

## Sky Hopinka's Meditations on Place and Space

BY SHANE MCADAMS MAY 14, 2019 1:53 P.M.

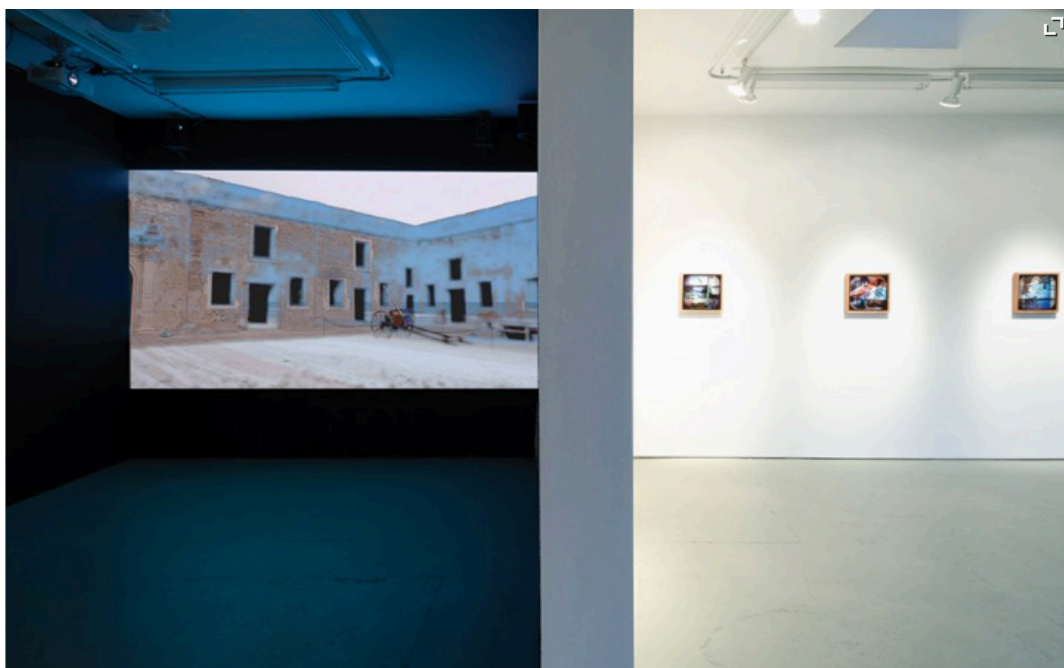


PHOTO CREDIT: MYRICA VON HASELBERG

Sky Hopinka's current show at The Green Gallery, "The Land Describes Itself," continues an investigation of land, space, time, politics and history—all set atop personal meaning.

One hesitates to call Sky Hopinka a landscape artist. Not because the label is technically inaccurate, but because of the connotations that attend such a label.

The history of American landscape art comes with an almost crippling supply of baggage. Nineteenth-century luminist painting is tainted by poisonous politics, and landscape art's esteem in general has declined since the days of the Hudson River School. Despite such associations, Sky Hopinka is in fact an artist of the American landscape—*his* American landscape. Those meditations on place and space delve into personal and historical relationships to the land as a Native American, a poet, a multi-media artist and mostly as a sensitively fierce dismantler of those persistent and quaint notions about the land we inhabit and fashion into art.

Shepherd Express, May 2019

# Tanya Leighton

His current show at The Green Gallery (1500 N. Farwell Ave.)—"The Land Describes Itself" (through June 1)—continues a productive investigation of the land, space, time, politics and history on top of personal meaning.

The two-channel video, *Cloudless Blue Egress of Summer*, is the show's clear emotional center, while a series of digital prints in the main gallery offers supplemental energy. The 16-minute video builds from a specific site in St. Augustine, Fla.—the longest continuously inhabited settlement in the U.S.—and unpacks its complicated history as a troublesome symbol of colonialism and general human folly. The video intersperses images and diagrams of the Spanish fortress Castillo de San Marcos, which was later used as a prison by the U.S. during the Seminole Wars ignited by the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

A scrolling textual account of a Seminole chieftain's escape from the prison (by this point called Fort Marion) plays alongside magical panning shots of drawings made by fellow prisoners of a circus they attended while captive. Captivating and emotionally wrenching by turns, the images provocatively pair grim survival and cultural escapism. Still, as unsettling as they are, Hopinka's earlier setup shots of a bobbing, hypnotic Atlantic Ocean soaks the entire viewing experience, reminding us of a more humbling and eternal geology that runs deeper than all our human catastrophes.

The content in the show uncovers toxic, shameful histories powerful enough to overshadow any personal meditations, but avoiding politics in a minefield of political subject matter is where Hopinka soars as a creator. To mention objective subject matter is almost to diminish his works' poetic delicacy. *Cloudless Blue Egress of Summer* is entrancing, gripping and often seductively beautiful. The work might be a political act by association, but it's mostly a multidimensional piece of landscape art made not by depicting a static physical viewshed, but by taking a single earthly site and breaking it into its component layers and personally reflecting on them.

In the release for the show, Hopinka reveals: "I've often had a difficult time in understanding my relationship to landscapes. I could never pinpoint why. These moving and static images attempt to stumble through that difficulty and uncertainty." The "difficulty and uncertainty" are palpable throughout the show. Each of the photo collages offers a cryptic message that further complicates the story beneath the fragmented imagery: "This is you describing what I saw," or "the outside being here right now." Like the video, these vignettes underscore the contingency of memory, which, like the land and its description, are constantly shifting and being reconfigured.

When the U.S. was busy carving up North America in the 19th century, a "landscape" aimed to permanently fix sublime fantasies into place, discarding alternative viewpoints and inconvenient narratives. The land Hopinka inherited a century-and-a-half later is covered with the desublimated fault lines of that troublingly oversimplified past. "The Land Describes Itself" confronts these complications and competing perspectives using poetry and impressionism to catch what is essentially uncatchable but clearly worth pursuing.