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Mysticism, Feminism, and Rapture: Corita Kent's Early Work, 1951–1962

Corita Kent's early works, produced between 1951 and 1962, engage with a deep history of religious images and symbols rooted in medieval iconography, filtered through the stylistic vocabularies of German Expressionism and the American Abstract Expressionism that was unfolding around her. In serigraphies such as *seven swords – blue* (1957), *immaculate heart* (1960), *passion* (1950), and *visitation* (1955), Kent was preoccupied not solely with capturing religious scenes but with the realism and human experience of Christ and Mary, developing what might be understood as an immanent theological reading of biblical figures. Hers is an aesthetic Christianity in which remote and divine figures assume the sensations of everyday people, already building a visual language in which the mystical and the popular co-exist. Carving out a style at the intersection of German Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism, Kent used important religious scenes such as the Crucifixion and the Deposition to envision empathy and sensation. At times bordering on abstraction, her early use of color and form invites a mystical experience, situating the viewer within a devotional space that operates through pictorial rather than liturgical means.

Kent came from a community and a tradition of female creators. It was Sister Mary Magdalene, ten years her senior, who recognized her potential as an educator and artist and served as a guiding presence at Immaculate Heart College. Magdalene created mosaics and, together with Kent, built the Immaculate Heart College folk art collection. This lineage of women making and teaching within the Order is essential context for understanding how Kent's artistic formation was shaped not by the canonical trajectory of the male-dominated art world, but by a pedagogical and spiritual community in which visual production was an integral mode of devotion and collective practice. Kent studied art history at the University of Southern California with a focus on the medieval period, where she encountered the art of the Blauer Reiter, which she would later cite as an inspiration for her own work. This influence can be traced through her professor Alois Schardt, a German Expressionism expert who had briefly served as interim director of the Berlin Nationalgalerie in 1933 before emigrating to the United States in 1939.

In *immaculate heart*, Christ and Mary appear together with the minimal intensity of a medieval icon. The work isolates the moment just after Christ's descent from the Cross, and Kent uses the scene as an occasion to explore the connection between emotional grief and physical touch. Expressive swathes of pink and purple throb around Mary's form and echo the dolorous tone of female suffering. Kent reconfigures the aesthetics of devotional pictures meant for contemplation and the arousal of compassion, fusing the scene of the Pietà, made iconic by artists like Michelangelo, with the devotional symbol of the Madonna of the Seven Swords. The pierced heart was a symbol for Mary's co-suffering for her dead son; the medieval figure functioned as a means of drawing a parallel between Christ's piercing and Mary's pierced soul, a powerful expression of maternal participation in the Crucifixion. Purple, too, held significance in medieval chromatic symbolism as an index of blood's transformation into spiritual substance. In this single work, Kent collapses the distance between the art-historical tradition of the Andachtsbild and the affective register of mid-century American abstraction, producing an image that is at once historically literate and emotionally immediate.

In *passion*, nails, ladder, whip, and the Latin acronym INRI symbolize objects associated with Christ's Crucifixion, what in Latin are called the *arma Christi*. Notably, Kent does not picture Christ on the Cross but instead summons on the picture plane different

objects that stand in for the sorrowful event and conjure it, mystically, to memory. Here Kent combines religious symbols with a sense of perspective that was long a part of medieval devotional practice. To meditate on the physical objects that pierced and lashed Christ's body was a specific technique meant to train monks and nuns in the experience of devotion, a form of structured empathetic engagement through visualization that Kent transposes into the medium of the serigraphy. Streams of green and red break up the steadiness of the pictorial ground. The symbolism of color is significant: red turns to green as if to symbolize the transformation of Christ's blood into something green and life-giving, enacting within the chromatic field itself the passage from suffering to renewal.

Seven swords – blue depicts the Seven Sorrows of the Virgin Mary, often shown as seven swords piercing her heart, representing key moments of sorrow and suffering in Mary's life from the Prophecy of Simeon to Jesus's burial. The symbol of the pierced heart emphasizes Mary's maternal role and the suffering she endured. Swathes of blue and green vibrate with an inner life, a silent music, upon a depiction of the universal subject of Mary. There is vulnerability in the figure, depicted in a Byzantine style that could almost be read as naïve, counter to the dominant mode of religious art at the time, which remained attached to late Renaissance hyper-realism. In an interview, Kent explained that her earlier work "went back earlier to try to find something that was stronger, and that's what got me into the Byzantine era, where at least there was strength and beauty. I thought that was a better thing to be working from." Kent's deliberate turn to pre-Renaissance pictorial models constitutes a critical refusal of the conventions governing mid-century religious art in America, seeking in the formal economy of the icon a directness and spiritual force that later traditions had diffused.

In *visitation*, Kent depicts the scene from the New Testament in which the Virgin Mary, pregnant with the Christ child, meets her cousin Elizabeth. Mary is rendered with a solemnity expressive of the news she carries. Kent conveys how the divine mother experiences human emotions and tactile sensations like an embrace, utilizing a printmaking technique of multiple semi-opaque layers to create depth within the work, confusing ground and figure. The bodies, cloaked in semi-transparent white, take on a ghostly spiritual quality, while the face of Elizabeth dissolves into abstraction in the background. In "st. thomas a beckett," Kent depicts the final moment of St. Thomas's death at the hands of knights believed to be acting on the king's wishes. The story of Thomas Becket forebodes Kent's own passage from religious to secular life. The image holds traces of Sister Mary Magdalene's mosaic style: the figures almost resemble a mosaic, with the slate grey reading like grout upon which the figure lies. Across these early works, Kent consistently demonstrates a capacity to draw on the deepest reserves of Christian visual tradition while subjecting them to formal procedures, layering, abstraction, and chromatic saturation that open devotional imagery to new registers of bodily and emotional experience.