

# Los Angeles Times

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- *We can create life without war.*

- *Good for you.*

- *Love is hard work.*

- *I love you very much.*

ADVERTISING

- *Love.*

The rooms in North Hollywood are filled with words that have been set on fire with joyful colors, posies and splashes of light. The place is an affirmation of life and a jolt to the social conscience. The time is the '80s, not the '60s. And this is not a time warp.

It is Corita's gallery. Who else but Corita?

She is in town for a few months, showing prints and watercolors at the gallery, working on a billboard project with Physicians for Social Responsibility, raising money for some old friends, the Immaculate Heart community--a group of women with whom she lived as a nun for some 30 years.

It is almost 20 years since the famous Sister Corita of Immaculate Heart College announced the time had come to do something different. She left the convent and Los Angeles and took up residence in Boston, cutting back on what had become an increasingly public life of teaching and lecturing. She did not disappear.

Corita Kent now, she prefers to be known as Corita. She has created hundreds of prints, some commissioned, some that she does for free. She painted a 150-foot rainbow on the Boston Gas Co.'s natural gas tank 15 years ago. She has produced murals, designed book jackets and illustrations and greeting cards, posters, T-shirts. And now billboards. Getting out the message.

For all the lightness of the delivery, at times, her messages are always serious. Whether she uses her own words or ones she has borrowed from other writers or lifted from the vernacular, they can be complicated. What they boil down to, however, is love. Not romance, but complicated, demanding love.

Appropriately enough, when her design for a postage stamp ("I wanted to do one all my life") was accepted, it contained her message at its simplest: LOVE.

She has been told that 700 million LOVE stamps have been sold to date, and said, "That's fun--to think of that many messages going out over the world."

A 20-foot replica of it was lowered last New Year's Eve, she said, from the old Post Office in Washington, while a crowd of 65,000 cheered it and the New Year.

That is how she chooses to remember its launching, and not, she said the other morning, with the official unveiling the Post Office held later on the set of "Love Boat." That was not what she had meant at all. She was not amused and she did not attend.

She wants to reach people and that seems to dictate the medium. She is pleased to be working with billboards now, because they serve, she said, "as a poor man's medium--until we can get more space on television. . . . I think we have to do everything. Whatever's worth trying."

To be taken by her on a quick tour of her works at the gallery is to be taken on a tour of her conscience. The words on her serigraphs reflect the causes she has helped:

"'It is still a fine choice: One world or none.' Roger Baldwin." For the American Civil Liberties Union.

"So far the crocuses have always come up." For Physicians for Social Responsibility.

"It's only fair that each child be cherished." For the Massachusetts Committee on Children and Youth.

"To be fully alive is to work for the common good." For Lois Pines, who ran for lieutenant governor of Massachusetts and lost.

"We live in one world and each act of ours affects the whole." For the New Alchemy Institute in Cape Cod.

The New Alchemy Institute?

"They're wonderful," she said. "They do good things. They develop new farming techniques for people to be self-sufficient."

Pastoral Landscapes

Not all of her art uses words. Her watercolors are pastoral landscapes and rocky seashores, most of them inspired by New England.

"I go out painting once a week with a friend," she said. "There are still marvelous things situated around Boston. If it's too cold, we sit in the car and paint. A lot of this was done in the car."

The woman behind all this art and action is 67 now, "aging" she chuckles. Hers is a small, slight figure and her loose, casual clothes, wispy hair and little-girl shoes only increase that impression. This is no sprightly little pixie, however. She has a kind face, and when she is smiling her warm smile, her capacity for delight, amusement and joy are evident. But when she is talking about her work, and the causes she works for, she is serious and unsmiling more often than not. She looks tired, and a little strained. Everything she does demands energy, lots of it. She has not run out, but she does look as though she feels the expense and keeps going anyhow.

"I'm not very good at relaxing," she said. "Not since the '50s. I was relaxed as a child, but then," she said, laughing, "all the troubles of the world came on me."

The message behind all those posies and happy colors, joyful phrases and bits of whimsy is not that all is sweetness and light--with the world or with Corita. Mary Poppins, Merry Sunshine and Pollyanna and the rest of that crew would probably give Corita a wide berth.

'Dark Moments'

“Many people say to me, ‘You’re too optimistic to be truly realistic.’ I have my own dark moments. I find these uplifting. They’re encouraging to me. Besides, I have a lot of darkness in my words. For example, I use that quote of Camus: ‘I would like to be able to love my country and love justice, too.’ ”

The billboard for Physicians for Social Responsibility is important to her. (Gannett Outdoor Advertising has donated space for one to be erected in Los Angeles soon, she said.) The group had been using the ominous mushroom-shaped cloud in its advertising, and she thought it would be good to try a more encouraging note, she said. In general, she acknowledged that her work has become lighter, maybe gentler, say from the political protest days of the civil rights movement and Vietnam war.

