HACHIVI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS
AND ARTISTS OF TANDANYA AND BOOMALLI

16 SONGS/ISSUES OF PERSONAL ASSESSMENT
AND INDIGENOUS RENEWAL

THE SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM
In the spring of 1994, Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds travelled from his home in Oklahoma to Sydney and Adelaide, Australia, as a recipient of the Lila Wallace/Readers Digest International Artist Fellowship. During his stay in Australia through the spring and summer, Heap of Birds exchanged ideas with Aboriginal artists about indigenous culture, discussing cultural strategies and beliefs, as well as his own work. The concept of sixteen songs that this exhibition explores is based on the words and phrases determined by Heap of Birds and later presented to artists of the Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative in Sydney, and to artists of the Tandanyka National Institute of Aboriginal Art in Adelaide as the basis for a collaborative project. This presentation is an outgrowth of that particular artistic and intellectual interaction; it has been adapted from an exhibition organized by the University of North Texas Art Gallery in Denton, Texas.

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds used the above sixteen words and phrases as a catalyst in the creation of this unusual body of work. They were chosen during Heap of Birds’ participation in the Tjistitstas Cheyenne Earth Renewal ceremonies held every Summer Solstice, and are prevalent in the artist’s thoughts on similar types of cyclical ceremonies found in all tribal/clan-organized cultures. When these sixteen words and phrases were presented by Heap of Birds to Aboriginal artists in Sydney and Adelaide as possible subjects for a collaborative work, the concepts these words signified were immediately acknowledged as synonymous with the artists’ own ancestral beliefs.

Heap of Birds called the resulting collaborations, “...a brand new way of seeing...culture/culture, without immediation back into Western culture.” [16 Songs video] Brenda Croft, Boomalli co-ordinator of the project, states:

“Edgar was well received...we found similarities: the issue of land, being invisible in your own country, dealing with people of Anglo ancestry...” [16 Songs video] The idea of indigenous peoples relating their own thoughts to their audience without the filter of Western culture was foremost in the collaboration.

Heap of Birds’ large-scale, coded-message drawings and the sixteen works by the Aboriginal artists reflect their shared interest in the issues of race relations, tribal sovereignty, the rights of self-representation, and the American/British custom of acquiring wealth. Combinations of images, objects, and language have been richly embroidered in this collaborative work, providing the viewer with both a literary and a visual approach to the common ideas set forth in the project’s purpose.

The large drawings by Heap of Birds are extensions of the artist’s philosophy of self-representation:

“As presented today, history and critical points of reference are a paragon of distortion. It is wrongly accepted that we should all share the vantage point of the Euro-male. This historical legacy is to be the focal point of human experience, just as once the sun was thought to revolve around the earth...As we have all chosen to stand on different points of this earth, we must be allowed to choose our own distinct priorities and historical references.” (1992)

The imagery in his drawings is a result of his fluid, direct, and immediate process. Heap of Birds always listens to music when he draws, which seems to contribute a rhythmic quality to the compositions overall. He has noted that these drawings represent a new approach which describes a thinking process from direct acts of daily life.

Heap of Birds’ Neuf paintings present the important idea of landscape and land itself. The paintings’ title refers to the “four” in Cheyenne cosmology, while the works themselves are based on the colors and shapes found in the landscape of western Oklahoma, the “landscape” of the ocean, and the colorful fish found in Australia’s Great Barrier Reef.

Brenda Croft’s response to the sixteen words and phrases is a radical departure from her stark, dramatic photographs of Aboriginal women and their families. Using a combination of cameo images, indigenous and English words, and painting, Croft worked with the concept of four, the number of persons remaining in her family after the recent death of her younger brother. The paintings of Rea, Richard Bell, and Kylie Russell, like Heap of Birds’ message drawings, use the written word as both narrative and a design element, establishing a rhythmic flow across the picture plane.

Taking a literal approach to self-representation through language, Shawn Dobson’s contribution utilized a copy of the Arrernte language dictionary which his mother had co-authored. The book cover features Dobson’s landscape painting of his ancestral land. The broken bottle which rests upon the book refers to his mother’s struggle to support his family while working for a local bottling company.

