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Exploring a Career Before, and Beyond, 'John and Yoko'



Kathy Kmonicek for The New York Times

CONCEPTUAL An oversize chess set.

By KARIN LIPSON
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IN 1968, Kevin Concannon was a 12-year-old Beatles fan when an avant-garde artist named Yoko Ono started appearing in press stories linking her with John Lennon.

He retained his boyhood interest in Ms. Ono, eventually conceiving of an exhibition that explores her work as an artist and a peace activist, both alone and in collaboration with Mr. Lennon.

The show, 'Yoko Ono Imagine Peace: Featuring John and Yoko's Year of Peace,' was curated with John Noga, then a graduate student. It is now at the University Art Gallery in Stony Brook University's Staller Center for the Arts.

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A framed record of "Happy Xmas (War Is Over)."

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Ge Song, a graduate student from China, viewing the "Yoko Ono Imagine Peace" exhibition.

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Kathy Kmonicek for The New York Times

Fred Pearsall, a Stony Brook University student, hanging a message on a "wish tree."

The exhibition was first presented in 2007 at the [University of Akron](#) and has since been shown at other universities. Featuring videos; photographs; posters and advertisements; lithographs; an oversize, floor-standing, all-white chess set; and even a live Japanese maple "wish tree," it will be displayed through Oct. 15.

On closing night, [Sean Lennon](#), the musician son of John and Yoko, and Charlotte Kemp Muhl — together they make up [the Ghost of a Saber Tooth Tiger](#) — will perform in the Staller Center Recital Hall; it will be the first concert of the new performing arts season at the center. Their appearance was arranged by Alan Inkles, the director of the center, to dovetail with the art show.

For some who avidly followed the Beatles, as a band and individually, Ms. Ono may still be best known as the wife of John Lennon, who was shot to death outside their New York apartment building in 1980 by Mark David Chapman, a delusional fan.

But the exhibition, starting with a few works from the mid-1960s and continuing to the present, suggests how Ms. Ono's roots as a conceptual artist provided an impetus for the phenomenon once known as "John and Yoko."

Before meeting Mr. Lennon, Dr. Concannon said, Ms. Ono "had been making work for the advertising medium that was about imagining things in your mind, as opposed to concrete objects." In the show are several magazines, from 1965 and 1966, in which Ms. Ono took out advertisements that served as conceptual-art instructions. One reads, in part: "Swim in your sleep/go on swimming until you find an island"; the text is superimposed on a pale photo of the artist, seemingly asleep.

Around that time, she also conceived of a "light house," a hypothetical structure to consist of light emanating from prisms. In 1967, Mr. Lennon, intrigued by the idea, invited Ms. Ono, whom he had met a few months before, to his house for lunch. He asked if she could build a "light house" in his garden.

"Oh, that was conceptual," Ms. Ono replied. She thought it would be built one day, but she told him, "I don't know how to do it."

Ms. Ono recounts that story in an 18-minute video compilation (provided by her and her staff) that includes a touching segment of Mr. Lennon recording the 1971 song "Imagine," with her by his side.

If Ms. Ono, solo, used ads as an art vehicle, "John and Yoko" employed "this massive advertising campaign on a worldwide scale" to promote their views, Dr. Concannon said. Examples in the show include a video from their 1969 honeymoon "Bed-Ins," during which they stayed in bed while the news media and others came to their hotel suites in Amsterdam and Montreal to talk about peace. Also on display from 1969 are examples of their posters and newspaper ads in various languages, declaring that "War Is Over! (If You Want It)."



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The show's participatory elements could themselves make for a gallery "happening": Visitors can use the all-white chess set, with pieces up to two and a half feet tall and titled "Play It by Trust" (the opponents being harder to identify when all the pieces are the same color); write messages on tags and tie them to the "wish tree" (more than one million such wishes have been collected from Ono projects worldwide); or stamp the message "Imagine Peace" on maps affixed to a wall.

They can also take home a small flashlight for which Ms. Ono has devised her own version of Morse code, called "Onochord": Flash the light in a sequence of one, two and three pulses, she instructs in the video, to signal "I-love-you."

In an e-mail, Ms. Ono explained her choice of that numerical sequence. "I wanted to make it very simple," she said. "You cannot make it simpler than that. It has a rhythm, too, like music."

In the show's 18-minute video compilation, a large crowd in Reykjavik, Iceland, uses Onochord flashlights during the 2007 unveiling of Ms. Ono's "Imagine Peace Tower." A realization of her conceptual "light house," which once beguiled John Lennon, the installation periodically projects a column of light into the night sky. Inscribed on its base, in 24 languages, is the message "Imagine Peace."

The lights will next be beamed nightly from Oct. 9 to Dec. 8 — the dates of John Lennon's birth and death.

*"Yoko Ono Imagine Peace" is at the University Art Gallery, Staller Center, Stony Brook University, through Oct. 15. Free. (631) 632-7240; stallercenter.com/gallery.*

*The Ghost of a Saber Tooth Tiger will perform at the Staller Center Recital Hall on Oct. 15 at 8 p.m. Tickets, \$34.*

*stallercenter.com;(631) 632-2787.*

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