Corita Kent
Small Cosmos

In the summer of 1968, Sister Mary Corita took leave of upheaval, turmoil, and controversy. While on sabbatical as a teacher with the order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles, she headed to her friend and gallerist Celia Hubbard's house on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. She was free to think about her artwork, have picnics on the beach, shed a skin of duty, and live simply as herself — or to find out who that could be. She was fifty years old; she was becoming Corita Kent.

The decision to dispense with her religious vows was her own, but she couldn't have managed it by herself. Having never rented an apartment — or even, despite having grown up in Los Angeles, learned to drive — she moved into Hubbard's living room in the Back Bay of Boston, and after two years, another brownstone near Copley Square with a bay window overlooking a maple tree. She hadn't abandoned her past though; far from it — she made regular trips back to Los Angeles to see former colleagues and friends, or to work with her North Hollywood gallery, and they visited her back East as well. Corita's former student from Immaculate Heart College, Mickey Myers, reunited with her after moving to Boston. By 1971, Kent's artistic practice had shifted, and she had her first show of watercolors in Los Angeles, the same year as her most high-profile commission: covering a 150-square-foot storage tank with a rainbow swash for Boston Gas. But concurrent with her heightened public presence and graphic work benefiting organizations and causes she believed in, it was watercolor painting — direct, intimate, and exploratory — that became the primary medium she would use for the rest of her life.

It was in England during the Romantic period when watercolor painting *en plein air* became more widespread, popular, even common. The freer brushwork more readily captured fleeting atmospheric effects, and it attracted both professionals and amateur artists. Notably the medium influenced the rise of Modernism, catching the attention of the early Impressionists, as well as of the 20th century Avantgardists Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee. For a short article published in early 1925, titled "Watercolors," the Swiss writer Robert Walser penned a suitably light and direct impression of the medium's practitioners: "[the watercolorist] documents his own good judgment, his feeling for what is." He identified their work as an appeal to "common sense." Kent advocated for something similar in her work, to see things "as simple as they really are," which "means that we see the relationships between everything and know that it's all just part of us and friendly and flowing in an unknown but a rhythmic pattern." She didn't underestimate a larger context in the struggle to maintain an artistic process amongst the reality of what "is." A brilliant writer herself, she considered art "whatever you may do amid adversity for the common good." This is excerpted from a posthumously published article titled "The Artist as Social Activist amid Adversity: How the Job Is Done," composed in 1984, wherein she also asserted: "I think we have to have the awareness that everything is sacred, and when we lose that awareness we lose connection with the whole, with the cosmos. . . . A picture may be a symbol for the whole if we look at it as a small cosmos." While many of Kent's

watercolors were translated into prints, it is the paintings' unmediated qualities which best speak to the tone of her maturing practice, and life, as an observer of details that could serve as symbols for a common, even sacred, whole.

The watercolors in this show span the years 1980–86. Her Bay Area print dealer, Marlene Teel-Heim, thought that the medium had particular significance for the artist, given that "watercolors were so much more spontaneous because you had the result right in front of you, right then and there." Kent would often manage to make it home with a handful of paintings, made *en plein air*, after expeditions around New England with her longtime friend, Elinor Mikulka. In one of these paintings, dated 1982, there's a suggestion of a road winding between two hillsides and disappearing into a thicket of burgundy. Mikulka did the driving — perhaps this is an implicit acknowledgment of her, or a symbolic rendering of one ordinary road that stands in for all the others they went down together.

Another of the paintings poetically holds a similar tension between absence and presence. A pale, walnut-colored wash surrounds a white flower and embellishes its stem with a few flicks of the brush. The floral contours are articulated by the negative space of paper, unpainted. Flowers were a favored subject for Kent, and not as some decorous motif but rather as evidence of her equanimity and philosophical approach to art and life. On her creative process later in life, she observed that a flower "has its own language, but it's not beneath our language; it's not different in kind; it's only different in quality." Another watercolor from 1984 shows a pencil drawing of a rose with its fuchsia petals painted wet-on-wet, as if whispering to — rather than shouting about — the nature of life, as a composition of layers that hold together before giving way to its absolute promise to fall apart, or dissolve together. A watercolor is a painting, but it is often also, as Walser might say, a documentation: Of where one goes, has been, or is. The paint settles as a memory might — lightly, with a chance of fade.

Two paintings each from the last two years of her life render the waves of the ocean as fluid lines and daubs, coursing as they might, and will. She was seeing the world around her and taking it by the brush in her hand — greeting it, and holding it, in relation and conversation. By 1986, Kent had decided to fight the return of her cancer, as she told Myers, with an open hand, not a fist. The free, flowing brushstrokes of these paintings, made in her final years, tell a similar story.

Paige K. Bradley

Corita Kent (1918 - 1986) was an artist, educator, and advocate for social justice whose work reflects the ascendancy of Pop Art, the spiritual renewal of the Second Vatican Council and the political activism of the 1960s. A Catholic nun for more than three decades, Kent was deeply committed to cultural, social, and aesthetic innovation. Her idiosyncratic approach to art and outspoken engagement with the world made her a target of criticism by conservative clergy, but also secluded the reception of her work from more elite contemporary art circles. Born Frances Elizabeth Kent, she entered the religious order Immaculate Heart of Mary in Hollywood at age 18, taking the name Sister Mary Corita. By 1947, she began teaching art at the Immaculate Heart College and later became head of the art department in 1964. During this time, the art department became a well-known hub of creativity and liberal thinking in the United States.