

Ken Lum on Corita Kent Transcript

02:50

Hi, my name is Ken Lum and the artist I've selected from the SFU Art Collection is Corita Kent, also known as sister Corita. There's a number of reasons why I chose Corita Kent. I'm more interested in this moment where, even as a kid, she was one of the few artists I had some introduction to. This is well before I knew anything about the art world. You know, I remember she was featured in certain magazines, and even making some magazine covers, I believe at the time.

03:35

So she had a degree of renown with the, let's just say popular audience, as opposed to the art audience, which I didn't know much about at the time, as I was only child. I was also interested in her, what it says about the art world, how her position relative to the art world, which is something that's always kind of interested me as an artist, I've written many essays on it. The other thing that interests me about Corita Kent is this period of the early to mid 1960s and what it calls up for me. You know, during that period in contemporary art or modern art, it was pop art almost exclusively performed by male artists, such as you know, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Mel Ramos, Robert Indiana, Tom Wesselmann, Claes Oldenburg. You name it. Very few female or women artists at the time. So, popular culture was seen as very gendered I would say.

04:50

They were very interested of course, in the surfaces of things the you know, the liners of soup cans to all kinds of advertising, graphics, and so on. They ironize you know, the kind of low mass cultural surface visual field by elevating the semiotics of mass culture to high art. Primarily through painting. So, Lichtenstein's silk screen is not strictly a silk screen in the sense of it being on print paper, but it has the scale and the presence of historical painting. It's done with oil paintings, it's done on very large scale, stretch canvas. So, there was this persistent element of looking at American popular culture, the consumer society, the world of commodities with a critical eye. Even if that eye is not overtly critical there's a kind of abstaining of opinion about the surfaces. There's an implied criticality precisely because that type of agnosticism was never really supposed to be an operation of high art. High art was

always about registering history, registering the sentiments, the opinions, the expressions, through gestures through technique, through composition of the artists.

06:35

It was never to be, something that was just passive. So that was the irony of an enforcer pop art. In fact, the ambivalence of pop art you might say, was that its passivity with respect to the question of being explicitly critical of the expanding and dominating and entrenching field of popular images, popular content, popularization through commodities, commodification processes. That was carried with it, its own kind of criticality. Even the idea that it was no longer possible to be critical was a critical idea. And so, Corita Kent doesn't really fit into that sense of what the art world would expect of art to perform in that day. Since, A, she was a woman and the bias was strongly towards men. The kind of silence, even the silence of pop art was the silence of the male artists. The you know, the person who doesn't speak the, you know, the sheriff, like Gary Cooper in *High Noon* doesn't say very much, and so on.

07:56

And B, she didn't really make high painting, so there was no device of ironization, to the extent that, like a Warhol painting performed. Her work was almost exclusively, and I hope I'm correct here, screen printing. Screen printing was always seen as marginal to painting in terms of ambition, fairly or unfairly. It was always seen as well, you know, it's highly reproducible, it's a kind of, you know, modest technique, the scale is more modest. It doesn't have the historical resonance of painting—the direct application of the hand and the brush onto the surface of the canvas. She was fairly or unfairly, somewhat marginalized, for that. I think the other reason why she was somewhat marginalized, historically, is that, you know, there was a belief, maybe it's still going on, but certainly a romantic belief that, you know, if you are called to be an artist you be an artist first, you don't be something else first. You may have a secondary job to maintain your practice and ambitions as an artist. You could be a barista at Starbucks, for example, but that's not your calling. Your calling is to be an artist, first and foremost, and to subsume all other activities, to the calling of being an artist. And Corita Kent was a religious figure, first and foremost. So many, many, many of her works, always had a kind of religious, let's just a religious, be happy kind of moral message to them.

