

HYPERALLERGIC



For Sky Hopinka, Wandering Is Both a Mode of Moving and Making

by **Mariana Fernández** February 10, 2021

Centers of Somewhere proposes an understanding of Indigeneity that is hybrid, fluctuating, and always in transit.

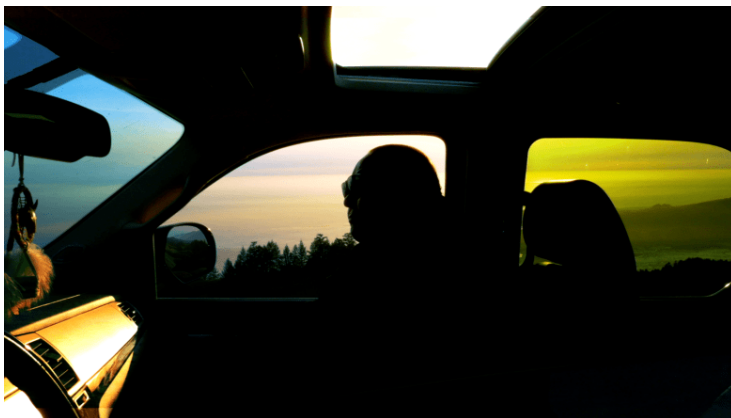
ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, NY — Sky Hopinka’s *Breathings* (2020) is composed of 16 photographs with no particular order. The series — now on view as part of *Centers of Somewhere*, the artist-filmmaker’s latest museum exhibition at the CCS Bard Galleries — comprises incidental images, records of his wanderings throughout the United States in the winter and spring of 2020.

As an experimental filmmaker, video artist, and poet, Hopinka’s practice is deeply informed by the notion of transit. His parents were active performers on the powwow circuit, and Hopinka, who is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, grew up spending a lot of time on the road, traveling from event to event. In his work, the road emerges as both “a place and as a space for community” (as he told *BOMB* in a 2018 interview), an ongoing state from which to approach knowledge and cultural production.

Sky Hopinka, “The foothold held fast as our toes ached and the salty water sloughed away skin and left bone to be ground to dust and sand. There’s only rocks and seagulls here though, steadfast against the sound of water trickling over and again with each push and pull of the tide, or some kind of wake” (2020), inkjet print, etching, 17 x 17 inches, edition 1 of 3, 2 APs

Centers of Somewhere largely emphasizes the role of language in Hopinka’s work. Curator Lauren Cornell brings together three of the artist’s earlier short films, along with *Breathings*, two wall calligrams, and the newly-commissioned *Here you are before the trees*, all dated 2020. Running through these works is a logic of wandering — a mode of making and moving that allows Hopinka to resist static ethnographic depictions of Native cultures and stretch beyond the manufactured diasporas of colonialism.

In one of these earlier films, *Jáaji Approx.* (2015), wandering and traveling also emerge as a way for the artist to formulate questions of identity and belonging. Hopinka merges audio recordings of his father Mike reminiscing about his experiences as a singer on the powwow circuit with his own navigation of the landscapes of present-day Wisconsin, California, and Washington State. Mike’s voice melds with old recordings of Ho-Chunk ancestral songs, overlaying images of the spaces that father and son have traversed, both separately and together. As these landscapes are flipped, collaged, and hypersaturated into unearthly colors, Mike’s stories begin to lose any single chronological through-line, shifting back and forth through time. Here, Hopinka’s wanderings blur distinctions between time, place, and generational subjectivities, opening up space for Mike’s stories to exist in the present.



From *Jáaji Approx.* (2015), dir. Sky Hopinka

A similar sense of temporal disjuncture reappears in the multi-channel video installation, *Here you are before the trees* (2020) — the exhibition’s centerpiece — bringing the institution itself into the larger narrative of Indigenous sovereignty and disenfranchisement. Bard stands on the tribal homelands of the Munsee and Mohican peoples, who in the early 19th Century were forcibly relocated to reservations in northeast Wisconsin, adjacent to the Ho-Chunk homeland. For Hopinka, who teaches film and electronic arts at Bard College, these stories of simultaneous displacement and survival — which connect the Stockbridge-Munsee to the Ho-Chunk, forced from Wisconsin to Nebraska — are embodied and personal. Against footage of the sun setting over the *Mahicannituck* (the Hudson River, near Hopinka’s current home), rolling streams in the *Waaziija* (the lands of the Ho-Chunk Nation, the artist’s tribal homelands), and his travel along highways linking the two, Hopinka superimposes the transcription of an 1854 speech by John Wannaucon Quinney and audio recordings of authors Vine Deloria Jr. and Adrian C. Louis. This complex layering of voices and temporalities addresses the ongoing structural

violences of land appropriation, while destabilizing static colonial perspectives about place, personhood, and language.



Installation view of *Here you are before the trees* (2020) in *Sky Hopinka: Centers of Somewhere*, 2020–2021, CCS Bard Galleries, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (all images courtesy CCS Bard; photo: Olympia Shannon)

At one point, Ho-Chunk anthropologist Renya Ramirez can be heard introducing the concept of the “Native hub” — a way of thinking about tribal belonging that likewise rejects the notion that Indigenous peoples’ cultural practices and historical knowledge systems are locked in a framework that is fixed and unchanging. According to Ramirez, the hub offers a mechanism to support Native notions of culture, community, and identity away from tribal land bases through signs and rituals like phone calling, storytelling, travel, and music. As the images on the screen alternate between highways and landscapes, Hopinka’s wanderings craft an alternative understanding of place and belonging that, like Ramirez’s hub, is collective, shared, and ongoing.

Anishinaabe theorist Gerald Vizenor once wrote: “The simulation of the Indian is the absence of real natives — the contrivance of the other in the course of dominance.” Where non-Indigenous research and colonial mythmaking have been intent on freezing the “Indian” in a lost and distant past, Hopinka suggests that instead it is possible to celebrate what Vizenor has called *survivance* — survival and resistance — for people who have persisted in the face of forced migration and displacement. Just as his films, videos and photographs make space for the past to coexist with the present, *Centers of Somewhere* proposes an understanding of cultural identity that is hybrid, fluctuating, and always in transit.



Installation view of *Sky Hopinka: Centers of Somewhere*, 2020–2021, CCS Bard Galleries, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (all images courtesy CCS Bard; photo: Olympia Shannon)

Sky Hopinka: Centers of Somewhere continues through February 14 at the CCS Bard Galleries (Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY). The exhibition is curated by Lauren Cornell.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the exhibition is currently only open to Bard College faculty, students, and staff. A selection of moving image works on view may be viewed online [here](#).