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HYPERALLERGIC

The Spirits that Haunt the Words of Edgar Heap of Birds

Hyperallergic sat down with Edgar Heap of Birds to discuss his current exhibition at MoMA PS1.

Sheila Regan

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Edgar Heap of Birds with "Health of the People is the Highest Law" (2019) (all images courtesy Edgar Heap of Birds)

In Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: Surviving Active Shooter Custer, on view at MoMA PS1, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation artist, activist, and teacher makes the case that America's atrocities against Native people permeate into our culture today.

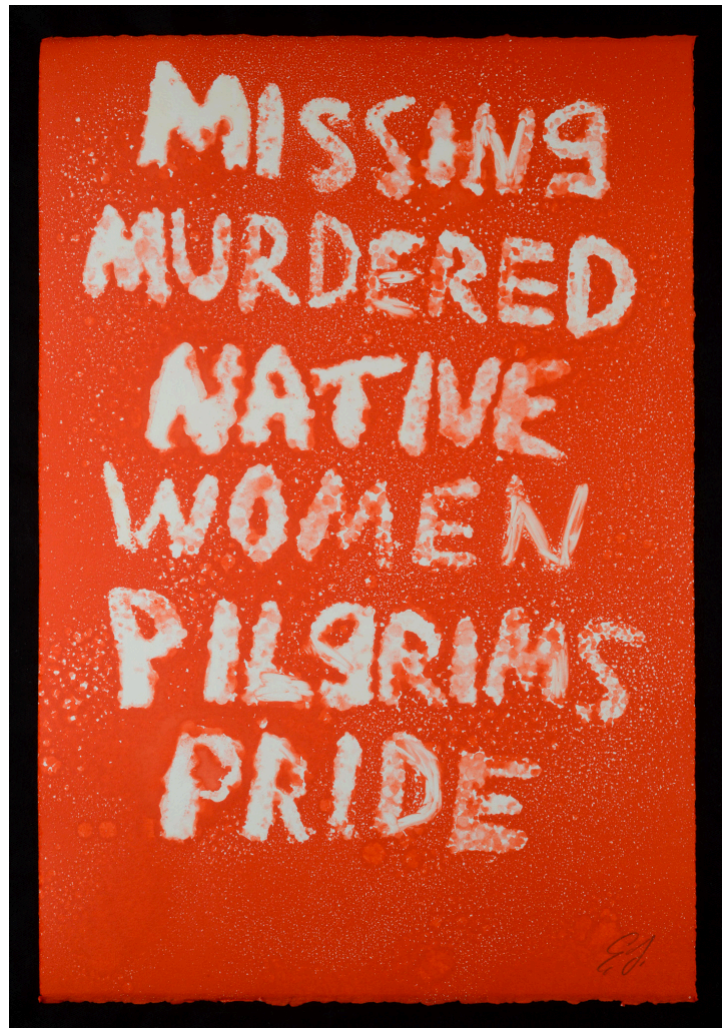
Organized by Curator Ruba Katrib and Curatorial Associate Oliver Shultz, the solo show of 200 works includes a major piece called "Health of the People is the Highest Law" (2019), which deals with Native health issues; as well as the title piece, which connects past violence against Native Americans with current events. The show also features a series of pastel text drawings from 1987 called "American Policy II," Edgar Heap of Birds's more personal "Blue Tree" (2005–

FORT GANSEVOORT

2017) monoprints, and sign pieces called “Trail of Tears” (2005) that are a part of his public art practice.

Hyperallergic: *Could you talk about your aims for Surviving Active Shooter Custer, which seems to reach into history in order to bring context into current discourse about gun violence?*

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: People get very upset about certain shootings, but of course Custer was the main terrorist that came to our country. Being citizens here, it’s important to look at Native history and compare it to the empire’s behavior toward indigenous populations, which is pretty devastating.



Edgar Heap of Birds, “Genocide and Democracy” (2016), monoprint on rag paper, 22 × 15 inches

H: *How does looking at that history inform current debates around gun violence?*

FORT GANSEVOORT

EHOB: The Republic was built on violence. That was where all the genocide happened, and it's still with them in a certain kind of shadowy way. If you go back to how the British and other colonial powers came here — even the kind of medieval thing that Columbus did with cutting off their hands, and in the Pueblo revolt, they cut off their feet. America, the Republic, even in its colonies — has been in an incredibly vicious, violent relationship with Native people.

No one ever dealt with that violence historically. There's no Holocaust museum for Native people. We've lost 50 million Native people, but there's no remark about that anywhere in the government. Like any disfunction, if you don't deal with your disfunction at home, it just gets worse.



