

AMERICA'S GRAPHIC DESIGN MAGAZINE
MAY/JUNE 1966
PRINT XX:III

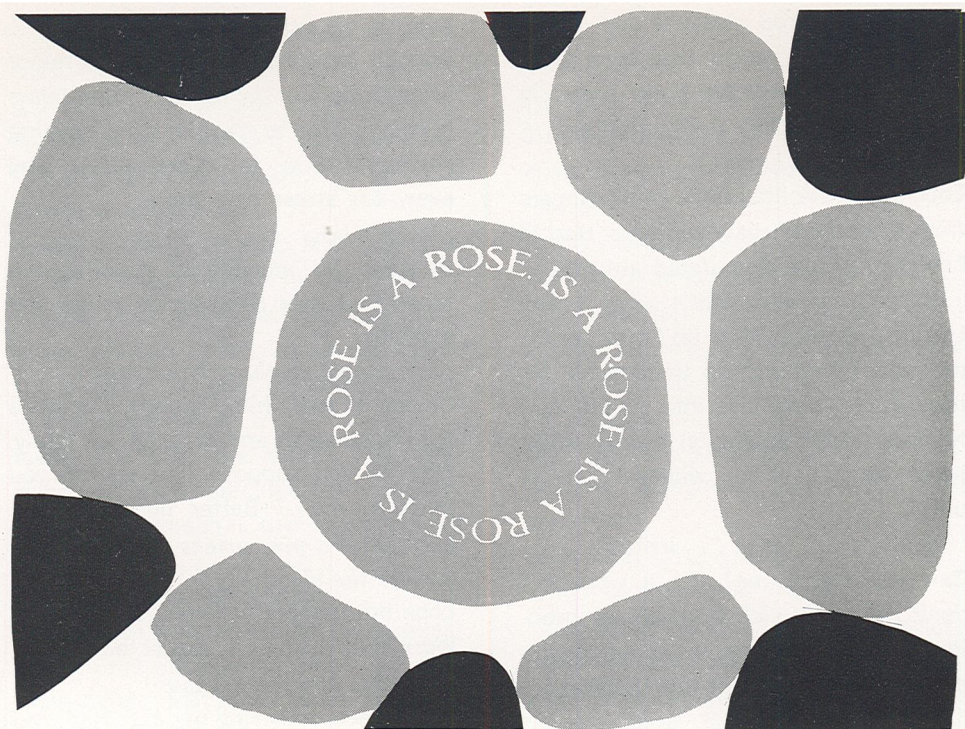
Print



Sister Mary Corita: 'Be Aware! Be Curious! Be Joyous!'

By Martha Monigle

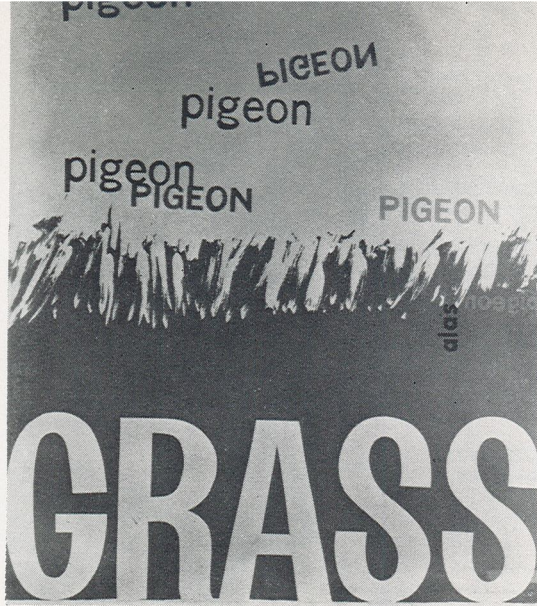
*In her teaching as in her art,
this exuberant, freewheeling nun
aims at "loving communication"*



