



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Hock E Aye VI  
Edgar Heap of Birds, 2020 August 12

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Hock E. Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds on August 12, 2020. The interview took place at Heap of Birds's home in Oklahoma City near the Cheyenne Arapaho Reservation, and was conducted by Melissa Ho for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

MELISSA HO: Hi, Edgar.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Hi.

MELISSA HO: This is Melissa Ho interviewing Hock E. Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds on August 12, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project, and Edgar's speaking to me from his home in Oklahoma City near the Cheyenne Arapaho Reservation. Edgar

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yeah.

MELISSA HO: Hi.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Hi.

MELISSA HO: Um, thanks so much for making time for this. There—I thought I'd start because you had suggested two works of yours, in particular, um, to bring to our attention in—in preparation for this conversation, *Places of Healing* and *Health of the People is The Highest Law*. Uh, those are both, um, installations of—of monoprints. So, could you tell me a little about these works and—and how they're resonating now during this current crisis of—of pandemic?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Well, they've become very appropriate in an odd way because of the disaster and the crisis of health and in the world, but, uh, interesting enough, are made far ahead of the crisis coming and that, sort of, speaks to Native American basest, uh, existence here in the country, whereas Native people have a health crisis every day, and they've had it since the contact—since Columbus came, you know, there were major, uh, diseases spread [coughs] from the Europeans and then it continued on to, uh—to, uh, also bad health, food. Uh, even the cavalry gave bad food to the Native people as part of the rations, and so, there's been a health, uh, pandemic, in a sense, with Native people across this country, uh, for hundreds of years, and they're still suffering and then there's—now, there's a, uh, Indian Health Service, which is a governmental body that is supposed to heal the Indians on the reservations, which is very poor, um.

So the first piece, uh, *Health People's Highest Law*, that with the Indian Health Service and diabetes, and hypertension, and heart disease, and all these things that I found in my own family, you know, my own reservation area, and I wanted to comment about that and then the second piece, uh, *Places of Healing*, uh, deals with how Native people actually, uh, struggle to resolve these health issues, and much of it is done with traditional healing. So, there are ceremonial sites throughout the country, even Alaska, Hawaii, across South America, and there are ceremonial sites where people go to heal themselves with the tribe, fast, uh, make prayers, and so I made a, kind of, a login of all these—of many of these ceremonial sites where I go, uh, to myself as a Cheyenne, uh, medicine person, too. So—so, anyway, those two projects were actually created before the COVID pandemic, and—and now, they seem appropriate, I guess, for people to look at those.

MELISSA HO: And how have things changed for you in the last several months? Um, how are—yeah.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: We've been—we've been more isolated, um. The tribal, uh, government has been really instrumental in keeping people isolated, in a sense, where there's not—sadly

enough, there's not as many social gatherings, which are very important, you know, communal gatherings for Native people, tribal people to get together, and, uh, the drum, the songs, and the dances and those kinds of things haven't been occurring, which has been very difficult, um, to, kind of, carry on without the community moving together, and we just completed the earth renewal ceremony, which renews the whole earth, uh, and we did that about two weeks ago. So, I'm an instructor in the ceremony, and so, uh, many of the participants, uh, and they probably all were tested for COVID, you know, to enter into the lodge, and we share a lot of things, touching and closeness, and, uh, it turned out very, very good—you know, it's a very good, kind of, cooperative exchange.

So—so, the tribe actually made a way to make that—to expedite that ceremony, and it was, kind of, odd to have infringement of the rest of the world in our ceremony which is usually very isolated, but because of the disease, we had to, you know, interject health services to come in and—and do testing before we started the ceremony, but we finished and everyone seems very healthy, and it's a good way, in a sense, as I said, with a piece called *A Place of Healing*—it's called Concho. It's a site where the shadow Arapaho come to make the ceremony every year, uh, and so, we were able to complete that and—and make the prayers for the whole world, you know.

[00:05:13]

MELISSA HO: Yeah, it—it seems like this, um—the situation of dealing with the public health crisis and um, sort of, confronting the fragility of—of life and also confronting loss is, of course, something that Indigenous communities have been dealing with for a long, long time. Do you see the—you know, now that it's confronting the entire United States of America more broadly, I mean, do you see that changing your—your work going into the future?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Uh, not—not really. I think it's, kind of, ironic, or I don't say—I don't want to say it's humorous, but—but, you know, to—to have empathy and to care for your people and to care for the earth and to care for health, that's sort of a new idea in America.

MELISSA HO: Yeah [affirmative].

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: It seems to be [laughs], you know, and it's just ridiculous that it is a new idea, like—like, we should not, you know—the—the Republic of America, the Republic, the capital behind the Republic, is about solo wealth, you know, that's what it's all about, basically, and how can the solo individual become wealthy and prosperous, and all that. And it's not about a community or—or—or, uh, you know, uh, a tribe region. It's more about the individual, and so, uh, the tribe is totally about the community and even in the leadership.

