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Corita Kent: 'The Sorcery of Images'
Celebrating Life and the Extraordinary in the Everyday
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by Jody Zellen



Sister Corita Kent (1918 – 1986) was an artist, activist and educator. She skillfully interwove her interests in art, literature, society, politics, and popular culture into her graphically bold serigraphs (screen-prints). A devoted nun and scholar, Corita attended and then taught at the Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles. During her tenure there, her work transitioned from being predominantly figurative and religious to incorporating colorful graphics combined with texts drawn from poetry and popular songs, as well as advertising slogans. At the time of her death from ovarian cancer in 1986, she had created a huge archive of prints, drawings and watercolors that have since been cherished, as well as collected by patrons and institutions world-wide.

While much of Corita's work and the details of her career can be viewed and researched at the newly opened Corita Art Center in downtown Los Angeles, on view at the Marciano Foundation is a multifaceted exhibition that includes *Irregularity: Corita and Immaculate Heart College's Rule Breaking Designs*, a selection of materials from the archive; a large mural of marchers carrying Corita banners; a grid of thirty images from *Damn Everything But the Circus* (1968), a series inspired by American circus posters that includes texts by poets such as E. E. Cummings. These works contextualize her practice and serve as an introduction to *The Sorcery of Images*.

The Sorcery of Images is the title given to a little known and rarely seen collection of over fifteen thousand 35 mm slides shot between 1955 and 1968 by Sister Corita, her students and her fellow nuns. These are on display as a three-channel slide projection. Upon entering the vast dark space at the back of the first floor, viewers are invited to sit on benches or lay back in beanbag chairs to take in an ever-changing rotation of triptychs culled from over 1100 images. Like an old-fashioned slide presentation (without the clicking sound of the carousel swapping pictures) this display cycles through a wide range of subjects. Corita and her entourage wandered through the streets of Los Angeles, as well as other cities with cameras, making pictures of architecture, chance encounters, dolls and puppets, food and snacks, as well as gatherings. Many of the photographs contain cropped typography and signage, abstract and vividly colored shapes, as well as the comings and goings of people Corita knew and taught. Collectively, they become a snapshot of the world at the time.

The images celebrate life and the extraordinary in the everyday. As presented, they become a poem filled with meaningful and metaphoric juxtapositions. Corita referred to her photographic work as sorcery or thievery — the art of relating sources into a new context that allowed everyone to make their own connections. While Corita never exhibited this body of work, she did present slide shows as part of her teaching, and the installation pays homage to her role as an educator.

Thoughtfully edited and sequenced by independent producer Michelle Silva, the photographs create a quasi-narrative that undulates and flows between details and far away shots, people and places, letter fragments and signage. In one triptych, the middle image depicts people sitting on a bench in a classroom as if listening to a lecture. It is juxtaposed with people attending a protest while holding colorful and artful placards, as well as a closeup of a railroad crossing sign taken at night.

A number of triptychs include reproductions of cropped print ads like one for Kellogg's Cornflakes, where one child pours out the contents of the box onto a table as another blows on a trumpet. This picture is juxtaposed with cropped text — blue letters on a white background — that reads "*It's Won...*" The third image in this sequence pictures three women (one in a habit) in front of a picture of fans in stadium seats. Some of the photographs show fruit, cookies, donuts and other snacks, some include Corita's own artworks while others capture street signage or graffiti.

The phrase, "*Do We Still Love Life?*" is part of a black and white page from the August 1967 edition of *McCall's*. It is juxtaposed with a slide focused on the words "*We Can Work it Out*" written in black on red. The third image in this sequence depicts an arm holding a yellow yardstick in order to draw a straight line. The question, "*Do We Still Love Life?*" is supported by hard work and precise measurement, as well as the message, "*we can work it out.*" The idea of loving life resonates.

While it is impossible to describe and retain each triptych or to note all the memorable individual slides, it is enough to take them in collectively and to think about Corita and those in her circle with roaming the streets and events with their cameras. Though not necessarily conceived as "art," these photographs as combined by Silva, become a thoughtful and poetic meditation on Corita's life and times.

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