

Journal of American Studies, 51 (2017), e14. doi:10.1017/S0021875816001717

Bill Anthes, *Edgar Heap of Birds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper). Pp. 232. ISBN 978 0 8223 5981 4, 978 0 8223 5994 4.

The Cheyenne/Arapaho artist Edgar Heap of Birds is, in my opinion, one of the great living American artists. And, while he is revered in the relatively small circles of American Indian studies and American Indian art, he is not as widely known outside these fields. Bill Anthes's smart and exhaustive study *Edgar Heap of Birds* just may change that.

Heap of Birds's work defies easy description. He paints, he draws, he makes signs, he fashions large metallic sculptures. His pieces can comprise entirely text and be politically provocative, like those from the 2012 *Secrets of Life and Death* series. The sixteen pieces function as mini haiku, each one comprising nothing but six vertically arranged words. The text appears to be hand-scrawled and is either in white on a blue background or in blue on a dark blue background, with messages like:

HAPPY
TO
DONATE
WHAT
YOU
TOOK
and
BULLETS
ARE
RAPID
FLESH
IS
SOFT

On the other hand, a Heap of Birds piece can be wholly non-textual and nonfigurative slices of color with no obvious message, political or otherwise, as in the *Neuf* series, which is a melange of brightly colored geometric shapes that resemble robot leaves.

His best works, and the ones most likely to endure, are those that engage the semiotics of colonial or bureaucratic authority but resist their totalizing and encompassing signifiers. A good example is the 2005 *Ocmulgee* series, a collection of forty-eight steel panels designed to look exactly like red-and-white parking signs. Each one is twelve by eighteen inches and perfectly mimics the standard No Parking signs in scale, color, and font. However, Heap of Birds flips the expected signifier to invoke the human toll of the Trail of Tears, with messages like

WERE
YOU
FORCED
TO
WALK
and
WALK

TO
OKLA
HOMA

Heap of Birds placed these signs along Peachtree Street in Atlanta as a reminder to both pedestrians and drivers of the horrific removal of southeastern tribes from their homeland to Oklahoma. “*Ocmulgee* engaged the important task of memory and reckoning with the past,” Anthes correctly and succinctly notes, “working to reinsert a Native presence into contemporary Atlanta” (135). Anthes goes on to connect the work of the *Ocmulgee* project to other important southern – and Atlantan – civil rights actions of the past, including those of Martin Luther King Jr., arguing that Heap of Birds’s intervention participates in the long line of empowering civic and historically minded acts.

One thing I admire about Anthes’s discussion in the above section and in the monograph in general is his tendency to get out of the way of the art. This is not to say that Anthes disappears from the discourse of the book – on the contrary, his voice masterfully weaves a narrative that moves back and forth between historical context, close readings of individual pieces, and important secondary sources. At no point in the book does Anthes posture or turn the site of Heap of Birds’s incredibly rich work into a platform for critical grandstanding. The book’s title, *Edgar Heap of Birds* – no subtitle, no clever turn of phrase – is perfect. The book is about Edgar Heap of Birds. Not Anthes.

To help underscore this point, Anthes organizes his study into four sections – an important number for the Cheyenne – that correspond to the four main areas of focus in Heap of Birds’s work: land, language, history, and future generations. Thus the book does not move chronologically, but thematically. At times Anthes feels like the best docent you’ve ever encountered, patiently and knowledgeably walking the reader through the complex layers of history, culture, and technique informing Heap of Birds’s *oeuvre*. Anthes’s main argument is that Heap of Birds’s art rises out of Native and specifically Oklahoman/Cheyenne/Arapaho contexts in order to participate in the larger project of art and meaning-making. In fact, Anthes’s best claim is that Heap of Birds’s work is actually forcing artists, viewers, collectors, scholars, and gallerists to rethink our relationship with art and art’s relationship with life. “Heap of Birds’s practice makes a puncture in the discourses of contemporary art and contemporaneity,” Anthes asserts, “and I hope that this book will make those stakes clear, as his work’s engagement with the discourses and spaces of the contemporary art world offers a critical challenge with the potential to transform those institutions and habits of thought” (23).

Generously illustrated with around a hundred images, most in color, Anthes’s study is a must for anyone interested in political art, contemporary art, and Indigenous studies. In fact, it is the best single study of Heap of Birds to date.

University of San Francisco

DEAN RADER