Edgar Heap of Birds, "American Policy II" (1987), pastel on rag paper, each: 22 × 30 inches, 90 × 150 inches

H: *Can you talk a little about some of the text in the piece? For example, "Make Uterine Hats your Sport."*

EHOB: That's actually from the Sand Creek Massacre. The Chivington militia were really destined and determined to erase the womb of the Cheyenne babies — the future babies and women. They actually cut out the uterus and wore it as a hat ornament during the massacre. It was sort of their sport — the Cheyenne Uterus.

FORT GANSEVOORT

And then “Fort Marion Cheyenne Camp X-Ray” is about how after the massacre of the Washita with Custer, when they took the women away to be raped, and they took the men — one of my relatives, Heap of Birds, was one of them — and made them POWs. There were no charges. There were no trials, and no due process. I take that and compare it to Guantanamo. They take you and put you away and no one knows where you are, who you are. They can do what they want with you.



Edgar Heap of Birds, “Trail of Tears” (2005), aluminum signs

H: *The pieces read like poems. How do you go about constructing the text?*

EHOB: First I write a note, sometimes in my phone, and then I put them on a vellum piece of paper in my studio and rework it. Then, when I’m getting ready to go to the print studio, I would have three-word phrases and put two of them together, so I would have a total of six words. Then I put them on to a newsprint, and I put the newsprint over on the light table, so I’m actually painting on a clear plate of glass with a clear liquid, doing a monoprint.

I’m ghosting all my prints now, and I intend to hang them like this to talk about this loss. The ghosts are Native citizens today. We’re what’s left from the massacres. I don’t have to repaint them. I just put a second piece of paper off of each plate. They have a whole different kind of

FORT GANSEVOORT

feeling for the lighter tinted piece. The ghost is the remnant of the murders — all the people that have come and gone and the ones that remain are represented by the ghost.



Edgar Heap of Birds, “Health of the People is the Highest Law” (2019), monoprints and ghost prints on creme rag paper, each: 30 × 22 inches, 90 × 352 inches

H: *Your other new installation, “Health of the People is the Highest Law,” seems to reference different health issues that affect Native communities — everything from diabetes and heart failure to suicide rates. What prompted you to use art to take on this topic?*

EHOB: In my own family and in my reservation, we have a lot of problems with health. In Indian country there’s this major catastrophe we are living through. A lot of it comes from the massacre era.

They made the Indians stay on the reservation, and delivered them all this food. It later became a USDA food program. But all that food was horribly unhealthy — high sugar, high salt, high fat, and preservatives. They made the tribes eat that — they couldn’t go hunt elsewhere. Actually the tribe was healthier in 1830 than they are today.

Today we have huge problems with diabetes and heart disease and liver disease, particularly from alcoholism from being so dysfunctional and depressed. The tribe is really struggling, and a

FORT GANSEVOORT

we have a lot of amputees. I have an uncle who lost all of his fingers. He lost all his legs, but he still was a drummer and dancer in the pow wow.

I wanted to call for a return to corn beans and squash — and go back to a healthier time of what we put in our bodies.

H: *One panel I found poignant reads, "Cirrhosis is from having no mentor."*

EHOB: They took the chiefs and warriors away. The first step of any American engagement with the enemy is to kill the leadership. That kind of thing is what brings the cirrhosis — when you have this lack of leadership for many generations.

I'm a priest and an instructor in the ceremony. I have young men right now who I am mentoring to go through the ceremony for four years, and I have another young man who asked me to take him through four years after this coming year. So I'm not just making art about it, I'm living what I'm talking about.



Edgar Heap of Birds, "Blue Tree" (2005–2017), monoprints on rag paper, each: 22 × 15 inches, 66 × 135 inches

H: *Are there any other pieces you wanted to talk about that are part of this show?*

FORT GANSEVOORT

EHOB: The “American Policy II” from 1987 is significant. That work is sort of the nucleus of my text work before it progressed to printmaking, so it’s nice that PS1 shows the historical legacy of how I got to where I am today.

H: *Sounds like you’re not planning on stopping any time soon.*

EHOB: Yeah, and I’m retired from the University of Oklahoma from teaching in June. My career in the public realm is getting more recognized but I’m very productive in the print studio. I don’t have any time to spare.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds: *Surviving Active Shooter Custer continues through September 8 at MoMA PS1 (22-25 Jackson Ave, Long Island City, New York). The exhibition is organized by Ruba Katrib, Curator, with Oliver Shultz, Curatorial Associate, MoMA PS1.*

Correction: A previous version of this article misstated the address of MoMA PS1. We regret the error.