

CORITA KENT  
**SPIRITUAL POP**



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PORTLAND ART MUSEUM, OREGON



somebody had to break the rules, 1967

## CORITA KENT **SPIRITUAL POP**

Corita Kent (1918–1986), a diminutive and charismatic nun of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, was full of intriguing contradictions. She was both a faithful Catholic and an unrepentant renegade, a devout follower of the ancient church and a keen student of modern urban American life. She had a great love for life, but also deep sadness over social injustice and poverty. For thirty-two years she lived as a nun in Los Angeles, becoming a highly influential educator, graphic designer, theorist, activist, and Pop artist. Although

Kent was internationally famous during her lifetime, scholars have only recently begun to reevaluate her work. New interest, too, has emerged among the younger generations, who respond to her brilliant typography, witty textual juxtapositions, and joyful message of hope and love.

Born Frances Elizabeth Kent in Iowa in 1918, Kent moved with her family to Hollywood in 1923. She joined the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary (IHM) at age eighteen, taking the name Sister Mary Corita. She later worked in the art



department at her alma mater, the Immaculate Heart College (IMC), where she was known as a loving but demanding professor who constantly challenged her students to look deeply at the world. In 1951, while pursuing a master's degree in art history at the University of Southern California, Kent discovered screenprinting (also known as serigraphy or silkscreen). She immediately took to the medium and sought to create a new type of religious art that eschewed the sentimental style that was popular at the time.<sup>1</sup> She drew on Byzantine and Gothic sources, producing dense screenprints for which she used as many as twenty screens to layer color. She was also deeply engaged in the art of her own time, and her screenprints evince the influence of Abstract Expressionism, as well. In fact, her affinity for the modern began to regularly appear in her work. In *at cana of galilee* (1952), for example, the subject comes from the Gospels, but the Eames chairs on which the wedding guests sit reflect the influence of the California designers Charles and Ray Eames, whom Kent had befriended. This sly combination of an ancient tale and

a contemporary element, as well as the scene portrayed—Christ turning water into wine—foretell the transformative, creative pairings of Kent's Pop work.

By 1955, Kent began to incorporate text into her prints. She had a great fondness for calligraphy, so it was a natural step for her to weave words into her designs, as in *christ and mary* (1954). Although the print may appear conservative, the Christian magazine that commissioned it rejected the image as too avant-garde.<sup>2</sup> Despite the rejection, Kent continued to make similar work, including luminous examples such as *visitation* (1955) and *wedding blessing* (1957).

In the early years of the sixties, Kent's art underwent a profound shift that reflected the rapidly changing world around her. In 1962, Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council (also known as Vatican II) to reform the Catholic Church and make it more relevant to modern life. Kent and her fellow nuns of the IHM enthusiastically embraced these ecumenical developments, turning their efforts to reaching the community around them and focusing



christ and mary, 1954



our father, 1964

on social justice issues and world hunger. At the same time, Kent encountered the work of Andy Warhol, whose thirty-two *Campbell's Soup Cans* paintings were exhibited at Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles in July 1962. This was the first exhibition of Pop art on the West Coast, and it had a notable impact on California artists, including Kent. Warhol's elevation of modest Campbell's soup into icons of modernity confirmed Kent's inclination to embrace the quotidian as well as the divine. Rather than copy Warhol, however, Kent, already an established artist in her own right, created her own "spiritual pop." She combined elements of Pop art, Vatican II dogma, and her quirky sensibility, resulting in work that was vernacular, experimental, playful, and witty.<sup>iii</sup>

Henceforth, Kent mined the raw material of daily life as her source material. She eagerly soaked up the chaotic visual landscape of Los Angeles, taking thousands of color slides to serve as a repository of ideas. For Kent, the advertisements, street signs, and billboards were not, as some saw them, blights on the environment, but urban psalms for the modern world. She often appropriated advertising slogans, juxtaposing them with poetry, scripture, and song lyrics and thereby transmuting commercial and mundane detritus into cheery missives of hope. For instance, Kent repurposed Pepsi-Cola's branding campaign of 1963—"Come Alive!"—as a spiritual injunction that echoes resurrection miracles of the Bible while speaking in the dialect of the day. Similarly, when Schlitz Brewing Company began promoting "real gusto in

a great light beer," Kent paired its advertising copy with a passage from the Psalms in *rejoices man's heart* (1964), thereby adding spiritual heft to the humble beer and modern relevance for the ancient poem. In this and many other examples, the friction of these unlikely juxtapositions sparks new meaning and inspires viewers to find spiritual sustenance in the secular world.