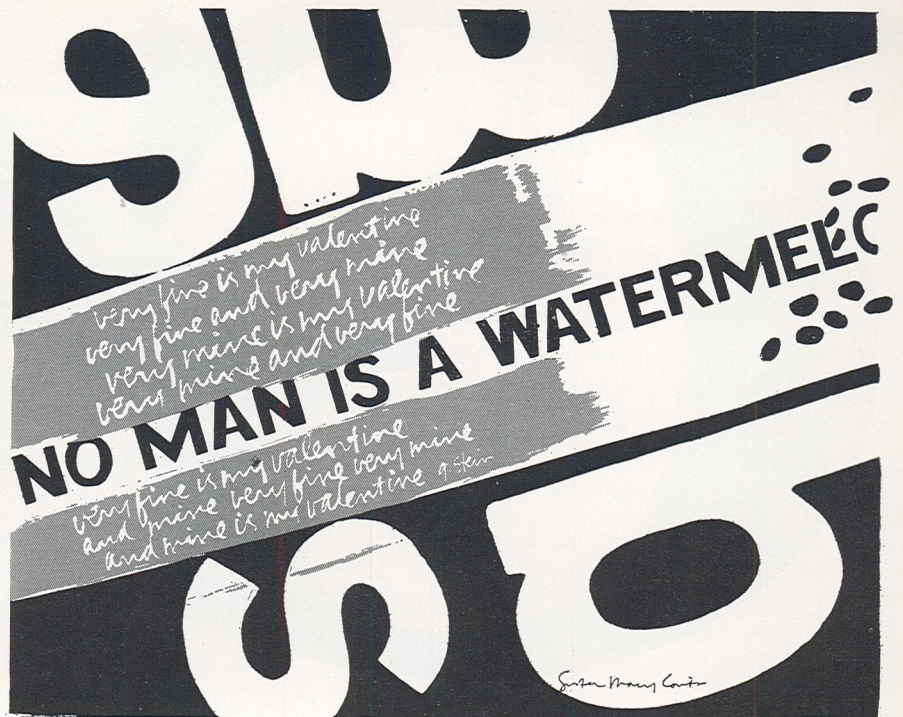
Surely one of the most remarkable women in American life today is Sister Mary Corita, a teaching member of the Immaculate Heart of Mary order in California. Both as an artist—her gay, fanciful serigraphs hang in such museums as the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris and the Museum of Modern Art in New York—and as a teacher—she is head of the art department at Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles—Sister Corita has been a forceful catalyst, propelling others into more zestful and meaningful encounters with life.

This capacity to stimulate people is perhaps best exemplified by the annual Mary's Day holiday on the Immaculate Heart campus. Traditionally, in the month of May, one day is set apart to honor the mother of Christ; each year the celebration is handled in a different way. Explains Sister Corita: "We throw out a question and ask the class what we can do to give things a different look and have people gather and join in and become a little more human."

Last year, inspired by the words of their freewheeling teacher, the young art students seized on a theme of food for peace ("We thought of food and pop art ideas and everyday things we see in the market"); rushed to express their



Opposite page, below: Sister Mary Corita is shown at work in Immaculate Heart College art department. Also shown on this spread are three of the serigraphs which have earned her a national reputation. These delightful silk screen prints typically feature fragmentary quotations from great minds (the quotes illustrated here are Gertrude Stein's). Sister Corita squeezes in her serigraphs during the short lull between summer school and the fall semester; she works fast and hard, turning out two or three prints at the same time.



