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PEACE PLANS



The Imagine Peace Tower is an outdoor work of art conceived by Yoko Ono in memory of John Lennon. It is on Viðey Island in Reykjavík, Iceland.

■ Yoko Ono interactive art evokes Rauschenberg legacy with its peace projects

By Harriet Howard Heithaus
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There's a show of Yoko Ono's art — the avante garde interactive works that first made her famous in the 1970s — opening Friday at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in Fort Myers. It's full of interactive opportunities and evocative pieces, and that's exciting enough.

But then, the gallery has new curator Jade Dellinger, who can barely contain himself over the potential for this space on the campus of Edison State College, and that's exciting, too.

In fact, it's hard to know which to get more excited about. But Dellinger, who organized the Yoko Ono exhibition as his first in his new position, is glad to create excitement for both.

Sitting in his office, where a dreamy Brian Eno CD induces a misleading aura of tranquillity, Dellinger hauls out flashlights, rubber stamps and a "catalog" for the show that actually is a box of its symbolic treasures. Visitors will be able to stamp "Imagine peace" on any spot on a series of maps that picture both global and local spots and flash "I love you" to one and all in the gallery.

"I felt Yoko's message of peace was in a way extending Rauschenberg's legacy. It was really connected with the kind of philosophical interests Rauschenberg espoused," Dellinger explained.

Rauschenberg, he pointed out, traveled to countries around the world creating art projects with children as a goodwill ambassador for the U.S. The "Imagine Peace" exhibition speaks to that shared hope.

Any exhibition that comes, he added, must pass the litmus test of whether it

can return somehow to the legendary artist whose name is on its walls. That connection may be by mentorship from Rauschenberg, whose last home was on Sanibel Island; by association with his collage printing techniques or his philosophical direction. Ono, whose formative years trail Rauschenberg's slightly, shares any number of connections.

But the peace link both intrigued Dellinger, and offered a quick opportunity. He was walking into a gallery that had no future shows planned. His successor, Ron Bishop, "had consciously left the schedule wide open for me so the next person after him wouldn't be obligated to his vision for a year."

With a mandate to raise the gallery's visibility and his own rudder of WWBRD — What would Bob Rauschenberg do? — Dellinger called on Ron Noga and Kevin Colcannon, curators of the "Imagine Peace" exhibition, who were just bringing it home from an international tour.

To his delight, not only did the curators agree to bring it here, Ono herself re-configured several of the pieces to work specifically in the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery. She even donated a billboard work, currently alongside U.S. 41 in south Fort Myers, exhorting people to "imagine" peace.

"The billboard doesn't say 'Rauschenberg gallery'; it doesn't say anything about the show. It's new, and it was created for us for Fort Myers for the show. It's a message for the new year," Dellinger said.

Ono also donated a sizable number of small flashlights, to be distributed in the catalog and to all visitors as long as they're available at the opening Friday. The commemorative pieces will enable visitors to blink out "I love you" in code, a sentiment Ono hopes will be shared among strangers as well as friends.

There are a wealth of other interactive elements to this exhibition:

■ A solid white chess board.

"It's a large one, the size of one of those lawn chess games," Dellinger noted. "Once you've moved two times you for-

get what square you were on... Eventually players come to the realization in the end — does it really matter what side you're on?"

■ The ink pad, stamps and set of maps. The latter are ready to be imprinted with "Imagine Peace," by every visitor in the spot he or she wants it. One can only imagine how things the impressions will be on Sochi, Russia, by February.

The maps include, significantly, one depicting every neighborhood in Fort Myers.

■ A set of globes created in a white synthetic material, to be broken at the opening. Visitors will be invited to mend them.

This segment in particular is said to recreate a piece that was first made for

the gallery at which Ono met Beatle John Lennon, her future husband.

■ A "wish tree," similar to those in Japanese temples, to which people can affix their own written wishes. At the end of the exhibition, a delegation of students from Edison will take the assembled wishes to be added to the Imagine Peace Tower in Iceland.

For those not familiar with it, the tower is a white monument, occasionally lighted from its "wishing well" center to send a strong beam about 13,120 feet into the sky. It bears the words "Imagine Peace" in 24 languages. Buried in the base of the tower will be the wishes gathered from these trees — as they have been from trees at each of the other locations the exhibition has toured.

Ono isn't expected to attend the opening, but Dellinger says some members of the Rauschenberg Foundation have expressed interest in being there.

That will be a treat for Dellinger, who has embedded plans to keep Rauschenberg's legacy in the gallery. (Even the walls are painted in tones the late artist used, a gray and a white blend so specific it has the name Bob White.)

Still, the major treat may be having Yoko Ono art.

"For me, Yoko is just one of those people who are seminal figures, in terms of popular art. She was creating art long before she met John Lennon.

"Falling in love with John probably did as much, or more, damage to her career as it did to his," he observed.

IF YOU GO

YOKO ONO'S 'IMAGINE PEACE'

When: Friday-March 29, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Mondays-Fridays; 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays; closed Sundays and holidays

Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, Edison State College, 8099 College Parkway SW, Fort Myers

Information: 239-489-9313; www.rauschenberggallery.com

Something else: Lecture by co-curator Kevin Concannon at 6 p.m. Friday, Rush Auditorium, J-Building at Edison State; reception, 7-9 p.m. Friday, Bob Rauschenberg Gallery