CHRISTIE'S

God's own Pop artist

In 1960s Los Angeles, Sister Corita Kent gained national fame and stirred up the Catholic authorities with vividly coloured prints that conveyed a message of hope and protest. Jonathan Bastable tells her remarkable story

For decades the teacher-nuns and the students of the Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles marked Mary's Day in the same way. The young women of the faculty donned long white gowns, like bridesmaids, and walked in procession to present a vase of white lilies to a statue of the Virgin. A mass would be held, followed by speeches and prize-giving.

That solemn ritual was turned on its head in 1964, when a whole new choreography was invented for the occasion. The demure promenade was transformed into something more like a hippy 'be-in', and it had a theme: world hunger. The students wore gaudy summer dresses, and carried placards depicting blow-ups of food packaging: 'Fresh Eggs', 'Toasted Almond Fudge'. Two friends walked side by side with banners that announced 'I like God' and 'God likes canned peaches'. Some of the nuns balanced garlands of flowers on their wimples.

Corita Kent (centre right) at Immaculate Heart College Mary's Day celebration, 1964. Image courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles. © Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

The message was clear: the sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary wanted to embrace the present day and the streets of the city. From now on, their fiesta was to be joyous and colourful, and impossible to ignore.

The presiding spirit of this Catholic happening was Sister Mary Corita Kent, a teacher in the art department of the college. Her innovations were a logical extension of the work she was doing within the walls of the convent. There, mostly unnoticed by the wider world, she had been experimenting with serigraphy and co-opting the imagery of American consumerism to her own artistic ends. That sounds like a kind of Warholian project — and it was.

But Corita Kent was not some doting Californian disciple of East Coast Andy. A century after her birth, it has become clear that she was a Pop art pioneer in her own right, a driven experimental artist with something to say.

In 1962 Corita Kent saw Warhol's Soup Can show at the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles. It was a kind of epiphany for her

---

Sister Corita was born Frances Kent in 1918. She grew up in Hollywood, then still a sleepy, sun-washed suburb of the city. Her religious vocation was clear from an early age; in 1936, when she was 18, she entered the convent of the Immaculate Heart. Like most of the nuns of her order, she took the name Mary, and so was known within the community by the second of her monastic names: Corita. Apart from a brief spell teaching in Canada, the nunnery on the edge of Griffith Park was her home and workplace for the next 30 years. She learned silkscreening while still a novitiate.

In 1947, because of her obvious talent, she was assigned to teach in the art department of the Immaculate Heart College. She became well known in academia, travelling all over the USA to give talks about how art was taught at IHC. And she was well connected: Charles and Ray Eames were friends, and she persuaded personalities including Buckminster Fuller and John Cage to address her students.

Immaculate Heart College Art Department c. 1955. Photograph by Fred Swartz. Image courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

In 1962, two transformational events occurred in Kent's life. First, she saw Warhol's Soup Can show at the Ferus Gallery in LA. It was a kind of epiphany for her. 'It shook me up,' she later said of his work. 'He's telling us what life is like for him... Maybe we need [something] to shake us up a bit.'

Second, the reform programme known as Vatican II was initiated in Rome, leading to a worldwide call on the church to renew itself and engage with the modern age. Kent, like many Catholics, greeted Vatican II with an upsurge of optimism. She saw immediately that her art could be a force in the coming spiritual revolution.

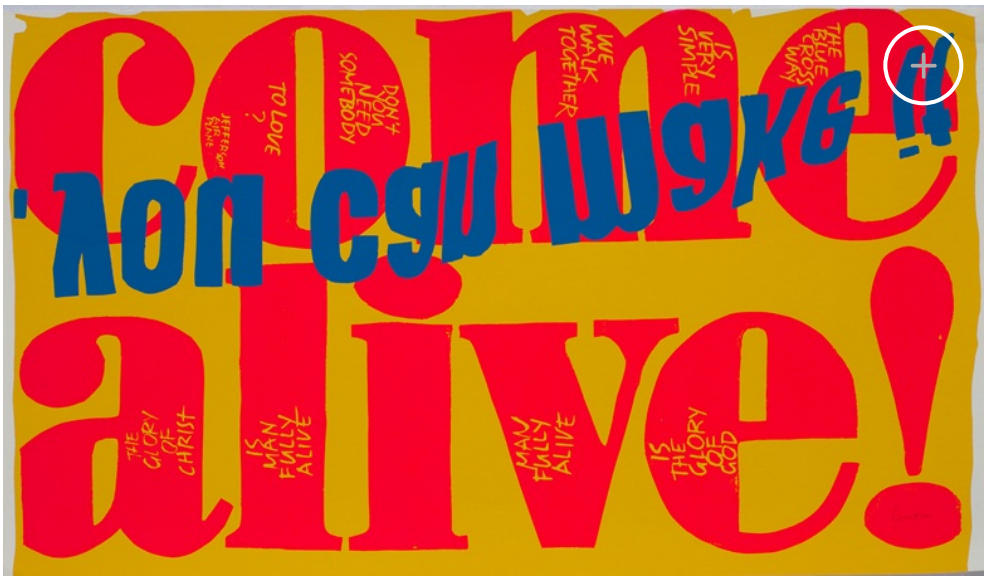
Corita Kent, That They May Have Life, 1964. Serigraph. 38¾ x 30 in. © Corita Art Center. Photograph by Arthur Evans

She drafted her students and fellow nuns into the enterprise — creating, in effect, a Warhol-style factory at the convent. She had a suitable source of inspiration in Market Basket, the grocery store across the road. One of her early Pop art serigraphs borrows the packaging of a sliced loaf labelled 'Enriched Bread'. The white circles that figure in her silkscreen, whether or not they were part of the original package design, make clear that the richer bread Kent had in mind was the communion wafer.