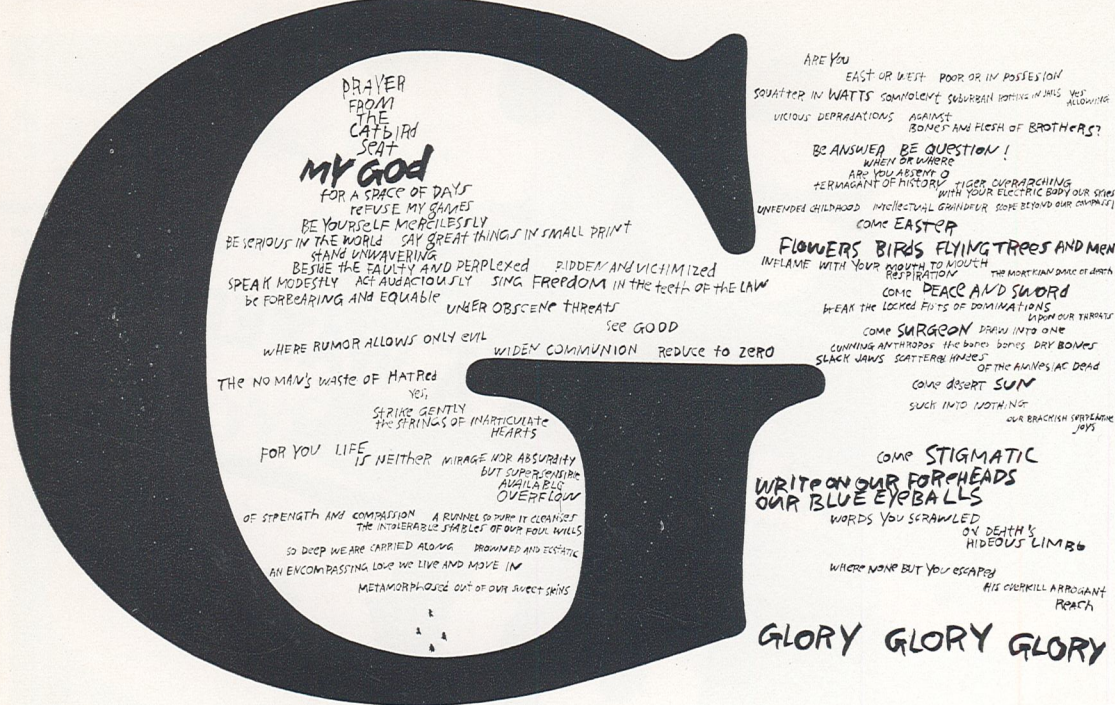
statements in banners, posters or structures ("We made dragons to represent what we have not done yet for peace"); and persuaded the student body and community members to pitch in and help. In the resultant day-long pop happenings, flower-wreathed girls in bright May dresses wandered about side by side with nuns, some of whom wore hibiscus wreaths tilted incongruously on their black veils. One student carried a poster lettered "I Like God." "Mary would have laughed at our wreaths, our pop art," Sister Corita says, speaking in her breathless, enthusiastic way. "Our colors were the colors of the market place and the sounds were of the here and now."

Sister Corita's exuberant and positive approach to life, with which she imbues her students, even embraces the advertising medium in all its forms. Rather than decry billboard and ad slogans, she accepts them as shorthand reports from her fellow man, to be lovingly received because "part of being in the world is to understand the language people are using." At the same time, however, she cautions against the miracles the ad man promises ("They're just great marvelous exaggerations"). In her essay "Art and Beauty in the Life of a Sister," from the recent book The Changing Sister, she

asserts: "Nobody should believe ads and billboards. They are contemporary fairy tales and are the carriers, as fairy tales have always been, of man's loves and hopes and beliefs." Since the advertising designer is required to create images that will reach the lowest common denominator, he is, Sister Corita feels, restricted in his artistic form. "In a sense, you are caught in a hierarchy, say between Fellini's '8½,' and the billboard that advertises Alka-Seltzer."

From the beginning, Sister Corita's own art style has been an avant garde presentation of fragmentary messages from great minds—all tied up in Corita-colored ribbons. To her, life brims with joy, and she is constantly transmitting this rapture in her art. ("The way Christ did it was great. He just loved it all to death.") Two years ago her messages ballooned into pop art. Explains Sister Corita, "I felt the need to speak in the way the world speaks to all of us today."

To call Mary, the mother of Jesus, a "tomato," as she did in a recent serigraph is not blasphemy, as some devout persons might think, but merely the artist's way of making a statement that can be communicated to others. Whether this statement is pop art or otherwise is, to her, beside the point.

