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SMC's Museum of Art opens two new exhibits: "heroes & sheroes" with "Hold it Lightly"

By Vera Kochan



Lisa Congdon's "Hold it Lightly" 2023 exhibit with "Boxes" in the center of the room Photo Vera Kochan

Saint Mary's College has recently opened two new exhibits in their Museum of Art that many could agree closely resemble each other in color and style. The works in the "heroes & sheroes" exhibit, featuring artist Corita Kent, were created between 1968 - 1969, while the "Hold it Lightly" exhibit was created specifically for this exhibit by Lisa Congdon as a type of homage to Kent's work.

□ Kent (1918-1986), was born Frances Elizabeth Kent, but changed her first name to Corita (which means "little heart") when she joined the Catholic order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles upon graduating high school.

□ According to SMC, "Working primarily with serigraphy, or silkscreen printing, Corita wanted her work to 'infiltrate the masses' and reach the largest audience possible. Often incorporating imagery from consumer packaging, popular media, and other everyday objects, her vibrant text-based compositions would become closely aligned with the Pop Art movement."

This exhibit is seen publicly for the first time on the West Coast.

□ SMC Academic & Engagement Curator Britt Royer explained that Kent sold her early prints in order to raise funds for her college, and it wasn't until the '60s that her work began to reflect the political climate of the times with a focus on war, poverty, racism, and other aspects of the tumultuous decade. As her popularity grew, so did the criticism from the archdiocese of Los Angeles. Tired of this conflict and her duties as a national lecturer, Kent sought dispensation from her vows, and at the age of 50, moved to Boston, Massachusetts.

□ Royer added that during her career, Kent strived to make her works contain messages of hope and love, often using bright colors, newsprint images, song lyrics, poems, and occasionally her own thoughts - always pulling from pop culture. During the 1960s, Kent worked with printmaker Harry Hambly, sending him notes and references along with her layouts to create her posters.

□ "Hold it Lightly," an installation by SMC alum Lisa Congdon, closely resembles Kent's "heroes & sheroes" in appearance and message by also invoking hope and love. Graduating in 1990 with a bachelor's degree in history, Congdon's approach to this exhibit, according to Royer, "is very holistic. Her sayings are general phrases and some she pulls from Kent. She draws digitally on an iPad and then creates her own symbolism and language." And, like Kent, she also uses the services of an off-site printmaker.

□ Congdon labeled her exhibit "Hold it Lightly" in order to explore "the paradox of caring deeply and letting go," something that is possible "when we actively strive toward something meaningful, while simultaneously knowing and accepting that the desired outcome may not happen."

□ Congdon stated in an SMC press release, "I've always understood art, including my own, to reflect the human struggle. For a long time, I existed in a place of disconnect since I felt to be taken seriously, my work needed to be dark and edgy. As humans, we want to make everything sit at opposite ends of the binary. To be a revolutionary, someone who cares about how they show up in the broken world, and to be joyful, means sitting in this gray area where both can exist. Corita is not only a role model in this area but also through her approach to making art, providing a space for me to feel that joyful work could be playful and serious."

□ Both "heroes & sheroes" and "Hold it Lightly" are on view at SMC's Museum of Art through Dec. 10.



Corita Kent's (from left) "third eye" 1969, "heart of the arrow" 1969, and "i in daisy" 1969 Photo Vera Kochan

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