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The Financial Times

May 29, 2009

By Rachel Spence

The sadness in Yoko Ono's latest work

Before he died, John Lennon described his wife as the "world's most famous unknown artist. Everybody knows her name but no one knows what she actually does."

Thirty years after Lennon's death, that scenario is set to change. At next week's Venice biennale, the world's most famous rock widow is to receive the Golden Lion award for a lifetime's achievement in the visual arts.

Talking to me in the lobby of Venice's luxurious Hotel Danieli, Ono makes it clear that her curious fate, to be simultaneously iconic and obscure, is the legacy of her marriage not her upbringing: she recalls that her mother enrolled her in music classes even before she went elementary school.

Born into a cultured Japanese banking family, she was the first female student to be accepted onto Gakushuin University's prestigious philosophy course. By the time she met Lennon, she was a prominent avant-garde artist and musician. She hosted concerts by John Cage in her Manhattan loft and created eloquent conceptual works herself, most famously the precociously feminist 1964 performance "Cut Piece" where she invited the audience to cut the clothes from her body.

For a woman bent on escaping sexual objectification, marrying a Beatle was not a good move. In the popular imagination, Ono became the exotic siren who lured a Liverpool boy away from the world's favourite band, destroying it in the process. Since Lennon's death, she has been hounded for exploiting his memory; just last week she was castigated for including



Wistful: The artist Yoko Ono in Venice to receive the Golden Lion award

Lennon's blood-stained clothes in a New York exhibition, a decision she justifies as a work of political art. "When there is so much violence in the world, people still seem not to face the fact that a violent situation robbed the life of somebody they loved."

In person, Ono is neither cynical nor naïve. Now 76, her boyish, black-garbed figure looks decades younger in her trademark dark glasses and a jaunty straw hat. Having detached herself from her entourage to talk to me alone – although an assistant sits at a nearby table – she gives an impression of a woman who is simultaneously powerful and vulnerable.

She declares herself "honoured" to have received the Golden Lion. "I was shocked because I felt that I was an outsider."

She has no illusions as to the cause of her marginal status in the contemporary art world. "When I met John I was already a famous artist," she recalls. "I was at the top of the hill and it looked like a lonely trip," she continues. "I thought: 'Great, together we will erase each other's loneliness.' And then I realised there was a little trap there."

Despite her fears, she married him in 1969. At first, with performances like the legendary "Bed-In" of 1969, it seemed as if her creativity would flourish. Yet as the 1970s unfolded, Ono's projects slipped under the radar of a public more concerned with the drama of her marriage. In 1975, following a two-year separation, the pair reunited and Ono gave birth to their son Sean. Five years later, Lennon was assassinated by a fan as the couple returned home.

"I could write a book about being a woman who has lost her husband," she murmurs, her voice infused with a new intensity as she recalls a period when she says she found herself the target for financial exploitation by men "who hit on widows". Ono's gritty refusal to relinquish control of the couple's multi-million pound empire is also responsible for much of the venom she subsequently attracted.

Even at the height of her grief, she went on with her work. "I think music works such as 'Walking on Thin Ice' and 'It's Alright' were pretty interesting but nobody really noticed," she says without rancour. "I was like a prisoner drawing on the walls or someone doing cave paintings. I was laying things for the future, for the next prisoner who might notice it."

Ono had to wait out the century. Around 2002, a new generation of club DJs started remixing her singles into funky dance tracks. In 2003, she installed her artwork, "Wish Tree" at the Venice Biennale and a series of major retrospectives followed.

Her new Venice show, *Anton's Memory*, is a collection of installations that evoke the figure of a mother through the trope of her son's memory. "I wanted to show that there's a little difference between what she went through and what was observed by her son," explains Ono, adding that she chose the name Anton "because it had nothing to do with me".

Ono denies that her own experience of motherhood has influenced this wistful visual voyage. "My son knows and likes me through my work and also as a mother."

More traumatic was her rapport with Kyoko, her daughter by Tony Cox, Ono's husband before John and after the Japanese composer Toshi Ichiyanagi. Kyoko was kidnapped by her father at the age of eight and only reunited with Ono in 1995.

Ono describes the experience as "terrible", though later she emails to say that her husband "may have been justified in his actions" because he thought her life with John "was not conducive to raising a child of that age".

She is clearly anxious not to risk anew her relationship with Kyoko. "I don't want to go into the detail of it, since he is the father to my daughter and I don't want to hurt her feelings." Yet the air

of frail equanimity that she maintains in person is undermined by the acute sadness that pervades the exhibition itself.

Described by Ono as “my best work ever”, it could only have been produced by an artist with a profound, no-longer fashionable awareness of the traumas that have shaped her own and other women’s lives. The centrepiece is “Touch Me”: wooden boxes containing marble female body fragments – limbs, breasts, a mouth – laid on a tomb-like black table next to a font of water with directions to spectators to perform a secular baptism. Another key work is “My Mommy Was Beautiful”, an antique desk with cards for participants to record memories of their mother, which will be mounted on wallboards.

Crucial to the exhibition’s rhythm is the presence of dozens of meticulous, pointillist drawings of organic, uterus-like forms, potent expressions of fertility that are a counterpoint to the merciless bleakness of installations such as the metal bed frame naked save for a small pile of unmatched sheets and a black, leatherbound bible.

“All my observations of what women suffer have culminated in that particular show,” she explains. “We are so privileged. Think about women in Arab countries. Their pain is unspeakable but they are women too, you know, and I carry their pain in me.”

This earnest, irony-free language mirrors the character of her art. In an era that lauds the savage, self-mocking wit of artists such as Tracey Emin, Kiki Smith and Sophie Calle, I cannot help wondering if there is still room for Ono’s intimate, Zen-like expressions of sorrow with their unique fusion of the feminist, the intellectual and the heartfelt. Yet as we say goodbye, and I watch her re-embark on the eternal female battle to retain power yet remain loved, I fervently hope so.

Yoko Ono: ‘Anton’s Memory’, Palazzetto Tito, Venice, to September 29. Tel: +39 041 5207797