

REMEMBERING SHAPES, SIGNS, AND BODIES

At the 52nd Venice Biennale, HOCK E AYE VI Edgar Heap of Birds presented *Most Serene Republics*, a series of installation pieces consisting of text panels that conveyed messages to the public in Italian, English, and Cheyenne languages. Using this framework of multilingual signage, the artist sought to engender a dialogue about place, history, and the creation of nation-states through acts of aggression which resulted in the displacement or exile of populations and cultures. In particular, eight text panels were positioned in the Giardini Reali (Royal Gardens) near Piazza San Marco which examined and deconstructed elements of Venetian history beginning with the First Crusade in the 13th century as well as acknowledging artistic and nautical achievements. As a site specific piece, the messages functioned to re-examine the past while including social and political commentary about present-day events.

A second installation located along the Viale Garibaldi paid homage to Native warriors and children that had died and were subsequently buried in Europe during the 1880s while employed as participants in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show ("Numshim" is Cheyenne for grandfather and "Nastona" is granddaughter). These memorial pieces honor forgotten spirits while also articulating a double displacement of peoples whom suffered removal from tribal homelands in North America only to be exiled again and exhibited in Europe. Each panel signals to the reader "rammentare," or remember, the life of a particular person from Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

While in Italy, Heap of Birds also created glass works in Murano at the studio of maestro Simone Cenedese. When approaching the new medium of glass, Heap of Birds initially wanted to transpose the multi-colored shapes that permeated the Neuf series paintings on to the surface of the containers ("Neuf" is Cheyenne for the number four). The tree-like shapes were a familiar image which extends from his own experience of viewing the land while taking walks at home on the Cheyenne and Arapaho nation. The shapes signal the reservation land and represent a vision, or experience, which moves across the surface in a life-affirming way. In one respect, the shapes project a celebratory image of life springing from the earth like an offering, every year promising revitalization and renewal. These shapes would eventually be influenced by subsequent visits to the tropics in which the colorful ocean reefs seen while snorkeling would alter and enhance the images of the trees on the canvas.

While making the new glass works in Murano, the Neuf shapes were transformed by the limiting effects of the hot glass into first becoming turtle-like shapes and finally becoming human bodies that rotated around the vessels. Heap of Birds describes the new shapes on the glass works as the bodies of the Pine Ridge warriors and children lost during the European tours of the Wild West shows. In that way, the relationship between the shapes, signs, and bodies become apparent because Heap of Birds's work evokes a strong sense of homeland and a worldview that extends from a circular awareness of the earth and a respect for all Indian nations as sovereign entities.

—Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds