

# URBAN SHAMAN GALLERY CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ART



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THAT WERE ONCE BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN

## Feature: Remembering in America: Toward a Critical Dialogue

by Shanna Ketchum

Contemporary artist **HOCK E AYE VI Edgar Heap of Birds** (Cheyenne/Arapaho) provides a critical context for analyzing both the individual and collective conscience of Native peoples living in the Americas. With art that structures time, place, and meaning into text-based messages, Heap of Birds succeeds in reclaiming the political status of art by simultaneously engaging and challenging the history of the United State's relationship to its indigenous populations and the natural environment.



Image 1 | Image 2 | Image 3

Most notably, the artist has displayed a quote from the American Declaration of Independence on an outdoor billboard (on the corner of Ellice Avenue and Smith Street) that captures the social conscience of an era in American history when state power maintained an incendiary position toward Native inhabitants by declaring them "merciless Indian savages." While the rest of the original document proclaims all men to be created equal with certain unalienable rights, Heap of Birds's billboard deftly reveals the hypocrisy inherent in the text while actively implicating the constitution of the work of art into public space.

As with many public art pieces whose realization depends upon audience participation, Heap of Birds embraces a collective model in deference toward revealing the full social humanity of the experiences of Native people living in the Americas. This integration of Native consciousness into the billboard text successfully necessitates a reordering of structures of power since meaning is often subject to multiple interpretations in the public realm. Indeed, as one scholar put it, "hostile or harmonious, the world resonates with the human presence, intrudes upon it, and will not be denied."[1]

In tandem with his billboard project, the artist strikes a balance at Urban Shaman Gallery with an exhibition of his prints, drawings, and metal Native Host signs that bespeak a private vision focused upon expressing the complexities often scarcely revealed concerning the conditions of modern Indian existence in the US. The challenge that Heap of Birds sought to address in these works are historically and ideologically connected to the image of the Indian as savage (as in the Declaration of Independence), whose humanity and freedom are continuously denied to him/her even in the present era.





Image 1 | Image 2

By addressing America's policy toward its minority populations and international relations, Heap of Birds used varying color pastels to form word phrases in "American Policy" that narrate US actions and artistic intervention. Often, the image that comes through is an interrogation of the history of violence, subjugation, and oppression shared by Native cultures.

In "Native Hosts," these series of metal signs have been publicly installed in various cities in the US and Canada to likewise highlight the presence of Native peoples in those areas by revealing the names of places written backwards as a directive for viewers to "turn around" and remember Native history.



Image 1 | Image 2



On a more personal note, Heap of Birds has also created a whole new series of monoprints titled "This Is Being" to offer a corollary experience that is entirely positive and comes from a decidedly sensual and personal affect. In fact, the artist believes that "as Native people, we are often relegated to act only as victims or radicals. We must also allow ourselves the human privilege to behave in sensuous ways as well." [2]

By offering both public and private perspectives on the Native experience in America, Heap of Birds has presented a significant body of work that exceeds ordinary expectation and inspires communicative exchange.

[1] Hilde Hein, "What is Public Art?: Time, Place, and Meaning," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 54, No. 1. (Winter, 1996), pp. 1-7.

[2] Edgar Heap of Birds, interview by author, Oklahoma City, OK., 17 June 2006.

Shanna Ketchum (Navajo) is a critic and art historian of contemporary Native American art. Her articles have appeared in major publications such as *Third Text* (London), *Estrago* (Latin America), Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian and the Plains Art Museum (USA). Ketchum has also lectured, both nationally and internationally, about contemporary issues in Native art at UCLA, California Institute for the Arts, Central St. Martins (London), and Bandung Institute of Technology (Java).

ConunDrum Online: Issue # 3 - Remembering in America

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