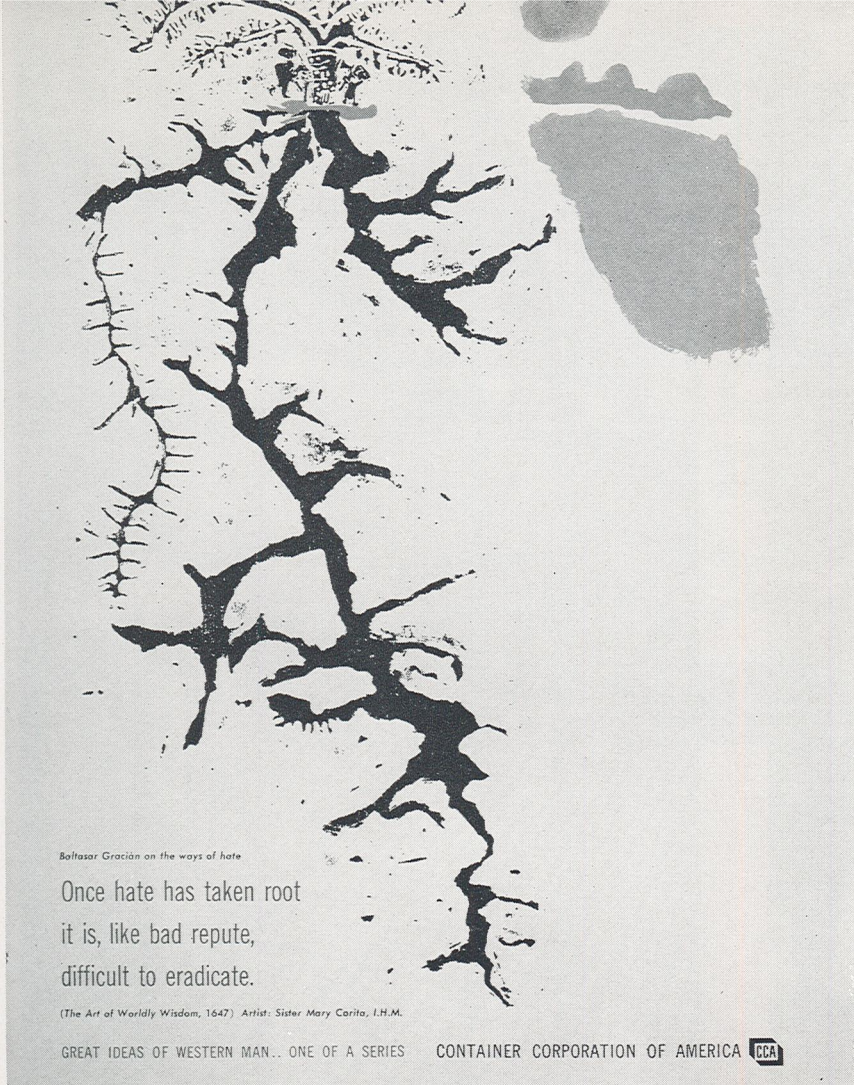


Without actually using religious images, Sister Corita interprets religious meanings everywhere. Often her serigraphs stress bread, easily translatable into the body of Christ which is symbolically distributed by the priest in the form of wafers at the mass. "We eat food every day and at the mass," she says. "We become what we eat." Although Sister Corita is fortunate that her religious order never censors her, she is nevertheless asked to discuss her work with the other nuns. "Sometimes," she says with a grin, "there are differences of taste." As to the fact of her being a nun as well as an artist, she comments with quiet sincerity: "I am helped."

