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Forbes

Native Sovereignty, Color, Movement, And Gesture Unite Diverse Works By Heap Of Birds In Call For Social Justice

by Natasha Gural
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Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds
Neuf Series from Maine 2000
56 in x 70 in Acrylic on canvas
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FORT GANSEVOORT

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds recalls the grueling process of reaching up an enormous 56-inch-by-70-inch canvas two decades ago to create an emotive abstracted landscape *Neuf* painting.

“This painting speaks to sovereignty of where I live and where I have been living,” the multi-media conceptual artist, activist, and educator explained during a walkthrough of his new exhibition, *Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, Standing Rock Awakens the World* at Fort Gansevoort in New York’s Meatpacking District. He describes the color as “somewhat symbolic. Color is part of the optimism and the richness. It’s not all just about the human justice discourse. That’s what’s in the news. This is what gets interesting.”

His earliest *Neuf* paintings, begun in the early 1980s, evoke his lifelong memories of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation landscape. His most recent works, on view as smaller canvases on all three floors of the Fort Gansevoort installation, are painted in Mexico where he spends time with his wife and daughter.

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Music popular at the time fueled the physical, emotional brushstrokes of the monumental *Neuf Series from Maine* (2000), but he now works in silence while painting outdoors in Mexico to avoid disrupting the neighbors.

To Heap of Birds, land is deeper than recorded history, it's "the beginning and the end," and it's what remains after we die.

No doubt every global contemporary art enthusiast has seen work by Heap of Birds. His multi-disciplinary creations have been on view at The Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, museums, galleries, public art installations, and art fairs throughout the United States, Asia, Africa, Canada, and Europe (including the Venice Biennale), as well as the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nations Reservation in his native Oklahoma. (The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribal Nations are a united, federally recognized tribe of Southern Arapaho and Southern Cheyenne people in western Oklahoma.)

One concept unites his public art messages, large-scale drawings, *Neuf* series acrylic paintings, prints, works in glass, and monumental porcelain enamel on steel outdoor sculpture: Native American sovereignty.

For the first time, three decades of his diverse work are on view as a comprehensive career survey until February 22 at Fort Gansevoort.

A tireless advocate for indigenous communities throughout the world, Heap of Birds creates a dialogue for social justice and personal freedom to thrive within the tribal community.



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds Standing Rock Awakens the World, 2019 24 primary mono prints and ... [+]
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The highlight of the second floor is *Standing Rock Awakens the World* (2019), 24 primary mono prints and 24 ghost prints on paper. Physical exertion and color come

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into force again with these works, responding to and chronicling the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, also known by the hashtag #NoDAPL, that began in early 2016 to oppose the approved construction of Energy Transfer Partners' Dakota Access Pipeline in the northern United States.

In April 2016, young people from Standing Rock and surrounding Native American communities organized as "ReZpect Our Water," and the effort compelled adults to establish a water protectors' camp. In September 2016, construction workers bulldozed a section of privately-owned sacred ground, and security workers charged at protesters with attack dogs. The pipeline was completed in April 2017 and its first oil was delivered a month later.

"ANCIENT COMET GAVE US GIFT WATER," one print proclaims. Another declares "OUR LAND IS CEREMONY MAHPE IS LIFE." Mahpe is water in Cheyenne, Heap of Bird's native language, along with English.

Last year, similar works were featured at MoMA PS1 as *Surviving Active Shooter Custer*, with mono prints on the left wall and ghost prints on the right wall. *Standing Rock Awakens the World* displays both connected on one wall, with mono prints on the left and ghost prints on the right. A similar exhibition was on view in 2018 at SITE Santa Fe. "Each one is a discourse of what happened in reference to Standing Rock," Heap of Birds said.

"It's a very complex method. Each 22-inch-by-30-inch sheet requires a plexiglass plate the same size. I create a drawing the same size on newsprint, all written backwards. I have to write backwards with clear liquid. It's a very crazy process you shouldn't be involved with. I use about 2000 Q-tips in one day (to adjust the writing). I need two people to roll plate," Heap of Birds explained. "It's a very intensive process. I make about ten prints a day. (You see) the viscosity of my oil and the viscosity of (the printer's) ink, which has oil mixed in."

Weather and climate create varying effects, Heap of Birds said, noting the most recent prints he created in Hawaii.

"I like that. I want to accept what it gives me," he said. "I take (the prints) outside and apply a special compound which disintegrates a bit."

Pointing to bubbles in the lower left corner of a deep red print that warns "YOU KNOW YOU CAN NEVER DRINK OIL," Heap of Birds notes that the effect looks like human

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blood. “If someone were cut here today, the blood would pool up,” he said. “The print process is going to give us the art.”

Heap of Birds uses four or five shades of red ink, and recently began experimenting with different shades of papers to create variety in the ghost prints. “The contrast is not about the words,” he said.

The ghost prints are created without replenishing the ink to demonstrate “how America thinks of Native people. I always think (the ghost print) is too dark.”

“My tribe sent buffalo meat and water to Standing Rock,” said Heap of Birds. “Standing Rock united different tribes.”

“My favorite is ‘ANCIENT COMET GAVE US GIFT WATER,’” said Heap of Birds. “An ancient comet gave us water. There was no water here. It all came from a comet. ... Standing Rock was about protecting the purity of the water. We can unify over that. Once you have that thirst, you never forget that thirst, so you always honor water.”

Heap of Birds used the term “active shooter” to describe massacres of Native Americans by U.S. troops more than a century ago, and to demonstrate how violent history is cyclical and ongoing.



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds Trail of Tears, 2005 4 aluminum panels 18 in x 109 1/2 in
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Steel parking signs that mark the forced relocation of Native communities, including tribes in New York and Oklahoma as part of the Trail of Tears, continue the dialogue of oppression and wresting power and land back to the people.

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Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds EH007 Color in Sky East 1991 110 in x 90 in 15 pastel drawings on ... [+] COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND FORT GANSEVOORT

Pastel drawings on paper transmute vernacular terms into an art form. Again, color is symbolic (green for growth, pink for white people), and the process is physically taxing.

“It’s very aggressive. I bust a lot of chalk. I tore a ligament in my arm. I don’t make them anymore,” Heap of Birds said. “Gesture goes into the painting. It’s about movement. Impressionism was feared because it’s about movement.”