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GOOD

The Message Of This Native American Artist Is Clear: We Demand To Be Seen

Edgar Heap of Birds' paintings are clever and insightful messages

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THE GOOD NEWS:

Contemporary Native American artists are staying true to traditions while defying expectations of what it means to be indigenous.

In "Do Not Dance for Pay," a recent work from acclaimed artist Edgar Heap of Birds, the title phrase appears in white letters that look as if they have been smudged on a blood red background. The statement is also a call to action from the Cheyenne artist who has commented on the issues facing indigenous people throughout his long career.

"In many instances today in Native American art, people make culture into art," says Heap of Birds by phone from Oklahoma City, where he is based. "It exists more as art than as culture. It exists for sale in a gallery or as a dance performed."

Heap of Birds advocates for community participation. "We need to focus on the community, the people and the traditions, not necessarily as subject matter but as actual dances, prayers, the reality of it, not the image of it," he says.

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Edgar Heap of Birds talks about his redefined signs at Pitzer College. Photo by Ted West.

The artist's own distinguished career goes back to the late 1970s. Over the years, his work has appeared in exhibitions across the globe, including institutions like the Museum of Modern Art and esteemed events like the Venice Biennale. A survey of Heap of Birds' work also runs at Garis & Hahn gallery in Los Angeles from Feb. 10 through March 10. He has created public art in cities across North America that has focused on both the legacy and struggles of Native Americans.

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His art takes on a multitude of forms. There are the works you might see in galleries or museums — text-based drawings and prints as well as abstract paintings — that are personal in nature. Then there are his public art projects, including signs that comment on Native American issues. "My public art is more of an issue of power and authority," he says. "We tend to believe signs and text out there in the public realm, but rarely is it dictated by Native people."

Within Heap of Birds' work are themes of history, identity, and justice. At Pitzer College in Southern California, Heap of Birds currently has an exhibition on display called "Defend Sacred Mountains." The show focuses specifically on four sites, all of which are considered sacred to different groups of indigenous people. Three of the mountains — Bear's House (aka Devils Tower) in Wyoming, Bear Butte in South Dakota, and the San Francisco Peaks range in Arizona have become tourist destinations. And Mauna Kea, Hawaii is the future site of the controversial Thirty Meter Telescope. Heap of Birds, who guest lectured on campus around the time of the opening, notes that students were often unaware of the significance and history of these places. "That's what we're really trying to do with that project is to teach citizens and visitors about

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these locations that need to be respected,” he says. “People don’t know, so it’s our duty to try and inform them about it.”



Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, *Native Host (Povunga)*, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Garis & Hahn

Heap of Birds has also spent 30 years as an educator, and while he has taught across the globe, much of his work has been in Native American Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is set to retire in June, but for his final semester he’s teaching a course on Native American film. The day before our interview, he says, the class talked about tourism and how that influenced Hollywood westerns, which, in turn, fueled stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans. “Stereotypes were reiterated by the gaze of the white man toward the Native people and it recurred as deaths,” he says. “Indians were always getting killed in movies and everyone thinks that they’re gone because of the media.” Heap of Birds talks about the work that needs to be done to challenge the stereotypes: “We’ve got to really appear and make a difference and express ourselves,” he says — and that’s something that connects film to art. To help combat the stereotypes, Heap of Birds encourages in-person engagement with Native artists.

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Three paintings by Edgar Heap of Birds. Courtesy of the artist and Garis & Hahn.

“Primarily what I advocate in every case is to meet Native people in the community, reach out, and have them come to class. My students all meet artists in the practice of art,” he explains. Heap of Birds often invites artists to visit the class. Then students write a paper on a living Native American artist whom they interview. “It’s all about face-to-face interaction and not mediated by TV or movies or even a lot of books. Can you actually go and engage these people and feel comfortable and continue to do that, continue to immerse yourself in this culture?”

That real-world interaction with indigenous communities remains part of Heap of Birds’ practice as well. He has learned from and collaborated with indigenous people in places like Australia, South Africa, and Sumatra. He asks, “Can we exist without this history of domination and find a way to enjoy our own existence with other indigenous communities, so that it’s not always being subjugated or harmed by history or the white man and always focusing only on this victimization?”

It’s not that Heap of Birds’ art reflects his culture so much that his culture is an inextricable part of his life. Although he is retiring from his university career, Heap of Birds will continue to teach as a mentor for younger members of his tribe.

“For me, the culture primarily is the underpinning, the foundation, for the life I live in Oklahoma. So, I can do anything I want to do because I’m about the community and the land, the plants,” says Heap of Birds. “If you have a solid foundation, you can explore all kinds of investigations and that’s been my privilege — to have a strong tie to the culture in my actual everyday life and not make it to be art about culture.”