Born in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1918, Sister Corita was raised in Los Angeles, a city as sun-splashed as her serigraphs. Though as a child she was always "interested" in art, she went from high school to the novitiate of the Immaculate Heart order to become a missionary. She was content to teach elementary-grade English to Indians in British Columbia until there arose a need for an accredited art teacher. After receiving a master's degree in art at the University of Southern California and becoming a teacher of art at Im-

maculate Heart College, she began to "play around with silk screen work." In 1958, encouraged by having won two first prizes at county fairs, she responded to an art magazine ad and entered an open group show for the Morris Gallery in New York. Impressed by the vitality and seeming artlessness of her work (which characteristically unites color areas with scrawled excerpts from sources ranging from the Bible to Betti), Morris Weisenthal offered her a show—which turned out to be the first of many such shows at the Morris Gallery. In all, Sister Corita has had about 200 what she terms "one-nun" shows throughout the world ("You have a lot of shows going and that's the fun").

Undaunted by her full-time teaching schedule, Sister Corita turns out assignments varying from book covers, industrial designs, and oil paintings, to a mural for the Vatican Pavilion at the recent N.Y. World's Fair. Her own serigraphs are squeezed in during the three-weeks lull between summer school and the fall semester, though by that time she frequently has lost her collected notes. "I'm not very organized," she admits airily, "but I get ideas everywhere." In whirlwind fashion she works throughout the day, concen-



Baltasar Gracián on the ways of hate

Once hate has taken root
it is, like bad repute,
difficult to eradicate.

(The Art of Worldly Wisdom, 1647) Artist: Sister Mary Corita, I.H.M.

GREAT IDEAS OF WESTERN MAN... ONE OF A SERIES CONTAINER CORPORATION OF AMERICA 

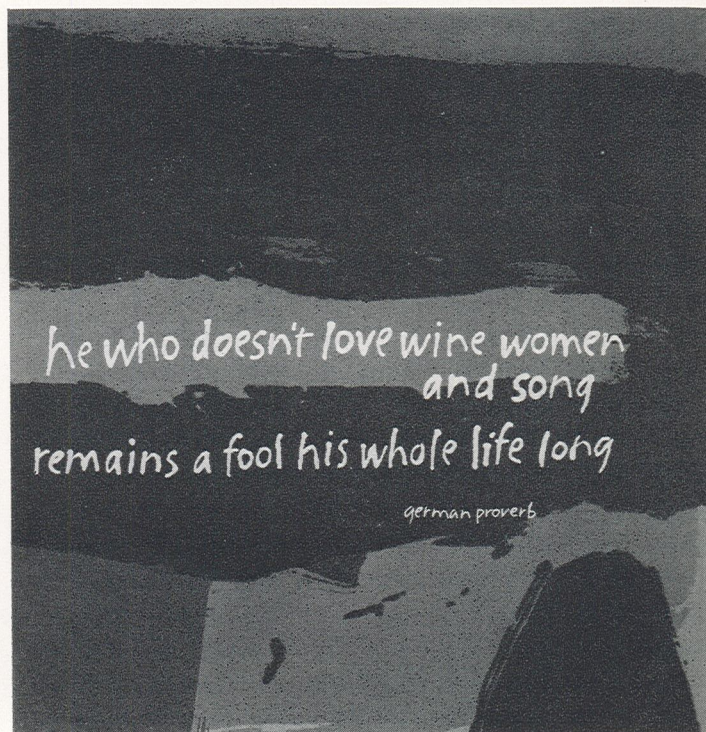
Shown here are examples of Sister Corita's work that have been used in various "commercial" applications. Opposite page: typographic setting of poem by Daniel Berrigan, S. J., from *The Critic*, a Catholic magazine. Left: *Great Ideas of Western Man* ad, for Container Corporation of America. Below: Cover of German recipe booklet, for Spice Islands Company (she designed the covers for all 10 booklets in the series, each one featuring recipes from a different country).

