the dam. But the tourists' plans are about to be dashed as an enormous Gila monster has entered the edge of the lake and destroys the dam, spilling water into the dry riverbed below while three other monsters wade in the fast-draining lake. Overscale Gila monsters would reappear throughout the 1980s and into the 2000s. In each rendition, Coe positions these reptiles as avenging angels to create a scathing indictment of greed and environmental destruction while applying the salve of humor to make her point.

Between Coe's lived experiences in Arizona and her interest in science fiction, she has created paintings over the years that depict UFOs and artillery fire in the desert, always with an autobiographical and environmental perspective. Fantasy and reality collide here; for example, near the family farm lies the Kofa National Wildlife Refuge surrounded on three sides by the Luke Airforce Gunnery Range and the Yuma Proving ground, now known as the Barry M. Goldwater Gunnery Range. Coe explores the irony of the juxtaposition of gunnery range and wildlife refuge, seeing airplanes flying overhead, artillery fire, and scurrying animals.¹⁸ She depicts such childhood memories in [*Yuma Range, 1984*](#), a twilight scene in the remote part of the Sonoran Desert where two coyotes take a joyride in her signature blue vintage Cadillac convertible that barrels through the desert on a two-lane road to escape a network of fires. Missiles dart through the sky, scatter-shot at varying angles towards unknown targets. In the

distance, a mushroom cloud of smoke reveals a bomb has landed, scattering saguaros into the air like so many toys. It is an amusing scene except for the reality that since the 1940s the desert Southwest has been used for target practice by the United States military.

One of Coe's first UFO works is [*Road Hazards UFO, 1984*](#). The setting of this painting is a classic western landscape, presumably Monument Valley, with billowing clouds at dusk. What interrupts the traditional scene, however, is the element of humor. A classic-looking flying saucer with a pink beam of light actively attempts to beam up a vintage Cadillac as three coyotes topple out to the ground, while another disc in the distance is busy drawing up more creatures. Coe enjoys a good story with her animals and shares that imagination with her viewers in delightful ways.

In 1985, the same year she was included in *Women of the American West* at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich, Connecticut, Coe terminated her business arrangement with Suzanne Brown and joined the Elaine Horwitch Galleries. Horwitch was a fan of her sense of humor, use of color, and the narrative quality of her magic realist paintings, and promised she could sell them easily. Coe recalls the lively Scottsdale art scene in the mid-1980s and the role that Brown and Horwitch played in building the excitement:

It was fun to go to openings at Suzanne Brown's and Elaine Horwitch's galleries. The artists were a cohesive group; we'd all get together and support each other. It was a real community, and Suzanne and Elaine were the top of it. Elaine always came across as a confident, happy person, but she was no pushover—she was dynamic. She really hustled. You could always depend on her to be at a lecture at the university to hear a famous female artist like Judy Chicago. She really cared and wanted to know what was going on in the art world.¹⁹

The move to Elaine Horwitch Galleries further expanded her visibility as an artist and provided opportunities to exhibit in museum exhibitions including *American Art Now*, at the Columbus

Museum of Art in Columbus, Georgia, in 1985, and *Women Who Create*, at the Coconino Center for the Arts in Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1986.

Coe continued to paint using animals as allegorical examinations of the impact of urban sprawl on nature, and gradually her themes became more sophisticated and her narratives more complex. She began a series of cowgirl paintings—one of the first artists in the area to depict strong western females rather than the traditional cowboy subject. Such works also inspired her partner, Billy Schenck, to add feisty cowgirls to his repertoire, using Coe as one of his models in bold new works about the contemporary West. Spending summers in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where Schenck built a cabin next to the Grand Tetons, Coe painted landscapes and subjects of northwestern Wyoming with mountains, trout streams, tall pines, grizzly bears, and self-portraits as an assertive cowgirl. For example, in [Roundup at Bear Creek, 1986](#), Coe creates a new fictional space in a majestic landscape called the Bear Creek Ranch. In this scene, lumbering black bears, with their tongues lolling and drooling, dash away from the ranch entry gate while Anne, depicted as a buoyant cowgirl riding in a 1950s-era red convertible with her sidekick wolf by her side, attempts to lasso them from a distance. Over the next two decades Coe's self-portrait as cowgirl becomes increasingly confident and realized in varying narratives set both in the desert and the mountains, autobiographical markers that reveal her place in time.

