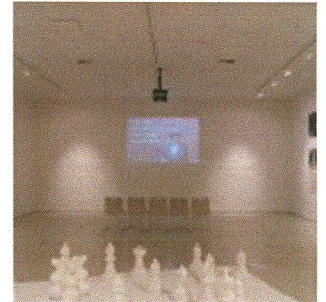


Co-curator Kevin Concannon brings Yoko Ono messages and insights to Fort Myers tomorrow night

By TOM HALL
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Tomorrow night, *Yoko Ono Imagine Peace* opens at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery with a 6:00 p.m. Gallery Talk in the Rush Library Auditorium by co-curator Kevin Concannon. This is the eighth Ono exhibition that Concannon and partner John Noga have co-curated since 2007, but it promises to be vastly different than any of its predecessors.



“I’ve been a huge Beatles fan since I was 12 years old,” copped Concannon in a December telephone interview.

So he naturally took notice of Yoko Ono when she and John Lennon embarked upon a whirlwind romance in 1967 that had the pop world talking and the media in a frenzy. But unlike the hordes of Beatles fans who resented the liaison and blamed Ono for the band’s break up, Concannon was never a hater. “Yoko was the first artist I ever encountered in a visual way.” Like Lennon, Concannon regarded Ono as an artist with something meaningful to say. He became a fan of ’60s conceptual art and Ono’s unique role as one of its leading pioneers.

The two did not become acquainted until nearly 30 years later, when Concannon wrote the catalog for a 1996 exhibition of Yoko’s work at Virginia Commonwealth University. That led to an essay for *YES Yoko Ono*, a 2000 retrospective on Ono’s career. But seven more years would pass before Concannon and Noga organized their first exhibition of Ono’s avant-garde experimental and experiential art pieces.

The show took place in the Emily Davis Gallery in the Myers School of Art at the University of Akron in Ohio. A cornerstone of that exhibit were photographs from John and Yoko’s “Year of Peace,” including the bed-ins staged by the couple following their 1969 nuptials to ramp up popular support for ending the Vietnam War as well as billboards John and Yoko erected in cities around the world that read, “War is Over! If You Want It.” Neither the Year of Peace photos nor War is Over billboards are part of the Rauschenberg Gallery exhibition, although an Imagine Peace billboard announcing the show does grace the southbound lanes of Cleveland Avenue, just south of Page Field Commons.

Subsequent presentations featured photographs, posters, advertisements, lithographs, interactive/participatory pieces and videos, including one showing Ono sitting on stage in a chair as members from the audience take turns using scissors to cut off pieces of her clothing, a metaphor susceptible of differing interpretations which range from the unfairness that women are required to endure in modern-day society to the freedom that only comes to those who prove willing to give up the pursuit of possessions and other materialistic goals.

“The exhibition at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery is dramatically different from that first show,” Concannon acknowledges. New Rauschenberg Gallery Director Jade Dellinger goes so far as to say that it’s been “totally re-conceived and restructured” in collaboration with the artist “to reflect the Gallery’s mission and its role as a learning laboratory on the campus of Edison State College.” But Concannon and Dellinger are coy. They decline to elaborate on the ways the exhibition differs from the seminal show at Akron or even its latest iteration at the Taubman Museum of Art, which closed on January 11, 2014.

“John and I actually thought the Taubman exhibition would be our last,” Concannon discloses. But then Dellinger asked them if he could bring the exhibition to Fort Myers. “The show has a way of finding its audience,” Kevin demurs. “It has an important message. One that is, sadly, always timely. It’s a message that can’t be repeated enough.” And with conflicts still taking place all over the world, Ono is pleased that those who encounter her artworks seem eager to help spread her dual messages of peace and love. And to assist them in this endeavor in the days, weeks and months following tomorrow night’s evocative opening, Ono has provided at her own expense a supply of postcards, button and flashlights designed to involve attendees in the process of achieving inner and world peace through the power of their imagination.

“Art and music open dialogues,” says Concannon. Which is goal of both the exhibition and the artist herself. “Yoko’s art is totally about communicating. She engages people through social media, but encourages [her more than 4 million followers on Twitter] to go out in the world and engage people one on one. There’s a huge difference between reading something in the news or a magazine and driving down the street and seeing an Imagine Peace billboard or coming to a place like the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery and getting swept up in Ono’s works along with everyone else.” Concannon knows first hand what that’s like. He got swept up in Yoko Ono’s cutting edge conceptual art more than 45 years ago, and learns something new with each exhibition because the audience’s reaction and interaction with the work makes each one completely unique.



Those who turn out for tomorrow’s exhibition will certainly come to see Yoko Ono in a new light simply through the expediency of encountering her work first hand. But those who attend Kevin Concannon’s Gallery Talk will see both Ono, her work, and her legacy in a light informed by nearly five decades of research, thought and contemplation of the artist and her work, augmented by conversations with the artist on a host of far-flung topics (many of which he prefers to hold in confidence). It is an unparalleled opportunity to get into the mind of one of the world’s greatest conceptual artists through the eyes of an art professional who may very well know her better than anyone else save Ono herself.

Yoko Ono Imagine Peace opens with Dr. Kevin Concannon’s Gallery Talk in the Rush Library Auditorium at 6 p.m. and a 7-9 p.m. reception inside the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery. ■