



Sue Coe, Strike, 1980. Mixed media on heavy white board. 27 x 20 "Poster design for the Hospital and Health Care Workers Union. Image courtesy of the artist and the Gallery St. Etienne.

### **The Artist as Witness:**

Elise Engler, Michael Caron, Ryan Carpenter, Nancy Chunn, Sue Coe, Lee Jupina Sr., Käthe Kollwitz, Michael Reddick, Rowan Renee.

October 18 - February 01, 2022.

*The Artist as Witness* presents a group of artists whose work has a laser focus on conflict and suffering, commentaries on injustice, and provoking social change. It is a visual companion to our NEA Big Read grant for the graphic novel, *The Best We Could Do*, by Vietnamese American writer Thi Bui - itself a work of witnessing, par excellence. Bearing witness through everyday events, Bui traces her journey through Viet Nam, Malaysia, and the United States, melding together grief and hope, the personal and political, the familial and national. Our exhibition comprises works by academically trained artists; artists trained in the Community Partners in Action Prison Arts Program; and students of art, sociology and history from Eastern, Central, UConn and Manchester Community College. They all challenge us with their profound engagement, whether as direct participants, or sympathetic supporters and allies. Their witness is rendered in meticulous figuration, the emotions conveyed are raw: empathy, compassion, outrage.

Käthe Kollwitz's desire to "bear witness" and "express... the suffering of human beings," is mirrored by Sue Coe's intent to "help serve justice and highlight the oppression that is concealed." Elise Engler performs a daily ritual of witnessing of listening to, and illustrating, the daily radio news broadcast. In 1996, Nancy Chunn famously transformed the daily front page of the New York Times – with her comments, redactions, and drawings. Chunn channels our collective "talk backs" to the media into a visual record of her own stream of consciousness reflections on both the events transmitted and the world itself.

Revealing draftsmanship is common to these artists: its legibility is particularly suited to their evidentiary vocation. To look closely at a drawing is to trace the history of its making, and, in this sense, each drawing acts as its own witness. The artists follow assertion by Art Spiegelman that "history is far too important to leave solely to the historians." Instead, they materialize history through the work of hand on paper and canvas. They give history corporeality, a physical presence. They render solid proof of unjust events so that they become impossible to ignore. From the time of Goya's 1810's *The Disasters of War*, artists have chronicled orally transmitted stories and documentary evidence of the effects of war and incarceration.

The graphic record produced by these artists challenge traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality, as well as the idea that history can be a closed discourse, or even, simply, a progressive one. Their subjective commentary on injustice is an alternative to, and questions, the widely accepted veracity of photography.

*The Artist as Witness* brings together nine artists working from the 1930s to today, and features new, student work made for the exhibition. Each artist produces consciously political art in response to specific events, or circumstances; their work is characterized by figurative representations of people and actions. They return often to the same image or theme over and over again, to accumulate evidence and solidify their commentary. *The Artist as Witness* informs the ways we understand the ethical imperative to witness. It provides a bracing reminder of the danger inherent in being a politically committed artist who feels compelled to speak about what she sees.

The exhibition is nourished by its range of different circumstances and perspectives:

- Nancy Chunn, Sue Coe, Käthe Kollwitz, Elise Engler, Rowan Renee claim their works as weapons in the fight for justice, records that bear witness to terrible circumstances, containers of memory, and portals to a better future.
- Michael Caron, Ryan Carpenter, Lee Jupina Sr., Michael Reddick developed their own rigorous, evolving, artistic practice as part of a dynamic arts collective in the Prison Arts Program. They explore within the prison, and within themselves, of darkness, confusion, path-making, road-blocking, connection, separation, building, demolishing, remembering, forgetting, moving forward, and giving up.

- Student responses to the book, *The Best We Could Do*, will be filtered through their class discussions and personal reflections on the experience of witnessing. They will explore artmaking as a tool for understanding and processing the symbiotic relationship of intellectual and emotive learning.

*The Artist as Witness* brings us face to face with the political moment. It demonstrates the modest means, but immodest impact that has been the gift of fine draftsmanship for millennia. This exhibition is our modest contribution to the ubiquitous and necessary attention in today's art world, to social injustice. It is an integral part of Eastern's role as a public gallery serving the campus and neighboring communities.

Julia Tikhonova Wintner, Art Gallery Coordinator, 2021.