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UTSA exhibit examines Yoko Ono, John Lennon's 'Year of Peace'

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Dan R. Goddard
Express-News Staff Writer

Yoko Ono, 74, is a dreamer, and she doesn't want to be the only one.

She's spreading her message of "Imagine Peace" around the world. On Oct. 9, which would have been her husband John Lennon's 67th birthday, she unveiled the "Imagine Peace Tower" in Iceland, a column of light beamed up from a wishing well base engraved with the words "imagine peace" in 24 languages.

"I consider myself very fortunate to see the dream my husband and I dreamt together become reality," she told the BBC at the lighting ceremony while Lennon's "Imagine" played.

In San Antonio, "Imagine Peace," in both English and Spanish, can be seen on nine billboards spread around the city. This idealistic plea is in conjunction with the exhibit "Yoko Ono Imagine Peace: Featuring John & Yoko's Year of Peace" on view through Oct. 28 at the UTSA Art Gallery at the 1604 campus.

"I think it is very important for everyone to wish for world peace," Ono said in a phone interview from New York. "We have destroyed so much that we have to go through a healing process before we can be well. If we can't imagine peace, how will we ever have it?"

The UTSA exhibit examines the solo work of Lennon and Ono before they wed as well as following them through their "Year of Peace" from their wedding in March 1969 to March 1970. This includes their honeymoon "Bed-In for Peace" at the Amsterdam Hilton and the recording of Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance," which became an anthem of the anti-war movement.

Also, they created the "War Is Over (If You Want It)" campaign, which featured multilingual posters and billboards displayed in cities such as London, New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Berlin and Rome.

"Both of them were involved in peace before they met, and they collaborated on peace projects after they got married," said Kevin Concannon, who curated the exhibit, which opened at the University of Akron in Ohio. "They used their celebrity to promote peace, and they certainly mobilized the youth culture. They actually used their fame to do something good."

Although now overshadowed by her relationship with the famous Beatle, Ono was a pioneering conceptual artist in the 1960s and a member of the influential group Fluxus.

In 1964, Ono presented "Cut Piece" in London, and many saw it as a plea for nonviolence during the era of the Vietnam War. Ken Little of UTSA is set to re-create "Cut Piece" in a performance at 7 p.m. Friday in the Buena Vista Building at the UTSA Downtown Campus.

"Cut Piece" requires Little, wearing a conservative suit and tie, to sit on the stage while audience members come up one-by-one and use scissors to cut away

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pieces of his suit.

Ono is a minimalist, and often uses simple advertising-like slogans in her work, which are known as her "instruction pieces." These became an important influence on Lennon's songwriting, Concannon said, which shifted from conventional love songs, such as "I Want to Hold Your Hand," to more socially conscious tunes, such as "All You Need Is Love."

The UTSA exhibit features originals, as well as reproductions, of some of the posters that were used during the "War Is Over" campaign. One hand-lettered sign appeared behind the famous couple in their television press conference during their "Bed-In," which is shown on video.

There's a re-creation of her all-white chess set, made with giant garden ornament pieces. Titled "Play It by Trust," the monochromatic pieces make it almost impossible for the players to determine which piece is whose, unless they agree to trust each other. A smaller version was featured in an exhibit of hers in 1967 at the Indica Gallery in London, when Lennon and Ono first met.

Also featured during that show was her "Conceptual Sales List," which included her plans for a "Light House." Yoko said Lennon asked her if she could build one in his garden.

"I told him it was only conceptual; I didn't know how to build one," Ono said. "But now 40 years later, we figured out how to do it. I think John would have been so pleased."

An artist's conception of the tower, with Ono standing beside it, is displayed in the exhibit's "Imagine Peace" room, which has several maps of the world's trouble spots, such as Iraq, the Middle East and Afghanistan. Designed as an alternative to a general's war room, where armies are charted, Ono invites viewers to use rubber stamps to print "Imagine Peace" on the maps where they want peace to break out.

Also on view at UTSA are some of Lennon's lithographs from his "Bag One" portfolio, which Ono exhibited in San Antonio at the La Mansion del Rio hotel in 1995. With Lennon's simple, whimsical line drawings, the prints record the couple's wedding ceremony in Gibraltar and the "Bed-In."

Lennon studied at the prestigious Liverpool Art Institute for three years before becoming a full-time Beatle, and, if the music biz hadn't worked out, might have made it as a visual artist.

Lennon's interest in transcendental meditation may have had some influence on the couple's efforts to persuade large numbers of people to think positive thoughts.

"Negative thoughts are a luxury we can't afford," Ono notes on her Web site.

Her feelings about the power of positive thinking may be best summed up by lyrics from her 1972 single "Now Or Never": "A dream you dream alone is only a dream, but a dream we dream together is reality."

"Yoko Ono Imagine Peace: Featuring John & Yoko's Year of Peace" runs through Oct. 28 at the UTSA Art Gallery at the 1604 campus, (210) 458-4391. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays through Fridays and 1 to 4 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays.

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