

FINANCIAL TIMES

The Catholic nun (turned pop art maverick) who taught Angelenos how to love

Sister Corita Kent's life is a classic LA story — and her bright, playful prints are about to find new fans

Anne Wallentine
Feb 12 2025



For years, the Corita Art Center (CAC) was confined to a narrow hallway running through the administrative offices of Los Angeles' Immaculate Heart High School — hung with Catholic nun turned pop artist Corita Kent's bright, playful, and earnest silkscreen prints. Kent's art mixes abstracted shapes, handwritten phrases, and blocky letters influenced by graphic design to express her visions of joy, faith and justice.

On March 8, the CAC is reopening to the public with a dedicated space in LA's downtown Arts District. The new centre will host rotating exhibitions, programmes and workshops, and house a portion of the archive of more than 30,000 artworks and ephemera — the most extensive collection of Kent's work (the rest is housed off-site).

“Corita is an LA story,” says CAC president and board chair Sheharazad Fleming. “Show me another artist, educator, social justice advocate, nun, feminist — this way of choosing to be bold, to live a life that meets her own values...that's what LA is about.”

It's hard to resist the enigma of Kent's life story: the nun in her black-and-white habit who became a pop-art pioneer (and a Newsweek cover star in 1967). But her arc makes sense as someone who sought a life of service and found it by dedicating herself to different causes: first to religious life, then the pursuit of art and education.

Born in Iowa in 1918, Kent joined the Immaculate Heart of Mary order of nuns aged 18. She began teaching art at Immaculate Heart College in 1947. The following decades saw immense social change in the US, with the country moving from the post-second world war economic boom to the progressive civil rights movements and counterculture of the 1960s. Artistic tastes also shifted, from abstract expressionism to pop art, both of which interested Kent — especially after her encounter with Andy Warhol's first show of soup can paintings. But tensions grew between the archdiocese and Kent's liberal order. The conservative archbishop of Los Angeles was infuriated by Kent's 1964 print, which declared, "Mary Mother is the juiciest tomato of them all." In 1968, she sought dispensation from her vows.



Corita with some of her serigraph prints in 1980 © Image courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Los Angeles, corita.org.

Kent's serigraphs combine eye-catching shapes and advert imagery (such as Wonder Bread's emblematic dots) with sacred texts: first the Bible, then the Bhagavad Gita and modern writers and thinkers: James Joyce, ee cummings, Gabriel Marcel. Many of her prints repeat the same phrases, emphasised in shifting forms and colours, like liturgical acclamations sung to different tunes. Her progressive politics also recur frequently, as in her arresting red, white and blue anti-Vietnam war print, "stop the bombing" (1967), whose text is a compassionate first-person plea. Love, in all its forms, is an enduring theme.

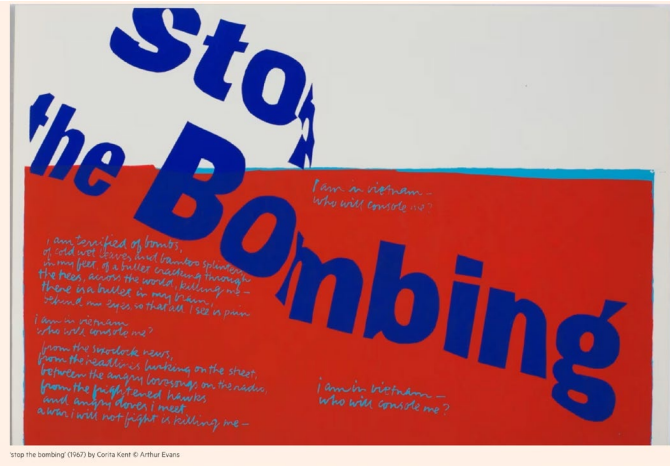
"Show me another artist, educator, social justice advocate, nun, feminist — this way of choosing to be bold, to live a life that meets her own values. That's what LA is about"
Sheharazad Fleming

Kent died of liver cancer in 1986. She bequeathed her artwork and copyrights to the Immaculate Heart Community, an ecumenical group established in 1970 by former IHM sisters. The collection's transformation from a homespun organisation founded in 1997 into an independent non-profit is being effected with a \$5mn seed grant from the IHC, which will be distributed over five years. It's a landmark achievement amid the CAC's years of efforts to widen Corita's name recognition as an artist (staff refer to her with the mononym) and bolster her legacy within the canon of 20th-century art history.

There are several prominent New York-based foundations dedicated to women artists — Carolee Schneemann, Joan Mitchell, Helen Frankenthaler, to name a few — but the CAC will fill a chasm among Los Angeles's art institutions with a space dedicated solely to the estate of a woman artist. For instance, the Eames House (which recently survived the Palisades fire) reflects the twin legacies of husband-and-wife designers Ray and Charles Eames. The CAC's Fleming points out that among heterosexual artistic couples, women's legacies are entwined with their partners.

“I have to ask, if Ray wasn’t among ‘Charles and Ray’, would we know her as well?” Fleming asks. “These women deserve to be amplified as a part of our LA story, because they will inspire future generations of Angelenos.”

The CAC’s new third-floor space, a mix of exposed brick and white walls, has been decorated with murals riffing off Kent’s works and created by students and faculty from the Los Angeles Trade-Technical College. The popular “Ten Rules” for artistic practice that Kent co-authored with her students sets the tone for her own brand of offbeat creativity at the entrance (Rule 4: “Consider everything an experiment”). Upstairs, directional murals inspired by her serigraphs “in” (1964) and “left” (1967) point the way to the gallery.



The inaugural exhibition, Heroes and Sheroes, features the series of works Kent made in 1968-69 of political figures she admired, including Cesar Chavez, Coretta Scott King and Robert F Kennedy. The centre also facilitates loans and travelling exhibitions, with an emphasis on lending to rural US institutions to spread more awareness of Kent’s work.

Following her ethos and life’s work as an educator, the CAC emphasises arts education with its mission of “making [the collection] as accessible and available as widely as possible”, CAC’s executive director Nellie Scott says. The centre already has a two-year waiting list for school and group tours of the new space.

“My highest hope is that [for] the people that we serve in Los Angeles, whether they’ve been to an art museum before or not, there’s a very welcoming feeling...[to] let the space be a container for dialogue and curiosity and conversation and community gatherings,” Scott says. “That’s how we’re envisioning this phase, as we...let it take shape and let the community help define what this looks like.

“People want her to be the ‘pop art nun,’” Scott notes. “But she’s so much more than that.”

Opens March 8, corita.org



Corita in her Los Angeles studio in around 1965 © Image courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Los Angeles, corita.org.