

**Hock E
Aye VI
Edgar Heap
of Birds**

Independent Artist
Southern Cheyenne,
Oklahoma, USA

INTERVIEW WITH HOCK E AYE VI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS

Laura: The first question I would like to ask is how you prefer to be introduced.

Edgar: Well, I would go with my Cheyenne name, it's Hock E Aye VI then Edgar Heap of Birds.

L: How do you conceptualize your pieces and how do you decide on the narratives that you're using in your art work?

E: Well, I guess all of it comes from real experiences, real occurrences in my life. Or I have empathy toward different issues. I did a big project on Standing Rock last month that I had feelings about, I had research on it, so it led me to delve into [it]. So, some things have a lot of research like some historical events. I'm doing a big project called "Columbus Day". I

had a lot of feelings about what happened, of course, with the whole Columbus coming and what not, and it led me to create a whole body of work about Columbus's voyages. And that was led by my trip to the Dominican Republic. So my artwork comes from having somewhere I gain my emotional sensibilities from, and then looking at it alongside historical events that I care about. My works come from real experiences, so I'm always mining my own life. But a lot of it, in a sense, is to understand it better, so that includes the historical things.

L: When you say to understand it better, do you mean for yourself personally or for a broader narrative?

E: Yes, broadly but then for me to understand it. To understand myself or understand my life, and I believe in that, that it's going to be an active investigation. That your life is an active, ongoing experiment. Through that growth and that quest, the viewer is going to be interested in what you're doing. If you have something active going on, discovery, then maybe the viewer will have the same energy to understand, to care about what you're making. Rather than trying to deliver a product that is complete, like most bad artists who produce all the sculpture in front of banks, for example. It's like they try to deliver something complete to decorate a lawn or a plaza, and usually it's horrible because there's no flex to it, there's no discovery, there's no life to it. Art has to have that kind of opposite approach.

L: A lot of your work uses images and text. Is there a reason you're more prone to using text, does it get more of a message across?

E: Well, it started out in graduate school, actually, when I had a lot of resistance from professors. I was on the East Coast in a prestigious graduate program in painting, and there weren't any kind of political

activists/artists on staff. There were no artists of color on staff teaching us painting. They were all white men—maybe there was a white woman, but she was the same. They didn't have much interest in learning about Native American history or Native American people, so I had to struggle to get them to focus on what I was doing. And I was very heavily politicized at that point. I was learning about activist events within the AIM movement and so forth, and I was really immersed in that. And they actually resented those experiences. Even throughout my undergraduate school too, there was no real push to self-identify. So the text was a way to really combat their resistance. I've taught at Yale, I'm in New York a lot, and that whole sphere of historical painting is about formalism. It's a formalist kind of school of thought about shape and line and pattern and color, and all these wonderful things, but not so much about equity or human rights or social justice. It came to be that when I was there in the 80's, in order to fight the formalist mind set, I ended up writing words. I actually did walls out in the hallway, and I had to find a way to communicate so the professors couldn't hide behind formalist values. And in a way, certainly, America still hides from Native people. There's not much of an awareness about Native life. We're pretty invisible, so focusing on the words is a way to communicate visually. It's a way to cut through the resistance and the amnesia. Most people can read, my lines are short, so they're already kind of digested—or they have entered their psyche before they can even deflect it. And that's what you have to be, you have to be quick too, because if you get too literal and too passionate on massacres and slavery, people will turn you off. So you have to do it quickly. That's where my short text comes in, especially with the public art. It's seen before they can stop it.

L: The first piece I saw of yours was *The Wheel*, which was outside of the Denver Art Museum here, and I wanted to talk a little bit about that piece in particular. I know the positioning of it on the land itself was significant, so could you talk a little bit about that work and how it came to be?

E: Yes, and we're restarting it right now. I'm a consultant for the museum, and we found a better place for it, near the new addition, with more land around it so you breathe a little bit more. It's a medicine wheel as a reference to the Big Horn Wheel in Wyoming. I've been up there numerous times, and I've taken my sons up there on top of the Big Horn Mountains. And the Cheyenne people have ownership of that site, along with maybe a dozen other tribes. They use it for their ceremonies, and they always have. I felt that was important since Colorado is a site for the Fort Laramie Treaty where they took the Native land away, and then they broke the treaty and moved us into Southern Colorado. Then they broke a treaty again and put us into the Medicine Lodge Treaty in Kansas. And then they broke *that* treaty, and they put us into Western Oklahoma. Then they had the Sand Creek Massacre and the Washita Massacre, all things very, very devastating to the tribe. But we still hold to the first treaty which is the Fort Laramie Treaty, and that area of Colorado (from Nebraska to Kansas to Colorado to Wyoming), that's our original agreement with the USA. Having that 50 foot circle, the solstice wheel, reclaims that territory back. It's set up on the summer solstice equinox-regal, Sirius, and it's got all the major star patterns represented on the vectors, where those trees are standing. The formation is also a hint back toward the Earth renewal lodge. On my reservation we still make the original lodge, which is more complex than you might realize; it's more complex than the sculpture is. All the tribes on the East face of the Rocky Mountains, I'd say from the Front Range to the Missouri River, all those tribes have the same religion and that's in the Wheel. It's a reference to