Several of the artists appropriated traditional painting techniques to illustrate their contemporary concepts. James Simon and Mark Blackman incorporated the dot painting style from Central Australia along with the fine line painting found in the Northern Territory art styles. Both artists chose important clan totems as subject matter. Blackman’s Four Bungerec, which relates to his family’s sea turtle totem on Fraser Island, has four turtles interconnected by a series of dotted “song
lines” to form a rough circle. They are contrasted against a very busy, dense background of overlapping lines which represent the urban side of contemporary Aboriginal life. Simon’s depiction of two kangaroos travelling in tandem denotes the traditional symbol for strength. The animals are painted in the white outline style usually associated with bark painting, while the forms of the kangaroo are surrounded by an aura of dense red ochre dots and multicolored dotted spirals.

Max Mansell and Kelly Scott expounded upon the traditional dot painting to produce two unique works relating to very urban concerns. Mansell reduced the dots on his canvas to a fine spray of color in which brightly painted fish seem to merge, appear, and disappear. The artist approached this composition as an environmental statement about the importance of water and the need to respect it as the source of life. Scott’s appropriation of the dot technique takes on a new twist with the introduction of large round buttons scattered over the canvas. The shapes of the buttons are contrasted with small cameo portraits of women printed on a flowered fabric which again echoes dot-like shapes in the background. The overall effect gives the impression that one is looking at an enlarged detail of a traditional dotted sand painting.

Harry Wedge and Gerard tackle the urban dilemma of the Aboriginal person who remains true to tradition while residing in the city. Wedge has a distinctive painting style which often features the colors of the Aboriginal flag: red, yellow, and black. This color combination automatically signals his support of Aboriginal sovereignty and firmly places his work in a political genre. Wedge states that he receives the subject matter for his paintings from his ancestors, who come to him in his dreams. His untitled work in 16 Songs refers to the Aboriginal dancer in the city who listens and dances to Western music, while his outback relative looks on in dismay. The painting’s message is a warning to Aboriginals not to forget their traditional dance and customs. Gerard refers to himself as an evolving artist. He began as a graffiti artist, looking at the difference between urban and outback lifestyles. His contribution to 16 Songs illustrates the duality of urban Aboriginal life. The figure in the foreground represents the new and the urban person, while the shadow is a symbol for the old and the traditional.

Elaine Russell, Gordon Hookey, and Judy Watson each have a distinctive style of painting which relates to traditional painting methods in spirit: communicating a specific message of pride in their Aboriginality and their homelands. Elaine Russell paints in a narrative style, using bold combinations of contrasting colors and bright yellow outlines, to define the main characters of her story. Her work in 16 Songs focuses on the importance of sharing among her people which she chose to illustrate by describing the hunting of kangaroos and the distribution of their meat among the group. Gordon Hookey was inspired by the great fires which engulfed the Sydney suburbs. While the press and the majority of the Anglo population perceived the fires as a threat, he looked upon them as a renewal of the land. This idea was based upon the traditional practice of setting fires to cleanse the land and capture game. In his painting, Hookey contrasts the major landmarks of Sydney against a raging fire tended by several Aboriginal people who are guiding the fire’s progression.

Judy Watson layers her images of place and ancestry with translucent veils of pigment. She states, “my work attempts to reveal concealed histories, cover-ups in the colonization of Australia.” Working on an unstretched canvas placed upon the floor, Watson recreates the same perspective used by traditional sand painters in their ceremonies. Red Earth Blood is a combination of pigment, acrylic, and oil pastel which flows across the canvas as a unified symbol of identity with earth and ancestry.

16 Songs represents an unusual but not unnatural merger of Native American and Australian philosophies and visual concepts. Their individual historical contexts and the contemporary experiences of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds and the Aboriginal artists provided a common and fertile background in which they were able to express themselves. This collaboration is an important exploration into the visual territory of the 21st century. The exciting and stimulating forms which have emerged are a precursor of great developments in the contemporary international art scene.

Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris
Assistant Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

Acknowledgements

This exhibition was selected from 16 Songs/Issues of Personal Assessment and Indigenous Renewal, organized by the University of North Texas Art Gallery, with support from Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Arts International Program and The Texas Commission on the Arts. In St. Louis the exhibition has been presented as part of the Currents series of works by contemporary artists. Currents is made possible in 1995 and 1996 by a generous gift from Mark Twain Bancshares, Inc.

