

Hochivi Edgar Heap of Birds

Cheyenne-Arapaho



Hochivi Edgar Heap of Birds and his family live a few miles outside of Geary, Oklahoma, in a house once lived in by his grandmother. The house sits high and solitary, with sweeping views of the mostly undeveloped land. From the front yard one can see how the land breaks down and away into the reds, greens, and browns of the surrounding canyons. The air here in summer is hot and has the feel, in Scott Momaday's words, of the "anvil's edge."

Heap of Birds was born in Wichita, Kansas, in 1954 and attended high school there. His formal art training began at the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, California, in 1975. This was followed by a B.F.A. degree (University of Kansas, 1976) and an M.F.A. (Tyler School of Art, Temple University, 1979), both in painting. He also completed graduate work in painting at the Royal College of Art in London in 1977. He is currently an associate professor in the Department of Art at the University of Oklahoma, where he teaches painting, drawing, and a workshop in conceptual art.

In addition to his teaching, Heap of Birds has lectured on art in Europe and throughout the United States. He has also curated a number of exhibitions, including "Modern Native American Abstraction" (Philadelphia Art Alliance, 1983) and "No Beads—No

Thinkers" (Geneva, Switzerland, 1984). Heap of Birds articulated the philosophy of the Philadelphia show: "Allowing Native Americans to interpret their future with a totally open perspective shall have a great constructive outcome."²

Heap of Birds has been exhibiting in both group and solo shows since 1977. His "canvases" have included the side panels of commuter buses, park and freeway signs, and the Spectacolor Light billboard in Times Square. About these public-media works he has written: "We find it effective to challenge the white man through our use of the mass media. . . . the survival of our people is based upon our use of expressive forms of modern communication. The insurgent messages within these forms must serve as our present-day combative tactics."³ The clear political dimension of Heap of Birds's work is further evident in the way he unifies language and image in many pieces. His complete message synthesizes both these ways of apprehending the world. As Lowery Stokes Sims has pointed out, "the ambition to modify linguistic habits that are deeply encoded in our collective psyche is no mean task. But artists such as Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds have realized that there is little choice in the matter for them, so crucial is this task to the psychic and emotional survival of their communities."⁴

Heap of Birds has been the recipient of a number of commissions and awards for his work. *Building Minnesota* was sponsored by the Walker Art Center of Minneapolis and was installed from March 10 to August 20, 1990. *Mission Gifts*, sponsored by the San Jose Museum of Art, ran from November 15, 1990, to January 15, 1991. His most recent commission was *Day/Night*, an enamel porcelain sculpture sponsored by Art in Public Places of Seattle in June 1991. In 1989 Heap of Birds received the National Art Award from the Tiffany Foundation.

I met with Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds at his home in Geary on the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation in late July 1991. We talked in his studio; the various sketches, paintings, and photographs pinned

Hachivi Edgar
Heap of Birds

20

to the walls provide a history of his career, right up to the present moment. After the interview we drove down through the canyons in his pickup.

LA: I'd like to start out by discussing a statement you made for the "Sharp Rocks" exhibit. You mentioned that as you looked around your land here in Oklahoma and found arrowheads, you came to believe that past weaponry was both defensive and preservative.⁵ Would you say that your work today has the same role?

HEB: Yes. That was early on, around '86. I was finding arrowheads as I was hunting, and I mostly ate the food I hunted. And I realized that back then the people wouldn't be sport hunting. But the bow and arrow was a new weapon for them. I was affiliated with the warriors' society, so I started to think a lot about the past and the images of ceremonies. And then you are kind of brought up short by the present and start to ask yourself, "What happens now? What do I do now?"

As a society member I was involved in a lot of funerals from alcohol-related deaths, and I had to shake the hand of everyone in the grieving family. And I thought about how people just played themselves out and weren't allowed to participate in white society. The experience of all those funerals was very moving, but then I tried to understand what I could have done before I had to shake the hand of the dead person's relative. And so I started to think of the art as a way to help preserve life, or even as a way to represent Native people and try to improve the situation, you know, by making that representation.

And of course I'd have to push the work harder — harder than it's been pushed before, as the warriors would have pushed it. The Cheyenne warriors of a long time ago were very, very dangerous people and took a lot of risks all the time. And that's what I think the work has to do.

LA: Could you talk about your role in the warriors' society?

HEB: Yes, a little bit. It basically functions as the caretaker of the ceremonial ways, things we do to renew the earth, and we also have the general welfare of our people in mind. I've been involved with it for about ten years, since the early eighties. I came to it when I was in my mid-twenties. I've tried to learn as much as I could about the ceremonies, although now I've sort of stepped

Hachivi Edgar
Heap of Birds

21

back from the society because there is a lot of factionalism and I really don't want to dishonor it by having to nearly come to blows over problems that exist. But on the other hand, I say it's kind of interesting that the tribe is so powerful that it can fight itself and still thrive. So we have both of those elements — great diversity and differences of opinion, and a sense of unity.

LA: Was it a return to tradition for you, or were you brought up in traditional ways?

HEHB: I wasn't really educated in the traditions as a young person; like, my father won't even come to the ceremonies now. I mean, he lives on the reservation area, in Geary, but for him personally, he doesn't really know about that stuff and he chooses not to be involved in it, which happens, you know, with everything. People have their choices. It's like, people might think that all Cheyennes or all Indians are right in the middle of ceremonial life. But they're not. Cheyenne people are individuals, so they all have their own choices. He couldn't teach me about it, so I sort of found my own way back to it, which is actually another strength of the tribe. The people in their twenties and thirties now aren't like my father's generation, the sixty-year-olds and the seventy-year-olds today, who had to just get out there in the trenches and work in aircraft plants or on the road crews just to put food on the table so we could grow up and come back and take care of this stuff, like the ceremonies and the traditions. That's the way it's been.

LA: That's interesting how those local realities influence people. On another level, your work seems grounded in broader historical realities. You've referred to the Sand Creek massacre and to the process of Oklahoma statehood, while at the same time you utilize modern mass media. How did you come to integrate history and modernity in your work?

