

By Alix Woodford

MacDowell Medal Day 2024 Honors Yoko Ono



LIGHT PIECE

*Carry an empty bag.
Go to the top of the hill.
Pour all the light you can in it.
Go home when it is dark.
Hang the bag in the middle of your
room in place of a light bulb.*

— Yoko Ono, Autumn 1963

On July 21, 2024, MacDowell honored interdisciplinary artist Yoko Ono during its annual Medal Day in Peterborough, NH. For those attending, the day was an invitation to engage with art and to consider its singular ability to empower and connect. More than a thousand visitors, from New England and all over the world, gathered to watch the ceremony and enjoy the remarkable once-a-year chance to visit current MacDowell fellows in their studios.

Introducing Ono as the 64th MacDowell Medal recipient, Nora Halpern—curator, art historian, and friend of the artist—read Ono’s “Light Piece,” a simple instructional piece that invites us to engage and reminds us of our power to manifest change, while expanding ideas of what art can be. It exemplifies much of the artist’s work, what Halpern refers to as “succinct calls to expansive action.”

Halpern discussed the role of audience participation in Ono’s art, one of its many pioneering features. This participation has taken numerous forms—at times to unite, at others to challenge. In the case of the 1964 film *Cut Piece*, shown that day in MacDowell’s James Baldwin Library, Ono sits quietly on the floor while audience members cut off pieces of her clothing. It is a haunting statement about vulnerability



Left and below: Yoko Ono, recipient of the 2024 MacDowell Medal. Photo: Bjarke Ørsted. The MacDowell Medal. Courtesy of MacDowell. Opposite, top, from left: Wish Trees on site at MacDowell. Photo: Cassandra Yerkes. Nora Halpern introducing Yoko Ono. Photo: Joanna Eldredge Morrissey. Opposite, bottom, from left: MacDowell fellows: Farah Mohammad, James Yeh, Hai-Wen Lin, and Ali Kaeini.

and gender-based violence, one in which the audience, by taking part, becomes complicit.

Describing Ono’s partnership with her late husband John Lennon, Halpern spoke of their activism, mutual influence and collaborations, including writing the anthem for peace “Imagine.” As extraordinary as their partnership was, it bothers Halpern that many people only associate Ono with her relationship to Lennon, not recognizing her as a boundary-defying artist in her own right. It was, Halpern said, Ono’s powerful art and activism that first drew Lennon to her.

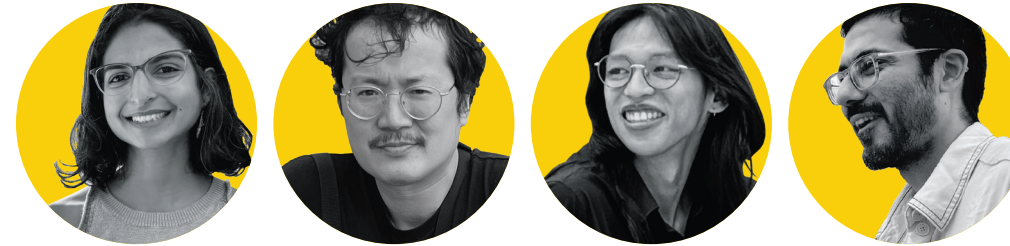
Accepting the Medal for Ono—who is ninety-one and watched by live stream from home—David Newgarden, Ono’s longtime music manager, described a tireless artist who “never met a medium she didn’t like.” Some of the diverse disciplines Ono has worked in include traditional Japanese music and opera, performance and conceptual art, avant-garde music composition, singing, sculpture, and film, not to mention the use of unusual media—billboards, trees, rotting fruit, and Lennon’s broken glasses.

Newgarden described Ono’s Imagine Peace Tower, a twelve-thousand-foot tower of light on Iceland’s Videy island, dedicated to the memory of Lennon, and shared an invitation from Ono to everyone present to add their own wishes to the two wish trees installed in MacDowell’s small orchard. After the event, the wishes would be sent first to Ono, then to the Imagine Peace Tower.

Medal Day is not only about the ceremony and the chance to picnic afterwards with friends on MacDowell’s beautiful grounds. It is also



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about seeing new work and meeting the artists creating it by visiting studios of current fellows who open their doors to the public for a few hours. Twenty-three studios were open this year, too many for one person to see without sprinting. Still, with a handy map, it was easy to pick a few and enjoy the walk along MacDowell’s wooded trails to find them.

Some of the visual artists meeting the public this year were New York City-based Farah Mohammad, whose vivid layered and sewn monoprints feature architectural spaces evoking psychological states, and Iranian artist Ali Kaeini, whose paintings deal, metaphorically, with diaspora. He uses cultural objects taken out of their original contexts to explore questions of identity and purpose in the lives of displaced people. Hai-Wen Lin, from Chicago, creates wearable (and flyable) kite sculptures that explore constructions of the body and its surrounding environment.

The desk in Brooklyn writer James Yeh’s studio held a digital typewriter and a bin packed with at least a hundred small notebooks. He doesn’t use a computer for creative work.

It’s too distracting. Yeh is writing a novel about non-traditional childrearing and eldercare. This is his second MacDowell fellowship. Asked what MacDowell means to him, he talked about the “lore” of the place, of being part of a tradition with those who came before. (In every studio, plaques line a wall, listing the names of the studio’s previous fellows.) MacDowell unites its residents, who may never meet, in an artistic community that spans generations.

At the close of Medal Day, visitors walked out past two wish-laden trees. The day’s wishes would make their way to the Imagine Peace Tower, joining over a million already there. “Ono creates art that asks something of the participant,” Halpern said. “By participating, the audience completes the work of art.” MacDowell honored Ono, and Ono gave us the gift of participation, like a bag of light we would take home and hang in the middle of our rooms at night.

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The MacDowell Medal

The MacDowell Medal was first awarded in 1960 to American playwright and author Thornton Wilder. The long list of recipients since includes Leonard Bernstein, Georgia O’Keeffe, I.M. Pei, Sonny Rollins, Joan Didion, Toni Morrison, and Stephen Sondheim.

Each year’s selection committee is comprised of practicing artists and specialists in the given discipline who choose the Medal recipient based on excellence and lasting impact. This year’s committee was led by interdisciplinary artist Laurie Anderson. The first interdisciplinary Medal went to Merce Cunningham in 2003. Ono’s is the second. While some recipients have been past MacDowell fellows, a connection with the residency program is not required.

MacDowell resident director, David Macy, explains that while “not a Lifetime Achievement Award, per se, [the Medal] generally goes to artists who have been at it long enough to actually influence another generation or two of artists.” Of Ono’s selection, he says, “From the 1960s onward, Ono repeatedly broke new ground, reaching new audiences with work that intentionally dissolved the line between *real life* and art. It would be nearly impossible to describe the development of interdisciplinary arts in the twentieth century without reference to Ono’s oeuvre.”

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