

## In her art and focus on peace, I'm just being myself,' Ono says

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Before we had broadly understood labels such as Minimalism, Conceptualism, performance art, video art and installation art, we had Yoko Ono.

Known by many only as a perplexing pop icon and John Lennon's widow, Ono has, for more than half a century, been a multidisciplinary artist of great intelligence and profound influence.

But don't just take my word for it.

The new exhibition "Yoko Ono: Imagine Peace," opening today at the Emily Davis Gallery in the Mary Schiller Myers School of Art at the University of Akron, offers an opportunity to experience an array of Ono's work firsthand.

Curated by University of Akron art professor and Ono scholar Kevin Concannon, the show focuses on Ono's role as a global advocate for peace. It features recent works by Ono in various media as well as art and objects from "John and Yoko's Year of Peace," including photographs of and remnants from the couple's famous 1969 "Bed-Ins for Peace."

As her exhibition was being installed in Akron, I spoke with Ono by phone last week about her unwavering artistic focus and her persistent belief in the inevitability of world peace.

Talking to Ono, you'd never know she's 74. She speaks excitedly about her current projects and is as easy with a childlike giggle as with timeless nuggets of wisdom.

Knowing that her current work carries forward ideas that appeared in her earliest pieces from the 1950s, I asked Ono how, as an artist, she has maintained such laser-point focus.

"I really don't know how I am, in a way. I'm just being myself. And being myself, it's easy," she said. "That's why things just keep coming out.

"It's more difficult to be somebody else," she added. "That effort of trying to be somebody else occupies a lot of people, and then we can't do anything."

Ono's connection with and empathy for people is an essential aspect of everything she makes. While, from one perspective, she is an extremely demanding artist whose work requires active viewer participation, she is also ultimately an altruist whose most essential subject is the welfare of humanity.

I asked Ono how her notion of imagining peace has changed since the 1960s.

"It hasn't changed at all," she said. "I just think it's getting more practical."

Citing her Imagine Peace Tower, a major work under construction in Reykjavik, Iceland -- which she conceived 40 years ago -- Ono stressed the practicality, for instance, of alternative energy sources.

"Iceland's main energy source is water, not oil," she said. "Because of that, when you go there and you just breathe for a couple of days, you feel very, very powerful. The air is clean, the earth is clean, and the water is clean.

"I want to stress the fact that this can be done in any country. People say, Oh, we have a water shortage, but what about oil? We have to kill to get oil.' "

The Akron show includes preliminary images of Ono's Imagine Peace Tower, which Concannon describes in his essay in the show's catalog as "a column of light that will contain wishes collected during the past eleven years by Ono from around the world."

Shifting our conversation to the complexities of the war in Iraq, I asked Ono how to avoid becoming cynical.

"We shouldn't count all the bad things," she said. "We should count the blessings. And that's all we can do, really. That is the only way out of this. We're just going to do it, together. Good power is going to permeate the world."

Ono's optimism sounds simple until it is witnessed on a larger scale in her work.

As Concannon states in his essay, "Imagine Peace' exists as a seed, activated individually and collectively in the minds and actions of those who encounter it."

Anyone who attends the Akron show will have opportunities to activate Ono's ideas.

Several interactive works are included in the exhibit. "Imagine Peace (Maps)" consists of world maps placed throughout the gallery, upon which viewers can stamp the words "Imagine Peace," and then take the rubber stamp home with them.

Ono's message in all of her work is simple or vast.

As she puts it, "Somebody said, You never learn anything that you don't already

know.' To respond to beauty means that you have it in you."

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