09:54

Even if it wasn't explicitly or specifically, a citation of scripture or anything like that. The message was about faith, celebrating life, optimism, and so on. So that would be in keeping with her religious being. She was hard to fit in to that moment, precisely because, you know, she's a nun first and then artist second. There's a sense that, not that she's a dilettante, but that she is a novelty. She is a kind of anomalous figure within the field of pop art. I think also, ironically, that you can make the argument that it was precisely because she was not an artist first, but she was very deeply interested in art, that she was even more pop than the pop artists, right. Because you might say she really embody the principles of pop art, because, you know, to surfaces, to advertising services to labels on tin cans of soup, all of these to billboard surfaces, they don't really have a criticality. They were never meant for that they were meant to sell a message or to sell an object or something. And so, in a sense, what she did was something that eludes in a way the art system, the demands of the art system. Of course, it never eludes it completely, but it skirts it, and it stays within the confines by and large part of popular culture and she herself became a popular culture figure. At the same time they weren't accepting of her. Yet she was in many ways the embodiment of pop. She was on, as I mentioned earlier, on magazine covers, she had her own fame and so on. So in that sense that I think it's ironic that she was marginalized, for those reasons I outlined as someone external to the art system, but was still, you know, it flattered the art system because the art system likes someone such as Corita Kent as a nun to flatter them. Yet at the same they weren't accepting of her. And yet, she was in many ways the embodiment of pop. She was, as I mentioned earlier, on magazine covers, she had her own fame, and so on.

12:18

The other thing I was really interested in Corita Kent is just during the time period. I'm not speaking about her, maybe inclusive of the late 50s when she was making these kinds of Georges Rouault-type, I would say Europeanized, abstract expressionist paintings. They weren't paintings they were screenprints as well, but there were more very layered, very complex and so on. But then in the 1960s, from the late 50s all the way up to the mid 1960s, you had in popular culture, this kind of fascination with nuns. I'm speaking about the state of movies during that period, of which I've seen all of them at the time, I'm afraid to admit. Such as *The Singing Nun* by a starring Debbie Reynolds, which was based on the biography of a true singing nun from, I can't remember if she was from France or Belgium, or maybe even Switzerland. She sung the very famous song called *Dominique*. Also *Lilies of the Field*, which was a movie starring Sidney Poitier, the only really well known African American Actor at the

time. He helps these helpless nuns, European nuns I recall that, salvage something in their fields and he's very handy. So, it was a kind of a curious movie about racial justice and equity issues, but through the device of these nuns. There was also *The Flying Nun* with Sally Field, which was a popular TV show. I forget what you call those kinds of gull-winged hats that the nuns would wear, some nuns would wear. Anyways with Sally Field, it was the idea that she discovered that with a gust of wind, she could actually fly by controlling the gull-wings on her hat, I don't know it's a habit, or hat, what would you call it. There's also *The Trouble with Angels* as Hayley Mills. The trouble with angels with Hayley Mills, which was a Disney film. I saw that as a little boy, it was probably only about, I'm not sure, six years old. I can't remember the others but there was a number of you know, sister... and of course *The Sound of Music*. How could I forget the sound the music with Julie Andrews?

14:59

All of these films and they're all, they all were issued about the same time in the early to mid 1960s, is that it was a time of innocence. Nuns were sentimentalized they were kindly; they were saintly in fact. They were the vehicle for racial justice in the case of *Lilies of the Field*. So, there was this image of the nun. Of course, later in the 1960s, the end part you had liberation theology in Latin America, nuns, priests, and so on. This was of course before the start of the 1970s when you had this to say a kind of counter cinema to this very kind of celebratory sentimentalize definition depiction of saintly nuns. I'm thinking of movies like Ken Russell's *The Devils*, and then the nuns were even became, you know, parts of themes within horror movies like *The Omen* and so on. I should also add that in the early 1960s, you had the very famous immolation, self-immolation of a Buddhist monk in the streets of, I believe Saigon, in 1963, or 64.

16:30

So this person, you know, who burns himself in protest of the ongoing war, that was taking place, Civil War that was taking place. You have this image of a kind of religious figure that was kind of elevated and unchallenged in terms of their purity, their innocence, and so on. So for me, since I, I'm old enough to have gone through that period, as a boy, there was a kind of nostalgia for me of that. Almost like a moment before the moment I realized how nuns were as fallible as anyone else. Religious figures are as fallible as anyone else, perhaps even much more fallible. When taking into account, you know, First Nations residential schools and so on. So, I was kind of interested in this period of innocence before the fall from out of grace. Now, one of

the things I was also interested in is, I mentioned the male artists. The male artists were able to deal with all kinds of content, right, which thought favorite within the art system. You know, there was in the Warhol paintings, there was, you know, car crash, suicide, race riot, electric chair. A lot of imagery, imagery of people being shot killed, you know, as part of the disaster series, which was highly critical, right in the kind of Warholian sense of what was going on in the streets of America at that time.