that religion, so that's why it's popular, because people use it. Tribes use it for different events; they go there, and it's all set up in the vectors of all the important star systems. Of course there is also a history of Colorado imbedded in the sculpture, including the racism, the violence, the mining, and other things like farming, reservation creation, the gentrification of Native life, and assimilation. Eventually, it goes back to actually being empowered to enter the ceremony and reinvent your history or readdress it. It's a circular awareness of history and your empower-[ment]. You're in control of it now; it's autobiographical, I guess.

L: With those pieces that hinge on visual text, you said you had some pushback when you were in graduate school. What kind of a reception are you getting now from pieces that are forcing people to be in the uncomfortable position of acknowledging an uncomfortable past? Is that something you still get pushback from?

E: Oh yes, oh yes. It depends on where you are. I did a piece about Abraham Lincoln; he hung 38 Dakota warriors during the Civil War. He executed them outside of Minneapolis in a place called Mankato. And people want you not to blemish their mythical president. They don't really deal with the reality. So they called me the new Charles Manson [laughs] when I made that piece. I just made a thing that was true! I'm aware of the pushback, and I kind of expect some of it. And there's some infighting with tribes, too. Certainly, they don't all get along, so I'm in a very touchy area when I try to represent tribal realities that aren't my tribe. But I feel compelled to help other tribes if they're being dismissed—and that's where my Native host signs come in. I just recently put up 10 or 12 in Arkansas at Crystal Bridges Museum, and then I made five at the University of Kansas, where they're permanent now. There's 12 at the

University of British Columbia at Vancouver, and there's some out in LA. And so, I find Native America and Native Canada to be very absent in honoring Native tribes and their realities. A lot of my work goes into humbly addressing that problem. But when you do that, some people say "you're not from my tribe, you can't speak for us". So I have to be sensitive to that, and maybe I'll step off and let someone else do something. People are going to be resistant but I think if you have enough grace and you believe in beauty and empathy, I find you can really articulate anything. It's not about shouting at somebody and assaulting them—that's another way, but I don't do that. The pushback, I guess, it can be like a flash point but through it we can deepen the understanding, and we always do.

L: That relates to the idea of visual sovereignty. It's a concept by Jolene Rickard that I have come across, a decolonial tool for resistance against colonization and for deconstructing the colonizing image and text. She talks about how to expand art critique and art theory, using this idea of self-representation to get out of the white gaze of alterity when discussing Native American artists and art pieces. I'm interested in your thoughts on visual sovereignty. I know sovereignty is definitely something that comes up in your work...

E: Yes, that's true. I know Jolene, we grew up together in the art world in New York City. I've been to her reservation, I did a piece with her and her kids. There's a middle school around the Tuscarora area, and I gave them a sign piece that I did. And again, I'm there to acknowledge her Nation with respect, without putting my own in it. But of course you've got to start with that. You've got to start with your own, your own identity. And that's what's problematic: the whole vein of what we call Native art is just horrible because it's catering to the white gaze. All the tourist art is

anticipating a white viewer looking at it. Have you seen that cover of *Art in America* I did? The red one that says “Do Not Dance for Pay”?

L: Yes.

E: That’s me calling out all the Native artists in America. Stop doing that, you’ve been doing it for decades, if not more—over hundreds of years—and where has it gotten us? You’ve been trying to cater to their needs. There’s a mythical Indian person, and you’ve been side stepping all the social responsibilities of your reality to make money. To be liked, to be embraced by the colonial power, so you’ve got to stop doing that, and you’ve got to represent yourself. And I guess you can call that visual sovereignty [laughs], but of course you just start with that. And if you’re going to call it that, what have you been so far? You know [laughs], it’s a “new” thing –what the heck have you been doing so far, man? You’ve got to really push back and deal with reality, which is a lot of really negative experiences Natives have in this country. So, yeah, I’m a supporter of that, and I live that existence. But I wanted to say that, for me, it goes deeper than that too. I think part of it may be the dysfunction of culture and the violence of America against Native people. All Native tribes had, or do have, a religious mindset, and they have a particular behavior, a particular ceremonial center, which *Wheel* addresses. But they’re living –you know ongoing living, historical engagements with religion and this earth, with your existence here on this planet. And within that practice, for the Cheyenne people there’s a dance—we call it a dance—, and within that there’s dancers, and within that there’s instructors, and it’s like a complex prayer. But within all those systems—what I’m trying to get to—there’s painting on your body. And this goes for all the different tribes. I think you can even call it a tattoo (even *tatau*—it actually comes

