

[ART JOURNAL]



Celebrity Interview

Peace

CONTINUED FROM P14

In 1966, she had a show at Indica Gallery in London. John Lennon turned up, though Yoko didn't know who he was: "The worlds of art and pop music were not like now, they did not mix. I had just made *Film No 4* [one of her most notorious: it's usually called *Bottoms*, as it consists of lots of them], it was a success and the avant-garde group rejected me. They said I was a sellout. So I had success but I was lonely. I knew about the Beatles, but the only name I knew was Ringo, because it consists of lots of them]. When John came, he didn't look like a rocker or an artist. He was a normal man in a suit, clean-cut. I used to call him clean-cut. He didn't like it."

The entwining of John and Yoko was traumatic: Lennon was still married, as was Yoko. "We were together as individual artists," she says, "but as human beings it could not be like that [she clasps her hands], because we both had families. It was not easy to come together."

They finally managed it, marrying in 1969. Two years later, Tony Cox, frustrated at his ex-wife being awarded sole custody of Kyoko, kidnapped his 8-year-old daughter when on an access visit. For an unbelievable number of years, he hid with her, initially in the confines of a US Christian cult group. Yoko didn't see Kyoko again until her daughter was 31.

I can't imagine how awful that must have been, I say. "Yes," replies Yoko, evenly, "it was so terrible. I kept imagining I was talking to her, but I couldn't speak to her. I didn't know where she was. And for a long time, it affected my attitude to having another child."

You didn't want one? "No, I definitely did but it was more that I thought I should never get too close to Sean in case John and I should split up. Sometimes the father feels pushed out because of the connection between the mother and the child. So I made sure that I was the artist and John stayed at home and was close to Sean. I thought I was being so intelligent! I was doing the business and John was happy at home with Sean. We were close, not just as lovers, but as mommy and daddy you know? We were a family."

And then? "You just don't think it could happen. Well you know it can happen but you just don't imagine..."

After Lennon's death, Yoko wanted to "clasp Sean close but I could not." She was worried that she too would be assassinated. "Although I wanted to put my arms around my son and keep everything away, I couldn't. I had to make sure he could survive without me."

Such cool-headedness! Yoko isn't cold by any means, but she's learned to suppress her emotions and think long-term. When I ask about May Pang, Lennon's mistress during his infamous "lost weekend," she says she didn't want the Ono-Lennon marriage to be "so suburban, you know? We were artists — why we were so conventional? We don't have to be this way." So Yoko pushed her husband into a fling with Pang, their assistant, a fling that nearly ended their marriage. Yoko doesn't talk about this in detail, however, "because May Pang has her own story and I don't want to deny that."

That's very gracious. "It is not gracious," says Yoko. She wants me to understand. "When I explained to you the situation with May Pang and with Sean, both times I made the decision in my head: OK, this is the correct path to follow. Then I have to see what happens, go on the journey, deal with the emotions that come out of that decision."

What a complicated woman Yoko Ono is. Intellectual and emotional, avant-garde but deliberately simplistic, making hard-headed choices for heartfelt reasons. Talking to her makes me view her OnoChord and Wish Tree more indulgently. Perhaps if I was 75, having lived through all Yoko has lived through, I would want my work to be reduced to the simple desire that we be kind to each other.

I've often wondered about Yoko's love life, post-Lennon. When I ask her, she tells me she has had relationships, but now she doesn't feel the need. Partly because it's difficult if you're famous — "look at Paul and Heather" — and partly because of her beliefs about the irrelevance of distance and time.

"Sometimes," she says, "John's death is like a dream, like it never happened. And sometimes it is right here. Before it happened, I had a feeling about myself like I was the artist alone, working, but after John went, I had to look at myself and say: you have changed. Your life has changed, this is who you are now. You will always be seen as with him. And when I did that I felt differently."

"Now I feel like the whole big thing of John is like an umbrella around me, protecting me. I still have emotions and an emotional life. I have decided to love all the people who miss John. A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is a reality."

Recovery? It's just a smile away

Randa Ali Ahmed's paintings explore prospects for hope amid the global economic meltdown

BY WEEDAH HAMZA
DPA, BEIRUT



Lebanese artist Randa Ali Ahmad and paintings from her exhibit Euphoria in Beirut last Wednesday.

A new exhibition just opened by Lebanese artist Randa Ali Ahmed would, at first glance, seem to be a fitting testament to the end of the global economic boom: the bare cement walls of a bombed-out looking Beirut gallery adorned by acrylic-on-canvas depictions of suited businessmen in varying states of dejection and despair.

Euphoria, the exhibition by Ali Ahmed that opened on Dec. 11 at the Phoenix Gallery in Beirut, offers a journey into the extremes of emotion that many of the world's executives — and, by extension, ordinary people too — have felt since the economic crisis began spreading around the globe this year.

