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ARTFORUM

OPENINGS: SKY HOPINKA



Sky Hopinka, *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes 5 seconds.

THE SEARCHING, striking digital films of Sky Hopinka are complex formal arrangements, conceptually and aesthetically dense, characterized by an intricate layering of word and image. But they are also wellsprings of beauty and mystery, filled with surprising confluences of speech and song, color and motion. A member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin, Hopinka (three of whose shorts are featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, opening this month in New York) has described his work as “ethnopoetic,” a term that encompasses several imperatives—among them, the mission to reclaim the ethnographic gaze that has dominated the representation of indigenous cultures and to bring the indirection of poetry to an exploration of Native identity both past and present.

Often rooted in a strong sense of place, Hopinka’s work harbors a pronounced documentary impulse. Several of his films, which typically run between ten and twenty minutes, revolve around historically charged sites whose complicated pasts and presents are only obliquely addressed. In *Visions of an Island* (2016), the camera roams the grassy tundra and peers over the bird-swarmed cliffs of Saint Paul, an island in the Bering Sea where, beginning in the 1790s, Aleuts were relocated as slaves in service of the Russian fur trade. In *Kunjkága Remembers Red Banks*, *Kunjkága Remembers the Welcome Song* (2014), Hopinka’s grandmother recalls her visits to Red Banks, the first point of contact between Indian tribes and Europeans in Wisconsin, near what is

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now Green Bay. *Anti-Objects, or Space Without Path or Boundary* (2016) surveys two architectural structures: the Cathlapotle Plankhouse in Ridgefield, Washington, a cultural center named for the Chinookan town that once existed there, and the Tilikum Crossing, a cable-stayed bridge in Portland, Oregon, that takes its name from the word for “people” in Chinuk Wawa, the Chinookan creole.

For Hopinka, a resonant locale is typically just a jumping-off point for larger questions of culture and identity. *Anti-Objects*, which borrows its title from the book by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma, overlays its perambulatory images with archival audio recordings of a linguist in conversation with one of the last native speakers of Chinuk Wawa, which had declined to the verge of extinction by the turn of the millennium. Kuma’s theories about the particularities of place and the relationship of objects to their environments lead to a consideration of the present-day utility of historical monuments and endangered languages.

Hopinka, who is fluent in Chinuk Wawa, has been an active participant in its revival in the Pacific Northwest, and language occupies a central role in his films. Many of them deal with the challenges of language preservation and transmission and, more broadly, with language as a container of culture. In Hopinka’s videos, words are heard and seen, learned and read, translated and transcribed, their meanings by turns communicated and withheld. The emphasis on language—specifically, the act of language learning, with its inherent lacunae of understanding, its movement from confusion to clarity—is often mirrored in the formal operations of his films.

The constellations of image, sound, and text in Hopinka’s work can be as elusive as they are mutually enriching, and the recent *I’ll Remember You as You Were, Not as What You’ll Become* (2016) represents his boldest move toward abstraction. It opens with on-screen text from the anthropologist Paul Radin about Winnebago conceptions of death and the afterlife. Dancing figures at a powwow are transformed into radiant, otherworldly psychedelic streaks, their movement accompanied by music recorded at a different sort of communal event, a folk-hymn singing in the traditional Southern style known as Sacred Harp. Throughout *I’ll Remember You as You Were*, Hopinka weaves in the feisty, humorous voice of the late American Indian poet Diane Burns. These seemingly disparate components coalesce into a moving elegy that is also, as the title suggests, an attempt to give form to the mystical processes of transfiguration and reincarnation.

The seven-minute *Jáaji Approx.* (2015), Hopinka’s most widely screened work to date (it appeared, for instance, in last year’s Sundance and Ann Arbor film festivals), remains the most concise, and perhaps most vivid, example of the filmmaker’s contrapuntal method. *Jáaji* is the direct-address word for “father” in the Hočąk language; the second part of the title alludes not only to the approximations of translation but also to the notions of proximity and distance that shape the video’s form and content. A road movie through archetypal landscapes of the American West, it combines fragmentary shots of open skies, coastlines, forests, mountains, deserts, and highways with Hopinka’s audio recordings of his father’s stories and songs from the powwow circuit. The elder’s words, sometimes indistinct, initially appear on-screen as phonetic

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transcriptions. Midway through, Hopinka cuts in to accompany his father on a song, and as the gap between speaker and listener narrows, the editing slows and the mood shifts, the images becoming more intensely colored. Manipulating simple elements to emotionally complex ends, *Jáaji Approx.* creates an effect of space and time being at once traversed and collapsed, of a relationship and a shared history coming into focus.

A selection of Sky Hopinka's work will be presented at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, on March 25 and 26, as part of the film program of the Whitney Biennial, which opens March 17.