18:23

He also had other male artists like Tom Wesselman, Rosenquist, Mel Ramos, who incorporated, female nudity, and so on, or Richard Hamilton, who incorporated female nudity into their work. Something which of course, would not have been possible for a religious figure such as Corita Kent. Corita Kent would make paintings of almost like Stuart Bristly, like painting, not paintings, but screenprints of poems from E.E. Cummings, you know, great experimental, modernist poet. The other thing that she did was she also did take a lot of advertising commissions. Most of the artists in the art world, I don't believe, did do that, but she did. Later on in the 1970s, I know she, because I've seen that she painted large strokes, rainbow strokes of colour onto a gas tanker. I believe, is still there, it was there five or six years ago when I was in Boston. It's very effective piece and she signs it Corita.

19:44

Certain things wasn't open to her in terms of the subject matter and those things such as precisely for the reasons perhaps, that she's a religious figure. So, she couldn't have incorporated female nudity, and so on. But it was also a sign of the you know, gendering the sexism that was inherent within the art system, dominated by men. They were allowed to of course, as men, play with softcore pornography, play with the, extent of the female muse and so on. It actually reminds me of, you know, this book by Eunice Lipton on Edgar Degas. Which was a kind of corrective to a long-held belief that, Degas was much more ambitious artists than someone like Mary Cassatt. Precisely because he painted street scenes, he painted behind the curtain, the dressing room of ballet dancers. Never taking into account, these opinion makers never take into account that they as a male could walk anywhere in Paris unescorted. A woman of middle class bearing such as Mary Cassatt would not have that privilege. She would not have privilege to all kinds of private spaces either that Degas had as well. So that was something else that I was also interested in.

21:19

The other thing I was also interested in terms of Corita Kent is how her work plays up text. I think her best work deals with text, color and text. Text, certainly by the 1970s was seen as a device of criticality, because in the aftermath of what became known as the crisis of representation. That is challenging the sanctity of images and of photograph even. Text was seen as something that could stand in for and compensate for the kind of dishonesty, you might say, the deceit, the deceptive potential of photography, and in particular of the image. The text had the kind of authority precisely because it was believed it didn't have a strong aesthetic dimension. So, you had works later on, of course, the next decade, by Martha Rosler, *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems*. The idea is that both systems are inadequate, but there was a popular belief at the time that from art language, to (inaudible), to Conrad Atkinson, to The Fox Group, that text was precisely because it didn't carry the baggage of representation, such as painting, or even sculpture, carry historically. That text was somehow anti-art in the sense that it doesn't bestow pleasure, it doesn't satiate the expectations of the art viewer as readily. I think that part of her work is what I find the most interesting, this kind of insistence of texts, even if the text generally are somewhat mild, somewhat celebratory, and so on.

23:45

It also was somewhat prescient of, New Age language, it was very...Unitarian Church, or United Church, not Unitarian, but United Church kind of idea of transcendence of the self, the acknowledgement of a greater being. She was unusual in the sense that, I don't believe there's many works, if any, where she actually explicitly spells out God's incarnations according to the Catholic Church. So, it stays in this kind of poetic realm and of course, that makes it more acceptable as art as well. And so those were those are mainly the thoughts I have in terms of Corita Kent. Was she a great, great artist? I don't know, I'm never interested in that question. I think there's a lot of really interesting figures that are suddenly outlier to the system of art which offers all kinds of lessons for the art world, but the art world is too inward turning to know this or even take those lessons to heart. And I think they should and I think she's a kind of a great example for anyone to learn about the operations of the art world as well. So those are my thoughts on Corita Kent, thanks a lot.