

Tanya Leighton

# FRIEZE

## The Unruly Exuberance of Sky Hopinka's Videos

At Slash, San Francisco, the artist combines idiosyncratic media poetics with assertions of Indigenous presence

In an era in which American nativism is strenuously proclaimed on behalf of non-Indigenous settler descendants, thoughtful exhibitions of contemporary Indigenous art matter more than ever. In 'Sonic Transmissions' at Slash in San Francisco, Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians) conjures idiosyncratic media poetics while grappling with Indigenous survivance in late modernity. Musing on memory traces that are both personal and collective, current and historical, Hopinka overlaps moving images of down-to-earth scenes of everyday human interactions with varieties of hypnagogic abstraction, which can only be generated through digital manipulations of audiovisual recordings. His renderings make dream-reveries the critical stuff of life, and lived-life fundamentally connected to dreams.



Sky Hopinka, 'Sonic Transmissions', 2026, exhibition view. Courtesy: Slash, San Francisco

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Entering the gallery, visitors are buffeted by soundtracks that stream and swell: traditional Indigenous songs, Christian hymns, home-brewed folk-rock band rehearsals, atmospheric instrumental music, an Indigenous stand-up comedian's set and reminiscences that range from casual to elegiac. The six videos' visual components surge even more forcefully, projected onto large screens. Hopinka's treatments frequently transform humans into ghostly figures – spirits who persist in 'real life' as flashes of perception and remembrance. Dynamic textual elements in each video also emphasize the visual, creating productive disruptions in usual flows of reading, calling attention to the value that Hopinka imbues in language itself.

A literal instance: the Luiseño language lesson in *Kicking the Clouds* (2021), in which audio recordings feature the artist's family discussing the actualities of revitalizing Luiseño, an Indigenous language threatened by English and settler colonialism. The video is also a multigenerational meditation on how keeping language alive keeps people connected. Narration over visuals of material Indigenous culture – beaded medallions and handmade clothing – details how family engagements helped maintain Luiseño language and culture while divergent experiences – like the cultural erasure enforced by traumatic boarding-school experiences for earlier generations – intervened as obstacles.

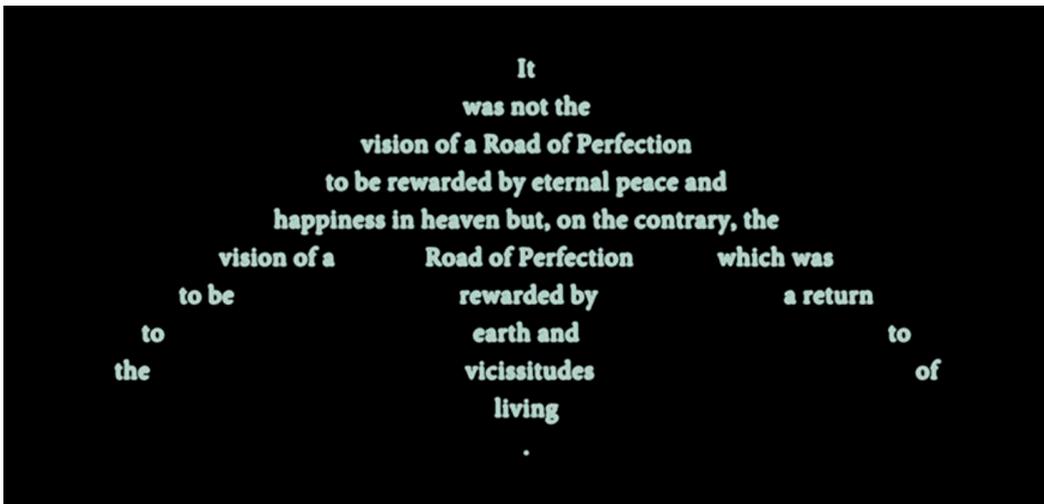


Sky Hopinka, *Lore*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: Slash, San Francisco

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The central video in the three-channel work *In Dreams and Autumn* (2021) follows several men in a slow-motion, seemingly endless march traversing a vast infrastructure (the Green Bay Packers' Lambeau Field, which has long connections with the Oneida Nation). Footage of their journey is flanked by digital projections of seascapes and landscapes – passages through desert canyon roads by automobile, followed by waterfalls, forests, skies and ripples on shallow water. These give way to abstract coloured lines, whose unnatural regularity of shape suggests traces of modern phenomena like television colour bars or lights on urban built spaces.

Starting from transfers of 16mm film, several of Hopinka's videos exude a sense of nostalgia bordering on melancholy: the refusal to let go of the past, or the insistence that the past be constantly reconsidered as part of the present and on the way to a possible future. Beyond nostalgia, the many screens, layered projections and radical post-production choices – extreme colour shifts, stop-motion flickering, backwards effects – visually embody haunting sensory modes. This is furthered with unconventional and evocative graphic designs for written texts laid out – and broken apart – into stylized bird shapes.



Sky Hopinka, *I'll Remember You as You Were, not as What You'll Become*, 2016, film still. Courtesy: Slash, San Francisco

Hopinka impels texts in repeated and determined flows across multiple screens, ignoring boundaries of frame to overlap on disparate images (implying the capacity of language to connect a multiplicity of experiences in time and space), and, further, in elaborate looping manoeuvres overlaying other projected imagery. This peaks in *He Who Wears Faces on His Ears* (2025), in which a rampant text initially crawls across the bottom of the screen, turns a corner to head upwards, then traces repeated circumnavigations inside the frame, half-filling it with irregular spirals, disorientating how readers usually take in textual meanings.

This unruly overflow expresses an exuberant assertiveness. Drawing from multiple sources, it manifests contemporary Indigenous cultural presence with an energy that is ready, willing and able to take advantage of technological mediations that transcend mimetic representation.