

FORT GANSEVOORT

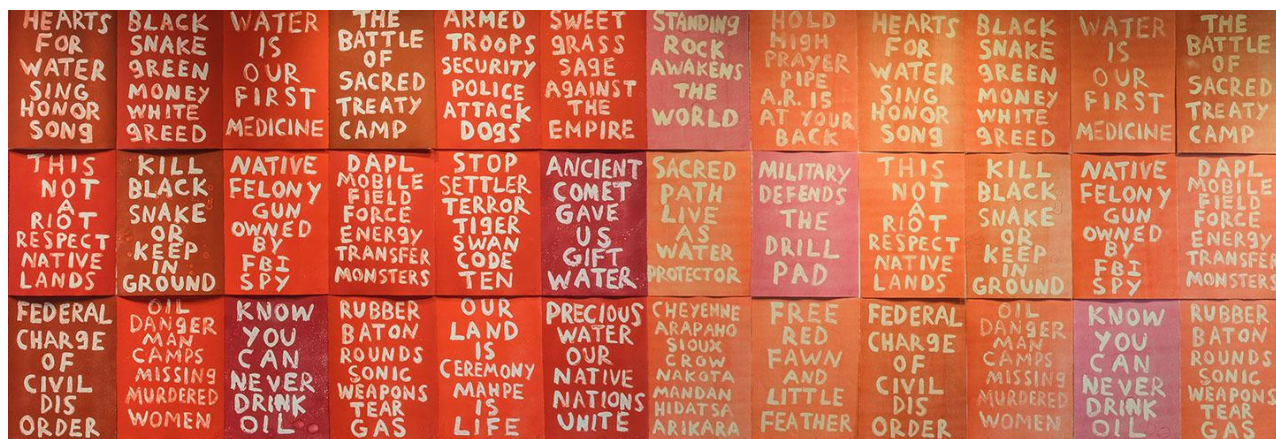
Frieze

The Anti-Imperial Poetry of Edgar Heap of Birds

by Lou Cornum

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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, 2.3 x 4.5 m. Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds works simultaneously in place and on the move. He has been living in Oklahoma City since the 1980s but has shown internationally for decades. His survey exhibition at Fort Gansevoort showcases mock street signs, multiple series of handmade prints, pastel text drawings and paintings spanning over 30 years, all concerned with an ethical experience of place.

Commanding attention on the first-floor gallery is 'American Policy II', a 1987 series of pastel drawings with Heap of Birds's iconic yet idiosyncratic lyrical phrases. The cyborg couplets of 'tarmac hawk' and 'coyote jet' are simultaneously evocative of nature and military equipment. At a distance, the words appear frenetically scrawled; up close, they reveal themselves as masses of vibrating lines. Although these days, his palette is impressionistic, Heap of Birds's colours were initially representational, as he explained in a walk-through of the show: for instance, words he associates with white culture are rendered in pink, such as 'shopping', 'sport' and 'death'.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Trail of Tears, 2005, 4 aluminum panels, 46 × 277 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

The sense of history in Heap of Birds's practice does not fit easily into the retrospective form. In their repeated condemnations of the US government, his works chart the recursive habits of empire. Appropriately, the galleries – extending over three floors – are not organized chronologically, and showcase works from series that were temporarily abandoned and then picked up again, sometimes decades later. Heap of Birds's 'Neuf' (Nine, 1996–ongoing) paintings, for instance, are a revelation: made in series of nine, as their title suggests, only a selection of each is shown here. Though they vary in size and scale, the paintings all depict joyful landscapes in palettes of seasonal flux. Fuzzy clumps of colour overlap atop a hazy ground; in the most recent paintings, completed on wood panels, the artist challenged himself to mix colours without using white. Murky blues and greens appear diffracted through a prism of some other but close-by world. A relationship to land here becomes a new way of seeing.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Color in Sky East, 1991, 15 pastel drawings on paper, 2.8 × 2.3 m. Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

These paintings are not overtly political, but they are anti-imperial all the same. A 2019 selection from Heap of Birds's 'Native Hosts' series (1988–ongoing) – steel panels with 'New York' written backwards in paint – are on view in Fort Gansevoort's yard. Each identifies a local tribe: for instance, 'Today your host is: Montauk', 'Today your host is: Cayuga'. When the works were first commissioned by The Public Art Fund for a 1988 installation at City Hall Park, Mayor Ed Koch demanded that two of the signs be removed. When Heap of Birds refused, the installation was cancelled.

The show culminates with a series of monotype prints, 'Standing Rock Awakens the World' (2019), which reflects on the 2016–17 Dakota Access Pipeline protests and employs the slow, labour-intensive viscosity process, involving the rolling of heavy weight over an etched glass surface. In the prints, the phrase 'military defends the drill pad' appears next to 'sacred path live as water protector' and 'hold high prayer pipe A.R. 15 at your back'. This series, along with the 'American Policy' drawings (1987) a floor below, link the military force used against civilians overseas to the brutal military oppression of Native Americans. In his walk-through, Heap of Birds described the splotches of red ink left around the white words in 'Standing Rock' as gathering pools of blood.

FORT GANSEVOORT



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Neuf from Mexico Sea II, 2019, acrylic on wood panel, 30 × 15 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Through powerful verbal juxtapositions, *Heap of Birds* articulates a political position in support of land-defenders and against militarism and corporate development as well as an ethical position, accountable to the land and the people who live off it. The artist's work prompts us to consider the forces that underlie our bloody and joyful world, so that we might both critique and celebrate what binds us to it.