

FRIEZE

Sky Hopinka Organizes Powwows to Process Childhood

The artist's new film, *Powwow People*, recreates the Indigenous dance gatherings that play a role in Native community formation



Powwow has been part of Sky Hopinka's story since before he was born. His mother (Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians) and father (Ho-Chunk Nation) – from California and Wisconsin, respectively – met more than 40 years ago on the weekend powwow circuit that has long brought together Indigenous communities to dance, feast, sell wares and trade stories.

Where many forms of Indigenous performance are inwardly directed, powwow is notable for what Hopinka described to me when we spoke last autumn as an 'embedded gaze': it is conceived as a form of public display. The gatherings use dance as a space of cultural survival, in which participants from different nations blend traditions or refine new ones. For Hopinka, while powwow is 'not for everyone, it is important for young people to participate in ceremonies and social activities [...] to understand that the things which make up their communities are valuable'. Historically divided into 'Northern' and 'Southern'

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far from their homelands. Hopinka spent his youth dancing in the Northern style and performing the 'Grass Dance', with its propulsive beat and flowing, ribboned regalia. During his first year at university, he began to organize powwows for his Indigenous student group. He recalls to me: 'It was meaningful to be doing that work, especially as it was something that helped ground me as I was searching for community and could always find it amongst other Natives in whatever city I was living.'



Sky Hopinka, *Kicking the Clouds*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Hopinka began making films in 2010. He shares with me that the 'DSLR [digital single-lens reflex] revolution emboldened' him to pick up a camera, learn from YouTube and make videos for Indigenous non-profits in the Pacific Northwest US. In the ensuing decade, he has quietly recast the tradition of landscape through 35mm photographs and HD video. From the beginning, he sought to resist existing documentary trends and 'what is asked of Indigenous filmmakers, which is often to teach a non-Native audience'. This tension makes powwow an especially complex topic: in contrast to other annual dances, it has long been an interface between inside and outside, Native and non-Native communities. Such duality is central to Hopinka's latest feature film, *Powwow People* (2023).

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The project centres on a new powwow gathering under Hopinka's direction. As well as younger participants, many veteran dancers of powwows from his past reappear, taking on a role of performer that he himself once occupied. In this sense, the film constitutes a genuine set of powwow events, but also serves as a series of reinventions, through the agency of its participants and the new layers of meaning that their commentary or Hopinka's lens will add in the process. His photographic and cinematic works use montage, archival material and narration to traduce the landscapes of memory and place.

Intergenerational exchange is a constant motif, as is the power of language to mediate our experience of the world. When he was younger, he tells me, Hopinka taught the *chinuk wawa* language of the Pacific Northwest, and still approaches his practice as a form of elaborating shared grammars over time: 'You don't want to have an advanced conversation with a beginner. The same is true for tribally specific art, and we are really at the beginning of all that – of understanding the past, and what is possible for Indigenous art in the future.'



Hopinka, *Kicking the Clouds*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Powwow is its own kind of language, rooted in the community where it is staged, but pliable enough to allow new generations of dancers to add their

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own interpretations of received form. Each event builds on an inherently syncretic set of conventions and elaborates on them in real time. For Hopinka: 'Powwow can be a bellwether for how a community or a generation is dealing with its own perception by the outside world as well as its understanding of itself. That fluidity is a part of its beauty.'



Sky Hopinka, *Kicking the Clouds*, 2021, film still. Courtesy: the artist

Powwow People gestated for years and, like many of his projects, it is highly personal: 'Autobiography tempered by formal choices that preserve opacity,' as Hopinka puts it to me. Although he concedes that the art world can be 'maddening to navigate' and wonders if audiences are more interested in tokenizing his practice than appreciating it on its own terms, he is heartened by his freedom to make works without concession. Hopinka tells me that, while powwow is a 'neo-cultural construct that emerged as part of the reservation system, it is one that tribes have constantly tried to make. I've danced since I was four or five years old. This is part of how I process my own childhood, and how I communicate my experience of the world.'