In the mid-1980s Coe accepted commission work while creating several bodies of new work as well. One such commissioned project was [The Ascension, 1986](#), created as a tribute to Jerry D. Barber, Jerre Lynn Vanier's father, who had recently passed away in 1985 from a long illness, to be given as a gift to her mother, Betty Barber Hughes. Coe was fond of Betty, who was a friend as well as a patron, and the couple had earlier purchased *Flamingo Phile* and other works, so she had an affinity for her shared love of animals. Using her traditional religious

allegorical format to create the painting and signature patterned frame, Coe visited the family home and retrieved photographs of the departed family pets to create her story. In this scene, a view of a desert mountain range at sunset is punctuated by three lofty clouds upon which sit three white poodles. The center poodle, Charm, Betty's favorite pet, is crowned with a halo as it ascends into heaven. The two flanking dogs also represent departed family pets--Nikki and Jellybean--who sport wings, suggesting they are cherubs, while other dogs appear to assist them in their climb skyward. In the foreground, various canines and cats once belonging to Coe and the Barber families appear to yelp and bark as they witness the ascension, while palm trees serve like sentinels against the mountains. Betty fondly called this painting the "Barber Babies."²⁰ To Coe, such works do not feel obligatory, rather they are within her deep sense of connection to the animals that have shared her life as well as our shared relationship with the animal world. This personal tribute is an acknowledgement of all animals who live in harmony with humans. Years later, Coe would create an homage to her own family in *Monkey Love*, 2000, and the recent deaths of several family members close to her in *Covert Operations*, 2003, expanding on the metaphoric content and depth of feeling about loss, life's passing, and transformation.²¹

By 1988, Coe and Schenck had amicably split. Perhaps as a nod to the changes happening in Coe's personal life, she painted [*Domestic Crisis, 1989*](#), revealing a chaotic scene of wild nature versus domestic order. The painting is set within a classic adobe home complete with Southwest interior décor popular at that time. Through windows looking outside one can see a majestic desert landscape. Two coyotes leap through an open window with teeth bared, one ready to jump on a terrified domestic cat while the other cat clings to the mantle nearby. A Navajo rug is crumpled in the mayhem, and a pueblo pot, coffee cups and saucers, lamp, and

flower vase go flying in the scuffle. Here again calm and chaos often serve as opposing forces that define life in general through Coe's works, and the animals reinforce those dualities.

After the breakup with Schenk, Coe returned to Apache Junction and purchased a small tract of land at the base of the Superstition Mountains.²² She made plans to build a home and studio, enlisting the help of friend and hiking buddy Robert "Bronco" Horvath, who a few years later became her husband and business partner. They were committed to finding a location for northern light exposure for her studio and to disturb as little vegetation as possible. She also reflected on the impact her home and the growing urbanization of Arizona would have on the desert through her art. In 1992, settled in her new residence and in a supportive relationship with Bronco, Coe focused her art and life on themes that had meaning to her. About that time, she purchased a summer place in the high desert, cooler environs of Prescott, Arizona, and later acquired adjacent land to expand her home there.²³