HEHB: Probably just from my own experience. I think that's how most artists are working, you know. However you live is how you're going to work. I grew up in Wichita, Kansas. My father worked for Beech Aircraft. My great-grandfather was the leader of the Elk Warriors' Society. So there are those dualities already. I went to the University of Kansas and the Royal College of Art in London and the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, you know, so I'm obviously versed in contemporary Western society.

So knowing those things and then coming back to the reservation area and being faced with all sorts of historical realities and

responding to them, I've continued to work in a way that tries to unify both in some way. As I travel around the world or around Indian territories I'll make something about a particular place. But I use modern systems to talk about it.

LA: You've written: "The insurgent messages within these forms [of modern communication] must serve as our present-day combative tactics." Can art bring about political change and is Native art by definition political?

HEHB: I think so. No matter what you as the artist do with the work, it's identified as Native art. That's a problem in some ways and it's a solution in other ways. Other people's art isn't white art or necessarily Italian art or Chinese art or whatever; it's just art and then you deal with the issues within it. But with us, people bring their perceptions of Native America to bear on all the art being done and you have no choice about that; they're going to do it anyway. So it's how you as an artist react to that. It's a political reaction whether you disregard those perceptions or whether you take those perceptions and spin it back toward people, which my work tends to do. I try to turn things around and talk about them when they want to know about me. So that's how I see the tactics of what I do.

LA: A sense of reversal and bitter irony comes through in much of your public work, like *Native Hosts*, *Mission Gifts*, and *Building Minnesota*. Not only is there a reversal of letters and words or a mirror image of words, but there's also a reversal of the usual expectations about history, of how things were. *Building Minnesota* refers to the execution of some forty Native people in the 1860s and suggests that on a symbolic level, if not also on a real level, those executions continue today. Could you talk about how that work came about?

HEHB: A big part of it was from a song I heard, which was an honor song combined with a contemporary folk song by Larry Long, who is a singer from Minneapolis. And I introduced him to a cousin of mine, Mitch Walking Elk, who is a kind of a country folk singer and artist, and they got together and they created a song called "Water in the Rain." It chronicles what happened in the 1860s when Abraham Lincoln executed thirty-eight Dakota warriors; later Andrew Johnson executed two others, signed the death warrants. So there were forty all told. But the honor song Larry and Mitch wrote was particularly moving to me. In the middle of the regular folk song about what happened they added

a traditional Dakota honor song of people who have died. And Mitch sings the song, but while he's singing, Amos Owen, a respected Dakota elder, reads the names, in Dakota, of the forty who were executed. And it goes on for a long time. Just hearing that song and thinking about it, you know, that was what Minnesota meant to me at that time.

Then the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis asked me to do a solo show there, which I did, called "Claim Your Color." It was a series of works — paintings and public works, drawings and photographs and multimedia type of work. So along with this show they also asked me if I wanted to do a commissioned piece, and I said, yeah, I'd do something.

Then I got the idea of making *Building Minnesota*. I went to Minneapolis for a site visit and gathered research about the forty who were hanged and thought about just honoring them by using my signs, either the one-by-one-and-a-half- or the one-by-three-and-a-half-foot ones. And that's what worked out down by the river, down along the Mississippi. I had the whole city to choose from, but I kept coming back to that water. When I did the piece, it was freezing, it was below zero, and I was running around really cold, but I kept coming back to one place, the granary [i.e., the area where large flour mills are situated], and it had a little plaque there. It was playing up the great shipping channel of the Mississippi, how it was the business hub of America and how the most grain in the world was shipped through there. Then I got to thinking about the land, and movement, and why the Dakotas are thought of being from South Dakota, like no one thinks they're from Minnesota. I didn't either, I thought, "Well, Sioux are in South Dakota; where else would they be?" And then you find that they got kicked out of here and all their warriors were executed.

All that clicked together as I was standing by the Pillsbury granary, and across the Mississippi was the Gold Medal Flour granary. I got to thinking about why would the government be so vicious. It was the largest mass execution in America's history; of course, no one even knows about it, or why it was done. Then I thought about the wheat and the land and shipping, the business aspect of it, and thinking about the Persian Gulf and the oil business. Commerce was always at the bottom of these situations, you know. It's not some kind of hatred or whatever; it's business, it's money.

So I got up early in the morning to put the piece in, like at 5:00

A.M. I had the contractors hired to put the posts in the ground for the signs, two posts a piece for the forty signs over a four-hundred-foot span, and it was going to be a tough job because the ground was frozen. But I had had this kind of waking dream about the project. It was strange; it was about flour. I went to an all-night grocery and bought forty pounds of flour. And I drew out a four-hundred-foot arc with Pillsbury flour, and when the crew came they just put the posts in on the same line as the flour. But it started snowing about eleven o'clock and I had to keep scribbling out this arc with my foot as the crew came behind me putting these signs in the ground and making the arc — because I wanted the signs to come out at people. The first idea was to have a straight line, but then I thought that was too reserved, so I made the arc bulge out toward where the cars would drive by or where people walk.

LA: So this work and the other public works are more or less site specific, in the sense that this one came together at a particular place, even though you had the whole city to choose from?

HEHA: Yes, and it was also about the water, the renewal of the water, and the ceremonial Dakota ways. I know those warriors were probably trained like I am, you know, and they probably had to live without water for ceremonies lasting four days, you know, to renew the earth, and so I thought that they would respect being by the river, so I put them there.

But all of my pieces are very site specific, but that's really about the theme, which is addressing the people. See, why take my art and put it in New York or in London or in Northern Ireland? I want it to address what a specific place is about. And in my case, I guess I'm known as some kind of modernist or some kind of crazy thing, so I get chosen to be in these big museums. But instead of showing my work alone, I try to address the tribal nation that's in that area, who usually the museum doesn't know about; they've never shown their work, they never talk to them, you know. They never knew about the local history until I come to town. So I try to make people aware of that, so when I leave, the issue doesn't leave with me, which is usually the case. Most of the time the problems go with you and they go back to business as usual, so I try to open that up.

Recently I've been up to Mankato, Minnesota, where they were actually hanged, to locate a permanent site for the piece.

