

### Sky Hopinka Reframes the American Landscape at the Barnes Foundation



BY **FRANCESCA ATTON** March 30, 2026 2:35pm

**Editor's Note:** This story is part of **Newsmakers**, an ARTnews series where we interview the movers and shakers who are making change in the art world.

**Sky Hopinka** (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians) has spent the last year and a half photographing the American landscape. That journey across the United States has culminated in the new site-specific installation, titled *Red Metal Dust*, at the **Barnes Foundation** in Philadelphia. For it, the multidisciplinary Native American artist constructed 11 panels that layer landscape photography and copper sheets and filter American histories and landscapes from an Indigenous perspective.

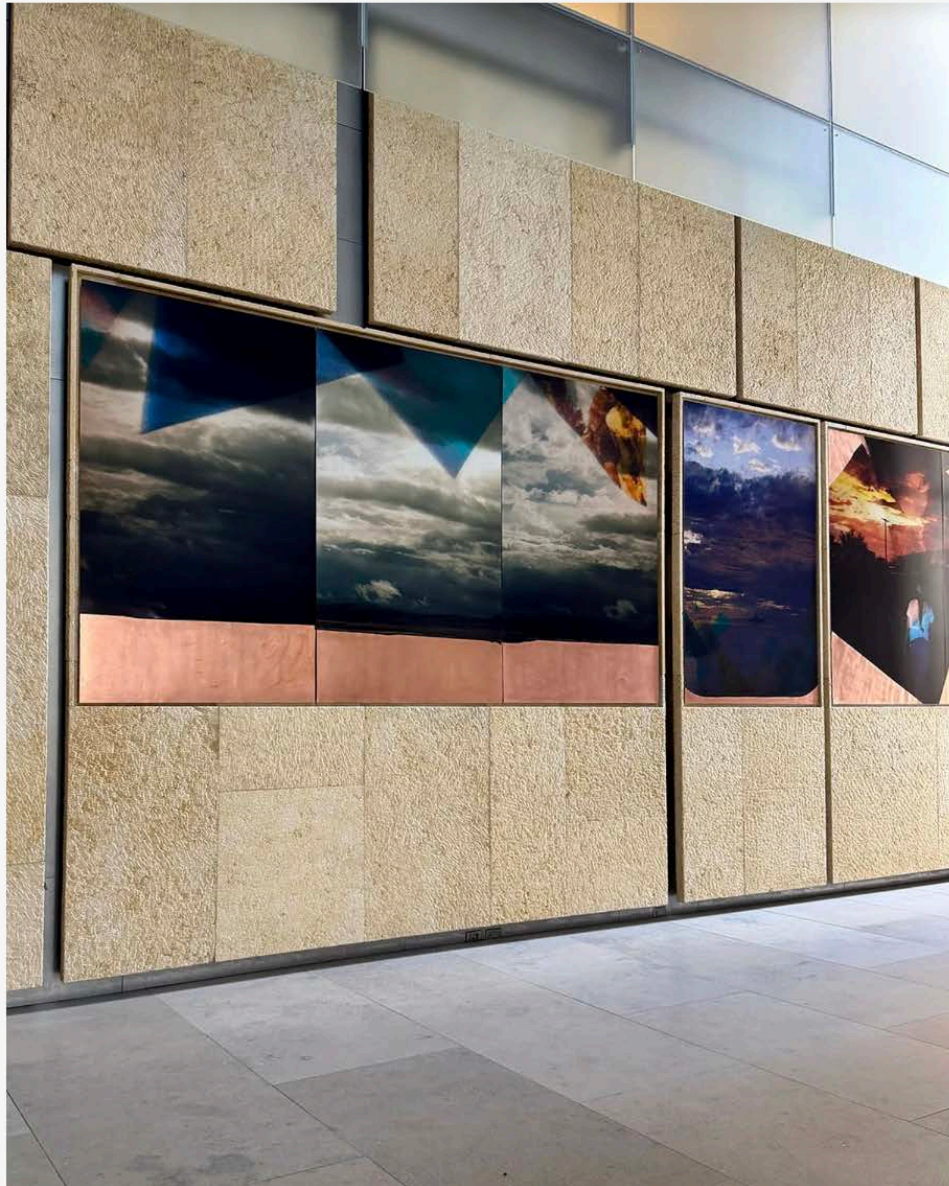


Sky Hopinka, *Red Metal Dust*, 2026, installation view, at Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia.  
COURTESY THE BARNES FOUNDATION

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# Tanya Leighton

These meditative photographic landscapes reference the Ho-Chunk tribe's name for copper, a surface metal that takes on the effects of its surroundings and wear-and-tear through physical contact. On view through next January, *Red Metal Dust* asks viewers to consider the cycles of time-past, present, future-via copper itself. *ARTnews* spoke with Hopinka to discuss the impacts of time and human presence on the American landscape in this new body of works.



