

Yoko Ono's 'Imagine Peace' opens Saturday at Taubman

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“Everybody knows her name, but nobody knows what she does.”

That’s how the late John Lennon described his wife, Yoko Ono, to Rolling Stone magazine in 1971. He called her “the most famous unknown artist,” a quote that has defined her career in the years since.

When “Imagine Peace” opens Saturday at the Taubman Museum of Art, the Roanoke Valley will have a chance to see what Ono does.

The artist herself won’t attend. Ono, 80, will be in New York, preparing for a sold-out Sept. 15 performance. She and the latest incarnation of the Plastic Ono Band — which includes son Sean Lennon — will play songs from her new album, “Take Me to the Land of Hell,” at the Bowery Ballroom in New York.

Interviewed via phone in August, Ono said she had little to do with the creation of the Taubman show — beyond having originated the artwork — and didn’t mind ceding control of it to others.

“We just plant the seed,” she said. “For some reason, it’s picked up by someone else who likes to sort of grow them. Isn’t that great?”

A longtime fan

“Imagine Peace” was first organized in 2007 at the University of Akron in Ohio by art history professor Kevin Concannon and graduate student John Noga. In 2011, Concannon joined the Virginia Tech faculty as director of the School of Visual Arts. He discussed the show with former Taubman Executive Director David Mickenberg, paving the way to bring “Imagine Peace” to Roanoke.

“I trust Kevin,” Ono said. “I really bless this exhibition .”

The two first became acquainted when Concannon wrote the catalogue for an exhibition of Ono’s work at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1996. He noted that Amy Moorefield, the Taubman’s new deputy director of exhibitions, was also involved in organizing that show. “Full circle!” he joked in an email. “Amy and I will be doing Yoko shows every 17 years at new Virginia locations.”

Concannon, 57, a fan of Ono since he was young, has made 1960s art and Ono’s art in particular the subject of his scholarship, contributing an essay to “YES Yoko Ono,” a retrospective on Ono’s career published in 2000.

He’s overseeing a second show of Ono’s art in the Armory Gallery at Virginia Tech that opens Tuesday, called “My Mommy Is Beautiful,” in which participants are asked to provide photos of their mothers and write tributes.

The allure of ‘yes’

Born in Tokyo and spending her early life traveling between Japan and the United States, Ono was a pioneer in performance art before her relationship with Beatles guitarist and singer Lennon catapulted her to international fame.

Ono’s art evolved through the 1950s and early 1960s to include audience participation, as a way to remove the distance between art object and viewer, and offer something new and exciting.

“Why don’t we make it so that people can touch it? People go to museums, they can’t touch things, you know. Why can’t people participate in a more positive way?” she said.

She created “instruction paintings” that weren’t actually paintings, but text instructions for imagining objects or scenes. One instruction painting from 1963, “Cloud Piece,” that begins, “Imagine clouds dripping...,” would be the inspiration for Lennon’s 1971 song “Imagine.”

In the early 1960s she took part in Fluxus, a international group of artists who created experimental art, music and performance works that often had an absurd, abstract feel. “Being an avant garde artist, that’s what I wanted to be so that’s what I did,” she said.

The story goes that in 1966, Lennon came to visit an exhibition of Ono’s art in a London gallery before it opened to the public — Lennon was a friend of the gallery owner. One of the exhibits was a tiny word attached to the ceiling that the viewer could only read by climbing a ladder. Lennon did so, discovered the word was “YES,” and became intrigued. He would tell interviewers that the emphasis on the positive implied by that “yes” drew him in.

Ono said it was really encouraging to find someone who understood her so completely. “He was very intelligent. He

understood exactly what I ever said.”

Lennon embraced Ono’s offbeat art. “The reality is that I didn’t change so much but it changed John’s world a lot.” The two began a whirlwind romance that at the time was considered scandalous, as both were married to other people .