LA: *Building Minnesota* sounds like a phrase from a chamber

of commerce pamphlet, but you twist that around, because Minnesota was actually built on the bodies of Native people. So the work really *is* about building Minnesota, but you have to go through some loops to get there.

HEHB: It's deeper than it appears. And I don't know how that happened. I mean my work just does that. I'm getting to where I don't even know how that happens anymore. Like a piece I just finished in Seattle has a lot of things going on in it, too. They just work out that way, and people seem to get into them.

LA: Would you say, then, that you're an intuitive artist, or becoming more intuitive, or do you tend to plan things out in a more formal way?

HEHB: I plan things out, you know, pretty well, particularly technically. I have to plan them out so that they actually work, because you always run into a lot of logistical problems in doing the site pieces. It's almost like the movie *Being There* with Peter Sellers. I think about that a lot, and "being there" is everything to me. It may sound strange, but it's also the Native way; it's like you go and sit down, you smoke your pipe or do what you have to do in a place that's specific, or you make the place specific by your presence, and then you make a choice, you make a decision. You take a reading of what that place is, you know, because I never make anything without going to the place. I never make the piece at my studio and then take it; I always go to the site first, sit, talk to people, look around, even take plants that are growing, bring them back, and then I get the idea for what to make.

LA: The sense of reversal of expectations and the grounding in history are also intrinsic to *Native Hosts*. How did the idea for that come about?

HEHB: The background to that is really interesting. A few years ago I met a Wampanoag from Massachusetts named Ohaneice. He worked at Tufts University and had two radio shows in Boston. I did a show at the Institute of Contemporary Art there and he interviewed me, and we got to be pretty good friends. He had a lot of interesting ideas and funny things he'd come up with. Like his skin was very pale and he said, "You know, people shouldn't be angry with us because" — and he was pretty pointed about it — "we've had the devil longer than anybody else, and he's in our skin, but that doesn't mean we're different from you guys. We've just had him longer than you've had him in Oklahoma."

I had a gig down at the University of Rhode Island, so we

rented a car and cruised down to Kingston, Rhode Island, my wife, my son, me, and Ohaneice. It was great, because as we drove he showed me which mountains they moved to make Boston with and he showed me what happened to the land. And I'm driving down the Interstate, and it's just a road to me, but he pointed out all these things.

But when we got down to the university, he was doing a benefit for Big Mountain with his radio program. So in the middle of my lecture I just said, "Well, maybe Ohaneice wants to talk about Big Mountain." I was the visiting artist that day, so I had the floor. What could they say?

But before he spoke he acknowledged all the tribes that were in the audience, and he named them, and he said that he felt privileged to come to this place and talk and be with the trees in Rhode Island. He didn't mention the president of the university or the governor or the mayor of Kingston. After the talk many people of these nations came up to me to tell me about their histories, and I became very aware that I was a guest in another Native country, and am a guest wherever I go in the world. Mayors or governors, wherever they are and whoever they are, it's not their place.

Sometime after that I got a commission for something for City Hall Park in New York City. I got this idea — I don't know where it came from — of telling New York who the host is, the real host. And I reversed the letters of "New York" on the signs because I asked for a history of the site of City Hall Park and I received — it's a pretty classic joke — a stack of Xeroxes maybe an inch thick which said that the history of the site goes back to 1620. That's when history began; yeah, that's when it started. And I told them that and they said, "Well, we don't know anything else about it." So I turned the name around after that. I'm doing a similar series in British Columbia in about a month. The signs will say that your host is all the tribes from that area.

LA: *Mission Gifts*, too, used that technique of reversing expectations and playing off of historical reality. Many people think that the missionization process in California was necessary to bring civilization to the primitive tribes, but then when you get into the background of that you find that it wasn't such a gift to Native people.

HEHB: That process was particularly vicious. I found it one of the most troubling events I've ever encountered in the history of this country. The treatment of the people, the diseases, the slaugh-

ter. On a smaller scale, it was similar to the calculated mistreatment of Jews in Germany in the thirties and forties. It was very, very vicious stuff. That history was the impetus for putting the show together.

LA: The show was actually on buses?

HEHB: On the sides of thirty commuter buses which ran throughout Santa Clara County for a couple of months or so. The signs said:

SYPHILIS / SMALL POX / FORCED BAPTISMS /
MISSION GIFTS / ENDING NATIVE LIVES.

LA: Do you ever get responses from people about the public works?

HEHB: Oh yeah, yeah. There's always a lot of feedback. People get very upset about some of it. But mainly it just starts the discourse and I think that's what I try to do with all the public work. I mean, if it doesn't do that, I don't know why we're doing anything. If we didn't begin the discussion of what the reality of this country is . . . I mean, *Mission Gifts* was a little pointed maybe and a little editorialized, but with *Building Minnesota* or *Native Hosts*, I'm not saying that Minnesota or New York are terrible places and that they shouldn't have done this or they shouldn't have done that. I'm just giving the information, because maybe people didn't know that the missions brought syphilis to the tribes. And when I went to California, I asked people where the Indians are, and they say they don't know where they went. So I tell them that the missions killed a lot of them off. I'm sorry if it's a mystery why they're gone, but that's why.

LA: Would you say, then, that you try to have an educational dimension to your work?

HEHB: Particularly with the public work, because it's always dealing with history just about all the time, and it informs people about the Native response to that history. But I don't like to make it didactic, hit people over the head with it. There's a certain amount of seduction involved with all art and life and love or whatever, and you have to sort of give that out and let people solve what it is they think needs solving. If you just give them the slogan, that's not enough for me. People criticized my work in graduate school in Philadelphia because it *wasn't* a slogan. I'd tell them what it *was* about and they'd get upset because it didn't look like what I'd said at all. They'd tell me, "Wait a minute; you're using words and you've got to say what they mean."

Hachivi Edgar
Heap of Birds



Hachivi Edgar
Heap of Birds



I once talked to an older artist I met, Ed Ruda, he was a visiting professor from New York. We were sitting around one day and I said, "Ed, the critics and all these people are giving me hell about using text and are telling me it's got to mean what it says." And he said, "What does red mean? What does blue mean? People think they know what blue means, or red, but they don't, so who says that letters and words have to mean the same thing?"

