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ABOUT THE FILM

A poetic, experimental debut feature circling the origin of the death myth from the Chinookan people in the Pacific Northwest, mahni – towards the ocean, towards the shore follows two people as they wander through their surrounding nature, the spirit world, and something much deeper inside. At its center are Sweetwater Sahme and Jordan Mercier, who take separate paths contemplating their afterlife, rebirth, and death. Probing questions about humanity’s place on earth and other worlds, Sky Hopinka’s film will have audiences thinking (and dreaming) about it long after (Grasshopper)

80 min. | USA | 2020

mahni – towards the ocean, towards the shore
by Ela Bittencourt

The following article was originally published by Hyperallergic, February 3, 2020

Artist Sky Hopinka (Ho-Chunk Nation/Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians) is best known for his intricate shorts, which explore questions of heritage and language, and the power of storytelling. Hopinka, who first learned Chinuk Wawa — a nearly extinct indigenous language from the Pacific Northwest — in Portland, Oregon when he was in his 20s, is particularly attentive to how experience is embedded in the sensorial aspects of language. Hopinka’s rapturous feature-length debut, mahni—towards the ocean, towards the shore, which premiered at this year’s Sundance Film Festival, elaborates on these enduring themes. Presented as part of the Festival’s New Frontier program — a section dedicated to the intersections of art, cinema and technology — mahni screened alongside films from artists such as Ai Weiwei and Francis Alÿs, along with a sizable group of directors working in VR.

In the past, Hopinka has explored experimental animation and digital media. His shorts, such as Fainting Spells (2018), deal with indigenous myths, and others, including Wawa (2014), explore language acquisition. Belonging, in the context of indigenous resistance and protest, also features heavily in Dislocation Blues (2017). The results have often been dense, syncretic visual poems. With mahni, which is set in the Columbia River Basin and features stunning forest and ocean views, Hopinka Mining Indigenous Myths and Languages to Contemplate Life’s Meaning. The film centers on interviews with his two friends, Jordan Mercier and Sweetwater Sahme, in both Chinuk Wawa and English. The fact that both languages are subtitled calls into question the opposition of ideas of a “native” versus a “foreign” language.

Unlike his shorts, in which protagonists including Hopinka’s language teacher and father, appear briefly, mahni is a sustained documentary portrait. Via separate conversations with the filmmaker, Jordan, a young father, and Sweetwater, an expectant mother (no relation), each speak of drawing strength from Chinuk traditions (in Jordan’s case, questions around masculinity and socialization; in Sweetwater’s, coping with her family’s struggles with alcoholism, and undergoing pre-natal water cleansing rites). Their personal stories reveal respective questions and journeys surrounding their identities. Their conversations are further framed by an indigenous origin myth. As Hopinka tells it, two protagonists, Lilu and T’alap’as (Chinuk for wolf and coyote, respectively), debate whether there should be an afterlife. Hopinka thus contemplates the meaningfulness of life vis-à-vis death.

At times, mahni also feels like a richly woven ghost story. For example, in scenes where Jordan is shown driving, Hopinka, whom we never see, asks repeatedly where they are going. The effect is uncanny, as if an omnipresent, disembodied spirit were observing them an eeriness further enhanced by the evocative electronic score.

As with any myth, Hopinka makes us question what belief systems inform the world, in Chinuk Wawa or North American English. Like a Borgesian Aleph that holds the key to existence, Hopinka lays claim to mythology, and explores a paradigm shift from the sacred to the profane. Such a shift signals a loss of aura that perhaps only investigations of language can help reclaim.

Sky Hopinka on Indigenous Language, the Afterlife, and Making His First Feature
—As told to Jordan Cronk

The following interview was originally published by Artnet, January 28, 2020

Mahni centers on the Chinookan origin-of-death myth, in which two people decide whether or not someone’s spirit comes back after they die. It’s the beginning of a longer cycle of myths that tells of a journey to the spirit world. As these stories tend to do, the cycle provides a model for understanding our own existence.

I was born in northern Washington, and after spending my teens and early twenties in Southern California, I moved to Portland, Oregon, to go to school. There, I learned Chinuk Wawa and began to get involved in Indigenous language revitalization, which offered me a framework for thinking about my place in this country and this region as an Indigenous person. The Pacific Northwest landscape is familiar to me: It’s my home, but not my homeland, as my tribes are from Wisconsin and Southern California. I find it deeply fascinating that there are so many ways to look at where belonging and its tensions come from, what these places represent.

Jordan Mercier acted in my only narrative short, huyhuy, or “trade” in Chinuk Wawa. That project helped us see our language in an unspectacular way, where it’s just the way
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Acropolis Cinema presents:

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April 9 - 11, 2021 – Lumiere Music Hall

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www.acropoliscinema.com