Among Coe's many projects during the 1990s was a large-scale triptych for the Paradise Valley Country Club, founded in 1953.²⁴ The painting, [*Country Road, 1990*](#), was commissioned by Donna Vallone Interiors, (now Vallone Design), who oversaw the historic club's renovations at that time. In this panoramic painting, Coe depicts herself in a white cowgirl shirt and red hat, driving down a two-lane asphalt highway in a convertible car with her poodle Rufus by her side.²⁵ We know it is her by the red hat, perhaps a conscious stand-in for her signature curly red locks. They are headed into a brilliantly colored Arizona landscape, alive with the beauty of the desert—blooming saguaros and yucca, billowing clouds, purple mountains, and yellow blossoming palo verde trees. In the rearview mirror, one sees more of the same—a desert paradise that goes on and on. The painting is enclosed in a faux-wood frame, dotted with blue jays, quail, cactus wrens, hummingbirds, and road runners, while jackrabbits and coatimundi

peer out of the prickly pear cacti laden with fruit. No longer a tongue-in-cheek critique of the clash of nature and civilization through whimsical anthropomorphized animals as in so many of her earlier works, instead this painting is a celebration, a show of gratitude for the land that Coe so ardently loves and protects. At a turning point in her life, it is also an assertion of her sense of identity and power as an accomplished painter in control of her destiny.

Throughout the decades, Coe has shifted between the celebratory and the critique in a careful balance of acknowledging the beauty of nature and our relationship to it and humankind's blatant destruction of the fragile harmony of nature we claim to seek. A poignant body of work exemplifies how fervent her passions and knowledge about the environment inspire masterful works. Presented in 1992 at the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, the series "Seven Deadly Sins" illustrate each of the seven vices first formalized in Roman Catholic theology in the fourth century C.E., and made popular in Middle Ages morality plays, literature, and art. Coe's love of mythology, biblical references, allegory, and parables was well-suited for a series of works discussing the environment through the contexts of pride, greed, lust, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth.

Coe's intelligent humor and mastery of her medium can be seen at its best in [*Seven Deadly Sins: Gluttony, 1992*](#), a compositional format inspired by fifteenth-century Dutch master Jan van Eyck's *Madonna of Chancellor Rolin*. Coe consciously mines such sources, declaring, "I've always looked at medieval art for guidance. It is the one genre that has influenced me the most. The Bible and many other spiritual books are also guides. That's why you're supposed to listen to the past, to honor it."²⁶ Her creation manifests similar arches from which to present a sweeping desert mountain background with a dramatic sky. But the focus of *Gluttony* is not religion. Rather, it is a large dog that has climbed onto a table brimming with succulent dishes

fitting of a traditional Thanksgiving meal -- turkey, ham, cake, pie, and other treats. Peering over the table is another dog, too small to leap up to the feast. Coe is well-aware that dogs are known to do anything to satisfy their food urges regardless of the consequences, so this storytelling is a humorous, approachable way to suggest society's inability to control its appetites.

A more pointedly environmentalist message can be found in [*Seven Deadly Sins: Wrath, 1992*](#). Enclosed in her signature trompe l'oeil frame, Coe sets the scene of a tumultuous dark sky and high vantage point of a city below and a sea in the far background. Above, jets and helicopters whiz through the air, dropping bombs on the city, resulting in a massive explosion of fire and destruction. Wolves, jaguars, hyenas, and bears clamor away from the devastating site, reminding the viewer about the cost of war on human and animal life. Cautionary tales as these directly capture the viewer's attention and, at times, the message is too urgent to coax the viewer through humor.

Coe found new ways to impact the environment in 1993 by becoming a founding member of the Superstition Area Land Trust, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the conservation of desert land adjacent to the Superstition Wilderness Area. She had long offered her images for environmental fund-raising events, including the Rainforest Alliance in 1988, Earth Day Arizona in 1990, Phoenix Zoological Society in 1991, and Defenders of Wildlife in 1992. Being directly involved in policy making and change gave her new purpose. As Coe asserts, "Getting all the interested parties to sit down to work on solutions is challenging. But it's in our interest to do the best we can. If we can't preserve it, what is the best way to maintain the unique sense of place that it provides?"²⁷ Around the same time she was appointed to the advisory board for the Trust for Public Land and the State Land Conservation Advisory Committee, and became a member of Six-Six Group which worked with environmentalists and

ranchers to find common ground, as well as the Arizona Wilderness Coalition.²⁸ In 1995, as a way to honor the animals she has painted most of her life, she illustrated the book *Here is the Southwestern Desert*, written by Madeleine Dunphy for Hyperion Publishing. Including a plethora of desert animals in their natural settings, Coe's contribution to the book, through her distinctive sense of style and color, reached youthful audiences newly acquainted with the rich flora and fauna of the Desert Southwest.