We are especially grateful to Edgar Heap of Birds, Judy Watson, and the collaborating Aboriginal artists for sharing their art and their vision. Special thanks to Diana Block, director of the Art Gallery at North Texas University, who first organized the exhibition and made it possible for us to take a portion of the exhibition. In St. Louis I thank Charles Wylie, the Museum’s assistant curator of contemporary art, whose help and support were invaluable; Marge Getty, our dedicated volunteer in Oceanic art; Stefani Weeden, curatorial intern; and Mary Brumstrom, director of the Australian Gallery.
Artists’ Information

HACHIVI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS was born in 1954 in Wichita, Kansas. He received his B.F.A. from the University of Kansas and his M.F.A. from Tyler School of Art, Temple University in Philadelphia, with additional graduate studies in painting at the Royal College of Art in London, England. His first solo exhibition was held in 1983 and his work has been shown consistently in group and solo exhibitions since that time.

His public art commissions include works for the Seattle Arts Commission, the City of Chicago Public Art Program; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; Three Rivers Arts Festival, Pittsburgh; the Institute of American Indian Arts Museum, Santa Fe; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

He has received a National Award for Meritorious Contributions to American Art and Culture, Association of American Cultures, Washington, D.C.; and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation award in painting and sculpture; and has been the recipient of grants from the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Lila Wallace/Reader’s Digest Foundation. The artist lives and works in the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation, and is associate professor of the University of Oklahoma, Norman.

THE TANDANYA NATIONAL ABORIGINAL CULTURAL INSTITUTE opened its doors in 1989. The name was derived from two words from the local Kaurna language; “Tand” meaning kangaroo and “Anya” place of the red kangaroo dreaming (now Adelaide). The Institute is a multi-arts facility managed by the Aboriginal community with support from state and federal governments. Emphasis is placed upon the exhibition and presentation of Aboriginal arts and culture with accent on the contemporary and innovative. Tandanya galleries have often featured the work of local artists which embrace traditional designs and media, as well as the most recently constructed performance piece.

THE BOOMALLI ABORIGINAL ARTISTS COOPERATIVE was formed in 1987 by ten Sydney-based Aboriginal artists. The word “boomalli,” which means “to strike or make a mark” comes from three regions languages and relates to the artists’ desire to make a mark through the exhibition of their art. The cooperative is a totally Aboriginal initiative which encompasses self-taught, art school-trained, and university graduate artists who reside in New South Wales. Both rural and urban-based artists are featured in their exhibitions, helping to erase the artificial divide which has often separated the two groups. Non-member artists from other regions are often included in their exhibits to present a wide ranging variety of contemporary Aboriginal arts.

Works in the Exhibition

HACHIVI EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS

Untitled (Neuf Series Painting), 1995
acrylic on canvas
78 x 105 inches

Untitled (Neuf Series Painting), 1995
acrylic on canvas
78 x 105 inches

Young Look, 1994
black marker on paper
80 x 134 inches

Vacant, 1994
black marker on paper
80 x 126 inches

BOOMALLI ABORIGINAL ARTISTS’ CO-OPERATIVE, SYDNEY

Brenda L. Croft
Four, 1994
oil on canvas
30 x 24 inches

Fiona Foley
Learn a War Cry, 1994
photograph of work at Museum for Contemporary Art, Sydney
16 x 19 3/4 inches

Gordon Hookey
New Growth, 1994
oil on canvas
24 x 30 inches

Rea
Blood/Red, 1994
mixed media on canvas
30 x 24 inches

Elaine Russell
Roo Hunt (For Everyone), 1994
oil on canvas
24 x 30 inches

Kylie Russell
Strength, 1994
oil on canvas
24 x 30 inches

James Simon
Roo, 1994
oil on canvas
13 7/8 x 9 7/8 inches

Gerard Scilo
Resistance, 1994
acrylic, gouache, aerosol, and pastel on canvas
30 x 24 inches

Judy Watson
Red Earth Blood, 1994
pigment, acrylic, and oil pastel on canvas
30 x 24 inches

H.J. Wedge
Dance, 1994
oil on canvas
24 x 30 inches

Selected Bibliography

Caruana, W., Aboriginal Art, Thames and Hudson, 1993.