LA: What is the function of color in your work, not in the public works, but in the *What Makes a Man* series or in a relatively abstract work like *Old Man Sits Calm near the Heat*, for example?

HEHB: Well, those are all from what is the *Newf* ["four times" in Cheyenne] series, which are acrylic paintings like five by six feet or so, and they began from the canyon right outside the house. The earth color is very red here, so that came into it; and another part of the imagery is the break of the earth, how the earth washes. That's where some of the forms come from in the paintings. But the totality of the color, I don't know; I've always had those colors. I mean, I've always painted. I'm a painter, that's how I describe myself. I'm not really a conceptual artist or anything like that. I deal with the way things look. Even with the public work I'm very involved with the aesthetics of the letters and what colors they are and all that. So I've always had this color, which is really a lot of different colors, as you see in the studio now. It's like a lot of colors that might not work together, but I always put them together, and they're getting brighter now, too. But there isn't a specific association with those colors. When I do the gestural drawings, like the word drawings, those have a direct reference about the word itself.

LA: Like in the *What Makes a Man* series? There the colors have a pretty specific meaning.

HEHB: Yeah, you know, like *Sweet Sage*: the sage is green, and the color of the earth is green, so I do associate that. It's a little game I play within my work where the paintings never have an association but the words all have associations.

LA: How did the specific forms come about? Would you call them landscape paintings?

HEHB: Not really. People can sort of see land in them or leaves or a lot of things, but I think the images are more informed by the canyon and the trees but in a very vague kind of reference. It's not very direct anymore. Now they really make themselves and the

way it's worked out is kind of interesting. This little eight-by-ten-inch painting was the first and only painting I did outdoors. But I had to paint one and then I brought it inside and it just suggested the next one and the next one, and that's been going on for maybe eight years to where even now I can see the difference between the earliest and the latest. The paintings are off on their own language totally.

But what happened one day, I was outside, and as you saw, from the top of our place here you can see twenty or thirty miles in every direction. You can see the horizon everywhere and the canyon breaks down into an arch. One day I was just out walking and all of a sudden I looked up and there was a circle in the sky and these clouds had made an upward arch which framed the downward arch, and there was this huge ellipse about a mile wide, and a few minutes later the top clouds moved and the ellipse was gone. And at that moment I realized that when I make these paintings I always start from the left with a shape and then I start from the right with a shape and I make it break down this way, see. And every painting I do I make that form and it's this view here, which I never knew until I saw it framed with clouds, when the clouds came.

L.A.: Does that framing give a sense a movement, or do you seek a sense of movement in those paintings?

HEHB: Yeah, I really do. I seek a lot of movement, and for a couple of reasons. The first one is more intuitive and it's about being in the canyons around here. I hunted and hiked down there, and there was a feeling of things being fixed and static. But then things would move fast, like quail against the trees, or coyotes or my dogs running by, moving like jackrabbits, and you have this flash of movement which I have seen all the time, and I like that. Somehow I like that passage of things, and I think back to the impressionists, who I discovered later, who were almost outlawed because their paintings moved too much. You know, the king of France didn't want anything to move; any kind of movement was radical. So I like in a political sense that these paintings are moving, and I hope that the world is moving and that Native America is moving, that it's not frozen. So movement, I think, is my friend. When things are moving there's always a chance.

L.A.: So even what might be seen as works about nature are operating on another level?

HEHB: Yes. People always want to stereotype them, say they

look like continents or something, but they haven't been here, they haven't walked around this land. They feel that all the work anyone does has to be taken specifically in their locale. With artists like Eric Fischl or Julian Schnabel, just as an example, or any of these people, everyone knows their intimate life stories because of the propaganda, so then you're informed about what they make. So people dwell on that particular place with them. With us, people think that we're just Native artists and we come in for a quick thing and we fill a slot, so we're not allowed as big a persona as Anglo artists like Robert Rauchenberg. He can do record covers or whatever, silverware, balloons, whatever, any kind of thing, and everyone just loves it. So I try to do that with my work, in the sense of trying to be a full person and not be pigeonholed into being only a Native artist.

L.A.: You use whole cities as your canvas, like in Minneapolis or San Jose. In Manhattan you used the Times Square message screen. This certainly blows away people's expectations about the narrow scope of Native art. You're doing a new piece in Seattle which makes a very broad statement, too.

HEHB: I just finished that. It's called *Day/Night*. It's porcelain enamel, which is a new thing for me. It's eight feet tall, forty-two inches wide, and two-sided. On the back side is an English translation of what's on the front, which is in Lushooseed, a technical version of Chief Seattle's language. One panel says "Chief Seattle, today the streets are our home," and then the other panel says "Far away, brothers and sisters, we still remember you."

It's all about the transient Native people who live in this park in Seattle, and how when tourists come to this park to get their pictures taken in front of this bronze bust of Chief Seattle, they have to step over the bodies of the Indians who are sleeping there. And there are totem poles in this park that were actually stolen from Alaska and British Columbia. No one in Washington makes these totem poles, but that's another representation of Seattle — totem poles.

All these discrepancies and miscommunications started to hit me. So when I got the commission to do a piece about Seattle, I hung out in the park, talked to people, went down to the wharf and saw the hookers and the drug dealers and all the things that were happening, you know, in the unofficial city. And then I went out to the official Indian center, which is at a beautiful place overlooking Puget Sound. I could have chosen to do a piece there,

but the real Indian center for me was Pioneer Square, where people drink their wine or beer and panhandle and sleep and what not, so I chose to put it down there. I mean, that's where the tourists are going anyway. Those two directions of society are making the work; the society that you witness is the work.

LA: What makes the work interesting is that people are more focused on the bust of Chief Seattle than on the living Indians all around. But that's a perfect analogue of what's happening anyway. On one of the panels you have your leaf forms and on the other side are dollar signs and crosses. You're linking those images?

