

# INSPIRATIONS

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## Yoko Ono exhibit links local hopes to wishes of the world

NOTES ON TREES AT RAUSCHENBERG GALLERY SHOW DELIVERED TO ICELAND

**W**ishes close to the hearts of Southwest Floridians have traveled far in the name of art.

Last spring, the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery hosted “Yoko Ono: Imagine Peace.” The exhibition included two “Wish Trees,” which are critical parts of Ono’s exhibitions. Visitors wrote their wishes – personal or global – on shipping tags and attached them to the branches of a tree.

Ono has been collecting these wishes from all over the world and taking them to The Imagine Peace Tower in Iceland. She built a light tower in 2006 on Videy Island as a memorial to John Lennon reflecting their mission to create world peace. The tower is powered geothermally, by naturally occurring hot springs. On it are 15 searchlights with prisms that act as mirrors, reflecting a column of light that soars miles into the sky. The base of the tower is a 30-foot-wide wishing well that contains more than a million wishes – now including hopes from Florida SouthWestern State College.

Jade Dellinger, Gallery Director at Bob Rauschenberg Gallery and Dr. Edith Pendleton, former Dean of Division of Libraries, thought it would be exciting and educational if FSW students actually delivered the wishes to Iceland when the exhibit closed.

Once they pursued the idea, everything fell into place. Iceland’s Fulbright Commission extended an invitation and the college paid the travel costs.



Studio visit with Icelandic Artist Sossa Bjornsdottir and artist from Faroe Islands, Birgit Kirke

*“As a child in Japan, I used to go to a temple and write out a wish on a piece of thin paper and tie it around the branch of a tree. Trees in temple courtyards were always filled with people’s wish knots, which looked like white flowers blossoming from afar.” — Yoko Ono*



Florida SouthWestern State College Visual Arts Professor Dana Roes, a Fulbright fellow who spent a year in Iceland, agreed to organize the trip and travel with the students. She chose three students based on their artistic talent and the likelihood that the trip would have a lasting impact on them and their art.

In March, Roes and FSW students Josué Charles, Christopher Lacoste and Leila Mesdaghi traveled to Iceland with a box of wishes. The group left for a five-day journey that included meeting artists, taking art classes and touring Iceland's natural wonders.

They suffered one setback at the beginning of the trip. Charles, a Haitian student, was denied entry into Iceland. He was not allowed, as a Haitian man, to enter the country with a passport alone. He had to fly back.

But the rest of the group entered Iceland and fulfilled their peace and artistic mission. When they returned, all three students had to complete another mission: create and present artwork that reflected their experience.

"The important part for the Rauschenberg Gallery is to help these deserving students excel and give them a meaningful opportunity to learn about professional practices," Dellinger said. The college provided them with a small stipend to buy materials for their work.

"Their opportunity exceeded a graduate school experience," he said.

In April, Charles, Lacoste and Mesdaghi presented their artwork at the Rauschenberg Gallery in a show called "Ferdalag," which means "journey" or "trip" in Icelandic.

The show was a success and students received tremendous praise. It was a transformative experience, Mesdaghi said. "The way I used to think about art is like night and day. There is not a day that goes by that I do not think of that experience. I am full of gratitude," she said.

The 37-year-old student recently received her Associate's degree at FSW and is pursuing her Bachelor's in Art at Florida Gulf Coast University. She also completed a four-month internship on Captiva Island through the Rauschenberg Foundation.

"I think that whole experience is my key to graduate school or further achievements," Mesdaghi said. "I have always been an artist but I never understood what it meant to me. The opportunities I got at FSW have been life changing."

Roes is proud of the level and sophistication of artwork being done at FSW.

"What we have to offer is unique," Roes said. "Here we are in Southwest Florida and we have access to the Rauschenberg Gallery and a great relationship with the Rauschenberg Foundation. Our students are encouraged to dig deep, be current and get pushed to think."

The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery is working diligently to create programming that is accessible to students but also challenging to visitors in the community, Dellinger said, such as the "Imagine Peace" exhibition.

Everyone was pleased with the entire event, even Yoko Ono, he said.

"These students certainly rose to the occasion and produced significant work," Dellinger said. "Yoko could not have been more pleased. She was tickled by how passionately Professor Roes and her student tracked down and delivered those messages to Iceland."

And Roes continues to keep wishing.

"My hope is that we can bring some Icelandic students to create art at Florida SouthWestern State College," she said. "That's what I'm thinking. We have a lot to offer."