The act of transformation was central to Kent's art. In addition to making startling textual pairings, she also physically altered the text itself, bending, inverting, and truncating slogans, logos, and phrases to play with viewers' expectations and jolt them into engaging with the words. Kent's remarkable ability to see the world around her with fresh eyes and translate her perspective into her art was noted early on by critics, one of whom wrote, "Her mission seems to be to surprise us into awakening to delight."<sup>iv</sup>

Kent also used the element of surprise to awaken her audience to issues of social justice, in particular, world hunger. The theme of food, and bread specifically, runs throughout much of her work, from *power up* (1965)—which combines the slogan of a Richfield Oil gasoline with a sermon by activist priest Dan Berrigan—to *fresh bread* (1967), a Pop art hymn to the importance of sharing food together. As the 1960s progressed, Kent's art became more political as she addressed civil rights, the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Her national and international profile rose and she became the face of the contemporary nun; her visage graced the cover of *Newsweek* on the December 25, 1967, issue, which bore the headline, "The Nun: Going Modern."

Kent's rising fame fueled the animosity between the progressive IHM nuns and the conservative archdiocese of Los Angeles; in 1968, exhausted from her teaching schedule and the tensions with Cardinal James Francis McIntyre, Kent left the sisterhood and relocated to Boston. Her work underwent another decisive change as she simplified her compositions, which voiced universal messages of peace and personal growth. Secular texts replaced the Psalms and Gospels of her earlier work, but the same unabashed spirit of hope, renewal, and transformation abides. As her close friend Harvey Cox, a Harvard Divinity School theologian, noted in her obituary, "Like a priest, a shaman, a magician, she could pass her hands over the commonest of the everyday, the superficial, the oh-so-ordinary, and make it a vehicle of the luminous, the only, and the hope filled."<sup>v</sup>



Corita, ca. 1964. Courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

The Portland Art Museum is proud to possess one of the largest holdings of Kent's work in the United States, allowing the Museum to present the full breadth of the artist's career. *Corita Kent: Spiritual Pop* features more than forty screenprints that trace her development through three distinct periods—from her earliest experiments to her bold Pop icons and her final, quieter, inspirational work—and introduces a new generation to the playful and profound work of this unique artist.

—Mary Weaver Chapin, Ph.D.  
Curator of Graphic Arts

All photos © Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles, CA.

This exhibition is organized by the Portland Art Museum and curated by Mary Weaver Chapin, Ph.D., Curator of Prints and Drawings; it is supported in part by the Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Endowment for Graphic Arts and the Exhibition Series Sponsors.

<sup>1</sup> As Kent recalled, "In the early days, I was trying to make 'religious art' that would be not quite as repulsive as what was around." Bernard Galm, "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait, Corita Kent," interview with Corita Kent, April 6–20, 1976. Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, transcript.

<sup>2</sup> Kent, oral history.

<sup>3</sup> On Kent's place in Pop art, see Susan Dackerman, *Corita Kent and the Language of Pop*, Harvard Art Museums, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Doug McClellan, "Sister Mary Corita, Serigraphs," *Artforum* 1, no. 6 (November 1962), p. 48.

<sup>5</sup> Cox, "Surviving with Style: Urban Guerilla with a Paint Brush," *Commonweal* 113, no. 18 (October 1986), p. 550.





handle with care, 1967

## CHECKLIST

All work is by Corita Kent (American, 1918–1986). Unless otherwise noted, all work is from the collection of the Portland Art Museum. Dimensions refer to the sheet size; height precedes width. CAC refers to the Corita Art Center, followed by the catalogue number in the 2015 raisonné ([corita.org/pdf/catalog.pdf](http://corita.org/pdf/catalog.pdf)).

