

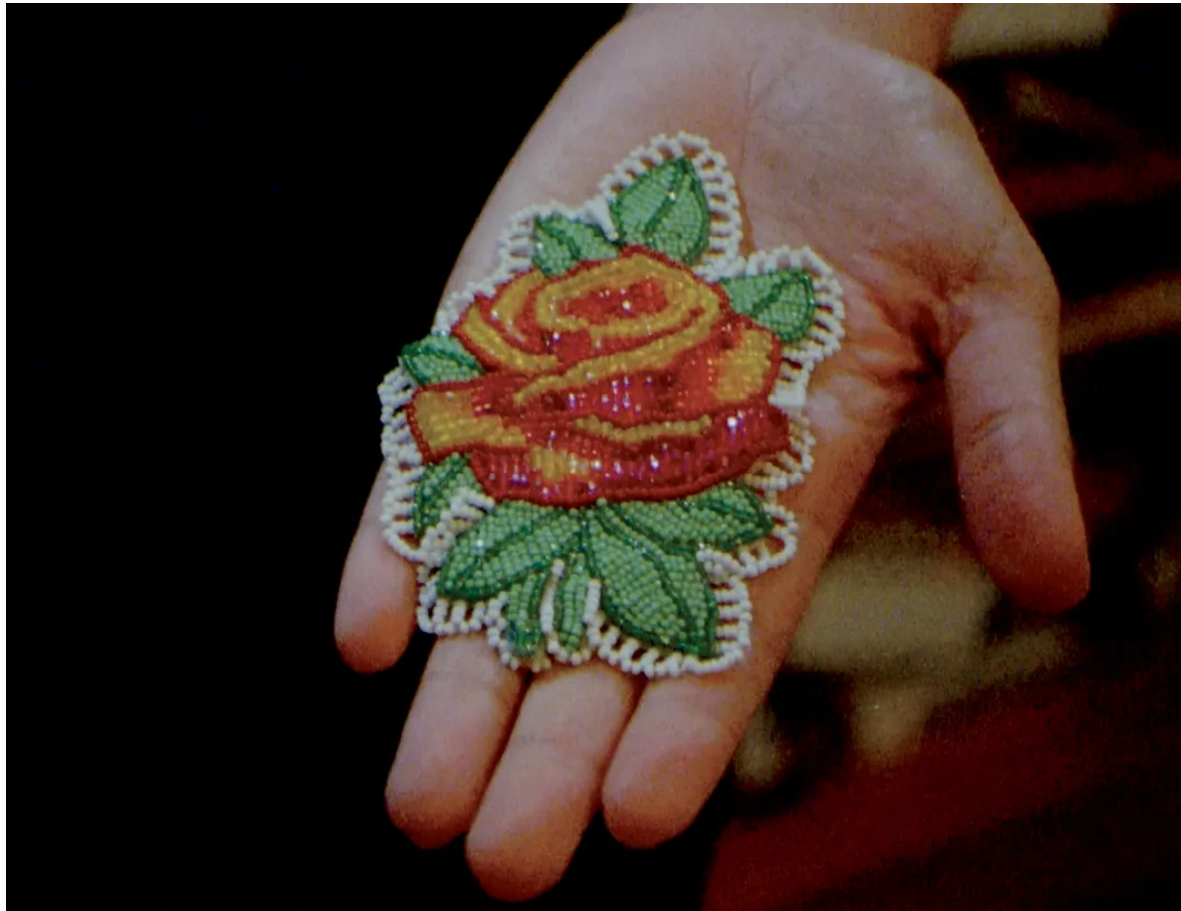
BROADWAY

ARTFORUM

Sky Hopinka

Frye Art Museum

By Emily Butler



Sky Hopinka, *Kicking the Clouds*, 2021, 16 mm transferred to digital video, color, sound, 15 minutes 36 seconds.

The poetic title of this exhibition, “Subterranean Ceremonies,” called attention to the numinous, communal realms of Sky Hopinka’s art. In this presentation, the artist, known for his writing and dreamy, color-saturated films and photographs that document his journeys throughout Indigenous homelands, focused on works made in the Pacific Northwest—particularly Washington State, where Hopinka grew up—and in his ancestral Ho-Chunk Nation’s territories in the Midwest.

BROADWAY

Language and landscape intertwined profoundly throughout this show, in part guided by Hopinka's collection of poems, *Perfidia* (2020). The writings were quoted in many of the works here. Recentring Indigenous filmmaking is at the core of the artist's practice, while his poetry questions the power dynamics of communication. His art creates a polyphonic space, where translation, via different tongues and visual forms, can be withheld or offered plainly. Is equivalence of meaning possible when two languages don't hold the same worldviews?

It's fitting that one of the first photographs encountered in this show, *We were at a loss of language, except for what we could speak*, 2023, has its title incised onto the work's surface. As secondary witnesses to Hopinka's extensive travels, viewers were offered ample opportunity to fill in the gaps and piece together various elements and thereby to create their own journeys and understandings. Meaning could be gleaned from the many references woven throughout—including texts by W. G. Sebald and Marc Augé, elements of Ho-Chunk mythology, and nods to Ezra Pound and Dante—all of which were juxtaposed with Hopinka's softly spoken accounts and transporting soundscapes. The result was an enthralling and generous audiovisual space that could be endlessly reread.

Listening carefully to the barely perceptible audio of *Kicking the Clouds*, 2021, one could hear recordings of Hopinka's great-grandmother teaching Pechanga to her daughter, as well as stories of the artist's family's migrations, most recently from California to Washington. The video reflects on the experience of learning ancestral languages and embracing Indigenous culture. Yet Hopinka's great-grandmother's voice also contains ambivalence, indicating the painful linguistic repression forced upon her in a Southern California boarding school, where the instruction was meant to erase Native American heritage.

Other videos, such as *Mnemonics of Shape and Reason*, 2021, placed emphasis on embodiment within the landscape. As the artist tells us, we are merely guests within this space, just as he and his camera are. Nature, of course, is Hopinka's primary subject; he uses it to reenvision how we communicate with one another, our environment, and the spirit world. This approach could be described as what Donna Haraway, in her 1988 essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," calls "[seeing] from below," a form of "loving care [that] people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view."

BROADWAY

A dynamic, two-channel, corner-projected work, *The Island Weights*, 2021, led viewers to the cardinal points of Ho-Chunk creation stories in order to meet the four water spirits—or “weights”—that prevent the earth from spinning chaotically out of balance. The narrator notes the spirits’ weariness with their duties. “How do you engage with myth when you’re trying to keep it close and precious, trying to protect it?” asks Hopinka in a 2021 monograph about his work, published by Poor Farm Press. “Rather than telling the myth, I try to tell the effects of it, or what are the repercussions of the story when you believe it?”

In Dreams and Autumn, 2021, the exhibition’s finale, draws from Hopinka’s 2021 poem, “Flesh and Ghost.” The text unravels steadily across three screens depicting various images (nature, crowds of people), allowing the viewer to read them with a slight delay—an echo that enables the artist’s words to sink in deeper. The work makes palpable the presence of Hopinka’s ancestors. “We imagined the colors were their dreams,” he says in this piece, “churning away in their memories.” The artist’s poetic visions are mirrored by his cinematography: His saturated colors also reflect his own impressions of filming in situ. At one point, we’re presented with a flipped and doubled horizon, first seen in *Mnemonics of Shape and Reason*, which radically shifts our sight line. When this kaleidoscopic illusion abruptly ends, the artist makes us realize how constructed our vision of the landscape really is.