

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS LOS ANGELES

Corita Kent

Marciano Art Foundation

By Daniel Gerwin ❸



View of "Corita Kent: The Sorcery of Images" 2025–26. Photo: Michael Anthony Hernandez.

What would Corita Kent (1918–1986), an artist nun who blended Pop, humanism, and progressive politics, have made of 2025? Perhaps it's exactly the right time to ask this question. On view at the Marciano Art Foundation, less than four miles from where Corita (as she was known) taught at the Immaculate Heart College, is a portion of the artist's newly digitized photo archive, curated from 15,000-plus 35-mm slides and photographs she and others at Immaculate Heart took and mined to create her internationally celebrated silk screens and typographic innovations.

In the Marciano's vast Theater Gallery, a slideshow of more than 1,100 images is projected three at a time, the whole cycle taking about forty-five minutes. The seating is comfortable, and the slides are presented at movie-screen scale and in luscious color. The selection highlights formal concordance, drawing analogies among a splattered stain, a dandelion's fluffy white head, concentric ripples in water, floral blooms, and hundreds of multihued balloons piled on the floor or dispersing in the blue sky. Parallels are also suggested between linear arrangements such as telephone wires, girders, and barren tree branches in winter.

During her life Corita expressed an affinity for the kind of geometric forms associated with Buckminster Fuller, and in the photos she finds these patterns underlying detritus, plants, and crowds of people at the college's annual Mary's Day celebrations. Her gaze transforms a scattered human assembly into a murmururation guided by organizing principles at the neural level, the way flowers bloom following a Fibonacci sequence.

As one would expect from this master of graphic design who created a US postage stamp and a banner for the Vatican, there are photos of printed text in every conceivable incarnation, including lots of advertising. The omnipresence of commercial messaging here can feel assailing in its beckoning for consumption, but ad firms admittedly hire some of the best talent available, and Corita found much by appropriating these forms to new ends.

In any case, it seems silly to rankle at capitalist manipulation when your hosts are the Marciano brothers, founders of the Guess clothing empire. There is irony in exhibiting an influential left-wing political activist such-as Corita (she did social practice *avant la lettre*) at the Marciano Art Foundation, which chose to shutter in 2019 when its workers sought to unionize—a settlement was eventually reached. Guess had already been pursued in the 1990s by garment workers union UNITE for illegal labor practices, including union-busting and sweatshop conditions, and the company's reputation remains mixed, with a Cambodian supplier to the brand currently accused of anti-union practices and the firing of workers who became pregnant. Corita actively supported the United Farm Workers while living in Los Angeles and might have balked at any connection with the Marcianos.

Artists have always relied on oligarchs for support, and though Corita was free of this burden when she produced the slide archive as a sister of Immaculate Heart, her legacy is now guarded by the Corita Art Center, a nonprofit that may have been unable to mount an exhibition of this scale without a wealthy partner. Perhaps it is fitting that Corita be seen at the Marciano, her passion for social justice entwined with the capitalist powers she both formally embraced and spiritually opposed. This *pas de deux* is found directly in Corita's work: She repurposed her Wonder Bread slide into several prints (not included in this show), my favorite being that *they may have life*, 1964, which incorporates the wrapper's design into a cry against hunger, disturbingly salient given this year's imposed famines in Gaza and Sudan.

Displayed outside the theater is *circus alphabet*, 1968, a grouping of thirty silk-screen prints, one of each letter of the alphabet plus four that comprise the phrase DAMN EVERYTHING BUT THE CIRCUS, from e. e. cummings. Each letter is layered with images and texts from sources including Thoreau, Rilke, and the president of Immaculate Heart of Mary. These posters present the circus as the embodiment of freedom and a rejection of authority and corruption—ARMED WITH BEAUTY AND DEMANDING JUSTICE is quoted on the letter U, for example. The word DAMN showcases a handwritten meditation on the jester during periods of societal rot, concluding IN SUCH TIMES CLOWNS BECOME WITNESSES, espousing a truth amply demonstrated of late. The print of the letter S offers a clue as to how Corita found so much in her slides—it is adorned with the text MY FAVORITE SYMBOLS WERE THOSE WHICH I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND. Looking through her archive, I saw a flower, an ad, a power line; she saw a mystery and, in it, possibility.