“Maybe it’s a sense of how delicate our environment is. As if putting peaceful stuff into the world would make it a little more peaceful place.”

At first Corita’s billboard seems a blur of colors, but its origins were in nature, the countryside outside Andover, Mass., she said. Under a blue sky, a mass of black seems to obliterate other colors on much of the canvas. They show through, however, and to the right there is green, which she has described as grass, springing up. Over all of it, the word, her own words, “We can create life without war.”

“Sometimes I’ve thought maybe it doesn’t make sense. I didn’t want it to be too slick. I wanted to make people think. The printer was a Catholic and he objected. ‘Only God can create life,’ he told me. ‘Well,’ I asked him, ‘who made the separation (between divine and human)? That’s the big problem. We’re not supposed to sit back and expect God to do it all for us.’ ”

#### Doesn’t Miss Church

Shortly after she had done the billboard, she said, an interviewer chided her somewhat, telling her her work of the ‘60s used to be so much more religious.

“I really think that this,” she said of the billboard, “is the most religious thing I’ve done up til now. It’s about the basic things. I’m seeing them in a healthier way now, less restricted by institutional binds.”

She does not regard herself as a Catholic, she said, and while she misses the Immaculate Heart Community (“that was very rich living”), she does not miss the Church.

“When the great leaders started religions, they told stories. God is infinite and unknowable--I’ve known that from my childhood. Symbols and myths present ideas that really can’t be expressed any other way. But then men came and built up organizations. They defined things that are not capable of being defined. Dogma had to do with that patriarchal system that is part of the culture, not religion. It’s narrowing. I wanted to be free of all that. I would like to be just totally open to life, to mystery and I try.”

Since she has been on her own her life is much slower, she said. She lives simply in Boston, she said. She is not a driver and finds it a manageable city to make her way around. She lives near the Public Gardens and likes to walk there. Her home functions as her studio. (“I just push things off the table. I usually work very small and then have them blown up. I love big things.”)

#### Much Time Alone

“There are a few friends I have a meal with. And once a week I paint with a friend, and once a week I go to a movie with a friend. It’s much quieter. I get my work done. I spend a lot of time alone, sometimes too much.”

The closest she comes to belonging to anything now, she said, is the work she has been doing with Physicians for Social Responsibility. She finds it demanding--meetings, receptions, administrative work, phone calls, errands.

She does, however, keep in touch with the Immaculate Heart community of lay women (which split off from the religious order). When she makes her yearly winter trip to Los Angeles, she has several showings of her work at private homes. She shares the proceeds with the community for the care of elderly or ill members.

And she serves on two boards, Life Actions, started by Los Angeles psychologist Sandra Seagal, and Mediators Productions of Malibu, in which she is also an investor. The former does research in human behavior based on sound systems revealed in the voice, and applies the techniques in therapy. The latter produces feature films and television programming based on critical social and ethical issues.

Not exactly a recluse. But she does prefer to be home. And home means Boston: “I really love that cold stuff back there.”

She does something related to her art every day, she said. At her own pace, on her own time. She has been at it a long time. And the results, for her as an artist are mixed.

She does not follow art criticism much, she said, but confessed herself somewhat perplexed and occasionally curious about her status. She has been called too popular, too populist, not expensive enough, and guessed that left her in the genre of folk artist.

‘Always Insecure’

“An artist is always insecure. You never do as well as you think you should be doing. Sometimes an affirmation is helpful.”

If affirmations are not always forthcoming from the art world, they are not in short supply among her fans.

“I’ve come to terms with that. It used to embarrass me to have someone come up and tell me this poster had such an impact. I make the distinction between personal and impersonal lives. I’ve always thought the gift (of art) was impersonal. It has very little to do with me. It’s not without feeling, but it’s something bigger than you are.”

Whatever her status, she does not sound worried about it. She is not rich, she said, but her work has given her a life she describes as materially “very comfortable.”

“I earn enough to support myself and in a very small way groups I believe in. I’m not a marcher. I admire people who march. I admire people who go to jail. I don’t have the guts to do that, so I do what I can. So I think, ‘Well, I’ve got my job.’ The world is worth saving and individual effort is what helps save it.”

Those individual efforts, of the marchers, demonstrators and other workers for peace are the efforts of people without the money, power and influence of the system they are opposing, she said, “but I think the spiritual energy that comes out of that effort is what keeps us from blowing up. That’s power. That’s real strength.”

“Love Is Still the Message : Corita Continues Her Heartfelt Work.” Los Angeles Times, Los Angeles Times, 15 Dec. 1985, [www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-12-15-vw-825-story.html](http://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1985-12-15-vw-825-story.html).