

Art Review

Sister Corita Kent Found the Sacred in the Profane

An installation of the artist's never-before-seen photographs accumulates meaning through association rather than argument.

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Corita Kent, "Untitled, Red Shoes, Los Angeles" (1967), 35 mm slide, Corita Slide Collection (photo courtesy Corita Art Center; all other photos Claudia Ross/*Hyperallergic*)

LOS ANGELES — “T” stands for “tight rope.” At least, it does in late artist Sister Corita Kent’s *circus alphabet* (1968), a 30-part series of serigraph prints that each feature a letter. In the “T” print, the words “High Wire Artists” appear alongside illustrations of formally dressed figures walking across precarious, taut lines. The metaphor feels apt: One can easily imagine Corita (she preferred to use her first name) standing among their multitalented ilk. Until 1968 (she passed away in 1976), she was a member of Hollywood’s Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. There, she juggled duties as an art teacher, Roman Catholic nun, left-wing advocate, and artist — much to the dismay of Los Angeles’s conservative Cardinal James Francis McIntyre, who frequently clashed with Corita over her activist artwork and reform beliefs.



Installation view of Corita Kent, *circus alphabet* (1968), 30 serigraphs

In *Corita Kent: Sorcery of Images* at Marciano Art Foundation (MAF), the artist's work again appears in the shadow of fraught institutions. MAF, a private museum housed in a hulking former Scottish Rite Masonic Temple, has been dogged by its own controversies since 2017, facing criticism for its opaque structure and lack of accountability. In 2019, it closed temporarily just days after its part-time service staff announced a unionization drive — and it still faces allegations that, like many private museums, it serves as more of a tax haven than a civic institution (MAF currently doesn't have a board of directors to answer to, according to 2020 reporting from the *Los Angeles Times*).

The exhibition includes a selection of screenprints and serigraphs in the lobby, library, and adjacent rooms, and a large, ground-floor theater gallery houses the exhibition's primary installation, "Corita Kent: Sorcery of Images" (2025), where a trio of large rectangular screens show selections from the artist's never-before-seen photographic archive. The artwork on view is less didactic or polemic than the artist herself. Instead, it is a call to "trust in the artist, in everyone, to make their own connections," as Corita is quoted as saying in the press release. Projected onto canvases suspended from the ceiling, the main installation recalls the lecture hall slide presentations that would have been familiar to Corita from her time as an educator, and invokes the classrooms in the former Masonic Temple, where members were educated in the order's esoteric religious rituals.

The installation's structure allows meaning to accumulate through association rather than argument. The three screens flicker through the "presentation" at varied rates, combining documentary shots of daily life with those highlighting Corita's political advocacy. Links between quotidian LA sights and her activism arise naturally through the installation's montage-like style: Recurring shots of kites and celebratory balloons at the sisters' Mary's Day parade appear silhouetted against clear, bright skies, creating images that resemble Corita's images of her sisters at political protests, their habits stark against the heavenly blue hue. Here, their activism is revealed as a kind of ritual joy, an event as celebratory and reverential as any other religious holiday.

In *circus alphabet*, W is for "what women know." The serigraph's accompanying quote is taken from an E. E. Cummings poem that declares, "damn everything that is ... unrisking, inward turning." Though this exhibition risks little, it offers a valuable view into the artist's outward-facing life — one entwined with problematic institutions. For Corita, this conflict could still produce the sacred: In 1964, she unveiled a large anti-war billboard, a display choice that merged her activist artwork with the form of commercial, capitalistic street signs dominating skylines. She called it "the most religious thing I have ever done."



Installation view of Corita Kent, "Mary's Day Procession, May 1966, Immaculate Heart College" (1966), 35 mm slide transferred to vinyl



Installation view of Corita Kent: *Sorcery of Images* within the Marciano Art Foundation library



Installation view of Corita Kent, "Sorcery of Images" (undated), selections from the Corita Slide Collection edited by Michelle Silva, 1,132 35mm slides transferred to digital TIFF files



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