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PORTRAITS OF PLACE

By Christopher Green

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Sky Hopinka, *Here you are before the trees*, 2020, three-channel video; at Bard CCS.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Early in [Sky Hopinka](https://www.artnews.com/t/sky-hopinka/) (<https://www.artnews.com/t/sky-hopinka/>)’s new three-channel video installation *Here you are before the trees* (2020), the artist-filmmaker holds a small freshwater shell up to the camera, just gathered from the shore of Lake Michigan. His grandmother, Dolli Big John, tells him that her own grandfather had said a Ho-Chunk isn’t a Ho-Chunk without a shell from Red Banks, Wisconsin, a site central to the Nation’s creation story. It’s a quiet moment, easy to miss among dramatic shots of stormy skies, highway signs, and picturesque forests, rivers, and lakes. Commissioned by the Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies for “Sky Hopinka: Centers of Somewhere,” the artist’s first museum survey, the video is ostensibly about the Hudson Valley territory where the college is located. But, like much of Hopinka’s work—represented in the exhibition by videos, calligrams based on Indigenous pictographs, and a new series of etched photographs—it is a multilayered portrait of place informed by both personal and historical understandings of the landscape.

Best known as an experimental filmmaker, Hopinka entangles the patterns of language and cinema in his work. His short films and videos, often subtitled in English, Hočąk (the Ho-Chunk language), and Chinuk Wawa, a Creole language of the Pacific Northwest, commingle word and image in ways that subvert linguistic systems and ideas about cultural identity. In *Jáaji Approx.* (2015), for example, Hopinka layers audio of an interview with his father about his experiences on the powwow circuit over footage shot from a car dashboard as he traverses the country by highways and bridges. At times, he manipulates the footage, combining multiple views or inverting the landscape. The audio is subtitled in what appears to be a foreign or Indigenous language, but is in fact his father's English words spelled in the international phonetic alphabet. "Jáaji" is an approximate translation of the direct address for "father" in Hočąk; the filmic wanderings and estranged linguistic markings indicate Hopinka's familial relations with sites and songs.

Hopinka's father was a drummer and singer, and his mother a dancer, and their rhythms pervade his work. In *Jáaji Approx.*, recorded Hočąk songs sync with the sound and blinking light of a car turn signal. In other films, his scores align with the repeated thrum of passing highway signs or flashes of fireworks and lightning. *I'll Remember You as You Were, not as What You'll Become* (2016) is an elegy for the late Anishinaabe and Chemehuevi poet Diane Burns, a fixture of the Lower East Side and Native American poetry communities from the 1980s until her death in 2006, who appears in archival footage of a poetry reading, tapping a beat on a microphone as she speaks. Interspersed throughout the video are excerpts of ethnographic texts describing Ho-Chunk concepts of death and rebirth; other segments show the circular movements of powwow dancers filtered through auroralike shimmering curtains of light that take shape to the chorus of a Christian hymn. The 2017 video *Dislocation Blues*, which Hopinka describes as "an incomplete and imperfect portrait of reflections from Standing Rock," alternates between the personal accounts of two water protectors, participants in the anti-Dakota Access Pipeline protests, and scenes shot from both the frontlines and its background. Despite the seemingly detached nature of the interview format, the artist positions himself and his subjects as embedded participants, neither objective in their memories nor capable of capturing the event in its totality.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREEN GALLERY, MILWAUKEE.

These three videos precede *Here you are before the trees* in the exhibition, and provide different lenses—political, personal, and elegiac—through which to view the new installation. The work

centers on the conjoined histories of the Ho-Chunk and the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohicans, the latter of whom were forcibly relocated in the nineteenth century from the Hudson Valley to an area of Wisconsin adjacent to Ho-Chunk homelands. Hopinka's own career has retraced these colonial movements: he now teaches at Bard, on Mohican territory. This history is further refracted through footage arranged on three screens. The beginning of the video identifies the subject of each channel: the Mahicannituck (the Mohican name for the Hudson River); the road (a Wisconsin highway); and the Waazijja (the Ho-Chunk Nation's territory on the shores of Lake Michigan). Periodically, these views—of dappled Hudson forests, the lakeshore, and passing headlights—shift between the screens, layering territories within one another. As the views interchange, an 1854 text by Mohican diplomat John Wannaucon Quinney decrying the injustices against his people scrolls across the three channels.

In *Here you are before the trees*, Hopinka's own movements serve as the connector between site, history, and personal experience. They also point to the work's central theses: that place can be described through a multitude of Indigenous centers, and that one can be centered in many different ways. Hopinka incorporates audio recordings of a lecture by Lakota legal scholar Vine Deloria Jr. and of a phone call with Ho-Chunk anthropologist Renya Ramirez, the latter of whom describes her concept of "native hubs," a way of understanding Indigenous belonging when distant from a landbased center. Hopinka's work is anchored in this notion, and his videos similarly challenge an essentialist view of Indigenous identity, namely accusations of inauthenticity that have historically been directed at those who have been forcibly removed or are personally distant from their ancestral territories.



Sky Hopinka, *Tejq. The Sea. It's neither our name for the great lakes or lesser lakes. It's the sea, and we said we were from the north and from the salt. It's too*

much right now. Too much like learning that my father performed the Breathings his entire life. I have, 2020, inkjet print, etching, 17 by 17 inches; at Bard CCS.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GREEN GALLERY, MILWAUKEE.

Hopinka has previously identified his work as “ethnopoetic,” partly in an effort to redirect the long baggage train of ethnographic film. Recently, he stopped using the term, seeking to move past the reactive nature of the “ethno-” prefix altogether. Instead of representing the land, he is more interested in helping it describe itself. The exhibition featured sixteen photographs from the series “*Breathings*” (2020), wandering images of oceans, clouds, barges, and airplane wings, taken on Hopinka’s travels throughout the US in early 2020. The photographs are hand-etched with text that encircles the borders of each image, written in spare moments on the road, while waiting in a car or terminal.

A new book of Hopinka’s poetry, titled *Perfidia*, co-published by **CCS Bard** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/ccs-bard/>) and the independent press Wendy’s Subway, was released in conjunction with the show. Comprising a long series of searching cantos interspersed with photographs from his journeys across the continent, the book links Hopinka’s commitment to letting many landscapes and centers speak visually with his own first-person ruminations, which delve into colonial wrongs, dispossession, land, and love.

Perfidia is titled after a line from an 1838 letter written by Ralph Waldo Emerson to President Martin van Buren in protest of the ongoing removal of the Cherokee from their homelands, calling the action that would come to be known as the Trail of Tears an “instrument of perfidy.” Treaties with the Mohicans and Munsee Lenape, once recorded indelibly in shell-bead wampum belts, were likewise treated perfidiously by the colonial forces that uprooted their communities. Hopinka handles these histories exquisitely, gingerly, and personally, like shells in the hand.