EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS

TELL YOUR SELF

level 2 projects
The Art Gallery of New South Wales
Sydney Australia
Nov 5 – Nov 28
The multifaceted art of Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds poignantly fuses political conviction and personal reflection. As a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Nation of Oklahoma, Heap of Birds has experienced a legacy of exploitation and domination. As a Native American artist engaged in the postmodern world of contemporary art, he constantly balances the politics of representation and authentic expression. Working in the disjunction of what is real and what is imposed, Heap of Birds seeks to challenge the sociopolitical codes that define the Native identity, while exploring the self as the site, and means, for cultural renewal.

For Heap of Birds, the conflict between mainstream and indigenous culture is encoded in the rhetoric and semantics of social discourse. Thus the artist's true medium is language (whether linguistic or pictorial), which he scripts, edits, and dissects to reveal the transparency of words and images that speak to oppress. Likewise, he makes visible the power of language as a potent political tool: "The survival of our people is based upon our use of expressive forms of modern communication... As a native artist, these insurgent messages delivered through art must present the fact that Native Americans are decidedly different from dominate white culture."  

Heap of Birds works within four seemingly disparate modes of artistic production — public art, abstract painting, photographic word prints, and text-based drawings or "wall lyrics" which, together, form the whole of his identity. Through public works, such as the series Native Hosts, the artist reclaims the history and territories of Native peoples by placing public signage on important sites of tribal communities, memorializing those who have fought and died for their rightful lands. These works often appropriate the technology of mass communication (traffic signs and computerised billboards), subverting the authority inherent to their commercial forms. His photo word prints exhibit a relationship to the public art projects by utilizing text that offers observations on political histories, and are presented within a gallery or artist book context.

More intimate are his Neuf paintings (named for the importance of the number four in Cheyenne cosmology), abstract works based on the colourful hues and organic forms of nature. Text gives way to bold, leaf-like swatches that inhabit the textured surfaces of large-scale canvases, whose visual symbolism speaks as powerfully as words. Neither random nor ordered, these lyrical forms are imbued with the spiritual religion of his ancestral heritage and reference the transcendentalism of early modernism.

The marker drawings in this exhibition are closely related to the "wall lyrics", although they inherit their gestural, improvisational spirit from the Neuf paintings. The marker drawings originally served as studies for the "wall lyrics" — random thoughts hand-drawn while listening to music, then ordered into tense poetics
and urgent declarations. Here, Heap of Birds abandons the wall lyrics for their inspirational siblings, in an effort to reconcile the disparity between his public and private persona. Where the wall lyrics are rendered in bright pastels with an extreme and controlled physicality, the marker drawings are dark, fluid, expository, and diaristic. Colour, with all its associations and resonances, is replaced by a monochrome black. Recalling the automatism employed by the surrealists to create a social consciousness out of two distinct realities, the external self is now shed to reveal the thought process of the internal psyche.

These calligraphic dialogues serve as personal mappings centred on desire and loss – sexual, spiritual, or cultural — as suggested by their parenthetical titles. With sound bites culled from advertising and headline news “ALL YOU CAN EAT / FOR THE CROWN / A MCDONALD’S SHOOTING (MAY I TAKE YOUR ORDER PLEASE)”, Heap of Birds abstracts from the media, repeating overused phrases and clichés that function as social codes but whose real meanings are lost in manipulation and false truths. Echoing the linguistic cadence of modern communication, the artist subverts the barrage of information, and misinformation, by inserting his own inflections to comment on, for example, the current state of art and the double-edged burden brought upon the artist of colour: “CURATOR STAR REPLACED ARTIST STAR / SELLING YOUR ASS / KING OF IN/ZONE TRANCE ART / NO MARKS WITHOUT MEANING”.

The drawings also reflect on the social vanities and cosmetic conventions that often define the female identity: “OH NO SEEN WITHOUT PAINTS / TINTED FOR ATTENTION”. Between the lines, Heap of Birds presents sobering reflections on human relationships and love but not without offering hope: “DEPOSITED WITH UNFAIRNESS FOREVER / NOT ANY BETTER JUST VARYING DEGREES OF WORSE / DON’T SPEAK WITHOUT IDEA AND MISSION / BUILD HUMBLE CENTER WITH PULSING HEART”.

Heap of Birds’ “drawings display, through words, the ongoing conflict of native life” 2, while reminding us that true change can only be fueled by creative expression. For Heap of Birds, the role of the contemporary artist is to build new paradigms for the signification and representation of culture, where the personal — constructed through images and words and regardless of origin or gender — becomes the means for social acceptance and transformation.

Susan Snodgrass


Overleaf: The artist with The Allure. –1994, block marker on paper