I remarked that to be a chief—there's 44 chiefs, and to be a chief in the Cheyenne tribe, you have to give all your belongings away. If someone wants anything from you, you give it to them, and you lead with generosity, and if someone ever has a meal—a communal meal, you eat last if you're the chief. You eat last—[laughs] you hope there's something left for you to eat because they've [inaudible] to save you some because you eat last. You don't eat first. You're the last person to eat. They wait in the back of the area, then they go forward at the end.

So, all these things—the apparatus of—of leadership is based on humility and community and sharing and that kind of attitude. So, we've been living that way for, you know, thousands of years, and now, you know, America still wrestles with, again, obviously, how do they resolve this crisis by actually giving into helping everybody without it being an individual—like, the mask issue. Do I wear a mask? And the individual won't—doesn't want to wear a mask, like, again, the individual wants to rule, and you can't—you can't change [laughs] an individual. So—so, those two pieces of work I made deal with community, deal with a, you know, sharing and, uh, empathy, but—but it's not a—it's an old idea, and we will continue to live in that way, and I'll continue to work in that way.

MELISSA HO: And the—both of those works that, um, we are referencing were—were created by, uh, what I think is called viscosity printing—

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yes, yes.

MELISSA HO: —um, and there's these two, sort of, sets and the set that you called the—the—the *Ghost Prints*—could you talk more about that—that ghost aspect of those prints?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yeah, yes. That's a good point. Yeah, I created these projects at Santa

Fe, and I work at Fourth Dimension Studios, and it's a Native-operated studio, uh—Navajo printer, master printer, Michael McCabe. We work together for 20 years—over 20 years, but we created those pieces out there. I make my drawings in Oklahoma; I go to Santa Fe, and we make primary prints which are the full inking of the plate, you know, but one—one pool off of there—off the plate and then we have one—so, we have one set that's primary that's, uh, the full, kind of, inking then we have a second pool, which is called the *First Ghost*, and that is a little fainter, a little—little lighter, uh, and then we've been doing that on a different color paper to, kind of, change up to the—the presentation of the—and they're words—they're texts, you know, pieces, and so, in my sensibility, uh, primary print is the way Native people live and exist, you know, we're very vivid. We're very much in—in focus. We're, you know, we're solid.

The *Ghost Print* is how America sees Native people, faintly a ghost image, just barely existing, you know, uh, lighter in focus and so on, and so, I always make two separate panels that way. So, one is—one is the real one in the sense and one's the, sort of, the remnant of what exists, and so, I—I challenge America to not fixate on the ghost but to fixate on the reality of Native America.

[00:10:06]

MELISSA HO: Um, what are—um, what are—oh, sorry, something strange happened with my audio there for a second. Can you still hear me?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yeah, I can hear you.

MELISSA HO: Uh, his sense of, sort of, addressing, um, maybe two different audiences at once, a Native and a non-Native, I'd like to ask you more about, um, what are the—the—the lessons and the ideas you think are more—most urgent for—for both those audiences to be hearing through your—through your work or just in conversation now?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Well, with my work, uh, it kind of has two major, kind of, uh, channels, uh. One began in the '80s and that was me moving to the reservation and living there, kind of, in a rural area and learning about the land and being very much, uh, a student of the land, and uh, and I made paintings then, abstract paintings. They're called the *Neuf Series*, and so, that was about sovereignty. That's my sovereignty and the sense, my location on the reservation where I lived about for 12 years, um, and during that time, though, I—I became even more politicized, and I made more text work, which were declarations of, uh, kind of, uh, combative declarations, uh, insurgencies within America to defend Native land and Native peoples' lives, and so, I have two things happening at the same time, and one is more celebratory, and one is more combative or informative.

Uh, so, I think it's very important to use the words to actually be very, very outspoken, and very clear to the—to the public—the non-Native public about the priorities of Native life, how to defend it, how do—we should interject policy, health, you know, all these things, jobs, all these things that happen, sovereignty with gaming, as an—as an example, you know, that kind of independence of sovereignty. So, I continue to work that way, and I think—Native artists should do that, I think, uh.

A piece I did also for the cover of *Art in America* a couple years ago said, “Do not dance for pay; do not dance for pay,” and, uh, it was a read monoprint, and so, I really call out all the Native artists in the sense to not—to quit dancing for pay. Like, we've been doing so much Native art for commerce in the market and to please the white man, and so, most of the white people think everything's fine because we have very pastoral, like buffaloes, or coyotes or something [laughs], all these images of just, you know, kind of grand, Western life, you know, and we have that—underneath that we've got poverty, alcoholism, hypertension, diabetes, uh, you know, huge, huge problems, but no one paints about that. They sort of dance for the pleasure of the white man to make money, and most of the Native art in the country is built on a commerce for the white man, like Sedona, Santa Fe, you know, those kind of places, um.