Some of the panels offer a close-up of the male-dominated business world in meltdown — in Ali Ahmed's distinctive stylized idiom: they could be traders on the trading floor after a heavy loss; or property moguls watching their asset values fall through the floor.

Others, however, point out of the maelstrom and toward what comes next: recovery, growth, and renewal.

"I wanted in my exhibition to show that positive things can come after such a crisis," Ali Ahmed said.

"I ended the theme with a painting of a man smiling, reflecting on the positive mood that will come after this dark cloud melts away," she said.

Beirut has long been one of the Middle East's trading entrepôts, and in recent years has been a favorite target for investment of the petrodollars flowing from the Gulf Arab states, particularly in real estate and commerce.

With oil prices a fraction of their level at the beginning of the year, the tide of Gulf oil money that has so buoyed economies across the region has begun to recede. Lebanon will undoubtedly feel the pinch.

Ali Ahmed stresses that her artistic mission is not to find solutions to these problems, but to imagine how people can be positive in order to retain the belief that solving them is even possible.

"I just hope that people who will visit my exhibition will see the positive atmosphere I am trying to show through my paintings," she says, adding that this theme is borne out by the development of the panels from despair to hope.

"That is why I displayed them in order, as a story, and ended with the last picture of a man with hope for the future," she said.

Crestfallen executive guests at the nearby Intercontinental Phoenicia hotel will be glad to know that the exhibition runs until next Tuesday.

The US\$74 million brothel scene

Why are British museums raising a fortune to prevent Titian's 'Diana and Actaeon' from being sold to a buyer who would take the painting out of the UK?

BY JONATHAN JONES
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



Titian's Diana and Actaeon.

After intense speculation and appeal after appeal, hopes are now high that Titian's *Diana and Actaeon*, which has been on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, will be saved for the UK. The National Galleries in London and Edinburgh are expected to raise the £50 million (US\$74 million) to purchase the painting from the Duke of Sutherland. It is a colossal sum of money. But the country could not let it go abroad. Why? Here, detail by detail, are the elements that make it such a revolutionary work, with a sensual power that inspired legions of artists — though none ever equaled its hedonistic magic and undercurrent of mystery.

CAVORTING COURTESANS

At the work's heart is one of the most sumptuous collections of nudes ever painted. The goddess Diana and her nymphs are bathing in a woodland pool when the hunter Actaeon chances by. It's a story that gives Titian ample opportunity to glory in women's bodies. In Renaissance Venice, where Titian was the leading painter, courtesans (basically

high-class prostitutes) were a recognized part of society and artists regularly portrayed them — but never more ecstatically than here, in what is in all likelihood a brothel scene cloaked in myth. Titian's brushstrokes tingle with desire. This is not just a painting of nudes, but one that goes in among them, almost making love to them.

MULTIPLE MIRRORS

Oil painting was, it has been said, invented to portray flesh, but it was also invented to portray reflection. Mirrors complicate and enrich Titian's imagined world. The mirror balanced on the fountain, the bulbous glass vessel next to it, and, most of all, the green water in which forms become spectral and eerie — all serve to multiply the pleasures of looking.

SUGGESTIVE PINK VELVET

Soft stuff is everywhere — the rich red velvet on which Diana is sitting, the pink hanging that fails to hide the bathers from a male voyeur,

various drapes and towels. These sensual velvet textures are erotically suggestive.

A FINAL CELEBRATION OF NATURE

The loveliness of the trees and grass, the sky's blue clouds, give reality to a mythological scene. Moreover, the autumnal leaves remind us that Titian was getting old. His vision of the nude is a final lingering celebration. Carnevale, the great festival of Titian's Venice, means: "Flesh, farewell!" It is a last hedonistic bash before Lent. This is Titian's carnival.

MYSTERY OF THE HIDDEN NYMPH

The nymph who stands with her back to us looks different from her companions. Her skin is olive, her muscles masculine. It's unsettling. Has a man infiltrated Titian's nudes? A non-European? The mystery turns you into Actaeon — you're right there in the picture, wanting to see more. And, like Actaeon, you're punished, if only with a tease. It's a prompt to make you look beyond surface beauty to the whole

mystery of existence.

PETS TO LIGHTEN THE TONE

A comic contrast of "male" and "female" pets lightens the grandeur of the scene. Actaeon's hunting dog is bravely confronted by Diana's little yelping lapdog. This is also a portent of what happens next in the myth: Diana will turn Actaeon into a stag to punish his voyeurism, and he will be torn to pieces by his own hounds.

A GENIUS FOR COLOR

Black slaves were becoming more visible in Titian's Europe. Yet his portrayal of Diana's African attendant is as much an example of his genius for color as of his ability to perfectly evoke their place in Venetian society. You are dazzled and mystified by the brightness of Diana's pearl-like skin; through juxtaposition, the black skin helps create that dazzle. Does Titian, too, include a black servant to show that he is actually portraying the courtesans of Venice? Is she the crucial clue that this is a brothel scene?