

Tanya Leighton



***Powwow People* – Sky Hopinka [TIFF '25 Review]**



Only his second feature-length film after *ma4ni—towards the ocean, towards the shore* (2021), Sky Hopinka's *Powwow People* is the director's least tangibly experimental project to date – at least in visual terms. And given the clear formal designs of his short film catalog, it's hard not to read this as an intentional shift. There is little pronounced abstraction to the compositions here, which aren't nearly so explicitly painterly as the director has conditioned viewers to expect, and there is even less avant-garde manipulation of the images. And for a filmmaker who has so long proven unique in his treatment of landscapes – no small feat given that landscape film is one of the longest standing subjects in the sphere of experimental cinema – those too are conspicuously absent in *Powwow People*. Indeed, for those fluent in Hopinka's work, upon first glance there appears to be a curious lack of any familiar directorial hand here at all. But stick with the film and its vision clarifies, in largely productive and sometimes thrilling ways.

Through his work, Hopinka has demonstrated a concern with the ways that Indigeneity persists in the present, how the historicity of Native culture meets and melds with the contemporary moment. Whether that is evoked in his landscape work, where both the material reality of the land and the artist's effort to preserve and interrogate that are at the fore, or in a study of the infrastructural and social means to support Indigenous contemporaneity (as in *ma4ni*), the filmmaker's overarching project feels compelled by an interest in the singular ways that past and present sit atop each other. Though taking new formal shape in *Powwow People* – which immediately asserts its switch-up from the usual Hopinka film in foregoing any typical poetic obliqueness in its name – that preoccupation remains very much in place. Following suit from its more straightforward title is a direct verité invitation into a powwow held on the grounds of Seattle's Daybreak Star Indian Cultural Center, where participants flock from all over North America to take part. Early on in the proceedings, Ruben Littlehead – emcee of the powwow – exclaims: "Put that in the documentary, Sky!" It's a minor, amiable moment that nonetheless speaks volumes to Hopinka's approach here, as the director seeks to smudge the seams of any intentional construction, leaving only observation and immersion as entry points to the semblance of thesis.

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The downside to this, of course, is that Hopinka is such an expert facilitator of images that the emphasis on close-ups and crowded frames here — as the camera roves the powwow grounds — can begin to feel less like an intentional aesthetic design than an absence of any governing formalism — or at least as an invigorating a formalism. But *Powwow People* is also concerned with duration — structured as a morning-to-night “narrative,” but actually shot over three days — and as it dances forward through its “day,” we become increasingly aware of Littlehead’s omnipresence, seemingly filling every silence with small talk and call-outs when there isn’t other business at hand to attend to. His voice functions as throughline across the film’s cuts and establishing shots, cohering its structure while also underlining *Powwow People*’s sonic texture as Hopinka’s primary formal concern. The director has long embedded an emphasis on language in his cinema, but it here takes aesthetic precedence like never before, conjuring the *feeling* of a community and a people through Littlehead’s nexus, enveloping the viewer in surprisingly experiential ways.

But just as we’ve settled into this aural atmosphere, which fosters intimacy in acclimating us to the various names we hear repeated, the inside jokes we can only glean bare suggestion from, and Littlehead’s silence-defeating announcements for powwow t-shirts and hoodies (which he has to confirm pricing on from the crowd), Hopinka shifts things again, and brings us to his bravura climax: a nearly 30-minute unbroken shot of the finals of the dance competitions. (Eagle-eared viewers will note that Julian Brave NoiseCat, co-director of 2024’s *Sugarcane*, is among the eight finalists, though he fails to make the top three.) But rather than overstyling this section or employing any of this more experimental tendencies, Hopinka surprises again in allowing the dancing itself to dictate the documentary form, as we follow and jump between the dancers, their mesmeric movement alternately ramping up and slowing down, leading them further from and in closer proximity to the camera. The sequence, as well as the film, is as open-hearted an invitation to his way of *seeing* as anything the director has given us before, and it’s in this section that the intense use of close-up clarifies. This is the portrait of a people from the inside, and Hopinka refuses to offer the illusion that any of that beauty or vastness or history can be contained within a film’s frame.