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OF FIRE & LIGHTNING

AN INTERVIEW WITH SKY HOPINKA

by Ashley Stull Meyers

The film *Fainting Spells* is a work about syncope — about tiny rushes of blood fueled by shock or awe. Its narrative is built around things lost, but more importantly, things that the land can bring back to us. In this spirit, Sky Hopinka examines the unfailing hope seen in environmental regeneration. In July 2019, Hopinka speaks to curator Ashley Stull Meyers about the communities of artists, musicians, and Indigenous thinkers that keep the (literal and conceptual) fires burning.

Ashley Stull Meyers: After watching *Fainting Spells*, I can't help but want to ask you about the title. Some of the film's visual effects seem to reference other states of consciousness and the jarring act of awakening. Can you speak to those themes and the heart of your attraction to them?

Sky Hopinka: I had always thought that the phrase "fainting spells" sounded evocative, and was a bit mysterious. It ultimately led me to explore the Xąwįska plant. After that the visual elements in the film really guided themselves in these waves of collapse and revival, where you lose yourself for a moment and then regain consciousness. There's something terrifying and beautiful about it, and I wanted the sections in the film to mimic that in a way, where each is about a kind of dreamlike state in between moments of conscious, and wondering *where did I go, and how did I get there*?

ASM: Let's talk about Xąwįska. Can you elaborate a bit more about what this is in Ho-Chunk culture and how it is used?

SH: It is an Indian Pipe plant that my tribe used to revive people that fainted. I came across it in one of our ethnobotany texts a few years ago. You dry it, mash it up, and then burn it like a smudge, and the smell and smoke brings people back. In my attempt to learn more, I found that the people I asked knew its use but no one was sure of the origin. Ultimately, it got me thinking about making up a creation myth for it — nothing canonical to my tribe, but rather about the search and process for understanding its uses, and placing myself in the position of someone who maybe needed to tell its story, and how it came to them.

ASM: The scoring of the film is incredibly powerful, from the instrumental sections to the licensed narrative songs. Can you speak about Arlene Williams, Carnes Burnson, Ramiro Ramirez, et al. and your decision to include their music in the film? In what ways do they inform your visual gestures?

SH: Arlene and Carnes wrote that song, "Go My Son" in the '60s and it's one that I've known growing up in so many different forms and iterations. It's one of those songs that's really well known in the Native community, but no one really knows where it comes from. They were kind enough to let me use the song in the piece and how it opens and closes the films really bookends it well for me, in the melody and the way Arlene sings — it's melancholic yet hopeful, and that really was the punctum for the last shot and its effects.

Ramiro has done music for me in the past, and when I came across this song of his I just felt it fit so well with the first section. With recollections of the sea, the moving landscape, and this lack of stability in the image that is then provided by the constant rhythm of the song, it just made so much sense when I heard it. And I understood why, later.

ASM: "Summer Sleeper" is written/composed by you. Was that written specifically for the film? Can you speak about that process in the context of the rest of your practice?

SH: It was written more or less for the film. I was taking a break from editing and messing around on my guitar when I came up with the rhythm and melody, and just played it over and over again while recording it on my tape player. I thought it would work well in the film. It definitely hit the notes of the tone I was thinking about while editing. I think it's pretty indicative of my practice, where I'll shoot and edit, but along the way meander and wander a bit through different materials I come across. I generate throughout the

process. Whether it's writing, research, or making music, those breaks from the "filmmaking" are always needed. I'm always looking for what will say the thing that I'm having a hard time trying to say.

ASM: One of the most striking visual allegories in the film is that of fire and (its more atmospherically dramatic form) lightning. Fire and smoke play a wide variety of metaphorical roles in conversations about the land, conquest, and new beginnings, which are all important in conversations about Indigenous rights and politics. Can you speak about these moments in the film?

SH: The main fire sequence was a controlled burn on a reservation in Oregon, and that aspect of land management and care is important for the health of the forest, as well as the safety of the people that live there. In some ways, the scene looks terrifying, rightly so, but it also signifies tending and involvement in the world around you, and that speaks to so many layers of the politics around land rights and all those things you mentioned. The controlled burn and fire is an in-between moment, between life and death, a liminal space where destruction is making way for something new and healthier. And the lightning is a referent to certain Ho-Chunk beliefs and systems within our community and culture.

ASM: Can you also speak about the film's engagement with spirits, the sacred, and generational longing? The accompanying text (handwriting by Leslie Orihel) is really special, and remarks on these concepts several times.

