

Acropolis Cinema  
presents:



April 9 - 11, 2021 - Lumiere Music Hall

# ABOUT THE FILM

A poetic, experimental debut feature circling the origin of the death myth from the Chinookan people in the Pacific Northwest, *małni – 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 Hopkina's film will have audiences thinking (and dreaming) about it long after (Grasshopper)

80 min. | USA | 2020

## *małni – 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 Luiseño 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, *małni—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, *małni* 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 *małni*, 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, *matni* 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, *matni* 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 Artforum, January 28, 2020*

*Matni* 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

that we talk. When I was ready to make a feature, it felt intuitive to return to the Northwest and see what we could do in this language and landscape.

I first met Sweetwater Sahme in 2006 as part of the Native student group at Portland State University. I was doing some location scouting and shooting tests, and she happened to be in Portland. Before we started shooting together, she told me she was pregnant, and that really guided the direction of the film—to frame the portraits around these moments of change and transition in the characters' lives, and how those moments could respond to the origin-of-death myth. Jordan and his wife, Amanda, had their daughter Ila five years earlier, and Amanda gave birth to their son Vincent during production. Nonfiction feels more natural to me than working with something scripted. I knew early on that I didn't want to learn a whole new way to make films, and instead wanted to see how well my short film-making practice scaled up to a longer form. The work is primarily self-funded; I served as cinematographer, sound designer, and editor.

The amount of footage for *mani* was about thirteen hours in total, which is much more than what I'm used to working with. And so I started assembling the movie the way that I would a short, constructing sections for the beginning, middle, and end. Those blocks introduced structure, but it was figuring out how to get to and depart from those scenes that proved most difficult. I decided to employ a few visual interludes of dancing, singing, and traveling as caesurae in the narrative, using them as opportunities to ease the burden placed on Sweetwater and Jordan to carry the story. Allowing them generous breathing room as characters was important to me, especially since there aren't any postproduction effects like what I've employed in the past. Almost everything that has a more visually abstract element to it was done in-camera with a slow shutter speed, and then fleshed out further in post. When I was editing, I never felt the impulse to affect anything for the sake of it—I was reluctant to overburden the film. Instead, I trusted the image and montage to create a space of understanding for the viewer. ♦



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