

## Corita Kent's Politics of Printmaking

A retrospective at Taxispalais Kunsthalle, Innsbruck, shows that the artist was bold both in her combinations of typefaces and in her political statements

BY CARINA BUKUTS IN REVIEWS | 27 AUG 20



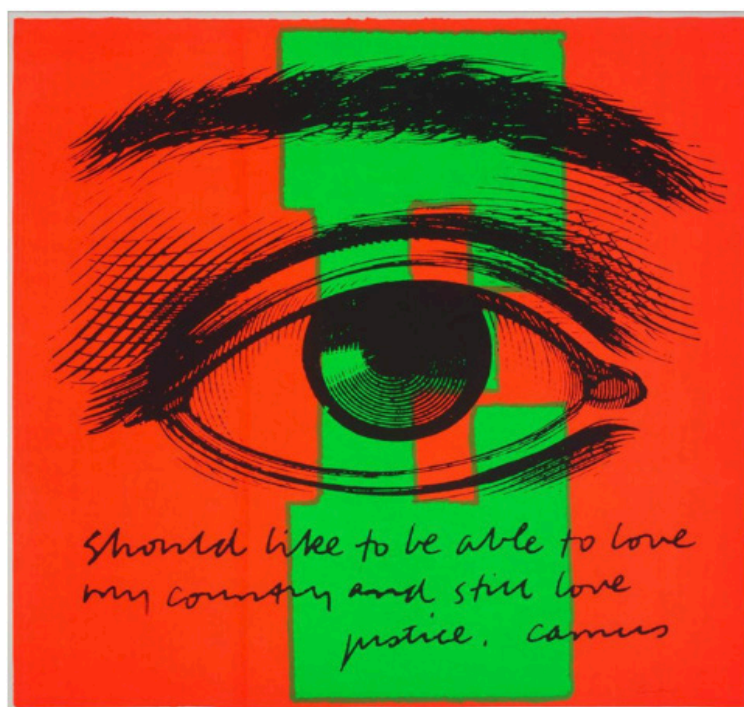
We are taught many rules when we're young, but we soon learn which ones we have to take seriously and which are made to be broken. Sister Corita Kent's classroom in the art department of Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles had ten rules, but I doubt her students were tempted to break even one of them. Unlike many regulations that prescribe what we should *not* do, these rules were a call to action, implemented by Kent to encourage her students to believe in themselves. The artist's current retrospective, 'Joyful Revolutionary' – which comprises more than 100 serigraphs, notes and archival documents – suggests that one rule in particular was adhered to by Kent herself: 'Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and fail. There's only make.'



Serigraphy Workshop at Immaculate Heart College Art Department, Los Angeles, 1950s and 1960s. Courtesy Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

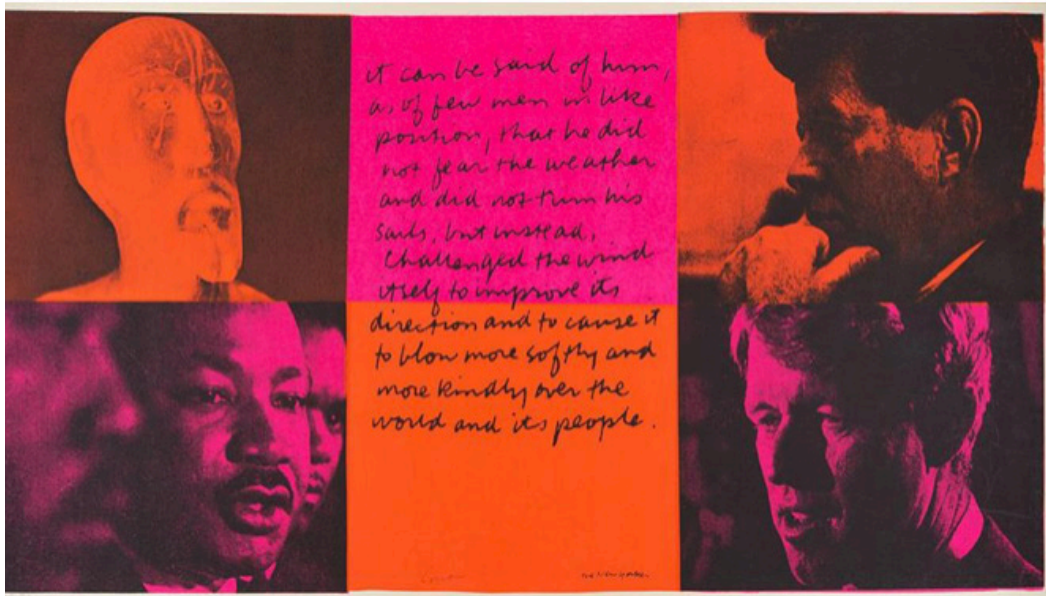
Having exhibited her colourful silkscreens widely from the early 1950s, Kent produced her most political works during the 1960s – a decade characterized in the US by civil-rights protests (culminating in the Civil Rights Act of 1968), demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy. While 'Joyful Revolutionary' provides a good overview of the artist's life and career – from her beginnings as a Roman Catholic nun aged 18 in 1936 to her work as an art teacher and her return to secular life in 1968 – the show's emphasis certainly lies on the political dimension of Kent's work.

In the first gallery, the series 'circus alphabet' (1968) comprises 26 prints of the letters of the (Modern English) alphabet. Set in different typefaces and including illustrations from the Ringling Museum of the American Circus – depicting tightrope walkers, acrobats and elephants – the series not only reveals Kent's interest in fonts, but also investigates the underlying logic of the alphabet and the construction of words and meaning. This is particularly evident in the work *E eye love*, in which an illustration of an eye and a green capital letter 'E' are overlaid on a bright red background and accompanied by an incomplete quote from Albert Camus's essay collection *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (1960): '[I] should like to be able to love my country and still love justice.' Here, the illustration of the eye substitutes for the homophonic absent personal pronoun, 'I'. A brilliant work, *E eye love* reflects on the relationship between text and image while simultaneously addressing the political discontent of the 1960s.



Corita Kent, *E eye love*, 1968, serigraph, 58.7 × 58.4 cm.  
Courtesy: Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles; photograph: Arthur Evans

The most powerful work in the exhibition is the series 'heroes and sheroes' (1969). Not only is Kent bold in her combinations of colours, typefaces and imagery but also in the political statements she makes. The blue, red and white used in *american sampler*, for instance, reference the colours of the US national flag while the typeface resembles that employed on 19th-century 'wanted' posters, which were used to appeal to the public to help track down criminal outlaws in the American frontier. In this work, Kent dismantles the various components of the word 'assassination' in different colour schemes to draw attention to the fact that it also includes the words 'sin' and 'nation'. Elsewhere, *love your brother* shows three neon green and purple photographs of Martin Luther King Jr. alongside a phrase in the artist's handwriting, in a muddy yellow, which reads: 'The king is dead. Love your brother.'



Corita Kent, *it can be said of them*, 1969, serigraph, 30.5 × 58.4 cm.  
Courtesy: Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles;  
Photograph: Arthur Evans

Having left the church a year before creating this series, it seems like Kent's best work was made possible by living without any restrictions. Her bold decisions – in her private life and in her art – reveal that she lived, above all, for the last of the ten rules of her classroom: 'We're breaking all of the rules. Even our own rules.' Kent's prints show how art can be used not only to address political issues but also as a means to break free from the expectations of others.

***Corita Kent, 'Joyful Revolutionary' runs at Taxispalais Kunsthalle Tirol, Innsbruck, until 11 October 2020.***