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And the world will be as one - in La Verne

David Allen, Columnist
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"Imagine Peace," an art exhibit about John Lennon and Yoko Ono's peace activism, includes maps on which visitors can stamp the phrase "Imagine Peace" and a large, all-white chess set. It's on view at the University of La Verne through Dec. 15. (Photo by David Allen)

Imagine an exhibition devoted to John Lennon and Yoko Ono's peace activities on public view in La Verne.

It may not be easy even if you do try. Nevertheless, it's there.

"Imagine Peace" is the name of the traveling show. It has previously appeared five times, in Ohio, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Texas.

Unaccountably, it's now at the Harris Art Gallery at the University of La Verne.

The show documents John and Yoko's Vietnam War-era activism and Yoko's pro-peace efforts of recent years. As a Lennon fan of long standing, and even something of an Ono admirer, I was curious to see it.

As you may know, the couple did not protest in the streets or engage in civil disobedience. In their hands, protest became conceptual art, propaganda and a testament to the power, and perhaps futility, of positive thinking.

Admission is free to the show, which opened Nov. 7 and ends Dec. 15. The Harris Gallery is located in the university's Wilson Library on Second Street a half-block west of D Street.

In the adjacent Campus Center, a "Wish Tree" designed to Yoko's specifications occupies the lobby. Through Dec. 15, when the installation comes down, anyone is invited to write a wish on a tag and hang it from the tree.

As a portion of the gallery devoted to the couple's Bed-Ins illustrates, even their honeymoon in 1968 - described in the Beatles song "The Ballad of John and Yoko" - became performance art.

The Lennons held press conferences in their hotel room as they lounged in bed in their pajamas. They used their allure as celebrities to draw the media and push the message of peace.

Admittedly, the newlyweds looked a bit foolish in the process, but, in retrospect, less so than Kim Kardashian.

In 1969 and 1970, they put billboards in world capitals - London, Hong Kong, Berlin, Rome, Toronto, Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles - announcing "War is Over! If you want it. Happy Christmas from John and Yoko."

La Verne is displaying photos of those. "La Guerre est Finie!" reads the one from Toronto.

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La Verne is displaying photos of these. La Verne got it first. Reads the one from Verona.

The couple's activities culminated, perhaps, with the "Happy Xmas (War is Over)" single from 1971, or maybe with the song "Imagine."

Although John and Yoko turned their energy to fighting for Green Cards and for custody of Yoko's daughter by her first husband, they weren't done yet.

On April Fool's Day, 1973, they interrupted their own press conference to declare the birth of Nutopia, "a conceptual country."

"Citizenship of the country can be obtained by declaration of your awareness of Nutopia," their joint statement read. "Nutopia has no land, no boundaries, no passports, only people."

They waved white facial tissues, which they said were the flags of their imaginary country.

Heh heh.

The gallery's centerpiece is a giant chessboard created by Yoko, every bit of it white, the pieces as large as bowling pins.

Pale blue booties are provided for anyone who wants to step onto the chessboard and move a rook or something.

"It's interactive, like a lot of her work," gallery director Dion Johnson said. "Visitors are invited to create their own rules."

To be candid, I had observed the chessboard without grasping the point: Rather than black pieces and white pieces, and black squares and white squares, everything is white. Who is there to battle?

"Without sides, without warring opposition, it's like a chessboard of peace," Johnson explained. "Taking away the conflict, you're left with a completely different scenario."

You might find all this embarrassingly precious, a charge leveled against John and Yoko 40 years ago, when many dismissed the billboards and Bed-Ins as publicity stunts or pointless whimsy by out-of-touch millionaires.

Certainly the exhibit has an element of packaging. A couple of the handwritten Bed-In posters on display say, in fine print, that they are "authorized reproductions."

For my visit I brought along my friend John Evans, a child of the 1960s who has visited the Dakota, the couple's latter-day home in Manhattan.

Of the exhibit, Evans said dryly: "It's an authorized reproduction of 1969."

I know what he means, but I'm inclined to be charitable.

Here in 2011, in fact, the Lennons' long-ago activities strike me as sort of brilliant. Lightweight and conceptual as their ideas were, they were catchy, and they float above the era's street-level bombast like helium-filled balloons.

It's hard to be against peace. You could even say, with a wink, that John and Yoko were uniters, not dividers.

"It's simple and it gets the point across," master's student Crystal Gonzalez told me appreciatively as she viewed the exhibition with her friend, Claudia Gonzalez, on Monday morning.

Crystal was especially taken by a wall of world maps, on which the phrase "Imagine Peace" had been applied hundreds of times by gallery visitors using a stamp and ink pad.

"It seems like more than ever there's wars going on," Crystal said, ticking off Iraq, Afghanistan, Egypt, Libya and Syria. "Even Occupy Wall Street, this applies to that as well."

Given that John and Yoko were promoting a sort of virtual peace, I suddenly wondered how they might deploy social media if they were doing this today.

Anyway, given its global focus, why is "Imagine Peace" in La Verne?

Created in Ohio in 2007 by a professor who's studied Ono's work, the exhibit hasn't traveled much. Johnson, the gallery director, knows that professor, Kevin Concannon, and arranged for the show's appearance in La Verne.

Gallery hours are 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday to Thursday. It's open today and will reopen Monday after the holiday weekend. Visitors unable to attend during those hours can call the gallery at 909-593-3511 ext. 4273 and arrange an appointment.

In his 10 years in La Verne, Johnson said no art exhibit has garnered more interest.

"Different generations - students, faculty, the public - everyone has a connection to it," he said.

Anyone who visits can pick up a button. White with black text, it reads "Imagine Peace."

Imagine peace.

Now who says newspapers print only bad news?

David Allen writes Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, which can't be good news. Reach him at david.allen@inlandnewspapers.com or 909-483-9339, read his blog at dailybulletin.com/davidallenblog, check out facebook.com/davidallencolumnist and follow [@davidallen909](https://twitter.com/davidallen909) on Twitter.

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