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PHOTOGRAPH BY FRED SWARTZ. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE CORITA KENT CENTER, IMMACULATE HEART COMMUNITY, LOS ANGELES

Swing out sister

The quiet nun who shook up the church – and the world of Pop Art

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Pop Art gave the world Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in the US, and Richard Hamilton and Peter Blake in the UK, but one of its lesser-known stars was a nun called Corita Kent. During the late 1960s and early 70s, she used advertising slogans and song lyrics, as well as biblical verses and quotes from literature, to create vibrant silkscreens with trenchant political messages about racism, poverty and injustice.

This year marks Kent's centenary – she was born Frances Kent in November 1918 into a Catholic family in Iowa – and it's being celebrated with an exhibition at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft in East Sussex. What's most striking is the juxtaposition of the monochrome nun – she wore the traditional habit complete with wimple and veil – and the brilliant colours which burst from her work.

"Her art is expressive, exuberant, loud and boisterous," says Ray Smith, director of the Corita Kent Center in Los Angeles. "But that contrasts with her own personality, because she wasn't loud. She had a quiet intensity and was quite a private person."

Words sing out of Kent's silkscreens, their simplicity often belying the complexity of their messages. In *that they may have life* (1964), she used images from a Wonder Bread wrapper to create a meditation on poverty and hunger, while in *for eleanor* (1964), she appropriated the US food giant General Mill's slogan "The big G stands for goodness", the source of which is a G for "God".

Threaded through her work is

her life as a nun: she entered her order, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, aged 18, trained as an art teacher and went on to head its college art department, leading to connections with leading artists, including the designer duo Charles and Ray Eames, film director Alfred Hitchcock and composer John Cage. But alongside acclaim from the art world came criticism from traditionalist Catholic churchmen – especially Cardinal James McIntyre, who took offence at works such as *the juiciest tomato of all* (1964), in which Kent likened the Virgin Mary to a luscious tomato.

After the reforms of Vatican II, Kent and her fellow nuns decided to abandon their habits and do more community work; McIntyre's opposition to this led Kent to leave the order in 1968. She moved to Boston, living alone at the age of 50 for the first time. Her work between then and her death in 1986 is quieter and reflects a search for meaning from other religious traditions. It includes nature-inspired watercolours, as well as pieces that reflect her experience of cancer, such as *live the moment light and out of the darkness* (both 1977). But it's her works from the 1960s that underline her relevance today. They trumpet her belief that social injustice can be changed and that at the heart of life it is love, and caring for others, that matter more than anything. ■

Corita Kent: *Get With The Action* is at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft, 5 May to 14 October (ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk)

Private screening: (clockwise from top) nuns in the art department in 1955; the juiciest tomato of all (1964); that they may have life (1964); for eleanor (1964); and Corita Kent

