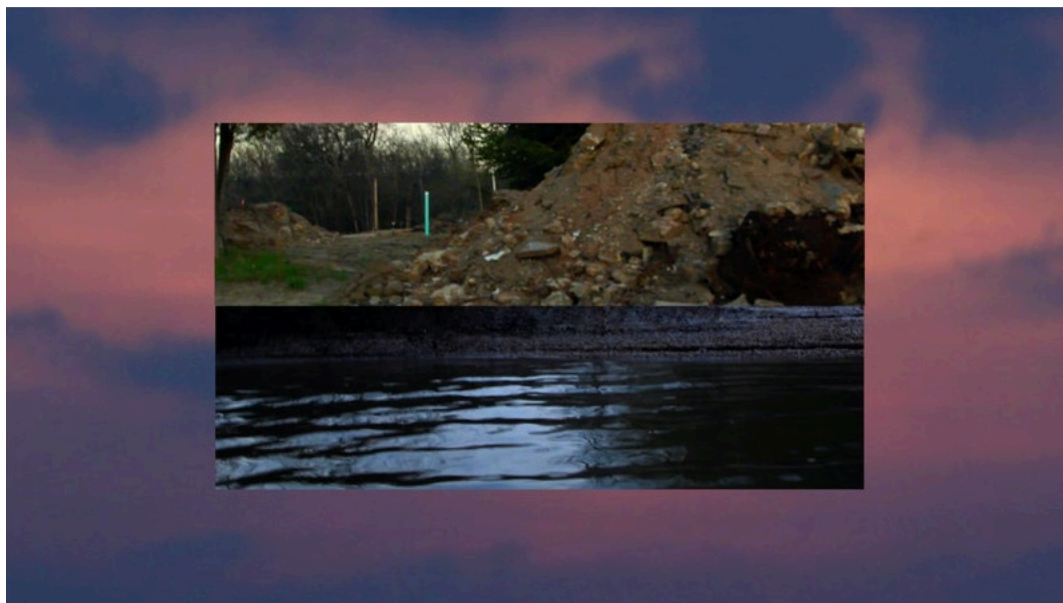


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BROOKLYN RAIL

Sky Hopinka at the Poor Farm

By Frani O'Toole



Sky Hopinka, *Kunjkága Remember Red Banks*, *Kunjkága Remembers the Welcome Song*, 2014. HD video, stereo, color, 9 min. 20 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

Soon they'll be salting the roads to Little Wolf, Wisconsin, where nine of Sky Hopinka's videos from the past five years are joined by new poems and a photo series for a solo exhibition at the Poor Farm. Summer, there were guests and traffic and progress on the Poor Farm's new roof. Winter is a freeze Hopinka knows well: he's been making work in Wisconsin since 2013, and as an enrolled member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, his tribe has been in the area longer than records can say. In the oldest video in the show, *Kunjkága Remembers Red Banks*, *Kunjkága Remembers the Welcome Song* (2014), Hopinka drives to the shores where oral tradition suggests the Ho-Chunk tribe originated, just an hour east of the Poor Farm via W-54.

Ways—highways, old ways—in Hopinka's videos yield a retracing. In *Jáaji Approx.* (2015), recordings of Hopinka's father, a powwow singer, are the soundtrack to the artist's journey along his father's performance routes.

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Hopinka has talked about comfort in knowing that, always, there are cars on their way to a powwow; in *Kunj́kága Remembers Red Banks*, *Kunj́kága Remembers the Welcome Song*, Hopinka films out the car's back window, a relationship forming with the blurred headlights, whose eyes recede into rain.

Jáaji Approx. and *Kunj́kága Remembers Red Banks*, *Kunj́kága Remembers the Welcome Song* share a room on the second-floor of the Poor Farm. All the other videos have their own quarters. Still they talk over each other. Voices desert their objects to become interconnected, to each other and to the Poor Farm, which was built in 1876 as an almshouse and, since becoming an art exhibition space in 2009, has not been scraped of its history. Hopinka's work is itself drawn to its texture, signing the walls with four calligram poems shaped into birds with text from Star Trek and serpents made of Ralph Waldo Emerson's letter to President Van Buren warning against Cherokee removal.

Embodied, these texts assert an ontology other than objecthood. Hopinka often uses language as the basis for understanding learning as a relationship between subjects. He is himself a former teacher of chinuk wawa, a Chinookan creole he began studying at the same time he started making videos. He's said in indigenous language instruction, you often know the name of your teacher's teacher —the genealogy traces back, and is retraced, recited, by acts of speech. *wawa* (2014) brings together six generations of chinuk wawa speakers, of which Hopinka is one.

Language insists on presence, forcing a preservation through active use — as with paths—unlike photographic technology's oxymoronic promises of immortality and, as Roland Barthes proposes, death. In the series *The Land Describes Itself* (2019), Hopinka takes pictures of classroom projector's tables shuffled with cut-up landscapes. Collaged, the cut-up images on the table restore relationships that the individuated, discrete landscape picture is severed from. The more strips, the more the visual is gently smothered, shielded from view. Editing to distort reality, rarely showing faces, and eluding context when he can, Hopinka resists the easy consumption of images and information that art can entitle. "We can be close, we can share, but not without gift, but not without compassion," Hopinka says as he films himself

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piling strips in *Lore* (2019).

It's not surprising that Hopinka prefers a medium that, like relationships, is time-based. Like most experimental filmmakers, Hopinka resists narrative's tendency to vest authority and certainty into a primary account, and as such, his videos consist of multiple forms of storytelling from within and, when grouped for exhibition, from without. No one source stands alone, and for this, the acoustics of the Poor Farm serve Hopinka's purposes well, spatializing a moment when, exiting the last room, memories from the other works can collect, recollect, in the pathways of the hall.

Paths are a way to understand how seldom one comes first. Ways—highways, old ways—are middling, cars ahead and behind. In Hopinka's latest video at the Poor Farm, the 5-channel *matini (towards the ocean, towards the shore)* (2019), he again films the road from a back window. In chinuk wawa, he wonders about his friend driving, "Who is he searching for?" The answer is known, though withheld: "Lilu and T'alap'as, they know. They know who he's missing." The name is reserved for friends and not viewers, but so it is that not every moment on screen must offer a "way in." Possibilities for engagement exist outside intrusion: "Hopefully he finds him, Hopefully he finds her. Hopefully he finds them," Hopinka continues, extending three lines of good will.