“The whole world hated the fact that we were together,” she said. The title of her new album, “Take Me to the Land of Hell,” refers to finding one’s passion under hellish circumstances, as she and Lennon did, she said. Because of constant, negative attention from the press, “John and I were in hell, and our love really grew inside of hell.”

One part of the traveling exhibition, called “John and Yoko’s Year of Peace,” features photographs from the “bed-ins” the couple conducted after they were married in 1969, in which they made use of the constant scrutiny they lived under, inviting members of the press into their hotel rooms to interview and photograph them as they advocated for an end to the Vietnam War.

“Their lives became a performance,” Concannon said.

The exhibition also includes images of the billboards the couple had erected in cities around the world that read “War Is Over! If You Want It,” a slogan they later simplified to “Imagine Peace.”

“I never felt it was a protest,” Ono said. “It becomes a protest because it’s not the same as what people are doing.” It was strange to her that anyone would think “the Vietnam War was something that people should be doing ... Now I am much more understanding about the world. I know that it’s even worse now.”

And so she continues to ask people to “imagine peace.”

She said that she doesn’t find it difficult to pursue her own art and also manage Lennon’s legacy. “I’m used to being many different things at once,” she said. “Women are like that.”

Knowing ourselves

Much of Ono’s art involves emphasizing a positive light, sometimes literally through the use of light.

The standard distress signal in Morse code, “S.O.S.,” inspired “Onochord,” a piece she created in 2004. “S.O.S. S.O.S. — This is really a desperate message. Can we make a positive message?”

Visitors to “Imagine Peace” will be given small flashlights that they can shine at one another in a simple 1-2-3 pattern, as demonstrated by Ono in a film loop that will show in one of the galleries. “It’s just sending light to somebody that you like,” Ono said, “or even a stranger. A beautiful message of light and a message of love.”

The show also contains photographs of the “Imagine Peace Tower,” a sculpture installation built in Iceland. Activated on Lennon’s birthday, Oct. 9, it shines 15 columns of light into the sky. It shuts down on Dec. 8, the anniversary of Lennon’s assassination by a gunman. The sides are inscribed with “Imagine Peace” in 24 languages.

Continuing the interactive theme, “Imagine Peace (Maps)” involves a series of maps showing areas of conflict in the world. Visitors are invited to stamp the words “Imagine Peace” onto the maps.

On a more playful side, Ono extended her penchant for asking viewers to conjure imaginary paintings in their minds to taking out advertisements in magazines for products that didn’t actually exist. Those ads will be part of the Taubman show.

There’s also a giant chess set that visitors are invited to play. The catch — a metaphor for the futility of conflict — is both sets of player pieces are white. Opponents who play often find it impossible to finish a game as the pieces get mingled, Concannon said

On Dec. 19, one of Ono’s more unnerving works will be performed at the Taubman. In “Cut Piece,” which debuted in 1964, the performer sits on stage, and members of the audience are invited to use scissors to cut off pieces of the performer’s clothes.

Ono has often performed the piece herself. A film of two of Ono’s performances of “Cut Piece” will play in the Armory exhibition at Tech.

Concannon noted that though “Cut Piece” is often interpreted as a feminist statement, Ono has never mandated that the piece be performed exclusively by women. “Imagine Peace” exhibition co-curator John Noga has performed the piece. Taubman Museum Curatorial Coordinator Eva Thornton will perform it at the Roanoke museum.

Ono said that though “Cut Piece” can be viewed as a comment on “the unfairnesses that women have to endure,” there’s another interpretation that’s about letting go of one’s possessions. “Instead of resisting and holding onto something that you want to hold on to, just go with it.”

She believes that people in today’s society spend too much time in pursuit of material wealth and not enough in pursuit of their passions.

Ono has a Twitter account with more than 4 million followers — though she believes social media makes people more isolated, contributing to the problems she perceives.

“We are kind of scared of opening up so much ... the fact that we have better toys doesn't mean that we can't have passion at the same time,” she said.

“I'd like to see us being less scared of being a human being.”

News researcher Belinda Harris contributed to this report.

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