

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## BROOKLYN RAIL

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: *Standing Rock Awakens the World*

by Susan Harris

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At Fort Gansevoort, New York, a 30-year survey of the artist's work articulates a political and ethical accountability to the land



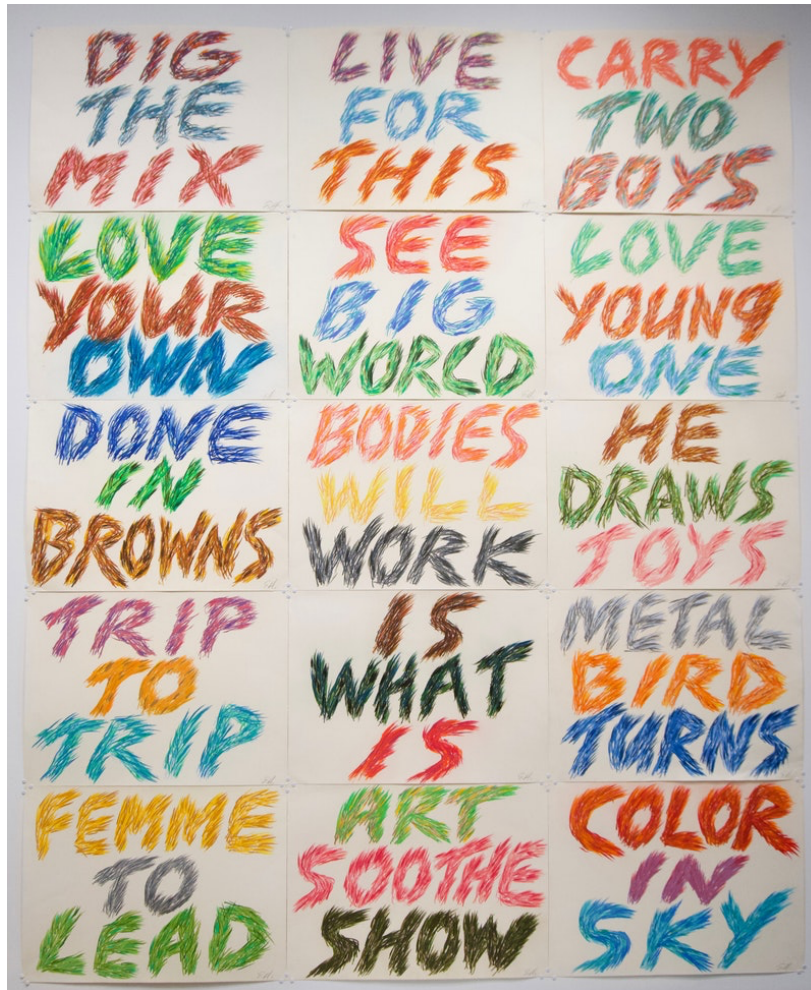
*Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Standing Rock Awakens the World, 2019, 24 primary mono prints and 24 ghost prints on paper, 90 x 176 inches. Courtesy the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York*

Artist, professor, community builder, tribal elder, humanitarian, Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho) is a model for how to live a life that is creative, productive, and authentic. Like his ancestors in the tribal realm, he is and does multiple things, because that is how it has always been. As an artist, he rejects the notion of a solo genius working in a signature style and, instead, finds it natural to have diverse approaches for doing things and expressing himself. His artistic output includes abstract painting, gestural drawing, language-based prints and signs, and public sculpture—all of which are brought together in a compelling mini-retrospective at Fort Gansevoort Gallery. Coming on the heels of a MoMA PS1 exhibition and inclusion in the current Met Breuer's collection show, Heap of Birds is having a New York moment. He has had a prodigious and successful art career traveling and exhibiting throughout the world for over four decades, but his meaningful, beautiful, and resonant work is finally being more broadly presented, contextualized, and received.

The show's title, *Standing Rock Awakens the World*, comes from a new artwork installed on the second floor that is Heap of Birds's response to the 2016 protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline. The work consists of 24 mono prints of white blocky letters on blood-red grounds with

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fugitive pools of water-droplets and 24 “ghost prints”—faded versions of the original prints made with the residual ink. Each sheet has a column of words that form haiku phrases ranging from strident accusations of government violence as with “NATIVE/ FELONY/ GUN/ OWNED/ BY/ FBI/ SPY” to poetic truth telling as with “ANCIENT/ COMET/ GAVE/ US/ GIFT/ WATER.” Protest, poetry, warning, and prayer: the artwork conveys existential crises facing humanity posed by the threat to natural resources from government and corporate powers.



*Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Color in Sky East, 1991,  
15 pastel drawings on paper, 110 x 90 inches.*

Heap of Birds began engaging with language and Conceptual art in the late 1970s while a graduate student at Tyler School of Art. Students extreme reactions to Vito Acconci’s performance and text works and the terse phraseology and cadence of Talking Heads lyrics such as “stop making sense” had a lasting impact. *In Our Language* (1982) was one of his earliest public text-based works. It cited the trapping of the Tsitsistas (Cherokee) by Vehoe (the white man) in Cherokee language, which ran continuously on a digital billboard in 1983 in Times Square and was shown along with works by artists such as Jenny Holzer, David Hammons, and Barbara Kruger.



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Three text works are featured on the ground floor of the current exhibition. *American Policy II* (1987) is a series of 15 boldly-colored pastel drawings of short word clusters that function both as image and language. Drawn with intensely physical, expressive marks, word groups such as “RELOCATE/ DESTROY, SENSOR/ BLOOD/ BONE, FIGHT/ THE/ PRETENSE” strike the viewer like lightning bolts to convey the tragedy of Native American relocation. Similarly in *Boost West* (1990) and *Color in Sky East* (1991), two series of pastel drawings installed on the third floor, the viewer experiences the quality of drawing/writing and the symbolic use of color as intertwined in the subjects of displacement, colonization, and relationship with the earth.

Following his practice of honoring the native inhabitants of the place he is working in, Heap of Birds installed a newly fabricated version of “Native Hosts” (1988–) to bring attention to the original tribes of New York. An ongoing series which Heap of Birds premiered in City Hall Park in 1988, here in the gallery’s garden are eight official-looking metal highway signs in a circle with the letters in NEW YORK reversed at the top to call into question the commonly accepted authority. Below are the words “TODAY YOUR HOST/ IS/ TUSCARORA”—or one of the other 12 tribes native to New York whose presence was essentially wiped out. *Trail of Tears* (2005) is another somber sign/text work on the wall at the entrance of the exhibition. The bland, unassuming aspect of the piece as four bureaucratic signs delays the sinking in of its solemn subject, which is the forced migration of Southeastern tribes to reservations west of the Mississippi.



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar *Heap of Birds, Home Stands Alone*, 1990. Pastel drawing on paper, 22 x 30 inches.

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A large painting from 1996 on the top floor and smaller, more recent paintings on each of the floors reveal the more personal side of Heap of Birds's practice. The interspersing of his abstract paintings with text and sign works throughout the three-floor exhibition effectively conveys the breadth and richness of his art and self. All of the paintings have a lyrical quality and a repeated dreamy, leaf-like shape which, along with his palette, comes from his relationship to the land. He says of their genesis:

Every day I saw the sunset and the sunrise. I started walking in the canyons. I started becoming a creature of the woods, observing cedar trees, juniper trees, the rock outcroppings, the water running off those rocks, the birds I was hunting. The "Neuf" series came out of all these moving shapes. One day I took a canvas down to the canyon, built a little easel, and painted outside on a tiny canvas board. It showed me another way of looking. I'm still making those paintings.

For 40 years, Heap of Birds has been unpacking stereotypes and romanticizations of Native people, exposing painful histories that have been forgotten and/or erased. However, "it's not all about the human justice discourse," he noted during a recent

talk. "The work at the end of the day—I think for all good artists—will in some ways describe you, what you love, what you're fighting for."

In the 1870s, Edgar Heap of Birds's great-great-grandfather, Many Magpie Birds, was a prisoner at Fort Marion, the Florida military base which has become known in modern times for the extraordinary ledger drawings created there by incarcerated Plains Indian artists. Made during the years 1875–78, the Fort Marion ledger drawings are narratives of personal and communal valor and military prowess made during a time when the fabric and underpinnings of the Native American world were being obliterated. As a headsman of the traditional Cheyenne Elk Warrior Society, Heap of Birds continues fighting to keep Cheyenne culture and language alive while carrying on the ledger artists' legacy of resisting erasure, negotiating with and critiquing the dominant society, and recovering tribal/community values. His artworks create opportunities for contemplation, reassessment and, hopefully, healing for Native and non-Native people alike.