So, we need to change that and be more outspoken about the reality. So, I challenge everyone to step forward and—as—as Native artists and really explain and share the difficulties and try to resolve these problems.

MELISSA HO: There's another way in which, um, your work, *Places of Healing*, is outspoken, is in the—the use of Native languages. Um, talk about how you deploy, uh, Native sovereign language in your—you know, you do so much text-based work, as you say.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yeah, yeah that's a very good point, and so with this piece, there's 24 primary prints and 24 ghosts, um, so that most of the text is actually in the tribal language that we're—we're, uh, you know, examining in terms of their ceremonial location. So, I think it's—that's another step, certainly, is to use your own language, you know, uh, tribal languages. That's a very, very strong sense of sovereignty—to be speaking your own language and writing in your own language, and so, that's how I handled most of those prints. Some of them are in English to, kind of, key in to—the viewer can sort of see that, you know, some—some location might be, uh more easier to understand, and they know all of them are all ceremonial places, but—but yeah, using Native language is very key and then to preserve it, learn it, uh, and that's how [inaudible] goes forward.

The main challenge is to go back to your tribal community and learn from the elders, you know, learn to help the elders, preserve your tribal identity, and not just make art about it, you know [laughs]; that's ridiculous. You need to go back and preserve it. Otherwise, it won't be there as a subject matter anymore, you know. You have to go back and pay your dues and spend your time and really be with the tribal people. So, I think language is one of the main ways to do that.

[00:15:00]

MELISSA HO: I'd like to ask you a bit more about that process at this moment because as we opened our, um—this interview, I mean, you were talking about some of the challenges during, uh, the pandemic for people just to physically be together and to, um, to, uh, be functioning as a—as a community. Can you talk more about, in—in your community, how—I mean, it's very interesting to hear about, um, the way COVID testing was folded into sort of a ceremonial process so that could happen. Is there—is—how—how are the elders and how is the community at large sort of, um, adapting—adapting to the situation?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Well, I do—an example is my—my wife, uh. I'm married to, uh, Shanna Ketchum-Heap of Birds. She's a Navajo, uh, tribal member from Arizona, and so, I'm familiar with the Navajo Nation. I travel there as well and in Arizona—Northern Arizona, and there, they actually were very—had to be very, very strict and actually closed down the reservation for travel, uh, after certain hours and—and, uh, suspend certain store hours, and, uh, although it's very rural, uh, the people didn't get much news, television, and all these contemporary technologies. So, they had to be alerted to the—to the dangers, and so, having the restrictions of, uh, travel and the weekends were off limits for moving around for their own—probably their own ceremonial things and so forth.

Uh, so, that was very restrictive and wearing the mask, and so, the—the—the president of the Navajo Nation was very, very strong in his—in his efforts to, uh, kind of seclude—make them—make them secluded in a sense or isolated for their health, and they actually turned it all around by doing those efforts, you know, better than America has, uh. They've actually come together—joined together to—to preserve their own health, and that's what's necessary, and that's what happens with a—with a good community, a good tribe. They work together.

MELISSA HO: If I could, you know, turn my line of questioning to, sort of, you more, um, personally, how, uh, how have you been caring for yourself and your family, um, during these months?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Well, we've been, uh, you know—of course, school was—I have a daughter who's 11. So, we—they would—school suspended back in the spring, uh. Travel is—is limited. I don't travel anymore. I used to fly probably twice a month, you know; I don't travel like that anymore, and we travel together as a family a lot as well, you know, um, and we don't—we don't do that. We drive. I went and printed—I made a new piece in Santa Fe, but we drove, and we stayed in a—in a place that was, uh, secluded and so on and worked with a team of just two people, uh, and we were all tested, you know, as well.

So—so, uh, I've been able to, kind of, continue working, uh, but I've been more or more secluded with my life, and, uh, everyone is healthy here, and, uh, we were—we've been tested before, uh, but—but it's difficult. It's very difficult to—to, kind of, sustain this sort of isolated lifestyle. As you know, you probably have similar—similar challenges yourself, you know. So—so, uh, we're looking forward to this changing, but I think we need to really work together in the nation, uh, to do so, and then making art about these issues are—is a very, very important kind of, uh, contribution to make, uh, and so, I felt strongly to go forward and do that, but yeah, we're doing fine, but it's just a very, very tough time to be so secluded, but having the ceremony go forward—is a—was a wonderful, wonderful blessing, and—and that made us all feel much better, and it

was so great to see everybody and to heal.

