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Forbes

2022 MacArthur 'Genius Grant' Honoree Sky Hopinka: Regular Guy

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Sky Hopinka, Artist and Filmmaker, 2022 MacArthur Fellow, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY

JOHN D. AND CATHERINE T. MACARTHUR FOUNDATION

A MacArthur Fellowship comes with a stipend of \$800,000 to each recipient paid out in equal quarterly installments over five years. The monetary award is unrestricted meaning it can be spent however the honoree chooses.

Vacations, cars, you name it.

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When filmmaker Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk, Luiseño; b. 1984) received word in October of 2022 that he'd been chosen as a Fellow, his thoughts didn't immediately race toward luxuries.

"The first thing that came to mind was paying off student debt," Hopinka told me. "I've been in debt for college since I was 18-years-old—first go around at community college. I've had a lot of debt following me around for the last 20 years. That mental freedom, or just relief, it feels huge."

For a "genius," Hopinka comes off as a pretty regular guy and not just because of his membership in a class of 40-plus millions of Americans living under the weight of student loan debt.

"I've been teased about, joked around about it," Hopinka says of friends and family reaction to his receipt of the MacArthur Fellowship, commonly referred to as the "genius grant."

The process for selecting MacArthur Fellows can be described as secretive. Nominees are brought to the program's attention through a constantly changing pool of invited external nominators chosen from as broad a range of fields and areas of interest as possible. Nominations are evaluated by an independent selection committee composed of about a dozen leaders in the arts, sciences, humanities professions, and for-profit and nonprofit communities.

There is no application. There is no short listing. There is no awards ceremony. Winners receive the life changing news out of the blue, as Hopinka did under the most mundane of circumstances.

"I just spent an hour and a half in a faculty meeting that started at 8 AM and was getting ready for my 10 AM 'Intro to Video' class and got this phone call from Chicago," the assistant professor in the Film and Electronic Arts Program at Bard College along the Hudson River between New York and Albany remembers. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is located in Chicago. "I thought it was my distributor because we were trying to connect and talk and I was just totally, totally confounded, blown away."

That's what his revolutionary short and feature-length films have been doing to critics and audiences since he began entering them in festivals in 2013. Earlier this year, he showed at the prestigious Sundance Film Festival. In 2017, his work was included in the Whitney Biennial, America's most esteemed survey of contemporary art.

Hopinka's films are deeply rooted in place, traversing both Indigenous histories and contemporary experiences. "Cloudless Blue Egress of Summer" (2019) takes viewers to Fort Marion in St. Augustine, Florida where Southern Tsitsistas (Cheyenne), Kiowa,

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Arapaho, Caddo and Comanche prisoners of war were taken in 1875 following the Red River War. It was here where the idea of the Indian Boarding School was hatched.

“Kunjkaga Remember Red Banks, Kunjkaga Remembers the Welcoming Song” (2014) takes audiences on a road trip to the Ho-Chunk nation homeland, present day Wisconsin, through the words of Hopinka’s grandmother.

The outdoors, roads, landscapes, beaches, forests, lakes, rivers. These sights fill Hopinka’s films. Born in Washington state, attending college in Oregon and Wisconsin, these sights and sounds imprinted on him.

Moreso than material objects, the greatest luxury the MacArthur Fellowship provides recipients who include writers, scientists, artists, social scientists, humanists, teachers, entrepreneurs and others is time. Time and space to think. Freedom to explore. An ability to slow down, to shed the yoke of constantly needing to produce.

“Trying to find space to work, to teach, to write, to do artist talks, it's felt pretty exhausting and like I'm running around trying to get a lot of things going creatively,” Hopinka said of his lifestyle. “This feels like it's going to allow me to say ‘no’ to some things and to start doing research on projects I've been wanting to research for years and to wander around a bit and film.”

The MacArthur Fellows Program is intended to encourage its honorees to pursue their own creative, intellectual and professional inclinations. The dream of following your heart’s desires without asking if those desires can pay the rent, or the student loans.

Hopinka’s work can currently be seen across the country. In Milwaukee, he’s featured in a group show at the Museum of Wisconsin Art’s satellite location in the Saint Kate Hotel and at the Green Gallery which represents him. He’s included in a major exhibition of contemporary Indigenous photography debuting October 30 at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art in Fort Worth, TX. Other presentations can be found in Brooklyn, near Seattle, New Haven, CT and Santa Cruz and San Jose, CA.