from Saoma). The permanent markings on the skin mark the body in a prayerful way. They are never ever changed to adapt to the artist's sentiments. They are tradition, there's a doctrine, there's an instructor that teaches you how to do that, and they're done for a prayerful experience. And that's sovereignty. In terms of visual sovereignty, that's the only real sovereignty because that's got nothing to do with anybody else –white people, even talking to white people or maybe expressing Native social justice. No, it's a primal experience of this prayer that you're making only for your tribe, only for the dancer you're working with. I've danced that dance for 16 years, you know, I've been involved with that for 30 years overall, and I'm an instructor. So as an artist, I'm very aware of what people call "tradition", but they always think it's on canvas or some crazy thing [laughs]. It's got nothing to do with canvas! That stuff is what Jolene talks about—it's very fitting and very important today—but it's a few steps removed from what I'm discussing. There are visual practices that are traditional, but they happen on a body and within a closed network of priests and dancers and warriors and medicine women. But again, it can't be changed by how you feel. You can't make it blue when it should be red, you can't make it a bird when it should be a snake, you can't change any of that to suit yourself. And so to me that's the most sovereign thing; it can't be altered. It's always been made that way, and it always will be made that way. But I think today when I talk about those kind of things, very few artists standing left are really equipped to conduct those ceremonies. They're more like studio artists. And so when you talk about studio art, that's a whole other world that's more personal and flexible. But what I want to focus on in this interview is that the whole practice is traditional, it's not just about traditional imagery; you can't alter any of it. That's the real challenge for all artists,

to go back and learn from the elders, to reformat that whole ceremonial life and rebuild it because that's what saves you, that understanding.

L: I think what got me interested in this concept of visual sovereignty is the idea of representation, and what that looks like in art, and what that means as...

E: And that's where the problem starts: representation. Where, though? Like, representation should be in yourself. In my own body, sitting in this chair or under the tree outside on this cloudy day or mentoring younger men. Not a picture of me. That's what everyone does in media, so you exist in media, but that's not really that important. I mean it's significant but of course if you can't self-represent your own psyche and your own body and your own religion, then what good is a picture going to do? A lot of people that are on the fringe of Native art are in academia, and many of them are actually mixed blood people that aren't from communities. They think Native life exists in a headspace, you know, it's like an essay or a value or a painting or a video show or a book they wrote... For me, Natives only exist in reality with each other, that's where they really exist—when they camp together, when they come together to sing, or they have a Powwow or they have a birthday party. That's Native life. And the headspace thing is really bogus. It can be pushed around, shoved around, lied to, it can be a big fake thing. But try faking out the elders, you can't do that [laughs], you can't go there. So for me, representation *is* me. Like an Indian sitting here or my son and I sitting together: that's Indians. It's not an essay about us. But we've already jumped over the fence, and we're all lost on the other side of the world, and people think it all exists as some kind of theory, you know? And that's something else, that's not Native life.

L: The reason I got into this work, and specifically museum and heritage studies, is because it's so problematic the way that Native peoples are represented within the walls of museums, and I think that leads to a lot of misrepresentation and misunderstanding of contemporary life and contemporary issues.

E: Well, I did a project in South Australia with these aboriginal artists from the city. And this is an example of what you're confronting. There was an artist who was a photographer, and they asked him to do a photo-documentary about Aboriginal men in prison, because all the prisons are full of Aboriginal people. So he went to the prison and did a residency there. He had a brilliant notion to find out what it's like to be an Aboriginal person in prison. He gave all the prisoners cameras, and they made pictures, and then he showed their pictures, see? So that's reality. If you want to know what it's like to be an Aboriginal in prison, give the Aboriginal a camera. And that's what museums never do, see? Museums will always do reporting on these people over there, and put it over here. And so the solution is to open the door and let the Indians make the exhibit or let them control things. And if you talk about representation, there you go. What you should have is real people. Not a replica or a report about them—even a well-meaning report. You really need to have them dictate what it is, then they'll represent themselves, you know?

L: That's what I'm trying to understand—a lot of the museum decolonizing (again, whatever that word or process really looks like or means) is still we bring on consultants and then they're not there after the project is finished. So the idea of visual sovereignty sparks in me the question of how do we progress, how do we push that forward, what does that even look like when we push it forward, in art, in museums? How do we move representation forward, so to speak?

E: The more direct you can be with communities, the better off you are, that's my thought. Less theory, but more hands-on involvement—where it's more of an exchange. As a curator, you would go learn from the community, and the community would actually add their engagement back to the museum. It's more of a collaboration, right, than an exhibit about the other. It's kind of giving up some of the power, and that's what decolonization is about. They have all the power; they can colonize you, brutalize you, and then take your resources. In the academy, you want to give your power –if you want to have equity–, you have to give your power back to the community that you're trying to represent. And share it, and then from that point on you're going to build something a lot better than another exhibit about somebody else, you know? But it's still kind of rare. It's good you're talking to artists because we make our own exhibits about ourselves. We don't make art about somebody, something else. We make our own embodiment of what we believe. So it's a good place to start with artists.