In 1996, Coe found herself without a gallery when Horwitch Newman Gallery closed, five years after the death of Elaine Horwitch. But the loss of a commercial outlet freed her to focus on two new bodies of work since the "Seven Deadly Sins" series in 1992. "Life Examined" established a new direction for Coe, one that is ambitious and serious-minded, tackling the subject of the ethics of science. Shown at the Joseph Gross Gallery at the University of Arizona's School of Art in Tucson in 1998, it revealed the breadth of her knowledge of art history and her mastery of perspective, verisimilitude, and atmosphere. In the exhibition's accompanying catalog, art history professor J. Gray Sweeney declared, "As a type of modern-day 'Techno-Bosch,' Coe poignantly addresses the fetishization of technology and science in contemporary culture. The result of her visual investigations is stimulating, disturbing, amusing, and always challenging."²⁹ In these new large-scale single-paneled works and triptychs, she tackles complex issues about the intersection between humans and animals, and nature and science.

One of the most dramatic of the series of the same name is [*Life Examined, 1998*](#), a large dark canvas that is framed in Coe's classic faux marble treatment with small details extending into the frame to remind the viewer it is only an illusion.³⁰ The scene within appears like a theatrical stage, complete with red velvet curtains that are pulled aside to reveal a disturbing scene of a science lab with an apocalyptic landscape and a lake at sunset in the background.

Tubes filled with a green liquid emanate from a mass floating in the lake and creep through the lab and over the frame toward the viewer. On the left, Dolly, the famous cloned sheep from 1996 is shown with a blue ribbon attached to her neck as she looks out to the viewer, while a black raven rests on her back like a bad omen of things to come. To the right of the composition, another sheep looks toward her as if resigned to be the next subject of an experiment. Nearby, two lab monkeys sit on a table covered by a white linen cloth, eating from a jar of pickles and rummaging through hazardous materials, perhaps as a nod to the noted painter Donald Roller Wilson, who painted chimpanzees in a dark-humor style with pickles flying throughout the composition. What solidifies this apocalyptic scene is an image of the proverbial “mad scientist” in the background, no doubt working on a genetic engineering project. Wearing a white coat, he heats two beakers of the green, glowing liquid while electricity crackles between two spheres nearby. Behind him, one can faintly see the bars where two horses are being held, waiting for their fates as sacrificial beasts in service to the advancement of science. No longer reliant on allegory or comic silliness in this series—Coe addresses the subject of hubris and ethics head-on—the humor is dark, and the message lingers like a bad dream.

As part of the 1998 version of “Life Examined,” Coe presented the series “Still Life: The Four Seasons” in a similar tour de force of trompe l’oeil display paired with intellectual acumen. These four works are heroic in some, whimsical in others, and deeply moving throughout. [*Still Life—Summer*](#) is the most uplifting. In this work, a large cow, with a harness and nose ring to indicate its domesticity, ambles across the picture plane with a monkey riding on its back. The early evening is punctuated with firecrackers that explode in the sky and an altar-like table laden with melons, grapes, plums, flowers, and a plate of hamburgers imply this as a Fourth of July celebration. [*Still Life—Fall*](#) is dramatically lit and reminiscent of a classic *nature mort* painting.