I have a young—young dancer I'm working with. He's about 35, I'm—I'm working with his family, you know, his grandmothers and all those people. So, I'm—I'm the leader of that group to kind of go forward, but four years, he'll be working with me, uh, and so, we didn't let this pandemic stop us. We went forward and tried to, you know, make our contributions.

MELISSA HO: That's great, um. Maybe just one last question, um. What do you think you'll remember most vividly from this—from 2020?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Um, well, probably just that, kind of, limitation of your movements and—and what matters, you know, your family, uh, the things in your community, and they may become more acute, you know, as to what matters when they take away the other things, and so, certainly, your family is the key, uh, part of your life and to protect everybody [coughs]. It's not too much far away from how we live anyway, but, uh, I think that's what I've learned about this. It's what really matters, and it's not so much the big institutions and all these things, and I'm very involved with all these museums and galleries and projects and so on, but—and I still maintain, you know, my work, but, uh, but I think the family and the land and the life, uh. I've been riding my bike. I'm—I'm—I'm a gearhead guy. So, I ride my—my pushbike, and so, that's really helped me a lot to be out on this lake every day riding the six miles and—and coming back home, you know. So, it's slowing down and maybe paying more attention to—to what's going on with this planet.

[00:20:25]

MELISSA HO: Thank you, Edgar. Um, can I just ask—this is a—not a significant question really, but what—what's a pushbike? Is—is that a different format of bike?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Well, that's, sort of, a British thing, but—or people say bike and they think—they think you mean a motorcycle [laughs], you know. So—

MELISSA HO: Oh [laughs]

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: —just a, you know, pedaling—a pedaling bike.

MELISSA HO: A pedaling bike.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: I don't ride a motorcycle around, like, for exercise so [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Got you [laughs].

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yeah, [inaudible] done that for 20 years—it's my thing to ride the bike. There's a place called Lake Hefner near me, and I've been living here for 20 years. So, it's really great to be out and in the—and the— and the—and the wind and the sun and, uh, enjoying that.

MELISSA HO: Yeah, being outdoors is a huge salve at this point.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yeah, cities aren't good for that so [laughs].

MELISSA HO: Yeah, that's true.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: I'm glad you don't go home under [inaudible] yeah.

MELISSA HO: It's true. Well, it's great to talk to you. Is there anything, um, else that you'd like to—to state for the record?

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Um, well, I wonder how you're doing with all this. How are you managing?

MELISSA HO: Well, like you say, um, I have a child who's school aged, too. So, I think, um, you know, I'll—I am seeing it a lot through his eyes, um, and wondering how he's going to remember this time, um, and there is this contraction into the family home and spending time together, um. At the same time, work has been very intense, um, and feeling very, very tethered to my computer—not always, uh, happily so [laughs], but I think this is—you know, us talking like this on the screen—this is, this is the new—a new normal for me because I—I never really did that, um, before, but now, this is—this is, you know, one of the main ways I have to communicate, certainly with, you know, a lot of colleagues and friends, um, and so, yeah, I—it makes me all the

more appreciative of the things I can do in person, but it's all very localized, just sort of my neighborhood, um.

So, I—there is a commonality of experience, um, that's happening right now, uh. In—although, you know, I'm—I'm curious because, of course, I'm in the Washington, D.C. area, um, with certain, um, you know—most of the people, uh, here in my neighborhood are pretty conscientious about wearing masks and so forth, and I've talked to people in other parts of the country where it's really contested, um. So, yeah—but I'm not going out too much, maybe like you. It's good to hear you're still managing to make work.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Yeah, yeah [laughs] yeah. That's a challenge. I guess, it's—my last comment is just to reflect on, you know, certainly Black Lives Matter and all the—

MELISSA HO: Yes.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: —kind of equity issues that we have, along with COVID, and—and like, with any kind of crisis, with any kind of challenge, you know, you—you hope that people maintain the priorities when it all goes back to—to whatever normal used to be, like—and we—we need to have the, kind of, you know—and the—and the—and the Washington Redskins team changing their name, all these things that happen, that we had been working so hard for that for 20, 30 years. I've—I've been involved and to see it happen so quickly—well, it's great, you know, and all the things are great to have equity, sensitivity, you know, racial, kind of, inclusion, all these things are wonderful, and we hope, uh—and—and—and—and the vice president, uh, candidate selected yesterday—tremendous, tremendous. I'm so excited about that. All that is wonderful, and just—let's just keep it all moving in that direction [laughs]. Let's keep it to where we're all going to be fair and—and have—empathy is there. I mean that's—we need to carry that forward.

MELISSA HO: Agreed. Well, thanks, Edgar. I'm going to stop recording. Thank you so much for making time for this.

EDGAR HEAP OF BIRDS: Sure. Great, great [laughs].

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