

Bockley Gallery



Edgar Heap of Birds

Opening Reception: Friday, September 8, 5 to 8 pm

Exhibition: September 8 through October 14, 2017

Gallery Hours: Wednesday through Saturday, Noon to 5 pm

Bockley Gallery is pleased to announce its upcoming exhibition *Edgar Heap of Birds*. The show will feature a range of Heap of Birds text-based works that span some three decades of his artistic practice, beginning in the mid-1980s. Also on view will be examples of his abstract, acrylic on canvas *Neuf* paintings and one commissioned public artwork that will be installed on the exterior wall of the gallery. Heap of Birds, who lives in Oklahoma and has taught Native Studies at University of Oklahoma since 1988, is an enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes.

Heap of Birds has long been a critical voice in contemporary art, one that challenges viewers to reconsider their stereotypical notions of Indigenous tribes, and to confront the facts about how the colonizers of North America tried to strip native cultures of their spiritual practices, their language and their land. Whether it is the romantic view of the noble Indian on horseback, or the use of Indian images and names as mascots for sports teams, or the historic appropriation of native lands, Heap of Birds illuminates this country's genesis through a simple but provocative configuration of words, often in a rainbow of colors, that provokes the viewer to confront the truth.

Heap of Birds is an artist of his time, and his work reflects contemporary art making practices rather than drawing on indigenous aesthetic traditions. He is a conceptual artist who expresses his ideas largely through words. As Bill Anthes writes so eloquently in his eponymous monograph on the artist, "Heap of Birds' text-based works are insistently in the present tense ('TODAY YOUR HOST IS...'), rather than focused on nostalgic representations of Native people in the past – gone and no longer threatening. For Heap of Birds, art making is a kind of symbolic and semiotic warfare, undertaken for community protection." The artist has described his work as "sharp

rocks,” or stone arrowheads found on his reservation, once used for protection and preservation. His sprawling text - like sharp rocks - functions today on a parallel and metaphorical plane.

Much of Heap of Birds work is serial, some of which have been ongoing since the early 1980s. His first *Neuf* painting – ‘neuf’ is the Cheyenne word for the number 4, a significant number that permeates much of indigenous culture – was made in 1981. He has continued to paint this abstract interpretation of the landscape and its inherent energy in a range of palettes and specificity of form. On view at Bockley Gallery are paintings from the 2012 *Neuf series, Nuance of Sky*. Here, the flat abstract, overlapping forms with serrated edges suggest feathers floating or hovering nuggets of energy, or stylized clouds. Conceived in an orchestral palette of blues and greens, these works symbolize the blue of the sky above and its reflection in the water below.

The 1989 text-based screenprint *Telling Many Magpies* had its origin as a die-cut wall installation in 1985. Here, Heap of Birds, using blunt words, demonstrates how the names of Indians and their tribes have been used by dominant culture to name virtually anything. However, it is this same culture that has neglected to recognize the true source of these words – the people behind these names. Disconcertingly, the artist often spells out his words in reverse letters and text to great effect, as he has done here with the word Natural.

This strategy of spelling words in reverse is also seen in the 2017 blue and white banner, mounted on the exterior gallery wall. Commissioned by the gallery, *Native Hosts for Minnesota* is the most recent iteration of his signature *Native Host* series begun in 1988. The first line of text in the 6 by 12 foot banner is the word ‘Minnesota,’ spelled backwards. This is followed by ‘Today Your Host is Cloud Man Village.’ Cloud Man was a Chief of Mdewakanton Dakota and French descent who was born c. 1780. He founded the agricultural community Heyate Otunwe in 1829 on the eastern shores of Bde Maka Ska Bde, or Lake Calhoun, the site of present day Lakewood Cemetery. In 1839, the community abandoned the site to move near the Minnesota River. Here, in the present moment of 2017, it is Cloud Man, our host who has allowed us to live on his native land.

As Anthes clarifies in his book, Heap of Birds uses the reserved text as a strategy to compel viewers and readers to “learn to see and think historically – an injunction against cultural amnesia and forgetting.” It causes the viewer to acknowledge contemporary native culture in the context of the historical past.

Other works in the show include the 2009 *Cross for Tepoztlan*, four of the 48 sign-like steel panels from the 2005 *Ocmulgee* series and the large, 2017 grid-like work, *Sovereign*.

Heap of Birds’ political, multi-disciplinary work is an expression of his Cheyenne-Arapaho identity and his indigenous understanding of place. His philosophy and work has influenced numerous contemporary artists, including the art collective Postcommodity. Their 10-foot in diameter balloon, emblazoned with the ancient, indigenous “open eye,” from their *Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente* public artwork was shown in the gallery this past spring. From his paintings to his public art installations, his work has charted a path for a deeper more critical understanding of not only this country’s history in relation to indigenous tribes, but also what it means to be a contemporary native artist in the 21st century.

HOCK E AYE VI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS was born in 1954 in Wichita, Kansas. He received his B.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Kansas in 1976 and his M.A. in Fine Arts in 1979 from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He also studied at the Royal College of Art in London, England. Honorary Doctor of Fine Arts and Letters degrees have been awarded by Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston (2008) and Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, Canada (2017).

The artist has exhibited his works globally, including The Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, New York, New York, The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia, Documenta, Kassel, Germany, Orchard Gallery, Derry, Northern Ireland, University Art Museum, Berkeley, California, Association for Visual Arts Museum, Cape Town, South Africa, Grand Palais, Paris, France and the Venice Biennale, Italy.

He has lectured widely here and abroad and he was Visiting Professor at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island and the Michaelis School of Art, University of Cape Town, South Africa. He has received grants and awards from The National Endowment for the Arts, Rockefeller Foundation, Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, Lila Wallace Foundation, Bonfil Stanton Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trust and the Andy Warhol Foundation.

Heap of Birds' artwork was chosen by the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian as their entry towards the competition for the United States Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale. He represented the Smithsonian with a major collateral public art project and blown glass works titled "Most Serene Republics" in Venice, in June 2007. In 2012, Heap of Birds was one of fifty artists honored by United States Artists with an individual fellowship award of \$50,000 and named USA Ford Fellow in the Visual Arts.

For further information or press photos please contact Bockley Gallery.

image: *Native Hosts for Minnesota*, 2017, 6 x 12 feet, vinyl banner