Within an illusionistic frame, a braying stag anticipates death, surrounded by arrows that have landed on a pumpkin and the edge of the composition itself. [*Still Life—Winter*](#) is the most somber of the group. Within an opaque night of snowflakes falling and the last rays of sunlight sinking, a dark bear rests on a table covered in white satin cloth while a black raven, holding a red ribbon in its beak, rests on its back. To know Coe's life story is to know that it is the palpable sense of loss the bear expresses, and in fact the bear looks out to the viewer in what appears to be exhaustion or sadness—or is it simply about to enter hibernation? [*Still Life--Spring*](#) shows signs of a new day. A crowing rooster positions itself on top of a ram that lies in repose with a pair of electric shears nearby, indicating the sacrifice of its fleece for the comfort of humans. But with the sunrise and the cock signaling a new day, a row of colorful irises that flank two flower-wreathed lambs signal a sense of rebirth.

In 1998, Coe's husband Horvath was diagnosed with leukemia and Coe focused on helping him to overcome the disease. During this time she painted new works and channeled her emotions into her pictures. In a return to her familiar bear imagery, [*The Spirit Bear, 1999*](#), reveals a large polar bear sleeping with a smile on his face in a berry and blossom nocturnal scene, while trout glide throughout the composition catching dragonflies and other insects. The tranquil dreamscape provides a scene of abundance, peace, and restfulness as if created as a wish for her husband. As Coe explains, "The bear is my spiritual animal protector, paradoxically both comforter and destroyer."³¹ When Horvath finally succumbed to the disease in 2000, Coe took solace in reading poetry, including the poems of Mary Oliver, whose values about the environment resonated with her. Oliver became one of her favorite poets and greatly influenced her at that fragile time of her life.

After Horvath's passing, Coe started to exhibit with Vanier and Cultural Exchange galleries and painted with determination to meet show deadlines and process her grieving. She created several large-scale works during this period, including *Hostile Takeover*, 2000. In this lively, comical scene four black bears have broken into a cozy 1940s-era home filled with kitschy Southwestern décor, ancient pottery, and bountiful food. While one bear attempts to leap through the window, knocking over little potted cacti, two others are already devouring a meal hastily abandoned by the humans who live there while a third bear eagerly licks up a pile of pinto beans that have spilled to the floor from a toppled pot. While true to Coe's message of the price to be paid for living in the territory of wild animals, it also resonates with autobiography—the scene reflects on transitions beyond her control and how fragile domestic life can be. Two years later, Coe processed her grief in more direct ways. In a distinctly darker palette and looser style, she created [*Grief and Transcendence*, 2002](#), a portrait of a large black bear comforting a red, curly-haired girl in its embrace as she looks out to the viewer. And in [*Red Sky at Mourning*, 2002](#), a bear with a soft orange glow stands before a red drape that cascades over a circular object like a shroud or altar while ravens holding red ribbons in their beaks fly overhead in a cloud-filled sky at sunset. In these works, the bear once again makes appearances as Coe's protector, the ravens as messengers, and the red drapery a symbol of sacrifice. Such works serve to restore the artist and become sources of understanding for others who can relate to the palpable sense of loss from her husband's passing.

Over the next several years, Coe slowly healed from her grief and continued to produce many paintings about life in the desert, environmental issues, and other animal-based narratives. Even a bout with breast cancer did not stop her focus on art, however much it slowed her output for a time. Fortunately, her cancer went into remission, and she concentrated on the future. [*Took*](#)

[*the Chevy to the Levy, 2007*](#), is a classic example of a Coe self-portrait, asserting herself as a woman in control. In this animated painting, a big red vintage Chevrolet convertible barrels forward, appearing to enter the viewer's space beyond the faux wood frame adorned with ranch brands. The scene is of a western Wyoming mountain region painted in Coe's signature style with large, puffy clouds and saturated colors. She wears classic cowgirl dress—hat, kerchief, gloves, and chaps—and mirrored sunglasses that add a sensual spark. The car drives through a stream with such force that rushing water sprays everywhere, while several rainbow trout scramble to avoid her lasso that attempts to capture one of them. The painting is pure fun—playful and upbeat—the artist is back.