HEHB: Yes, in this way. Those streets of Chief Seattle's are our home, because he had all these great ideas that he offered people. His name was actually Sealth, and I just wanted to talk with him and tell him, "Look what's happened to us; look at where we are. Everything you said was true, and look where we are now. It all seems to be about money. And what has the white man's religion done for us?" But, too, the leaf patterns and tree forms show that we won't forget about people on the street, or even on this reservation. Like, when I talk to people on the street, they ask me where I'm from and I say Oklahoma, Cheyenne-Arapaho. They say, "Oh, I'm from South Dakota (or Yucatán or North Carolina)." No one says they're from Seattle, and maybe they've been there fifteen or twenty years. They never forget about their people, and their people don't forget about them.

LA: So physical removal or separation doesn't correspond to a spiritual removal. Your mind is with your people.

HEHB: Yeah, the value you have is still with the original place that you come from, your nation.

LA: There seem to me to be a number of strands in your work. You have your public work, which is highly politicized, and then you have the gestural drawings we've discussed, and you use words and language also. Is it accurate to split your work into separate categories? Do you prefer to show all the types of work together?

HEHB: Yeah. I like to do it all together. I like to do the paintings and then I even do these stat photo pieces that are black and white text, like *Brick Prick* and *Hard Weed*. So it's best when it's working together, you know. It's just that the art world doesn't want you to have that venue. They want to keep it clipped down so they can compare it with this other agenda they've got.

Like I just got some information about another group show that's going to happen, and it's just so tiresome to have another one with Native artists or with non-Native artists or whatever. I mean that I'm really tired of people creating communities of artists which don't really exist, which is what you do when you make a group show. You're making a facsimile of a community, because the curator has got an idea, not to mention a job, and they ask you to step into that idea with them. Like the Heard Museum, they get these ideas and I don't know what we've got to do with the ideas. We're individual people.

An example would be like here on the reservation area and in Oklahoma City there's a group I founded called Makers' Alliance. We show together, our kids play together, but we're not all from Oklahoma. We taught in Texas together and we made a sweat lodge together because we all might want to pray, not that we're getting paid to make a sweat lodge. Because we work together, it's legitimate that we show together. But all these shows that happen because someone had a notion, that seems off-track. In those cases, you're put in a position where they take a slice of your work but they don't take all the things you do, or even representative things. No one gets to know all the things you do. There's just that little bit that fits the agenda that seems to be popular at the moment. And so all that means being marginalized again. You're marginalized for everything in the country already, and then you're marginalized again by a museum. So I think the element that should be pushed is to have solo projects and shows, and I'm not speaking about myself. I have enough solo shows that are going to keep continuing, I'm sure. But for many Native artists trying to make a career, they should be allowed to speak fully and be all the things they are and be given a venue and a museum, just like you would any other prominent artist in the world.

LA: Do you find that if your work doesn't fit into preestablished categories of what Native art is, museums and galleries don't want to have anything to do with it?

HEHB: Oh yeah, yeah. That's pretty much a given. Or the flip side: they've reestablished the stereotype to be the political Native artist, so they want that work. They don't want to look at the prose work or the drawings because that doesn't fit into what they thought you were. All that stuff is just deadly. But the big problem I find, especially in New York and back east, is the trend of moving away from art and into the curatorial. Right now, the

powers that be are curators. I was in a show in Boston, my work was there, I was there, and upstairs was an exhibition by Cindy Sherman. Anyway, the curators of our shows were there at the reception, and someone walked in and looked at my work and said, "Oh, that's interesting," and then asked what show was upstairs. And the curator of Cindy's show said, "Mine." And that's just indicative of what we've come to. It's the curator's show, not the artist's show. That's just so derailed. Another instance of this was on an invitation to a show. There weren't any artists on it, just the title of the show and the curator's name. The artists aren't necessary.

LA: The artist just serves the curator's function.

HEHB: Yeah. I think that's a big problem and that's why we have so many disjointed shows; someone's got some idea, some crazy idea. I was in London a while back and there was a show I went to called "Women in the Water." I don't know what that was. I mean, I don't know if any women thought about water or if they were into swimming or what they were doing. A student of mine called these shows theme parks, like Six Flags over Texas or Epcot Center. I agree with him. I think that's what we've got. We've got theme-park art and people get entertained, but I think exhibits should just be all about the artist, what the artist feels, and you don't really have to curate that; it already exists. You just have to find the artists and let them have their shot.

LA: It seems like there's no differentiation between going to a theme park and going to a museum or gallery.

HEHB: Well, if these type of shows would really reveal something, I'd be in favor of them, but I don't see them revealing any organizing intelligence or enlightening us. It seems to be misguided to me.

LA: To switch channels here, how did you come to integrate verbal and visual art? How do the two work together? Why work with words in the first place?

HEHB: It developed in graduate school, particularly in Philadelphia. And I went to London and I got totally confused about being Cheyenne and living there, and traveling throughout Europe, hanging out in Florence or Nice or the Riviera. I mean, it was great, but I got to feeling out of place, so I decided that I should go back to Oklahoma and learn more about where I'm from.

Anyway, I was searching pretty hard for what it was that I

should speak about, and where I really was from, and that led me to reading histories about Cheyenne-Arapaho people. And you come up to the land, and the loss of land, and battles, and treaties being broken really quick, in the research. And so I'm faced with what to say about all this. Do I make a bunch of narrative paintings about Custer killing children in the Washita River? Then you become a realist painter portraying the massacres. What do you do? And so I ended up notating those things, more or less, rather than trying to develop a visual experience of those occurrences in history.

I had a wall in my studio in grad school and it was full of photographs and words, and it was really funny because New York City artists would come to the Tyler as visiting professors and they'd come and look at this wall. They'd say, "Where are the paintings?" I'd tell them that I didn't know how to make them yet. I've got pictures and I've got words, notations primarily, so that's how it began. I've continued that same process, not to play on the heartstrings of the public and depict a murdered child or something, but to create how I notate these emotions.

LA: The words have become a work of their own. But they're not narrative in the sense of sentences and paragraphs.

HEHB: They're like short bursts of words that I present as images. They do have an intrinsic connection. They might start out as sentences or referring to a larger experience, but it's edited down to be shorter.

