

Love of Place

The Paintings of Caroline Coon

By Jennifer Higgin

In 1996, Caroline Coon painted a picture of a park. The sun blazes white-hot in a cerulean-blue sky. Nine majestic Poplar trees rise like flames, casting spilt-ink shadows on the parched, pale green grass. People lounge about, walk their dogs, play with their children. A few high-rises and the sliver of a Victorian church overlook the scene. It could be just another summer's day in London but the title reveals its significance: *Horniman's Pleasance – Carnival Morning, August 24th 1996*. The park is where the Notting Hill Carnival traditionally starts. Within hours, it will be filled with revellers – something that Coon greets with joy. She writes: "Since 1966, despite establishment opposition, everyone who can put aside hardship and heartache joins in the parade, the spectacular August bank holiday bacchanalia of food, music and dancing."¹

Horniman's Pleasance is just one of Coon's many works that pay homage to the neighbourhood she's lived in for six decades. Although she struggled with financial insecurity and, for too long, a lack of recognition, Coon has always found solace in her community. "All the world", she writes, "seems to gather here, contributing to a street life that zings with different languages and resourceful energy which can lift the human spirit even on the saddest day." When I visit her at her home in July 2022, she tells me how she has painted "in private for 40, 50 years" – which she describes as "an advantage" as it meant she could do what she wanted. She lives in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, where some of the richest people in the country co-exist with the poorest. The site of both Grenfell Tower (which you can see from Coon's living room) and Kensington Palace, its council motto is *Quam bonum in unum habitare* or 'how good it is to dwell in unity'. Coon believes, however, that notwithstanding the inequalities that are rife in the area, with "each crisis the richly diverse multi-cultural community pulls together to do the hard work of political repair". She has explored this slippage between appearance and reality again and again. In her 'Brothel Series' (1996-ongoing), for example, she pictures furtive men not only in hotel rooms but on ordinary streets, nipping into a doorway or reading a card in a shop window. The artist has long protested the criminalisation of prostitution, believing it vilifies

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Caroline Coon's statement for her 2022 exhibition at Stephen Friedman Gallery.

not the clients but the sex workers, who should be treated with the same respect as teachers or nurses.

In 2001, Coon revisited the Notting Hill Carnival from a particular angle in *Carnival: Sunday Morning, August 26th 2000*. She focussed on an unremarkable street. The crowds are beginning to gather: an animated mother and her child hold a string attached to a red and blue balloon as they head in the same direction as a youthful man with a slight paunch, wearing a pendant and a yellow t-shirt; a woman in a red boob-tube gesticulates to someone out of sight. While a sense of celebration is intimated, storm clouds interrupt the blue sky and a closed shopfront is emblazoned with 'Employment Agency'. As with much of Coon's work, her composition pivots on glimpses of precisely rendered, sharp-edged narratives: as people go about their days larger stories hum, just out of sight.

Coon is endlessly fascinated with her vicinity, writing that "even though I think I know each inch of its territory – Grand Union Canal, the parks, secret mews and dark alleys – every so often I see something familiar in a new light." To create her paintings, the artist spends hours sketching in plein air. She prefers not to work from photographs as "drawing something makes you really observe".² After squaring up the composition, she underpaints in grisaille and builds up colour with oil paint mixed with turps and linseed oil. The result is a meticulous surface seemingly devoid of brushstrokes – an art of deep looking that results in crystal clear, near psychedelic high-key detail. In *Grand Union Canal at Ladbroke Grove: A view from the bridge* (2008) – an ordinary scene – a couple are taking a photograph of another couple and their child on a bridge over a canal. Birds form loose formations in the winter sky, bare branches shiver in the cold, the water shines like ice and the schematized flesh of the figures is rendered with unearthly detail.

In *Kensington Memorial Park, Indian Summer 2011* (2012), Coon's debt to artists of the past such as Georges Seurat – who made clear that life, in all of its richness, could be witnessed in a park – is clear: in horizontal bands of yellow, green and blue, women gossip, young men strip off in the sunshine, kids kick a ball. Yet, as in the work of myriad artists including the sixteenth century German Mannerist Hans Baldung, the Belgian Surrealist Paul Delvaux and the British Pop artist Pauline Boty – all of whom Coon cites as influences – hyperrealism renders the everyday strange. She pushes this idea to its

² Author conversation with Caroline Coon, 25 July 2022

extremity in *Rush Hour: She Strips Them Naked With Her Eyes* (2004), the artist's tribute to Delvaux: a crowd of unclad people, some with briefcases, most with tall muscly bodies and penises, are frozen as they walk towards us. One holds a copy of the Daily Mirror with the headline 'Burning in Iraq'. Coon loves bodies and nakedness. "The nudity of Renaissance painting", she says, "is so glorious".

Coon's view of humanity is one of great accommodation. She tells me how she was making preparatory drawings for *Canal – Love* (2022) when she realised she was sitting on a condom. It made her laugh: here was human existence exerting itself, in all its messy glory. It was then that she altered the illegible graffiti on the grubby wall of the tunnel: in bold pink, black and grey lettering, she painted 'LOVE'. Amongst the rubbish, a goose peers at its reflection; somehow, plants bloom in the murky water. Windows of a nearby building are as colourful as a Mondrian. In the distance, a flock of parakeets swoop and soar. Life, as it always does, goes on.