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Yoko Ono advocates peace through art in Harris exhibit

Posted by Julian Burrell on Nov 11, 2011 | Leave a Comment



Professor of Art Keith Lord and sophomore Rosana Chavez stamp "Imagine Peace" on large maps in the Harris Gallery on Monday. Yoko Ono's Imagine Peace gallery invites the visitor to contribute to the installation by participating in a giant chess game, or by adding a stamped phrase to the maps, evoking a personal experience for the observer. / photo by Scott Mirimanian

Julian Burrell
Associate Editor

Yoko Ono is one of the most polarizing figures in the history of the Beatles. Fans of the fab four always have an opinion on the wife of John Lennon, not all of them positive. However, Ono and Lennon's philanthropy and their fight for peace cannot be disputed.

Their peaceful philosophies have been encapsulated in the traveling exhibition "Yoko Ono: Imagine Peace," which opened Monday at the Harris Art Gallery. The exhibit displays many of Ono's trademark artworks, showcasing the heavy avant-garde conceptual style that she so often works with throughout her pieces.

"Yoko is one of the most influential conceptual artists in the world," said Dion Johnson, director of University art galleries. "Her work with John and the ideals it brings up like peace... is something very fundamental to the University."

The exhibit spans much of "John and Yoko's Year of Peace," featuring the "War is Over" posters in multiple languages that were seen throughout the world in the late 1960s and early 1970s along with photographs of where they were hung.

There are also photos of Lennon and Ono's famous "Bed-in" protests and a projection of Ono's many speeches on spreading peace.

Fans of the Beatles will also be quick to notice the photographic documentary of the Beatles' first American broadcast of their hit song "All You Need is Love."

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The focus of the exhibition, however, is clearly on Ono's art work and how it relates to her fight for peace.

"I've followed her for a long time," said junior psychology major Alyssa Contreras. "Not necessarily for her art, but for her activism and everything she fought for."

The exhibit also gives those who aren't familiar with everything Ono was a part of to see that there is more to her beyond the notion that she was responsible for the Beatles breaking up.

"She may have been responsible for the break up, I don't know," Contreras said. "If anything, though, she was a positive (influence) in John (Lennon's) life. She brought out a lot of strong morals."

Ono's work is unique in that it actually encourages people to touch, affect, and otherwise tamper with it as it hangs.

On one wall are a series maps entitled "Imagine Peace Maps." To the side of the piece are a series of stamps that read "Imagine Peace."

Attendees can use to mark any location on the map, adding a deeply personal layer to what is otherwise a fairly straight forward piece.

"We're conditioned not to touch things in the gallery or the museum," said attendee James Gilbert. "Even, here people are hesitant to take part in any of the art."

The element of outside participation is important to appreciate the full effect of the art.

"It really adds such a sense of cooperation from the viewer," Gilbert added. "People want to manipulate and work with the (pieces) even though there's no indication that they should."

Attendees are also encouraged to take souvenirs of buttons with "Imagine Peace" on them and flashlights which Ono used to spread the phrase "I Love You" in morse code during her speeches.

Most immediately noticeable in the entire space is a piece titled "Play it by Trust." This piece is a large chess board, with both sides and the board being the same shade of alabaster white.

At one point, two students tried to organize the pieces into two opposing sides and play a giant-sized game of chess. After a few moves they realized how difficult it was to keep track of which side was which and abandoned their game

"It's a very minimal piece... and it's got a very simple message," Johnson said. "If there are no sides there is no opposition and peace can be maintained."

The art on display all shares this theme: Very simple meanings and concepts that are elevated thanks to the level of involvement from the observers.

That level of participation is perhaps the most significant of the exhibit and achieving the peace Lennon and Ono's movement was all about.

As Lennon said, "A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is a reality."

"Yoko Ono: Imagine Peace" will remain on display in the Harris Art Gallery until Dec. 15.

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Exhibition curators John Noga and Kevin Concannon speak with Margo Crutchfield and Sam Lee about Yoko Ono's "Imagine Peace" at the Harris Gallery reception Monday. The exhibition showcases archives and photo documentation of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's Year of Peace tour, as well as interactive art installations that encourage participation from the viewer. / photo by Scott Mirimanian

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