

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## Art in America

**IN THE STUDIO: HOCK E AYE VI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS**

William S. Smith

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IN 1981, Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds (Cheyenne/Arapaho) packed up his studio in Philadelphia and drove his Volkswagen bus to Oklahoma, where he has lived ever since. A director of Just Above Midtown Gallery in New York, where Heap of Birds had exhibited work with other emerging artists, including Ana

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Mendieta, warned that he would be crazy to go. “No one will ever hear from you again if you move out there,” Heap of Birds recalls the gallerist saying.

Heap of Birds spent part of the early '80s living in a remote canyon on a Cheyenne reservation, which is not, in fact, an obvious place for a former student at the Royal College of Art in London with an MFA from Tyler School of Art at Temple University in Philadelphia to make his name. Yet the setting defined the direction for his life and career. Heap of Birds immersed himself in the Cheyenne tribal community, eventually taking a leadership role in the ceremonial Traditional Elk Warrior Society. He also gained a clearer vantage on what would become the core themes of his mature artwork. Rather than accepting the power dynamics underlying the relationship between center and margin, New York and the reservation, he began working to expose—and subvert—those dynamics.

If Conceptual artists of the 1960s and '70s employed language as material, Heap of Birds wields words like weapons. The pithy phrases he scrawls on paintings and monoprints are searing indictments, calling out state violence against Indigenous people. *Genocide and Democracy* (2016) comprises sixteen prints saturated in sanguine ink and adorned with brutal truths: AFTER / NATIVE / GENOCIDE / U.S. / PROUD / DEMOCRACY, reads one. Such works take direct aim at historical narratives that obscure the Native presence in the United States; in other pieces, Heap of Birds's phrases are more personal and expressive, asserting his individual subjectivity as a Native person. Rejecting a dichotomy between protest and poetry, he has created a multifaceted body of work that also includes his ongoing “Neuf” series, sensual abstract paintings rooted in personal memories of landscapes and hallucinatory visions.

The questions Heap of Birds has been asking for decades have recently moved to the center of national debates. At a time when activists are calling for statues of Confederate leaders to be removed from civic spaces, sparking pointed arguments about how and by whom history is represented, Heap of Birds's public art offers a trenchant model for contemporary monumentality. Elements of his “Native Hosts” series, begun in the late 1980s, resemble metal regulatory signs or institutional place markers. Installed in outdoor public spaces, Heap of Birds's signs identify the tribes that inhabited the land prior to colonization, naming them as “hosts” and printing the official name of the site backward. The first of these, realized in New York's City Hall Park in 1987, asserted historical tribal sovereignty in the art capital he had been “crazy” to leave. NEW YORK TODAY YOUR HOST IS WERPOE, one sign announced.

Often bypassing professional art world circuits on trips to rural communities in Indonesia and Australia, Heap of Birds has established ties with Indigenous groups around the globe, participating in workshops on traditional craft and creating collaborative artwork. He is quick to point out that his Native heritage alone is not sufficient to facilitate these exchanges. He counters cultural appropriation with calls for deep collaboration. I spoke with Heap of Birds several times this spring and summer on the phone and in person in conversations that spanned multiple venues in New York and Oklahoma, where he maintains a studio and teaches at the University of Oklahoma in Norman.

WILLIAM S. SMITH I'm curious about the phrase “Do Not Dance for Pay,” which appears on the print you made for the cover of this issue.

HOCK E AYE VI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS “Do Not Dance for Pay” is related to another piece I did with the phrase “Conduct as if Elders Stand Among You.” I heard that from Hawaiian poets who were protesting construction on the sacred mountain Mauna Kea. I thought that was a great way to think of how to live. When you're around your elders, you act differently. You're more respectful. I'm aware of that when I'm

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in the art world and in urban centers, where claims about Native culture aren't necessarily monitored by elders.

I just took care of two dancers during our Cheyenne solstice ceremony, which can be life-threatening because it involves fasting for three days in the summertime with no water. It's very grueling—and very spiritual. But there, everyone knows who I am. They know who my dancers are, and we're all moving through the ceremony together as we've done for many years. That's the way I see Native America: as a tribal community of elders, children, and families. In the solstice ceremony no one is dancing for pay. Nothing there is for sale. There's no market anywhere nearby. So when you leave that traditional place for some contemporary, urban experience, what is your motivation for expressing yourself? If elders were watching you, would you be doing the same thing?

