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A Retrospective of Edgar Heap of Birds Rises High

With public art pieces, biting political, text-based work, and more intimate abstract paintings, this small exhibition illuminates Heap of Birds's expansive career.

Sheila Regan

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Edgar Heap of Birds, "Sovereign Series" (2017) mono print (all images by the author for Hyperallergic, unless otherwise noted)

MINNEAPOLIS — The Bockley Gallery currently has on view a mini-retrospective of the work of Edgar Heap of Birds (whose Cheyenne name is Hock E Aye VI), which contains examples of different bodies of work the Cheyenne/Arapaho artist has created over his extensive career. With public art pieces, biting political, text-based work, and more intimate abstract paintings,

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the small exhibition carries a pummeling point of view, illuminating Heap of Birds's expansive career.

The exhibition comes several months after Heap of Birds visited Minneapolis to give a talk at the Walker Art Center, which at that moment was embroiled in controversy over Sam Durant's 2012 "Scaffold" sculpture, as well as the touring Jimmie Durham retrospective, recently opened at the museum. The now dismantled "Scaffold," which referenced seven historical gallows, including one that hung 38 Dakota warriors at the end of the U.S. Dakota War, had enraged local Native communities, and questions of Durham's Cherokee identity caused members of Native communities both locally and nationally, to further distrust the Walker.

In his lecture, Heap of Birds talked about his own work with communities — with the Cheyenne and Arapaho nations, as well as Native and non-Native communities around the world. In 1990, he had even made his own piece concerning the U.S. Dakota War, but did so in a way that allowed the local Dakota communities in Minnesota to give input and blessing to the project.



Edgar Heap of Birds, "Native Hosts for Minnesota," 2017 (vinyl banner)

You can see in the Bockley exhibition that impulse to elevate issues and concerns held within Native communities. Heap of Birds's work can be sharply critical, even with the artist's conscientiously formal practice. Greeting both visitors and passersby is an installation hung on the brick wall outside the gallery. The oversized sign is designed to look like a road sign, with its sans serif font, blue typeface, and plain border. At the top, "Minnesota" is spelled backwards, followed by the words "Today Your Host is Cloud Man Village."

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According to Bill Anthes's book, *Edgar Heap of Birds*, the artist began his "Native Hosts" series back in 1988. Like the new commission displayed outside Bockley Gallery, the "Native Hosts" contain the "settler" name of a place written backwards, with the Native Host spelled forward, welcoming the viewer. Like many place names around the country, Minnesota is a derivation of a Native American word ("Mní sóta" means clear blue water in Dakota), but its appropriation by a state responsible for many atrocities against Native people warrants Heap of Birds's critical treatment. Cloud Man Village, meanwhile, was a short-lived community led by Dakota chief Cloud Man, on the banks of the Bde Maka Ska lake in the heart of Minneapolis. After leading the community for 10 years, following the Dakota war, Cloud Man was later imprisoned at Pike Island where he die



Edgar Heap of Birds Exhibition at Bockley Gallery, Minneapolis (courtesy Bockley gallery)

Bockley Gallery is located in a picturesque neighborhood, within walking distance of both Lake of the Isles and Cedar Lake. It's a residential area, with a few storefronts on the same block, including a restaurant and a book store owned by Anishinaabe author Louise Erdrich. The choice to hang a work in public reminding neighbors of some unpleasant history is slyly subversive, but abrasive. Its cheerful message subtly presses the viewer to learn more about the place where they live.

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Edgar Heap of Birds, “Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi,” (1989) screen print

Inside the gallery are works from 1989 to 2017. The oldest, “Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi” (1989), is a screen print that makes a political message that’s as relevant today as when Heap of Birds created it. Like the “Native Hosts” series, the artist writes the top word backwards. In this case, the word is “Natural.” Beneath it is the text:

WE DON'T WANT INDIANS

JUST THEIR NAMES

MASCOTS

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MACHINES

CITIES

PRODUCTS

BUILDINGS

And then at the bottom, printed in larger letters is “LIVING PEOPLE.” Around the text are black smudges, abstractions of black birds in flight. The stark poem calls out the commercialized primitivism that is pervasive across American Society — in sports team insignia or Land O’ Lakes butter which use stereotypical images of Native Americans, that are divorced from contemporary life.



Edgar Heap of Birds, “Cross for Tepoztlan”, (2009) pastel on paper

While the “Magpies” piece critiques stereotyping Native people, other works offer more specific messages. “Cross for Tepoztlan” (2009) for instance, arranges nine pastel text drawings into a cross. The words the artist uses poetically refer to the destruction of a culture by the Spanish,

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when they conquered and colonized the Tlaluca nation in what is now Morelos, Mexico. The words are sparse, but keenly chosen. “Church Destroy Medicine” reads one drawing, the letters created by furious slashes with a pastel.

For his “Sovereign” monoprints, Heap of Birds takes on Native American casinos. He doesn’t offer commentary, but lets the listing of the names of such establishments offer it’s own opportunity for debate about the value of sovereignty and the ownership of income-generating institutions at the cost of societal ills such as gambling and alcohol addiction. The piece also recalls Heap of Birds’s earlier “Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf, Telling Hachivi” piece, by showing ways in which Native culture gets commodified to attract non-Native customers.



Edgar Heap of Birds, “Ocmulgee” series, (2015) steel panels

In the “Ocmulgee” series, the text once again reads like minimalist literature. The four works, originally installed outdoors in a posh Atlanta neighborhood, according to Anthes, look like road signs. They are strung together as if stanzas of one poem mourning the “Trail of Tears” walked by the Southeastern tribes of the United States, following the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Seemingly unassuming, these pieces are rife with the anger of a people who have not forgotten the harm done to them.

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Edgar Heap of Birds, "Nuance of the Sky", Neuf Series, 2012, acrylic on canvas

Also included in the exhibit are Heap of Birds's "Neuf" paintings, which at first seem like anomalies. These abstract landscapes don't contain texts, as Heap of Birds's other works do. Instead, they convey the poetry of the hues and color of the land. In his book about the artist, Anthes notes that these landscapes don't contain a horizon line or perspective: tools for colonization in the view of some Native theorists. Instead, Heap of Birds inserts viewers into the land itself, surrounding them, demonstrating what it means to be a part of the land, rather than mapping it to conquer it. The paintings are meditative and serene, but share a political message with Heap of Birds's other work.

Heap of Birds's showing at Bockley offers a small taste of the immense body of work this artist has created over a number of decades, and the only improvement I can suggest is that he deserves much more recognition. If there's one thing that I've learned from the "Scaffold" and Jimmie Durham controversies, it's that there's a need for more attention to be paid to Native artists working in contemporary practices.

Edgar Heap of Birds runs through October 21 at Bockley Gallery (2123 West 21st Street, Minneapolis).