After years of processing life changes through her art, Coe's world dramatically shifted when she met Sid Greist, a retired United States Air Force pilot and Motorola engineer. The couple married in 2009 at a friend's house at the base of the Superstition Mountains and Coe discovered a renewed sense of belonging with her partner. Addressing yet another version of her ongoing cowgirl series, she painted [*The New Watering Hole, 2010*](#), an upbeat mix of nostalgia and perhaps a sly nod to the wealthy patrons whose homes are adorned with her work. In this colorful painting, Coe is dressed as a cowgirl in all her romanticized glory--large hat, fringed chaps, bronze cuff, and a green neckerchief. She shields her eyes as she gazes out to the distance, a big smile on her face. Her horse bends down to take a drink at the edge of a desert swimming pool while a herd of cattle just beyond appear to warily wait their turn for water. The multiple sun umbrellas and the distant golf course tell us this is a resort of some kind, yet a conundrum exists. Her smile suggests she is accepting of this clash of cultures, and in this scenario, it is not wild nature against civilization. Rather, it is the conflict of two competing entities for the sake of commerce—cattle ranching and tourism. One can assume her smile accepts the mix of

competing interests. But in Coe's paintings, smiles can be deceiving. The viewer might interpret the scene according to their values, but it is a situation that is happening in real-time as farms and ranches are overtaken by development in myriad ways.

After Coe overcame breast cancer and found new love, another health crisis occurred in 2012 when she suffered from a heart condition. Sent to a Phoenix hospital by helicopter, she paid multiple visits to cardio specialists who discovered she had atrial fibrillation and was not getting enough sodium in her diet. This difficult time caused her to become very weak, and her painting began to slow, but she remained determined to regain her condition and her art practice. Over time, her health rebounded, and she remains grateful for every day that she can be with loved ones, her animals, and her studio.

Coe took on a major challenge when she was invited to submit a proposal for a large-scale public art project, one of several terrazzo floor designs sponsored by the Phoenix Office of Arts and Culture for one of Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport's Sky Train® stations, and it was accepted. Her submission, [*Topo Magic, 2013*](#), was inspired by the topographical maps that she and her husband Sid poured over when hiking in the Tonto National Forest. While other artists used computer-generated designs in repeating patterns for their projects, Coe created her project as one large drawing made to scale, in fact sketching it out on the street to see the scale and composition in a tangible context. To Coe, receiving the commission was a strange new world but also exhilarating to take on such a monumental work seen by thousands of travelers every day. The 450-foot-long floor feature on the platform of the East Economy Station graphically depicts natural features, including rivers, canyons, farm fields, and mountains, as well as human-made features of the land in a colorful topographical style of contour lines indicating elevation changes. To create this work, she used eleven colors and worked with a team

of terrazzo specialists who used new materials to withstand the harsh conditions in the open air. Coe first proposed the project in 2008 and worked for five years until completion, making sure that views of the canals, farms, and water of the Salt River Valley could be seen in the design, just as one would see the earth as they took off from the airport. Coe's commitment to the project resulted in a greater community awareness of the breadth of her abilities and ideas as an artist.

From 2017 onward, Coe began to take on more commission work, created a new website and fulfilled lingering projects. Keenly aware of the passage of time, with friends, family and herself not getting younger, she focused on a book documenting her life and work, written by Amy Abrams and published by Ranthia Press in 2017. In this beautiful publication with key works from Coe's major themes throughout her career, Abrams covers significant periods that trace the autobiographical nature of her paintings. When after fifteen years of representation with the Larsen Gallery came to an end after the gallery realigned its mission and focused instead on the resale market, Coe struck out independently and took control of her own sales. She accepted special requests and began to think about new series of works inspired by dreams and ideas formed through the news of the day.

