

Fishman, Dan. "Anne-Lise Coste @ Eleven Rivington," *White Hot Magazine*, July 2013.

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Anne-Lise Coste, Installation view, Eleven Rivington, New York, June 2013. Courtesy of the artist

Anne-Lise Coste

[Eleven Rivington](#)

June 20 - August 9, 2013

by Dan Fishman

Anne-Lise Coste has extracted Guernica from the art history textbooks and put it in front of us again, fresh and newly modernized, in a small gallery in lower Manhattan. The twelve canvases are the end result of what Coste calls “the trance of painting with Picasso”—her daily struggle to rearticulate the Cubist master’s powerful images through her own handiwork. Her black-and-white images, like Picasso’s, immediately evoke war’s human inhumanity: women with children dead in their arms, distorted limbs flailed toward the sky, horses with horns for tongues, men with blood drops for eyes.

“As much as I would like to paint flowers and beautiful women, there’s war going on,” Coste said to me over breakfast. “The world is not all flowers and beautiful women.” It’s refreshing to hear that Coste still believes that art can be critical of the world we live in, that artists have a duty to be direct, political, and humane. Walking through the Eleven Rivington showroom, it’s clear that while Coste owes her images to Picasso, she owes much of her improvisational style and her thickly applied spray paint to politically minded graffiti artists.

Unlike many anti-war artists, Coste hasn’t chosen one particular war to be against. Rather she’s against the very idea of war, in all of its varieties and contexts. In her artist’s statement she writes that the ability to talk about war has become, for her, “way too nationalized.” Questioning the importance of lived experience for authentic political protest, Coste asks, “Is being anti-war today only legitimate if you yourself are suffering from war?” Her work answers that rhetorical question with a resounding no: her voice and her art are her rightful means of dissent.

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Having broken *Guernica*'s widespread hysteria into a dozen individual horrors, Coste distances Picasso's masterpiece from its role as a document of the Spanish Civil War. As a result, the images have greater flexibility in terms of their contemporary significance. In one canvas, dozens of skyward-turned men are caught among an onslaught of downward-dropped upside-down "A"s, which conjures, at least for this critic, footage of drone strikes in the Middle East. Her repeated, angry-looking fluorescent lamps remind me of artificially lit war prisons like Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. When an obscured head breathes with difficulty through what look like layers of thick dangerous gas, I think of chemical warfare. Many of these modern elements—the "A"s, the repetition of the lamps, and the layers of seeming gas—are Coste's, not Picasso's, though they're incorporated so seamlessly into Cubist visions that it's easy to forget that they're hers.

Coste, like Picasso, places a high value on freehanded improvisation. Using her airbrush machine, she paints quickly and with very little self-consciousness. "You have to have an idea of what you are doing, but it should be a vague idea," Picasso once said, and I bet Coste would agree. Each of her canvases has been produced over the course of a single day, serving as the record of that day's experience with an aspect of *Guernica*. Even the choices of which aspects to re-imagine were unpremeditated: one day the horse called to her and another day the woman-with-child. The purposeful lack of calculation in her work, combined with her general avoidance of self-censorship, adds to otherwise severe paintings touches of whimsy and childlike innocence.



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