SMITH What is your motivation, then, for taking part in the global contemporary art world?

HEAP OF BIRDS The real mission of my art is to reset history, to be truthful about what happened to Native people. In the Cheyenne Warrior Society, part of my ceremonial responsibility is [pq]“You can't instantiate the real, ceremonial, memorial time of prayers or dances in a gallery.”[/pq] to protect. I see protecting Indigenous people around the world as a big part of my job as an artist. I've worked in Africa and Asia—I was in Indonesia recently meeting with tribal weavers and talking about their practice. Rather than attending an art fair, I'm more interested in going to Sumatra and working with the weavers around Lake Toba, a volcanic lake.

SMITH But you also work with major art institutions and address audiences that include non-Native people. Where do you draw the line between traditional, community-based modes of expression and contemporary art? Some of your work seems to straddle that line. Your outdoor sculpture *Wheel* [2005], at the Denver Art Museum, for example, features a circular arrangement of forked columns that resemble structures used in ceremonial architecture. But you've modified the surrounding landscape and deliberately withheld certain elements from the structure, such as a roof.

HEAP OF BIRDS Some of my work is guided by what I see and hear in ceremonial settings. I've got to be true to those origins. But when I'm dealing with ceremonial knowledge, I've also got to be careful not to try to replace a Native activity with contemporary art. You can't instantiate the real, ceremonial, memorial time of prayers or dances in a gallery. For *Wheel* I took out two of the trees in the area so as not to make it like the actual ceremonial site that we choose every year to build a temporary structure. We already go through that process; we don't need a site that stands every day. But some Native American visitors, especially Plains Indian visitors, still recognize the place. I was with some of them who made it a place to pray, which I found very gratifying. It's not a one-way process; it's always a dialogue.

SMITH It seems as if that dialogue has been a key aspect of your practice since the early 1980s.

HEAP OF BIRDS Early in my career I returned to Oklahoma and rebuilt my grandmother's house on the reservation. I had no money and no plan, and I just wanted to go back to this 500-acre canyon and be there, immersing myself in tribal life. But at the same time, I was still exhibiting art, teaching, and traveling. In '82 I did a project with the Public Art Fund, showing a piece I'd made on the digital billboard in Times Square. It displayed sentences that included the words “Tsitsistas,” which is what we Cheyenne call ourselves, and “Vehoe,” our word for spiders and white men. Keith Haring, David Hammons, Barbara Kruger, and many more also did works for the billboard. I prepared mine from the canyon, composing the texts on little cards. And then there it was, my first public artwork, in Times Square.

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SMITH You grew up in Wichita, Kansas, and had some formal art training through college. But when did you engage with Conceptual art and start asking critical questions about history and identity in your work? Was that in graduate school?

HEAP OF BIRDS Yes, but it was a struggle at Tyler because there were few people of color on the faculty. My buddy, Stanley Whitney, was an exception. I count him as one of my great friends. He was a key influence on my painting in particular. The huge earthquake for me was when Vito Acconci came to Tyler. He gave a talk one night that polarized the grad school. Some students were there for all the wrong reasons—they were there for finishing school, basically. They hated Vito's talk. They said Vito's work wasn't even art. And I said, "That's the best art I've seen in my life!" He showed me how to address sexuality and gender. He didn't show me much about race, but the personal, intense reactions to his work stuck with me.

SMITH Is that when language became central to your art?

HEAP OF BIRDS Yes, and I credit some of it to the Talking Heads. We were all disciples of the Talking Heads at that time. David Byrne used a lot of three-word phrases like "stop making sense." On a formal level, that phraseology and cadence fascinated me. So I used to make little notes to myself, with a few words or short phrases. I hung these notes on the wall, and later I realized I could make bigger pieces out of them in pencil and pastel.

I later took one of these drawings to Michael McCabe, a Navajo master printer at Fourth Dimension Studio in Santa Fe. He showed me a process called viscosity printing, which I really enjoy. I write out words backward in oils of various grades that cut the ink in different ways. Works like *Genocide and Democracy* and *Dead Indian Stories* were made this way. The ink's blood red, so they look like a crime scene when blood pools up on a flat surface.

SMITH Is that related to backward writing in your "Native Hosts" series?

HEAP OF BIRDS That's coming from a different place. I flip the name of the province or the state as a way of displacing its authority. The works are meant to degrade the states and provinces and cities, and to have the Native world rise back up. It's about asserting sovereignty, and calling yourself or a tribe a "host" is a gentle way of asserting ownership. Native people are hosts, considerate hosts. We accept America into our living room, but we're not Americans. When Native people were granted citizenship, it was applauded as a benevolent gesture. But no one asked us if we wanted to be citizens. Do we want to be citizens of this republic? I don't think so.

Sovereignty is the key to the individual rights of a nation, and to the people within a nation. That's why questions about identity and tribal membership are important to understand. The "Native Host" pieces are very specific about which tribes are being acknowledged in which locations.

I made the first "Native Hosts" signs in New York's City Hall Park when Ed Koch was mayor. I picked twelve New York tribes and made a sign for each of them. NEW YORK TODAY YOUR HOST IS SHINNECOCK; NEW YORK TODAY YOUR HOST IS TUSCARORA, and so on. More than twelve tribes occupied the New York City area at various times. But the Cheyenne never did, and so there's nothing about the Cheyenne in the work. I don't matter in New York in terms of tribal affiliation. I just stepped aside and let the New York tribal voices be heard through my art [pq]"Whenever I come to a new place, I try to understand the memorial aspect first, and then we can go on and do formal experiments or whatever else typ

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ifies contemporary art.”[/pq]practice. I don’t do many “Native Host” signs in Cheyenne because, for me, this stepping aside is part of the piece. Even if you’re native, you can’t take over and make a site your own place if it’s not.

The “Native Host” works are accessible, and I’ve been invited to do them around the country. I think they’re popular in part because they’re not very explicit about all the horrible things that have happened to Native people. They’re courteous nods toward sovereignty. But when you start to get specific about history, as in *Genocide and Democracy*, that’s when everyone gets very worried that some reality is going to slip out through the cracks, and we’ll start talking about massacres, poverty, dysfunction on the reservation. All these things are the reality. But you’re ostracized if you speak about it in a specific way, and many Native artists don’t even approach content like this. It’s not even on the table because they see the outcome: that someone’s going to censor them, or they’re going to be cut off from the ability to sell their work.

SMITH *Building Minnesota* [1990], the public artwork you made at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, deals with a specific history: the hanging of forty Dakota men in the 1860s.

HEAP OF BIRDS That piece is a memorial to forty warriors who were executed—thirty-eight by Lincoln and two by Andrew Johnson. I made signs for each warrior with their family name and positioned them down by the Mississippi River. They were Northern Plains people who all went to the same ceremony I do. They fasted without water. So I put them by the water in an arc formation and I poured flour on the ground in a line connecting the signs. Descendants of the executed warriors came there and tied eagle feathers and bundles of ceremonial objects to the signs. They took it as a memorial site.

SMITH The artist Sam Durant recently created a sculpture for the Walker—a large wood gallows structure—that was meant to memorialize the same execution. But Dakota leaders were upset by the piece and asked the museum to dismantle it, which they did. What was your reaction to that episode?

HEAP OF BIRDS It was a failure because Native people were not included in the symbolic commemoration of their history. If I went to Australia and proposed that I make a project about renewal for Aboriginal history, but I talked only to non-Aboriginal people about it, I’d be a total idiot, right? You would never do that in Australia, so why would you do it in America? You need the actual community members first, and you need to stay with them.

The gallows project had a few other stops before it came to Minneapolis. It originated in Europe. And that’s the problem with these international art world–type projects: they rarely deal with the places where they’re realized. Artworks about specific histories can’t be treated like pieces on a chessboard. They’re not actually transferrable from site to site. You’ve got to deal with the people who are on the ground and the history that’s on the ground.

SMITH You spoke about Jimmie Durham’s work at the opening of his retrospective at the Walker, which happened to coincide with the controversy about Durant’s sculpture. Durham’s claim to Cherokee identity has been challenged by some Cherokee people. How do you engage in such debates about tribal identity?

HEAP OF BIRDS I guess I just call everybody out. Being part of a tribe is not about having an ID card. What difference does that make? Who’s going to drive people to the medical clinic when they need help? Who’s going to pick up the diabetes medicine for someone’s grandmother? We have some deaths

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on the reservation—some are from violence. Who's going to help bury that child? Who's going to help these kids who have no parents? Those are the important questions. That's tribal.

Enrollment is the business of the tribe, whether it's through ceremonial leaders or elected officials. That's up to them. But I would take it even a step further and really ask: Who's going to donate the wood for the ceremonial leader to make that ceremony? Who's going to help them if they don't have any money because they're too busy with the prayers? Who's going to help others learn those prayers to send them out again later? That's what real identity is to me.

SMITH Many of your works function as memorials. Why is that important to you?

HEAP OF BIRDS The Southern Cheyenne and the other Prairie tribes have social dances for birthdays, graduations, for honoring elders. We have these dances with the drum in the center. They're more social than religious. But the first song we sing is always a memorial song, and everyone stands. And then if you've lost your mother, your father, your cousin—it's a time to think about those spirits. After that song is over, we'll have warrior society songs, a chief song, and then later we'll just have a big party, dance, have fun, tell jokes. But the first thing is to have that moment to remember those who passed.

I often think of my artwork in this way. Sometimes I'll come to a certain location and find that no one has sung the memorial song yet. No one's really acknowledged the loss. In Australia, for example, they haven't acknowledged fully the loss of all those Aboriginal children, all those lives, the land. Whenever I come to a new place, I try to understand the memorial aspect first, and then we go on and do formal experiments or multimedial collaborative projects, or whatever else typifies contemporary art. But first we need to have that acknowledgment.

Often my public art is the first memorial song. That's what I did at the Venice Biennale in 2007. People didn't even know that tribal members were dead and buried all over Europe. Twenty or more Sioux warriors and children died while traveling with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, which toured Europe in 1890. Many of them died in Italy; one guy died in Rome after he went and saw the Pope. The Biennale is a big spectacle of horrible "solo genius" contemporary art where only the solo genius is being celebrated, so I wanted to come and acknowledge all those warriors who died, putting up signs around Venice with their names and saying NATIVE SPIRITS PERISHED. I saw it as my mission to have that song sung. Then, after that, you can have the solo genius things.

SMITH Do you think of your abstract paintings as different from that "solo genius" thing?

HEAP OF BIRDS Within the tribal realm, going back hundreds of years, there weren't defined jobs, like a doctor or a hunter. There was a multitasking way of living for everybody. There were four or five things you could do well and contribute to the community. And I didn't think this through in a deliberate way, but my art practice has turned out to be the same. You do what's needed.

I keep talking about community, but as a modern person I want to express all my different levels of awareness. Painting is important to me. Printmaking, public art, sculpture, teaching: all these things have equal weight. So I don't pick one thing, which flies in the face of the Euro art marketing model. If you do one thing, you can sell it better.

When I was in London working on my paintings at the Royal College of Art in the late '70s, they called me a Neo-Constructivist. They thought I was a Bauhausian guy because I was making really angular, geo

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metric work. And all the Europeans thought, “Oh, this is about me. This is about my tradition.” But my paintings were about the Oklahoma sunset, and about Cheyenne beadwork. They thought I was a young guy looking at De Stijl, which I did love because it reminded me of my grandma’s moccasins. So I remember making one painting with forms reminiscent of De Stijl work, then I painted on some of my grandmother’s beadwork designs. I put the two shapes, coming from two traditions, on the canvas and had them fight. I had to see who would win and where I would go. The beadwork won, of course, and I went to the Indian side.

When I returned to Oklahoma I couldn’t continue that geometrical stuff. It felt like I was living on top of the horizon line above that canyon: every day I saw the sunset and the sunrise. I started walking in the canyons. I started becoming a creature of the woods, observing cedar trees, juniper trees, the rock outcroppings, the water running off those rocks, the birds I was hunting. The “Neuf” series came out of all these moving shapes. One day I took a canvas down to the canyon, built a little easel, and painted outside on a tiny canvas board. It showed me another way of looking. I’m still making those paintings.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW Work by Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds in “An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940–2017,” at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, through fall 2017.