

# Tanya Leighton

Press Release

Sky Hopinka  
'Sunflower Siege Engine'

28 January – 25 February 2023

*Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge*  
– Aimé Césaire, 'Poetry and Knowledge' (1946)<sup>1</sup>

Commissioned by the San José Museum of Art and University of California Santa Cruz's 'Visualizing Abolition' multi-year project connecting arts, prisons and justice, Ho-Chunk artist Sky Hopinka's latest film *Sunflower Siege Engine* (2022) delicately turns nonlinear personal narrative practice towards the carceral borders kept between his ancestors and communities. Since the mid-19th century, an inheritance ideology has conscripted millions of Native ancestors in projects of necropolitical research. Science was called in to justify museum captivity, supporting the lie that tribal nations' families were settler pre-histories of modernity. Only after many Native peoples fought, and died, in World War I for the state that had colonized them was its citizenship bestowed. American captivity for white supremacy created Native prisoners of war, both dead and alive.<sup>2</sup>

*"There's no right way to be indian, /  
just a whole lot of wrong ways"*

Mohawk activist Richard Oakes proclaims, "[t]he population has always been held as prisoners and kept dependent upon others," in archival footage of his speech addressed to "the Great White Father and All His People". We see Oakes in 1969, windswept on the island of Alcatraz, before he led a 19-month-long occupation of the famous uninhabited prison in the San Francisco Bay with over twenty other students. We see him in 2022, on a laptop screen in Hopinka's studio, a symbol, like all those years ago, of the conditions on reservations that enclose many Native nations in the United States. We see him speak to a situation that remains both the artist's concern and anguish. Hopinka's inclusion of a figure that the 20th century's American Indian Movement largely forgot embodies a question of solidarity; what if a politics of abolition was as important to histories of Native resistance as struggles for repatriation?

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<sup>1</sup> Aimé Césaire, 'Poetry and Knowledge', in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946-82*, trans. A. James Arnold, CARAF Books (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), xlii–lvi

<sup>2</sup> In 1868, William Alexander Hammond, the then United States Army Surgeon General, made a federal order to obtain Indian skulls for the Army Medical Museum and in 1924, the US government only passed the Indian Citizenship Act after many Native peoples enlisted in World War I

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*“It’s time to go home, and float breathlessly on currents of willow and pine”*

In the cameras he holds, Hopinka chooses to swim in the lacunas of displacement and surrender to spiritual warfare. The dead and the living commune outside the scope of the law—the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (1990)—that brings Hopinka in anticipation of their return to nationhood. They commune at the intersections of his movements between Cahokia in Illinois, the coast of San Francisco and Seaside in Oregon. They commune in the analogue 16mm film and multiple exposures of digital video; of obsolete and contemporary. They commune in the equality of land and sky that accumulates in his medium-format photography. They commune in the presences, seen and unseen, of friends and collaborators, like Abby Lord and Adam and Zack Khalil, with whom he has worked to bring back some of the hundreds of thousands of ancestors still kept in state institutions and museums. They commune outside the conscripts of government policy that beleaguer intimacy and forestall closure.

*“There’s a failure in our walk, /  
I think to myself as I think about body and face and form and place”*

Hopinka told me that the excerpts of his poem—*Believe you me* (2022)—feel language in the film, unlike in older works like *wawa* (2014) where he utilizes it as a subject. To what end? Anishinaabe and Chemehuevi poet-ancestor Diane Burns’ nonchalance offers a clue. Through her, the somatic grammar of vulnerable comfort overrides the accusations leveled by others. He enters his own body, *“thinking about how easy it is to be stoic and to be called Nothing.”* With his camera, he reflects on how his own aging reflects his sensitivity to the past, tracing how, *“your distant voice eases the tension in my back.”* A critical intimacy with the weight of history turns his voice inward to the people who make parts of it possible.

*“I told you to wait for me”*

As Room Thirteen’s song “Tidal Wave” washes us into the film’s coda, Hopinka directs us with an imperfectly animated Disney-esque karaoke pointer: singalong to the surrender. Touch and play my wandering with your voice, asking us to consider the perspectives from which we may or may not join a ceremony stretching thousands of miles. Errantry is often spoken of as a passage between islands that requires neither to be central, yet in this body of work, we see how redrawing one’s history away from those who have stolen them requires the refusal of a singular root and the maintenance of many.

– Che Applewhite

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Sky Hopinka (born in 1984 in Ferndale, Washington) lives and works in New York. He is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians. He spent a number of years in Palm Springs and Riverside, California, Portland, Oregon, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In Portland, he studied and taught chinuk wawa, a language indigenous to the Lower Columbia River Basin. He received his BA from Portland State University in Liberal Arts and his MFA in Film, Video, Animation, and New Genres from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He currently teaches at Bard College.

His video, photo, and text work centers around personal positions of Indigenous homeland and landscape, designs of language as containers of culture expressed through personal, documentary, and non-fiction forms of media. Recent solo exhibitions include LUMA, Arles, Broadway Gallery, New York, and Memorial Art Gallery, Rochester in 2022; Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Block Museum of Art, Chicago, Vorspiel/transmediale, Berlin, and VOX Centre de l'image contemporaine, Montréal in 2021; and Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri, Tate Modern, London, The Green Gallery, Milwaukee, and CCS Bard (curated by Lauren Cornell), Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson in 2020, just to name a few. Current solo exhibitions include the 'Current Speed' exhibition series (curated by Tyler Blackwell) at Speed Art Museum, Louisville, Kentucky; 'Behind the evening tide' at LUMA Westbau, Zürich, and 'Seeing and Seen' at the San José Museum of Art, California.

Hopinka's work is included in the permanent collections of SFMOMA, San Francisco; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; The Whitney Museum, New York; Kadist, San Francisco; Milwaukee Art Museum; Minneapolis Institute of Art; Northwestern Mutual, Milwaukee; Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton; and Princeton University Art Museum, amongst others.

He was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University in 2018-2019, a Sundance Art of Non-fiction Fellow for 2019, an Art Matters Fellow in 2019, a recipient of a 2020 Alpert Award for Film/Video, a 2020 Guggenheim Fellow, and a 2021 Forge Project Fellow. In 2022, he received a MacArthur Fellowship for his work in films and videos that offer new strategies of representation for the expression of Indigenous worldviews.

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The gallery is open by appointment, Tuesday – Saturday, 11–6pm