But that ecclesiastical pun was not the half of it. Kent found that the supermarket aisles were full of phrases and imagery that she could turn into a Pop art commentary on the life of the spirit. Where other artists saw a fleeting surface beauty, she detected incidental meaning. It might yet be as ephemeral as a soap carton or a glimpse of a gas

station, but it was worth grasping because it was a moment of insight. So when a Pepsi ad exhorted consumers to 'come alive', Corita agreed, and spelled it out by quoting St Irenaeus on the canvas: 'The glory of God is man fully alive.'

Almost by accident, Kent's work at IHC made her nationally famous. 'She's a nun and an artist, she's so modern,' announced one magazine, hardly believing that these three things could exist in one person. In 1966 she made the cover of *Newsweek*, and in the same year *Harper's Bazaar* named her one of 100 'Women of Accomplishment'.



Corita Kent, Come Alive, 1967. © Corita Art Center. Photograph by Arthur Evans

But while America was enamoured of Corita Kent, the church authorities looked on with growing dismay. James McIntyre, Archbishop of Los Angeles, considered the

modernising nuns of the Immaculate Heart insubordinate and frivolous.

As for Corita's artworks, they were unhelpful to ordinary Catholics and bordered on blasphemy. He wrote repeatedly to the mother general of the convent, saying that he had 'received many adverse comments and criticisms of this type of artistic representation... from the standpoint of reverence'.

McIntyre was especially troubled by a work in which the word 'tomato', taken from a Del Monte tin, was accompanied by a text in Corita's own hand. This combination, commercial typography plus scribbled commentary, was characteristic of Kent's silkscreens — but it was the text, taken from a letter that Corita received after the 1964 Mary's Day, that outraged the archbishop: 'If we are provided with a sign that declares Del Monte tomatoes are juiciest, it is not desecration to add: Mother Mary is the juiciest tomato of all.'

Corita Kent's work Power Up melds a sermon on spiritual fulfilment by Daniel Berrigan, an activist priest, with the advertising catchphrase of the Richfield Oil Corporation. It is seen here above the altar at Our Mother of Good Counsel in Los Angeles, circa 1965 © Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

The archbishop couldn't see it for what it was: a beatific Madonna, reimagined for the era of the neon-lit diner and the interstate billboard. For Mary's Day in 1966, Corita created a wide banner that was hung behind the altar at the convent. It consisted of the words POWER UP (a catchphrase of the Richfield Oil Corporation), beneath which she transcribed a sermon by Daniel Berrigan, priest, poet and advocate of civil disobedience.

It is one of her most striking works, and it moved the archbishop to fire off another furious letter: 'What pertains to the liturgy and to sacred art comes within my jurisdictions. We hereby request again that the activities of Sister Corita be confined to her classroom.'

Corita Kent, I'm Glad I Can Feel Pain, 1969. © Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles. Photographs by Arthur Evans

Corita Kent, The Cry That Will Be Heard, 1969. © Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles. Photographs by Arthur Evans

In 1968, exhausted by the fight and the limelight, Corita left the convent and moved across America to Boston. Her work had become darker in the latter part of the decade, politically indignant. One work, incorporating photography and printed pages now, mourns the death of Bobby Kennedy and contains the phrase 'I'm glad I can feel pain', a passing remark of one of her students.

Another piece of protest art repeats the words 'American Assassination' and words contained in them — 'sin', 'nation' — all of it in blocky wanted-poster capitals on stripes of colour that are reminiscent of the US flag, that ambiguous Pop art icon.

'The joy in her work… was her gift to a good grey world. [Catholics] needed joy, joy, joy. Corita had it in abundance; she gave it' — Dan Berrigan

---

Corita Kent produced more than 800 silkscreen editions. Taken as a whole, they have the urgency of graffiti stealthily stencilled on a wall at night. Phrases sometimes appear unfinished, hurried ('I love you very...'), not because a cop car is coming round the corner but because the kingdom of God is nigh.

In spirit, though not in ideology, her serigraphs recall Mayakovsky's agitprop posters. A descendant of her artistic method can be found in Shepard Fairey's *We The People* portraits, made downloadable as a resource for political protest. Here, too, the democratic insistence on wide distribution is part of the point.

Kent burned her truths on stretched linen, and she found truth in all sorts of places — not just at Market Basket, but also in Beatles lyrics and even Bible verses. She died in 1986, by which time the heady hopes of the 1960s had faded. But her serigraphed colours remain bright. ‘The joy in her work… was her gift to a good grey world,’ wrote her friend Dan Berrigan. ‘One emotion seemed denied to Catholics… they needed joy, joy, joy. Corita had it in abundance; she gave it.’

Corita Kent: Get with the Action *is at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft, East Sussex, until 14 October.* Corita Kent: Just to Live Is Holy *is at Dubuque Museum of Art, Iowa, 22 September-6 January 2019*

9 July 2018

POST-WAR & CONTEMPORARY ART | ARTISTS

Main image:

Corita Kent, circa 1965. Image courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles