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New Bockley Gallery show reflects history of American Indians in south Minneapolis

Artist Edgar Heap of Birds incorporates local history for his solo exhibition at Bockley Gallery.

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Edgar Heap of Birds' "Nuance of Sky #1, Neuf series"

When artist Edgar Heap of Birds arrives to a new city for an exhibition, he thinks about how he can honor the place and the indigenous people who live there.

In his newest self-titled solo exhibition at Minneapolis' Bockley Gallery, Heap of Birds showcases art spanning his long career, from text-based conceptual pieces produced in the 1980s and '90s, to abstract paintings from his colorful 2012 Neuf series. Then there's the new signage series titled "Native Hosts for Minnesota" (2017).

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“Native Hosts” incorporates three large-scale signs, each with white background and light blue letters. One spells out: “ATOSENNIM” (that’s Minnesota spelled backward) with smaller text below that reads: “TODAY YOUR HOST IS BDE MAKKA SKA,” a reference to the renaming of Lake Calhoun.

“I support all the renaming and the activism that is going on with the native community in Minneapolis,” the artist explained. “They have unmasked Calhoun as sort of a villain who created the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Most of these founding fathers are not the best people.”

Another sign from the “Native Hosts” series reads: “ATOSENNIM TODAY YOUR HOST IS CLOUD MAN VILLAGE.” And another: “ATOSENNIM TODAY YOUR HOST IS HEYATA OTUNWE.”

Heyata Otunwe, or Cloud Man Village, was a 19th-century agricultural community founded in what is now south Minneapolis by the Mdewakanton Dakota chief Cloud Man. White settlers saw the development as evidence of assimilation. However, those living and working at Cloud Man Village simply persisted with their Dakota way of life. The community was abandoned in 1839 after just 10 years. Cloud Man died at Pike Island in the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862.

Heap of Birds’ approach differs from most artists working today, who arrive to a place, hang their work for their exhibition, meet with the people who helped organize it and then go home or (if they’re lucky) move along to the next show. He became interested in Cloud Man Village while researching the history of Bockley Gallery’s Lake of the Isles neighborhood. So he dug a little deeper, even interviewing living relatives of Cloud Man himself.

Native history and place

A professor at the University of Oklahoma and a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes, Heap of Birds spent the past four decades creating work that addresses the genocide of American Indians. His art dismantles stereotypes, it confronts the romanticization of native people. And despite the heaviness of his subject matter, Heap of Birds often employs humor and irony.

Uncovering and honoring native history is at the heart of Heap of Birds’ work, an endeavor straddling both art and activism. Honoring place is another integral part of his practice. He recently participated in “Without Boundaries” at the Anchorage Museum, creating a series of panels honoring each of Alaska’s 12 major tribes.

“You go back and honor the original citizens who would have inhabited these areas,” he explained, “just to be aware that you’re on Indian Territory, wherever you go, and you need to have some respect for that.”

“Native Hosts” is not the first work Heap of Birds created after investigating the Upper Midwest’s dark early history. In 1990, he installed a project called “Building Minnesota” with the Walker Art Center. The series incorporated 38 signs along the Mississippi River in Minneapolis,

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one for each 40 Dakota citizens executed in Minnesota on orders of Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson in 1862 and 1865 following the U.S.-Dakota War.

The Bockley show includes plenty of non-Minnesota work, such as the “Sovereign” series, a collection of red and orange monoprints with white lettering that spells out various native-sounding names. Almost all are made up, but onlookers could easily mistake them for glitzy casino marquee signs, lending the pieces a rather tongue-in-cheek feel.

Casinos are an important source of revenue, noted Heap of Birds, providing tribes with resources for elder care and youth programs.

“One of the things that native people have been able to squeeze out of the genocide is having national rights within the reservation,” he said. “After all the poverty, genocide and dysfunction, they can help themselves with these enterprises. So it’s really important.”

Then again, there’s a certain friction to the series, the way it plays with casino branding and stereotypes about native culture. The pieces have their own humor, but the joke is really on viewers who mistake the prints for signs representing real casinos.

“I like that people don’t know what they are — unless they’re a gambler they might,” said Heap of Birds with a chuckle. “I really enjoy that moment when they think, ‘Oh, that might be a casino! They had a good buffet. I ate a lot of food there that I liked.’ ”