### *at cana of galilee*, 1952

Color screenprint on laid paper  
25 × 19 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches  
CAC 52-01  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
85.14.202

### *fiat*, 1953

Color screenprint on wove paper  
18 × 24 inches  
CAC 53-04  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
91.84.690

### *benedictio*, 1954

Color screenprint on wove paper  
23 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
CAC 54-02  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
83.57.440

### *christ and mary*, 1954

Color screenprint on laid paper  
12 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 19 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches  
CAC 54-03  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
80.122.235

### *guardian angel*, 1955

Color screenprint on wove paper  
17 × 22 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
CAC 55-07  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
82.80.197

### *resurrection*, 1955

Color screenprint on wove paper  
22 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 17 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
CAC 55-12  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
84.25.333

### *visitation*, 1955

Color screenprint on wove paper  
23 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 16 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
CAC 55-16  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
83.57.439

### *woman at the well*, 1955

Color screenprint on wove paper  
17 × 23 inches  
CAC 55-17  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
83.57.442

### *wedding blessing*, 1957

Color screenprint on wove paper  
19 × 24 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
CAC 57-12  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
84.25.344

### *christ drew in the sand*, 1962

Color screenprint on wove paper  
25 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 30 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
CAC 62-10  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
84.25.650

### *the word pitched his tent*, 1962

Color screenprint on wove paper  
25 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 30 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
CAC 62-32  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
84.25.652

### *walking over the sea*, 1962

Color screenprint on wove paper  
25 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 30 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches  
CAC 62-36  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
92.94.27

### *for eleanor*, 1964

Color screenprint on Pellon  
29 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> × 36 inches  
CAC 64-06  
Courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart  
Community, Los Angeles, CA

### *in*, 1964

Color screenprint on wove paper  
36 × 24 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
CAC 64-07  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
92.94.26

### *our father*, 1964

Color screenprint on Pellon  
29 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 36 inches  
CAC 64-13  
The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection  
92.94.264



apples are basic, 1966



power up, 1965

*rejoices man's heart*, 1964

Color screenprint on Pellon

28  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 38  $\frac{3}{4}$  inches

CAC 64-17

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

84.25.658

*the juiciest tomato of all*, 1964

Color screenprint on Pellon

29  $\frac{1}{2}$  × 36 inches

CAC 64-26

Courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart  
Community, Los Angeles, CA

*wide open*, 1964

Color screenprint on Pellon

28  $\frac{5}{8}$  × 35 inches

CAC 64-30

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

92.94.265

*for roses*, 1965

Color screenprint on wove paper

23 × 16  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

CAC 65-54

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.572

*power up*, 1965

Color screenprint on four sheets of Pellon

Each sheet (A-D): 28  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 35 inches

CAC 65-12-65-15

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.568; 86.569; 91.84.291; 91.84.292

*apples are basic*, 1966

Color screenprint on Pellon

29  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 36  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 66-18

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

92.94.263

*please tame me*, 1966

Color screenprint on Pellon

30 × 36  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 66-08

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.567

*Footnotes and Headlines: A Play-Pray Book*, 1967

Book with offset lithographs

Published by Herder and Herder, New York

10  $\frac{1}{4}$  × 7 ×  $\frac{3}{8}$  inches

Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum Library and  
Archives, Portland, Oregon

*fresh bread*, 1967

Color screenprint on wove paper

14  $\frac{3}{8}$  × 23  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 67-32

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.573

*handle with care*, 1967

Color screenprint on wove paper

23 × 35 inches

CAC 67-18

Museum Purchase: Funds provided by the Graphic  
Arts Council

2016.89.5

*somebody had to break the rules*, 1967

Color screenprint on Pellon

29  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 36  $\frac{1}{16}$  inches

CAC 67-12

Museum Purchase: Print Acquisition Fund

2016.89.1

*stars*, 1967

Color screenprint on Pellon

29  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 36  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 67-01