One departure from Coe's tightly controlled, colorful allegories during this time can be seen in [*Tickets with Charon, 2017*](#). In this nocturnal scene, two young women, one blonde and one redhead, representing archetypes, sit peacefully in what appears to be an ancient boat, steered by an unrecognizable figure shrouded in a dark cloak. The blonde, a representation of Coe's sister Kathryn, holds a pet cat, while Coe holds a teddy bear. They are crossing the River Styx to the afterlife, brought there by Charon, the ferryman of the Greek underworld of Hades. While the idea of addressing mortality could be seen by some as macabre, it is a touching tribute

to their longstanding relationship and deep bond as sisters while acknowledging the inevitability of death.³²

In 2020, when the multi-year Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in profound ways, it affected Coe as well, and recently she has been assessing the world through a new lens.³³ At times she feels moved to work in a more realistic way and at other times, she contemplates a more loose, expressive style. As Coe explains, “I still want my animals, because they are my allegory, the metaphor for life on earth. But maybe the works will be more abstract—I don’t want to go back but grab some of that which was before and keep some of it while creating a whole new process.”³⁴ She contemplates new processes and allegories and parables that she has not yet addressed—like the Last Judgment—and waits for the muse to guide her to new work that is sure to be as revealing and rich with metaphor as in her past works. She is not afraid of darkness; rather, it helps to see the world as it is just as much as she celebrates the poignant, uplifting moments through vibrant color, loveable animals, and life’s bounty. Like all of us who have been affected by the pandemic as well as the passages of life, Coe considers the idea of “going dark” and avoiding humor and bright colors in future works, and knows that whatever course her art takes, it is on her terms, invested with deep personal motivation and determination.

--Julie Sasse, Chief Curator, Tucson Museum of Art

¹ Anne Coe learned about her heritage when several family members conducted genealogy studies on the Coe family using Ancestry and shared the information with her. Robert Coe, another family member, also wrote a book about the Coe family. Unless otherwise cited, information for this essay came from a telephone interview with the author on August 21, 2022.

² Coe does not have genealogical information about her Scottish heritage, rather family lore from her mother’s side of the family.

³ The Tohono O’odham were once grouped with other O’odham tribes under the name Pima, but in recent years, the word Pima has been recognized as a derogatory term and is no longer used to describe the Indigenous peoples of the region. Clarence Ellis also had a clinic in Guadalupe south of Tempe, Arizona, at that time.

⁴ Dreamy Draw is part of the Phoenix Mountain Preserve along state route 51 north of Phoenix. The area was coined by residents to describe how miners in the area appeared after a day of toil in the hot sun. Copper and cinnabar, used to extract mercury, were mined there until the mine shut down in the 1940s. Sunnyslope was well known in 1919 as a dry, sleepy town with tent houses and cottages used for tuberculosis and asthma patients. For

more information on the history of Sunnyslope, see <https://sunnyslopehistoricalsociety.org/brief-history-of-sunnyslope/>. Accessed November 10, 2022.

⁵ Amy Abrams, *Anne Coe: Wisdom of the Wild* (Silver Springs, MD: Ranthia Press, 2017), 17.

⁶ Anne Coe, telephone interview with Julie Sasse, August 21, 2022.

⁷ Anne Coe, email to author, November 29, 2022. Coe refers to her family's land as a farm, not a ranch, but the terms are interchangeable in various articles, and Coe uses the word ranch in many of her paintings of fictional scenarios based on her upbringing.

⁸ Anne Coe, telephone interview by author, August 21, 2022. Amy Abrams explains that the farm had no television, no radio, and no telephone, so spending time in nature was key to stimulating Coe's imagination and understanding of the world. Amy Abrams, *Anne Coe: Wisdom of the Wild*, 20.

⁹ Anne Coe, telephone interview by author, August 21, 2022.

¹⁰ Anne Coe, telephone interview by author, August 21, 2022.

¹¹ Amy Abrams, *Anne Coe: Wisdom of the Wild* (Silver Springs, MD: Ranthia Press, 2017), 27. While Coe's daughter was placed in a loving home, Coe later found her daughter Ellen when she turned eighteen, and the two developed a close relationship that continues today.