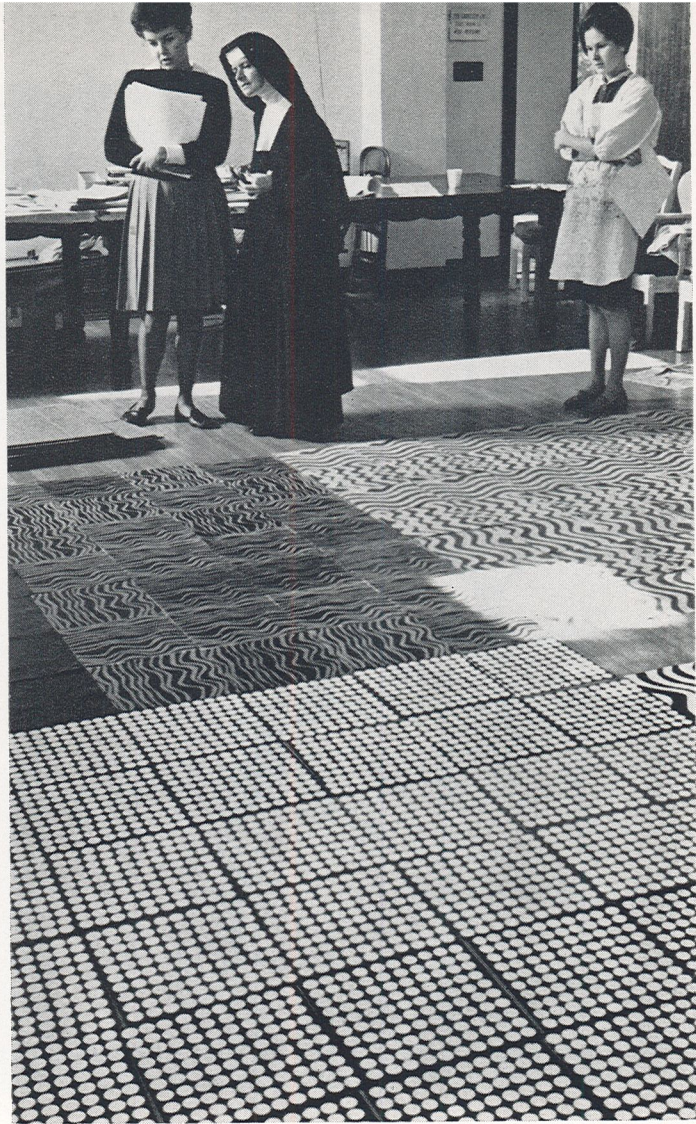
trating on several silk screens at the same time, averaging 100 prints of each.

Perhaps it is Sister Corita's ability to relate to people and to have a "loving communication" with them that makes her regard teaching, not art, as her chief interest in life. In a non-directive teaching method as spontaneous as her style of art, she presents her students with stimuli—records, tapes, photographs, films—without any kind of introduction. In this way she flings them into an exercise of their own judgment, "which is what very few people ever learn to do in the visual arts." For supplementary activities, they are taken to art galleries every week.

"Mostly you teach them to be aware! To be curious! To be joyous!" she exclaims. "You try to connect them with the artists who are doing great things."

In discussing the requirements of today's design training, Sister Corita comments, "It seems to me that when the students finish their schooling they should be able to do a great many different kinds of things. If they have had enough impossible jobs thrown at them while they're in school, when they get out and another impossible job is thrown at them, it would





simply be the next problem for them to learn how to do that." Sister Corita tries to persuade her art majors to be English minors, believing that such studies will greatly reinforce their art training. A true appreciation of art, she maintains, involves a study of life, which requires working with words and ideas.

An enthusiastic teacher liberates the creative impulse in students; an enthusiastic and talented artist/teacher may unwittingly call out an imitative response. Sister Corita shrugs off such criticism of her students' work: "I think any school falls into this certain way of expression. Everybody else is working with what everybody else is working with and it has a sort of common look."