LA: Is it like a free association or a kind of automatic writing?

HEHB: No, they come out of very direct experiences. For example, this one up on the wall is about Peru. It says "Metal bird turns." I had been traveling in South America, to the Amazon, and I was heading back home and very excited about getting a plane out. The plane was a jet, but it had to stop in two towns to get back to Lima, and land on these tiny runways. People were just running onto the plane and throwing their bags under the seats. That puzzled me. But I figured out that the runway had no lights and the plane couldn't really stop. It was dusk. As we taxied, there were kids playing soccer over by the runway. There was a woman walking by with her baby. There was no security or fence. It was a commercial Aero Peru flight — but I just thought about a metal bird. It suddenly seemed very primitive, just a big tin bird that was getting ready to get out of there and get back to Lima. So I put that experience down in three words. They don't

speak about the whole experience, but they speak of mine. I just hope that in all the word works, even in the paintings, I'm combining my experiences with the viewer's experiences, my life with the viewer's life.

I don't think it's possible to give a full world to somebody; all you can do is slip something in for the viewer to engage with. Then through the art experience you enlarge the viewer's perception of the world and maybe something will emerge for him. Like when I saw that mother and baby, saw the kids playing soccer, saw people running onto the plane, and I was trying to get home — that's what made my life at that moment. It was a very direct experience. It wasn't a revelation.

LA: And you'll distill that experience, that moment, into words?

HEHB: Yeah. Hopefully the words will resonate because they are distilled from my perceptions.

LA: And the words are a sort of intermediary between your experience and the viewer's experience?

HEHB: More a focus on their own experience, in that they would make something new out of it with their own life rather than gain mine, internalize mine. Like, when you're in the tepee and the ceremony starts, the leaders don't say the whole world is right here for you, take this book home and read it. It's all sorts of elements which come together to make the world.

LA: And you present these elements through your work. And your work functions on numerous levels, from the personal, in *What Makes a Man*, to the national and the international, as you've shown in work about South Africa and Northern Ireland. What connections do you make between the personal and the global?

HEHB: Well, they kind of happen. It's hard to say, because you're not always able to make pieces that address international issues. It's not always clear that you can make those connections. For example, I went to Northern Ireland and spent a couple weeks in Derry and Belfast, and then I had the message made in Oklahoma. It said: PEACE / UNITE / RESPECT IRISH HOMELANDS / NO MORE KINGDOMS / NO MORE KINGS. And I had that message when I returned to there, but I was prepared to change it if people didn't like it, but the moment I took it out of my satchel everyone just flipped out about it. They said that it would go up on a billboard in downtown Derry, so we went with that message.

But even in the *Native Hosts* pieces, I worked in some ways that were tentative, because you're a visitor and you have to see if it's appropriate for you to speak, and if it's not you sit back down and let someone else talk. So those public works have their own built-in limits.

My paintings give me the greatest latitude. I come into the studio and turn on the Janet Jackson music and I stand here and paint. I come back and forth over a period of months, maybe an hour at a time, doing little parts of the painting. I don't spend day after day all day painting. But again, I relate to the paintings all the time. Like this painting here sat for maybe nine months without any changes. Now it's almost finished, but I had to react to it rather than come in and make it. I don't think you can do anything that way. People do, but they screw everything up. You can't just come in and pose something, even on canvas. You've got to let it talk back to you, have some sort of interplay.

But I think these paintings, like in the *Newf* series, are the most personal because there are no inherent politics about them, in the sense that I'm not giving clues or thinking about how people are going to react or how they are going to read the work. The words and the gestural kind of drawings are kind of in between the paintings and the public works, the signs that go out in public. They're public because the text is very accessible to people. Everyone can pretty much read my simple words. They're about my experiences with my children, my marriage, my sexuality. So by doing four different kinds of things I can get at who I am, and if you present that, maybe people will know what you think, at least a little bit. But I couldn't use just one way of expressing myself.

LA: It sounds like the forms you work in are ways for you to explore yourself.

HEHB: Oh, yeah, totally. They have to be. That's what makes them. You can't make anything if you're empty. If you can't explore your own self, your own persona, I don't know what you do. You have to just sit back, take a trip or something.

LA: You work slowly?

HEHB: The paintings I do, but I do a lot of other things. I spend a lot of time with my kids, I travel and do other projects, curate things, little bursts of time on different projects.

LA: Your activities are quite diverse. You're not in the studio fifteen hours a day.

HEHB: No, no. But, you know, I feel — it's weird — unsuccessful

most of the time. I wish I could do this better or that better, or make sure that my son didn't cry, or play more with him, but I don't know how you resolve that. You just keep plugging away at everything. But then I think that maybe it's a good thing to feel a little jittery, always to have fire under your feet. Even when you get money, like we have a little money now, but it's not a happy thing to have; nothing changes. It's weird. But you're sort of worried about that for a long time.

LA: You've referred to the language installations as "wall lyrics."

HEB: Yeah, I guess in some kind of relationship to poetry, even though I don't like the word "poetry." I don't know what it means, but people link my work to poetry. But I was thinking about the lyrics more in terms of music. When I'm working in the studio doing the drawings there's a lot of music, very "up" music like contemporary black music, and so there's this pulse and I think the pulse gets into the drawings. When you see them they really jump around. They're not static at all, and even the edges and the fringes of them are very rough. But I always relate the images to the wall, because as I work I put them up on the wall and draw right there, make a fifteen-drawing installation right on the wall. So the drawings have more to do with music than poetry, because I feel a lot about music and it's a driving force within all the work.

LA: Can you trace back some of the other influences on your work?

HEB: Well, I guess the first one I think about is Blackbear Bosin, the Kiowa-Comanche painter. He lived in Wichita, where I grew up, and he had a studio there, which I visited, and I did get to know him. We talked every now and then, but of course we were at odds, you know, about the things that I would make, because he had more traditional ideas about what Native art could be. He was really pretty much of an abstract painter, if you look at his work, but there were always figurative things in it. But anyway, that left a little void in between us, but we could talk about it. There was a time when Native artists, maybe they still do, argue about what Native art is or isn't, what it could or could not be. But for me he was an example that you could be an artist, that you could work as an artist. It was very rare to have someone like that.

