

# Justice in the wild



A show of Anne Coe's work, like "Snake River Sushi," will open with a reception at 5 p.m. August 13 at Partners Gallery.

*In Anne Coe's world, the underdog gets even.*

BY JEAN WEISS

It all began with armadillos. "I had a really eccentric uncle who sent me an armadillo and two babies," Arizona painter Anne Coe recalls, looking back on her years growing up on an Arizona farm. "He was from Texas. That really stuck in my head. To have this armadillo — this mammal who seemed like a reptile."

Coe's allegorical-satirical paintings where coyotes prey on little poodles, bulldozers unearth ancient Indian artifacts and bears stage a counterattack on a cafe where hunters hang out have their intellectual roots

in that chance meeting with those hard-shelled creatures. After struggling as a figurative painter in college, Coe chose the embattled armadillo as the theme for her final master's show and found a new direction for her work.

After her armadillo series, Coe never looked back.

Next came brilliant avant-garde depictions of coyotes, Gila monsters, bears and even the cowgirl, all victims of civilization encroaching upon the wild. But in Coe's work, there is a twist: The underdog gets even.

"It's not like real life in my paintings," notes Coe. "The animals win and get even. Nobody really gets hurt. They are impervious to bullets. It's fun to be able to create a world where there is justice."

Coe's message has been a popular one. She found a place for her art in galleries from New York to Los Angeles. Now, her work is carried in Santa Fe and Scottsdale galleries, along

with Partners Gallery in Jackson.

Even the Walt Disney Corporation has been charmed by Coe's view of the world. One of her projects for the upcoming year is to illustrate a Disney children's book called *This is the Southwestern Desert*.

Though the topics of her paintings dovetail with her environmental ethic, the source of Coe's humorous, boldly colorful and ironic scenes is her own experience living on the edge of the wilderness. As a child on her family's barren farm, at her home now on the edge of the Sonora desert and in the years spent living on the borders of Grand Teton National Park, she learned reverence for what is wild.

"I like living on the edge, but I respect the edge," says Coe of her current home. "I don't even kill scorpions. My background growing up on the ranch left me with a profound love of the land and everything that grows on it and lives on it. My roots are in rural Arizona, rural economies and ranches, but I find myself really at odds with a lot of those things because of the obvious conflicts with nature. All those conflicts are in my work."

Surviving on the land gave Coe an existential viewpoint evident in her paintings. She also survived being embarrassed by her Arizona roots. "We didn't have green fields, big red barns and fat black and white cows," she remembers.

Instead, her town had a

Shell gas station sign with the S gone blitz. If you believe the sign, Coe lived in "hell". Now as a painter, Coe is inspired by contrasts and controversies in the Arizona environment. As animal species like the jaguar are threatened by increased development, Coe fights back from her studio, painting boldly colored characters and taking occasional breaks to step through French doors leading to the Sonora.

Coe was one of the first Arizona painters to celebrate the coyote. But when she began seeing symbols of the animal in chain stores, she realized the fad had stripped them of their symbolic power. She waged a battle for Gila monsters, whose habitats became a nuclear testing site during the 1950s, by painting mutations of Gila monsters seeking worldwide revenge. She's even found justice for what she includes as a dying breed, the cowgirl. Coe's Western heroine drags unwanted Romeos off of her property and can catch several trout from a stream with just one toss of her lariat.

Coe's body of work thus far has celebrated the free-spirited, humorous and powerful quality of nature. Her paintings are thought-provoking, empowering and dazzling. And from what Coe says of her future plans, there is more revenge in store.

"My goal is to get much more gestural with my animals," she says. "I like putting things that look real in really strange situations. The work is pretty didactic, but I have a deadly serious message." ▲