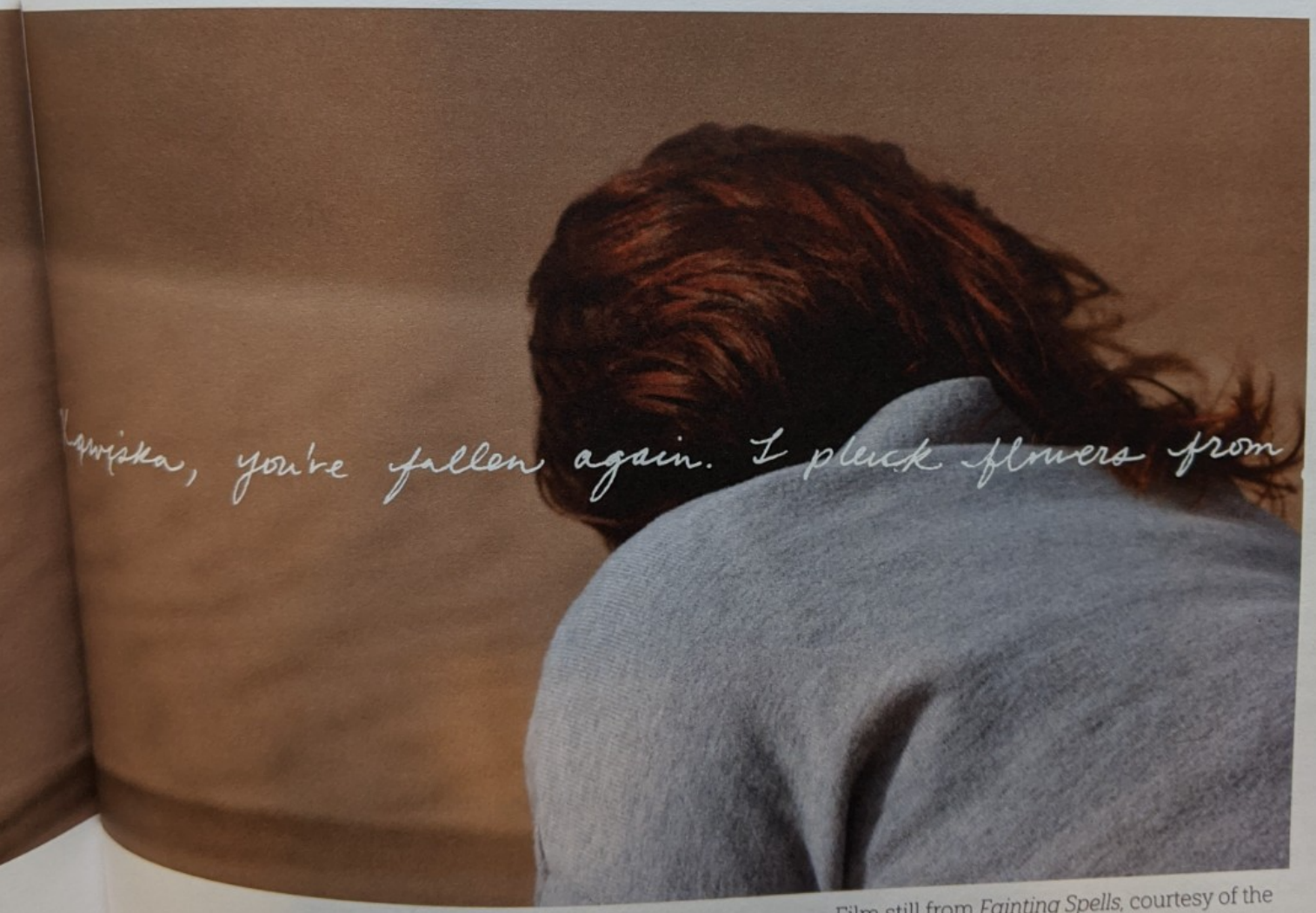
SH: The framework of the film is someone asking to be told a story, about the origin of the Xąwįska, and the scrolling text is the telling of that story. That storytelling space is where it's usually okay to talk about such things. The spirit world is a place I think about often, and these different layers of consciousness are all mysterious to me in so many ways. Making work about those things is as much about my wandering through those ideas and practices as it is about pointing to them and feeling okay and safe enough to talk about them, however coded it needs to be. I wanted the text to feel familiar, and conversational and personal. I asked Leslie to write it out to add that intimacy that speaks to intergenerational storytelling, and the sharing of knowledge.

ASM: Lastly, who is the cloaked figure represented in much of Fainting Spells? Are they hero, villain, or neither?

SH: When I was working with that footage with the greenscreen cloth over myself, I overlaid the images, and the figure reminded me of the Xąwįska. It's a personification of the plant. I don't see the figure as hero or villain, but just as is — as an observer that ferries people around these different states of being.

ASM: What attracted you to filmmaking as an artist? What are the stakes of the medium where it concerns record keeping and storytelling? And, do you consider yourself a documentarian?

SH: Finding film to be an intersection of my main interests was what drew me in, and the possibilities with what I can do is what keeps me making work. I can make films such as this one and use writing and music and images to convey these meanings that I'm working through myself, within my own culture. Seeing what other Indigenous filmmakers are doing, what they're thinking through and what their concerns are, also feels important. For me, that's very exciting. I wouldn't consider myself a documentarian in the most formal sense, but I like to say that I am. I don't think I make work in conventional sorts of ways, and by me claiming that this is documentary, it disrupts the expectations and ethics of that practice in small but deliberate movements.



Film still from *Fainting Spells*, courtesy of the filmmaker.