¹² Anne Coe, email to author, December 6, 2022. Coe had Virginia Wolf in her life in the 1980s and into the 1990s, dying at 15 years old at her home in Apache Junction, where she buried her in the backyard.

¹³ Coe received the phone call from the station's remote truck. Her brother flew up to Winslow to pick her up. Coe recalls it was very difficult to get her father's body out of South America but then Senator Barry Goldwater was very helpful in dealing with the situation. Anne Coe, email to author, November 10, 2022.

¹⁴ Jean Weiss, "Justice in the Wild," *Images West* (Summer 1993), 14.

¹⁵ Coe recalls that she officially moved in with Billy Schenck at his east Mesa trailer home in February of 1980, when the Salt River flooded, which closed all crossings except at Mill and Central Avenues in Tempe and Phoenix and kept her from her daily commutes to school or work because she lived on the other side of the river.

¹⁶ Anne Coe, telephone interview by author, August 21, 2022.

¹⁷ For a comprehensive overview of the work of Anne Coe, see Amy Abrams, *Anne Coe: Wisdom of the Wild* (Silver Springs, MD: Ranthia Press, 2017).

¹⁸ Todd Wilkinson, "Artist Vignette: Anne Coe," *Wildlife Art News* (March/April 1992), 120.

¹⁹ Anne Coe, telephone interview by author, June 17, 2016. Information about Coe's and Schenck's relationship and her transition from the Suzanne Brown Gallery to Elaine Horwitch Galleries is derived from Julie Sasse, *Southwest Rising: Contemporary Art and the Legacy of Elaine Horwitch* (Scottsdale, Tucson: Cattletrack Art and Preservation and Tucson Museum of Art, 2019), 327-329.

²⁰ Jerre Lynn Vanier, email to author, October 28, 2022.

²¹ Amy Abrams, *Anne Coe: Wisdom of the Wild* (Silver Springs, MD: Ranthia Press, 2017), 84.

²² Billy Schenck, interview by author, June 18, 2020.

²³ Anne Coe, email to author, December 9, 2022. Coe also purchased land on Mt. Union in the Prescott National Forest in Central Yavapai County with the hopes to build a home and studio in a remote place, but her dream died when Bronco died in 2000. She subsequently sold her Prescott land.

²⁴ *Country Road* was sold many years later by the Paradise Valley Country Club to a private collector, with whom it resides today.

²⁵ Coe's dog Rufus was her latest dog and passed away in 2022. He was a red standard poodle rescue dog. In 2018, she painted *Untitled (Rufus)*, which is now in the Jerre Lynne Vanier collection. All of Coe's animals are dear to her and those that have passed are buried in her yard to keep them close.

²⁶ Anne Coe quoted in Kiana Dicker, "Anne Coe," *Southwest Art* (June 1992), 82.

²⁷ Anne Coe, quoted in Cathy Cromwell, "Anne Coe: An Artist's Unspoiled Landscape Fuels her Creativity," *Phoenix Home and Garden* (November 2003), 78.

²⁸ Amy Abrams, *Anne Coe: Wisdom of the Wild* (Silver Springs, MD: Ranthia Press, 2017), 21.

²⁹ J. Gray Sweeney, "Life Examined: Exposing the Beast Within," *Anne Coe: Life Examined*. Tucson: Joseph Gross Gallery, University of Arizona, 1998, 1.

³⁰ *Life Examined*, 1998, is now in the collection of the Tucson Museum of Art.

³¹ Anne Coe quoted in Amy Abrams, *Anne Coe: Wisdom of the Wild* (Silver Springs, MD: Ranthia Press, 2017), 89.

³² Dr. Kathryn Coe died in 2021. She was an anthropologist and Professor Emeritus at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, and the author of more than 100 publications.

³³ Anne Coe, phone interview with author, August 28, 2022.

³⁴ Anne Coe, phone interview with author, August 28, 2022.