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First Impressions (The Art of Boat Names)

Emily Waknine

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Text appears on screen, hand-drawn, pen on paper. Each word moves and changes, one to the next. In the mind of the viewer they evoke emotions, each single word seems to tell a story. In the video *First Impressions (The Art of Boat Names)*, an animated video produced in 2014 by Toronto artist Emily Waknine, the words gently moving and morphing on the screen are names found on local boats. Each name will eventually break apart and morph into the next, while the gentle bouncing motion of the animation mimics the movement of a boat on water. Each frame of the video is illustrated simply, and the cell animations feature boat names fading into one another in alphabetical order on the screen. The images are imperfect; simple in their lack of colour, highlighting the often absurd nature of the words - boat names detached from their boats. The accompanying audio is a simple melody, produced on a cheap Casio then digitally altered - eventually sounding like a tape in a walkman with a dying battery - warped and haunting.

Over coffee and a conversation that started with boats and ended with cats, I asked Emily why she chose boat names as an area to explore. There are infinite choices when naming a boat, conventions around how it can be done and how it can be undone. Every choice of name is very telling of the owner. Names can be self-deprecating, bordering on masochistic: "She Got The House", "Obsession" "Girlfriend". They are often absurd, humorous, and rely on puns and creative spelling like "Liquid Asset" and "Fantasea". Names are chosen to evoke strength and power (Titanic) or to relay the hobbies and passions of the owner. In *First Impressions*, Emily isolates each word and as the disembodied names morph into and out of focus on screen the viewer sees no images. There is simply the motion of the text as it moves and changes and the highly evocative nature of the boat names bring images to mind as they float across the screen. The words become pictures. The viewer begins to envision the boat that goes with each name

and perhaps more tellingly, the owner. In our conversation, Emily spoke about “pictures that will never be”, referring to the images that the boat names illicit. The names of boats tell the story of how the boat came to belong to its owner and indeed, who that owner may be. They sometimes defy pretension - an acknowledgement of the love the boat’s owner feels for the object. Emily showed me a video she had taken of the boat named *Obsession*, bobbing up and down slowly at its dock, the calmness of the image in contrast to the name.

Our conversation continued from the nature of the boat’s names toward boat culture in general. What is the draw that boats and the water seem to have? The idea of peacefulness and escape can seem incongruous with life in Toronto. There are few spaces in the city where the clutter and noise begin to fade. Even though the cityscape never fully disappears, it can seem far away when viewed from the Toronto Island, the Leslie Street Spit, or the marinas along the waterfront. These spaces provide a sense of peace. Having grown up on the water and around boats myself I understand the calmness that they inspire. Seeing a horizon dotted with sails is an image ingrained into my childhood, and walking alongside the marina catching glimpses at the sailboats and their names is something I did almost daily. For me now, seeing the water and hearing boats moored at the marina are a reminder of home. Boating becomes a common denominator - bringing people together despite the anonymity of a large city into a subculture that can sometimes seem exclusionary and elite. While boating, you are a member of a special club. A phenomenon that always stood out to me when boating as a kid was what I nicknamed the “boat wave”. No matter the size or class of vessel, there was an unwritten rule that you had to wave at the passengers of each passing boat. It’s an acknowledgement of a common ground, a shared pastime.

As we watched the video of *Obsession* floating calmly on the waves, Emily proclaimed her own obsession in boats and their names. After pets and people, what object is so dependent on a name? The boat *Girlfriend* became a temporary home for one of her friends, and this is certainly a nod to how absurd these names can sometimes be. In speaking about obsessions, we spoke of Emily’s other one - animation as a form. For me, the appeal of animation is its potential for simplicity and accessibility. Simple illustration comes to life and animation remains unhindered by centuries-old histories and conventions. Humour and delight in the moving image are inherent to animation and timing becomes crucial. *First Impressions* speaks of the temporal nature of a wave, the motion of the water, and the glimpses we get into the life of the owner when we meet the boat. First impressions are fleeting, and Emily’s work is a tender look at these fleeting glances.

-Tori Maas