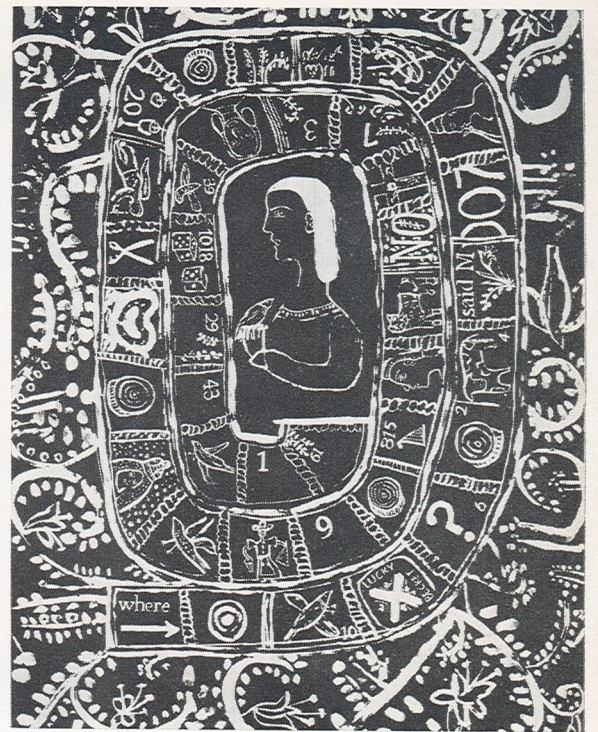
When pinned down to a definition of the "Immaculate Heart" look, she defines it broadly as "flat, lacking in perspective, which makes it different from most people's concept of art." A further identification of her students' work is the absence of a smooth technical look which, she admits, in a comparison with the output of some Eastern art schools might not show a surface professionalism. In her opinion, this technical expertise arrives with experience outside

school. "Once they have this itch that they care how a thing looks, that will stay with them. Whereas I think that technique, if acquired too soon, can give them a kind of deadening satisfaction that prevents their ever looking or growing any further."

In general, Sister Corita approves of the master-apprentice relationship practiced at Immaculate Heart whereby the older girls—seniors—teach the younger girls what they themselves have been taught by the instructor. These senior student assignments do not always work out, Sister Corita explains, if the students do not bring to it a sense of responsibility.

The fame of the Immaculate Heart art students' work, which is exhibited in various galleries on both East and West Coasts, far exceeds the physical size of the college art department ("We're only a baby department in the liberal arts"). Out of an 800-member student body there are only about 30 girls who major in art. If the adults (men and women) in the extension courses are added, the total student enrollment is approximately 1500.

Meanwhile, spurred on in this rugged Western atmosphere of free expression, the Immaculate Heart students gallop off



Opposite page: Photo at right shows Sister Corita discussing student exhibit for IBM showroom in Manhattan. At left is exterior view of exhibit which consisted of 725 boxes featuring quotes on the subject of peace. The show aroused much hostility and controversy, causing Sister Corita to comment: "I didn't know peace could be such an explosive word." This page: serigraphs by three of Sister Corita's students (courtesy Scarabaeus Gallery, New York). The artists are Claudia Leonard (above left), Charla Khama (above right), and Carol Lee.

in a fury of creativity. For example, last fall IBM requested a Christmas exhibit for its New York showroom. A class discussion resulted in the girls' collecting 725 cardboard grocery boxes, pasting messages and designs on them and assembling them into ceiling-high structures on the theme "Peace on Earth." To the great surprise of Sister Corita and her students, the IBM exhibit aroused so much controversy that it had to be shut down temporarily while some of the peace statements from five famous men (Pope John XXIII, President John F. Kennedy, Adlai E. Stevenson, Dag Hammarskjold and Jawaharlal Nehru) were removed for fear of being interpreted as a propaganda protest against the Vietnam war. "I didn't know peace could be such an explosive word," Sister Corita comments wryly.

With characteristic humility, she declares that the work done by the students for the IBM exhibit was much better than their teacher could have done. On the whole, she was well pleased with the degree of student vigor displayed in the show. For Sister Corita believes that energy of this kind is a form of love and that "love is what moves us to create, to go beyond ourselves."

