

HYPERALLERGIC

FILM

The Exciting Native American Film Program at This Year's Whitney Biennial

At Yale Union, visitors can preview the films Sky Hopinka has curated for the Biennial.

Lindsay Costello May 28, 2019



(courtesy Yale Union)

In *What Was Always Yours and Never Lost*, Ho-Chunk/Pechanga filmmaker [Sky Hopinka](#) curates a diverse selection of film and video works that shine a light on the contemporary Indigenous experience. The exhibition at Yale Union, which will also be featured at this year's [Whitney Biennial](#), consists of films that explore native identity within and beyond colonial history. Some engage with semiotics, resulting in an experience of collaged sounds rather than direct language translations. Others focus on

landscape and location to create room for Indigenous perspectives.

Yale Union is large and airy, with towering windows welcoming in floods of natural light. For this show, monitors are housed in minimalist wood structures that center focus on the films while also functioning as subtle wayfinding devices. There is only one entrance/exit point, and the installations are organized from north to south in an undulating line. The films create a metaphorical territory for revitalizing Indigenous language and representation while employing cardinal direction to explore this territory.

Hopinka's own *First Annual* thoughtfully documents a powwow held in the gallery in advance of the show. Powwows are adaptable, often defined by the gathering within a location, rather than the location itself. This flexibility allows for the continued reclamation and occupation of diverse spaces, like a gallery. In the novel *There There*, Cheyenne/Arapaho author Tommy Orange writes, "We all came to the Big Oakland Powwow for different reasons. The messy, dangling strands of our lives got pulled into a braid ... And we've been coming for years, generations, lifetimes, layered in prayer and handwoven regalia, beaded and sewn together, feathered, braided, blessed, and cursed." Hopinka illustrates the intense, vibratory energy of the event. Sound echoes throughout the immense gallery. MC Fred Hill is nearly unintelligible, his words becoming a hazy, lilting song. Hopinka pairs the energetic footage with moments of calm — still shots of ocean waves and lush green spaces remind the viewer of the foundational relationship between humanity and the land.

The Violence of a Civilization Without Secrets, by Ojibway filmmakers Adam Khalil and Zack Khalil and Tlingit artist Jackson Polys, stands out as a compelling study on indigeneity and the claiming/reclaiming of something lost. It deconstructs the aftermath of the 1996 [Kennewick Man](#) discovery. Skeletal remains of a prehistoric



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Paleoamerican man were found in the Columbia River in Washington state, beginning of a years-long battle between the Umatilla people and the United States government over whether the remains should be reburied under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. The initially unclear origins of the remains fueled the racist notion that ancient Europeans were on the continent prior to recognized Indigenous peoples. The film tells the story by compiling news reports, court testimonies, and images of skeletons against an ambient musical backdrop by

Éliane Radigue. Interspersed is an ethical critique of the museum as an institution. It illustrates the postmortem violence of colonization, white supremacy, and theft.

James Luna's *The History of the Luiseño People* offers a more intimate narrative of loneliness and isolation. In the film, the Luiseño artist makes a series of phone calls from a darkened room on Christmas Eve. References to Americana are woven into his conversations with his family. These calls feel like modern storytelling; Luna at times bends the truth depending on who he's speaking to, but his diction remains the same.

Plains Cree filmmaker Thirza Cuthand and Algonquin filmmaker Caroline Monnet's works create ultra-sensory worlds. In the darkly comedic mockumentary *Reclamation*, Cuthand envisions a near-idyllic planet without white people. Monnet's *Mobilize* is comprised of rapidly shifting landscapes, city scenes, and archival depictions of Native American craftsmanship, all set to the intensity of Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq's "Uja."



(courtesy Yale Union)

Faces in the Crowd, an installation by Colectivo Los Ingrávidos, is the exhibition's crescendo. The 17 films in this collection all respond to the 2014 disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers' College in Iguala, Mexico at the hands of police and the army. The students were *en route* to Mexico City, where they had traveled each year to commemorate the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre. The films blend together to create a trance of repetition and frenzied urgency. Heavily saturated color, ambiguous visuals, and rapid editing cultivate tension and anxiety. Several

experiment with the translation and abstraction of language. Moments of silence highlight the gravity of the incident, pauses in between screams. Positioning *Faces in the Crowd* as the end of the show feels like a battle cry, or as the installation's film *The Sun Quartet* puts it (quoting David Huerta's *Ayotzinapa*), "a vibration thick with tears, a long howl."

What Was Always Yours and Never Lost is on view at Yale Union (800 SE 10th Ave, Portland) through June 9. The program will play at the Whitney Biennial September 20 and 21.

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