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

91.84.913



woman at the well, 1955

*yellow submarine*, 1967

Color screenprint on wove paper

23 × 35  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 67-20

Museum Purchase: Funds provided by the Graphic

Arts Council

2016.89.2

*A i love that one*, from the *Circus Alphabet* series,

1968

Color screenprint on wove paper

23  $\frac{1}{8}$  × 23  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 68-31

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

91.84.916

*a is for astrology*, from the *Signal Code Alphabet* series, 1968

Color screenprint on wove paper

17  $\frac{5}{8}$  × 23  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 68-01

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

92.94.267

*crazy enough*, 1968

Color screenprint on wove paper

23 × 26 inches

CAC 68-003

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

92.94.266

*king's dream*, 1969

Color screenprint on wove paper

23  $\frac{1}{8}$  × 12  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 69-70

Museum Purchase: Funds provided by the Graphic

Arts Council

2016.89.4

*news of the week*, 1969

Color screenprint on wove paper

23 × 12  $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

CAC 69-64

Museum Purchase: Funds provided by the Graphic

Arts Council

2016.89.3

*third eye*, 1969

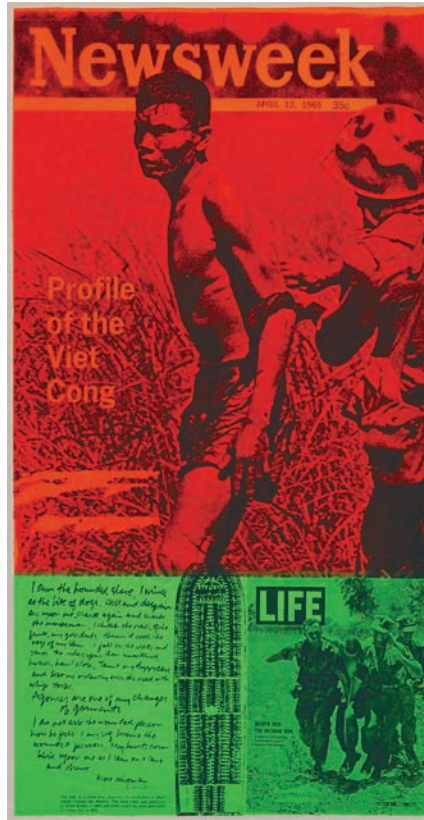
Color screenprint on wove paper

23  $\frac{1}{8}$  × 12  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

CAC 69-71

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.576



*news of the week*, 1969

*me must be turned upside down to become we*, 1972

Color screenprint on wove paper

20  $\frac{3}{4}$  × 20  $\frac{1}{4}$  inches

CAC 72-07

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.578

*to love is to expect*, 1972

Color screenprint on wove paper

23 × 23 inches

CAC 72-08

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

91.84.296

*welcome o life*, 1973

Color screenprint on wove paper

22  $\frac{1}{8}$  × 34 inches

CAC 73-05

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

91.84.293

*the legs of the earth are my legs—shell writing #5*,

1976

Color screenprint on wove paper

21  $\frac{7}{8}$  × 22 inches

CAC 76-22

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

92.94.270

*flowers grow*, 1977

Color screenprint on wove paper

16  $\frac{1}{8}$  × 11  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

CAC 77-02

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

92.94.269

*love the moment*, 1977

Color screenprint on wove paper

16  $\frac{1}{8}$  × 11  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

CAC 77-01

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

92.94.268

*this moment*, 1977

Color screenprint on wove paper

16  $\frac{1}{8}$  × 11  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches

CAC 77-06

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.574

*bright bird*, 1978

Color screenprint on wove paper

24 × 24 inches

CAC 78-23

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.571

*dancing star (2 of 4)*, 1978

Color screenprint on wove paper

12 × 11  $\frac{7}{8}$  inches

CAC 78-20

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

91.84.915

*yes #3*, 1979

Color screenprint on wove paper

20 × 20 inches

CAC 79-03

The Vivian and Gordon Gilkey Graphic Arts Collection

86.13.579

Cover: for *eleanor*, 1964  
Photograph by Josh White.  
Courtesy of the Corita Art  
Center, Immaculate Heart  
Community, Los Angeles