He used to sell jewelry and stuff and he probably did things

he didn't like to do, like working in an aircraft plant. He didn't have to do that too long, though, and he maintained his studio and his own lifestyle through art. So he was the first really major influence.

In high school I painted funny little Indian drawings or profiles of Indian heads, the typical kind of Plains Native work. I didn't do that for long, but it was a mannerism I saw. At undergrad school [the University of Kansas], I had a lot of teachers who weren't necessarily well known but they'd studied at places like Yale and RISD [the Rhode Island School of Design]. But they were in a weird sort of landlocked art world. In Kansas it's really isolated and dead and it plays like Norman, Oklahoma, or something. It's hard to get out of there, like something keeps pulling you back. I learned about frustration from them, too, about how you got to move, you got to get going, and they gave me an agenda. They'd tell me about Berkeley or London as a place to study. They showed the students that we had to look beyond this local place. It's an international game we're playing and it's good to get versed in that, so I did. And that's when I applied to go to school in London and got accepted at the Royal College of Art. I went to London on a scholarship and traveled all around Europe. But like I was saying before, it was more or less an experience which showed me how much I was from another place.

But it was interesting in a way. Because of British colonization, the city is full of everybody but people from England. There are students from Malta, Hong Kong, you name it, so there's an incredibly diverse group of people. People must have thought I was from Saudi Arabia, because one time a bus driver started talking to me in Arabic. And one time a professor I didn't even know came into the studio and said that my work seemed to be more about a round place, not this New York-Frank Stella stuff which I'd been doing. And I took his advice and I came back home and found out what that earth awareness was.

Another powerful influence in grad school, when my work got a little more mature, was Vito Acconci. He gave a talk at Temple about his sexuality. He was a writer but he got into a lot of performance work. He did some crazy stuff and people thought he was nuts, but I thought he was great because he was really saying something with his own self about his own self. He wasn't pretending to do something, but putting himself on the line. And later, in '82, I had this show with him. I was putting up my work

about the Sand Creek massacre and I backed into somebody and it was Vito. He was putting up his stuff. It was a great moment. I see him on the subways sometimes in New York and we guest lecture at the same schools.

LA: That's interesting. In a way you bridge Black Bear Bosin and Vito Accosci. Maybe that isn't so extreme if you think about it, the connection of the old and the new. You've written some about the Fort Marion artists and your great-grandfather, who was a prisoner there.* You mentioned the continuity of the warrior's spirit and the public messages in the work of the 1870s, which is what you're trying to do 120 years later. What is your sense of connection to the prison drawings?

HEHB: Well, there's been some controversy about that work. To me, there have been some strange readings by Native art experts, who aren't Natives at all, of course, but they are experts about us. And the reading is that when the Cheyenne warriors and chiefs went to Fort Marion, they were somehow happy about being there, in this totally horrible prison. This view comes from the absence of aggressive imagery in their work. In the Northern Plains drawings of the 1850s and '60s there were some very violent drawings. But my premise is that if you are in prison, you don't draw pictures about killing the warden and then expect to get out someday. They made pastoral paintings and the ones about war were the ones about hunting. But these guys were stone warriors — that was their job. But they were smart enough not to do that in prison, and they got let out to come home eventually.

So I guess what I meant is that from my looking at the art, that was the first time that Indian artists had to project what the white public would think of the art. Before, what you made was within your culture; you dealt with your own culture and you just worked. But now, we, Indian artists, are in a public arena, an international arena. And we've got to think about what that arena is all about and how we're going to work with that, like the Fort Marion prisoners had to work with what they had, and they beat it, because they got to come home. You've got to beat it that way, outsmart it. It's subversive, where they don't think you're doing that, they think you're just putting it out there, but no, you're spinning it around.

LA: In a lecture, "Insurgent Messages for America," you stated: "Countless times our combative measures through Art are misrepresented or corruptly undertaken by the non-Indian. Too

often the white man masquerades as the native artist, creating many self-serving images. Regretfully when true Native American Art is finally accepted the style turns out to be that which fulfills the comfortable fantasy held by the non-Indian. It must be understood that the dominant white culture is not in a position to instruct in the essence of the native outlook, but can only learn."⁷

Could you expand on that?

HEHB: Well, yeah. In the institutionalized art world, many of the Indians aren't Indians at all. They have nothing to do with the nation or the culture; they'd rather deal with galleries and museums and collectors. I once had an older collector in an art history class I taught and he was only interested in how to be a more savvy buyer. The art world would rather deal with the white masquerading as the Indian because it just makes the business run smoother.

I do support trying to get rid of people who masquerade, and I support the law about identifying yourself and your nation. We've got to do something about these people who are not Indians passing themselves off as Indians. I regret that some people's parents didn't want to claim their tribal heritage because it was a discriminatory thing, but I guess I would forgo those people to get rid of the other ones. Nothing is a pure system. I mean, in the ceremony that we have you can't eat or drink, and if you want to leave, well, no one's going to force you to stay. Maybe you'll faint or maybe you'll get sick, but that's the breaks. That's what happens. But for the greater good, to make this renewal you have to make sacrifices. I think that the bulk of Native artists support the law, so we can get rid of these impostors. Anyway, we're not saying that you can't show; just don't claim to be an Indian.

LA: It seems as though there's a double-edged sword in that Native art has to look "Indian" in order to be accepted, while at the same time the ethnic artist is restricted to a different category. Do you find that work is judged by the ethnicity of the artist rather than the quality of the work, or can the two be separated out?

HEHB: I think it can be separated out. If you're honest in who you are and say who you are, then the work is going to be the work and it's not going to be automatically successful just because you're from somewhere or have a certain background.

LA: It's funny that Native people are the only group who have to prove who they are. You can call yourself a German artist and not have to go back generations.

HEHB: The weird part about it is that we don't have people masquerading as German artists. We don't have people saying, "I'm kind of black." Some people from southern Spain are part African, but they don't sit around claiming to be black artists or infringing on African events or exhibitions. It's a weird game.