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## **ARTnews: How did you conceive of *Red Metal Dust*?**

**Sky Hopinka:** I've been thinking about working with copper and building on my photo-making practice in a few different ways. Over the last six or seven years, I've done some etching on top of the photographic surface. I'm always thinking about ways to disrupt the photographic image. Copper is a material I've always found beautiful, and it has a lot of cultural significance-not only for my tribe, but tribes across the continents. This installation became a way to combine these disparate elements that I've been thinking about formally, while also continuing to take photographs and use a few different interventions that I've been creating with transparencies, for instance, in previous works.

## **You mentioned your tribe's and others' relationship to copper. I know the name of the installation derives from the Ho-Chunk name for the metal. Can you talk about that connection?**

There are different uses, meanings, and material objects made from copper, as well as in our stories, which describe copper as the third descendant of another stone. There's something about that that is really touching, in terms of how to look at these landscapes and the people within the image, how to think about myself making them, and how to think about people looking at these works. The Ho-Chunk word [for copper] *mąqsšuc* means "red metal." The last part of the title "dust" comes from this idea in stories about the ways that people come from dust.

## **Which American landscapes and people did you choose to photograph?**

They're all from the last year and a half. It ranges from shooting out of the window from a cross-country Amtrak train ride to aerial photos taken while flying over the US. I photographed Arizona and Washington states, specifically the coast where I'm from and where I like to photograph a lot, as well as Tulsa and Tahlequah, Oklahoma. These are places that I've been traversing or that I've been shooting other projects.

It's not meant to be a coast-to-coast survey of North America or the US, but these are places that are important to me that I've passed through. Thinking about that mixed with the diasporic nature of Native peoples-at times it feels like we're dust, but there's something substantial to that presence, no matter how spread out or how far away from our homelands we are. That felt like an encouraging reason to work with the material, along with the ways that

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copper is also seen as a living thing in our stories. In the work, there's this idea of it being alive from creation to where we're at right now.

**As a surface metal, copper shows the effects of its environment and wear through physical contact. Tell me about that material pairing.**

I spent the last few days polishing and cleaning every copper surface, knowing that it's going to oxidize, it's going to breathe, it's going to reflect the living environments, and I think that's really beautiful.

As people pass through this space, their breath, their presence, and things that they give off are going to affect the coloration of this material, and then it will be like a reflection of all who passed through the space in this moment of time. That's life in so many ways, metaphorically and physically. I don't know how it's going to [change] in the next year or in the next 10 months of the show, but I'm looking forward to seeing how the copper responds. It's this small little gesture to the reflections of the living that reminds us of where we've been and also where we're going.

**It's a very intimate collaboration installation between yourself, the viewer, and the element of time. You mentioned a return to some techniques you previously used.**

Yes, all of the photographs are shot on film-some are medium format and others are 35-millimeter. In some ways, the works function like a bit of a diary, but the overlays of the transparencies on top of the images further gesture to a series of works called "The Land Describes Itself" [2019]. It's nice to revisit that technique of printing photos on transparency papers and putting them on another projector and then overlay those on top of the photographic landscapes in different configurations. It's a convoluted process, but it's another intervention to affect the landscape in a way that speaks to my memory of it.

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***Untitled 11* is one example that includes people walking away with their backs to the camera.**

There's this trope of the Indian walking away into the sunset and handing out the lands peacefully to the white settlers. This is my way of playing with that trope a bit. The photo itself was shot on a reservation. And then the copper is that intervention that is about framing life and presence.

**I know that the copper holds tribal significance, and it has also been heavily used in the US to mint the now-defunct penny and create the Statue of Liberty, for instance. Were you thinking about those connections?**

I thought about that, but it's also a metal with thousands of years of history and use by Native peoples. Of course, the American lands are always going to be looked at, especially in Indigenous work because that's the way that we are framed. I've always been interested in trying to ignore that. It's not like I'm making work in response to the 250th anniversary of the US or pennies or the Statue of Liberty or copper roofs.

**Philadelphia is known as the birthplace of the US. Does it mean anything to show this work here during the anniversary of the country's founding?**

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It doesn't. There's 250 years of history to unpack, but then there's also the years before that with the relationship to the tribes and to this place. It's hard to distill what it means to be here. There's also the history of the Barnes and the collector himself. History is a way to abstract a line and a lineage and a continuation of presence that reminds you of the *actual* lineage and the *actual* continuation of people as human beings, and where we sit on that continuum. And that's how I think about it. There's a long history of Native people coming to the city and living in this country, and a country moving and claiming Native lands, but then here we are today. It's important to relate to that history and remember that history, and what happens next is also important. I am existing right here, right now, in this year, on this day. But then what happens in the next year? There's this idea, too, of life coming from dust and, so then, what's the next life going to be like?

### **What do you hope people will take away from the installation?**

I don't know because these works don't exist in a vacuum. They exist in conversation with many other things. I have the reasons why and how I made these, but whoever is going to come here, they're not just going to be American, they're not just going to be white, they're going to be from all kinds of backgrounds. The interpretations, the stories, and the experiences people bring is part of how the work lives and exists. That's what makes art living.