LA: Why would that masquerading be done?

HEHB: There's the mythical model of the Native world, which on one hand people want to destroy the existence of Native people, while on the other they want to be part of it.

LA: That must make people schizophrenic, because at the same time you're being destroyed, you are being embraced.

HEHB: Yeah, yeah. The thing of it is to me, though, is that people don't want to be Native; they want to remain themselves while pretending to be Native. They don't want to come live like you or have fights and have drunks around; they don't want their kids to go to the second-class schools, have third-class health care. They don't want that. They want to stay themselves but yet think they're you. Then they can disavow any problems they've caused, because they're you. That washes them clean — and I say no. If you live in America, I want to know where so we can talk about the land your house is on. I don't care where you are, you are on Indian land and you're profiting from it. And when you make money on your investment, that's Indian profit you are taking. No one is in the clear on this.

It's the same in other ways, too. People ask me in all honesty if they can attend a ceremony and go through some of the rituals. But it's like when my grandma was a kid, they'd go in a wagon for a week to visit Kiowas and they'd take gifts; they wouldn't go empty-handed. Because they want to share what they had, they would take something. So when people ask me, I say, "Well, why don't you take some meat and some gifts and stick around for a week or two, instead of just zipping in and out for an hour?" If I go somewhere I gather up dishes of food or baskets of groceries to offer my hosts just as a courtesy, right? I mean, that's what is done. It's important to make that exchange.

LA: You've written about the role of sexuality in your work, and a good bit of your work addresses that. The IATA [Institute of American Indian Arts] just had a show of the human figure in Native American art [summer 1991]. It had a good reception, but I sense that most people don't connect to Native artists doing nudes, or believe that the domain of Native artists should include

the sexual or the sensual. Why is this an important dimension of your work?

HEHB: Well, it's all about the kind of dehumanization we face and the myths again, and they're related. If you're a myth, then you're not human anymore and you don't suffer human problems and there are no human solutions we can find for you. We don't have to do any legislation or reappropriation of taxes or decide on fishing rights. All we have to do is read about you in a book, make sure that you stay in the dead past. The white man has done that to Native people through taking away their sensuality and sexuality, which is very, very real. It's a very active, sexually active kind of culture, even in jesting and joking with old ladies and stuff. All these kinds of things are fair game for teasing, say, and the sexual energy is always there in our cultures, more so I think than in Anglo cultures. It's been absent, so therefore I tend to stir it into my work and it's revealing in some ways. It's just more of my reality. And then if you can face people as human beings, maybe you can deal with their problems in a real way. But we mythologize different groups — blacks, Asians, Latinos, what have you — misinterpret them, and then they're not real anymore. It's the usual ethnocentric, anthropological perspective.

LA: Looking ahead, you have an exhibit planned for Berkeley in the spring of '92. Could you talk about that?

HEHB: It's a piece actually commissioned by the Wexner at Ohio State, but part of it will be at Berkeley. It's called *Is What Is*, and it's stepping beyond *What Makes a Man or Sharp Rocks*. It will examine sexuality, tribalism, warriors, family, self, trying to make those things clear. That's the next step for me, to be even more personal and deal with some of these things. I've made a diagram of it. It's based on my travels to Peru and Mexico, and on my participation in ceremonies, and on my self. I made a lot of drawings in South America, and I'm going to make drawings about words.

It also involves the two coasts in this country, and the four directions. They are persona places where I become this individual who speaks about art. So the West Coast one will be called the "Boost" and there'll be an East Coast one. And then the north is a ceremonial position for the tribe, so the paintings will have a northern orientation. I'll install the paintings to the north on a kind of curved wall at the Wexner, and I'll have the Peru drawings facing south and other things facing east and west to make a

directional kind of installation, kind of how I sit here in the middle of America in Oklahoma and things are moving around me, and how I move around my place here.

What it may really be about is spirits. An older Cheyenne ceremonial woman came into my studio and looked around one day and said, "I don't know if these are paintings or what they mean, but there are a lot of spirits in here, watching us." And I think that's one of the best interpretations of the paintings I've ever heard and I was very happy with that.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- "Is What Is" (1992), University of California Art Museum, Berkeley, CA.
- "Dig the Mix" (1991), University of Colorado Art Galleries, Boulder, CO.
- "Hard Weed" (1991), Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, and Definitely Superior, Thunder Bay, Ontario.
- "Claim Your Color" (1990), touring retrospective exhibition, Exit Art, New York, NY.
- "American Policy" (1988), Orchard Gallery, Derry, Northern Ireland.
- "Heh No Wah Maun Sun He Dun: What Makes A Man" (1987-88), touring exhibition, Gallery of the American Indian Community House, New York, NY.
- "Sharp Rocks" (1985-87), CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, NY.
- "In Our Language" (1983), language/video installation, C. N. Gotman Museum, University of California, Davis, CA.
- "Foreign Bodies" (1982), Southern Plains Indian Museum and Crafts Center, Anadarko, OK.

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds

M



Tuscarora

There are two distinct strands in Rick Hill's photographs and paintings: the meditative and the satirical. In the former works, Hill uses both "straight" portraiture and photo-collage, accompanied with text, to create highly personal reflections on culture, family, self, life, and death. In such works as *My Grandmother*, *My Father*, *My Friend*, and *My Son*, Randy, all from 1971, Hill attempts to take the measure of these lives and the meanings of those lives to him. These photographs give him the opportunity to explore the reality of his own life and to come to the realization that no one stands alone.

This realization of connectedness and endurance on both a family and a cultural level emerges powerfully in *Along the Flowered Path* (1971). The work concerns both the death of his brother and the birth of his son. Hill's brother and Hill's infant son were each borne along the same path. Hill notes about the work: "We will all follow that path sooner or later, just as our ancestors before us. Even in the afterworld, the Iroquois will walk together as one." In this case, as in the other works in this series, the personal portrait encodes cultural values.

At first glance Hill's "straight" portrait photographs of real people may appear prosaic, but this is a deliberate strategy on his part to

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