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Toronto Harbourfront
Marjan Verstappen
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There's nothing cryptic about Marjan Verstappen's sand animation *Toronto Harbourfront 1688 – 2013*. That is, of course, for the viewer from the Greater Toronto Area. To others it could seem like an abstract expression in colour, texture and movement. But for those familiar with how maps plot The Tdot, the coastal line is bitingly clear and the reference to how the waterfront has been pruned and polished since the late 17th century feels convincingly true.

As the sand morphs to reveal the constant flow of human-made contours and the growth of the Leslie Street Spit, there's a sense that an intimate knowledge of how the land has been shaped is at play. This is impressive considering that Verstappen herself is a Kiwi who has only recently found herself in Toronto. Her sense of familiarity has been well earned though through her passion for cartography, deep archival research of aerial photos, and a vested interest to get to know the area. On a personal level, a core part of Verstappen's practice is to experiment with new art techniques as a way to understand her geographic surroundings better. *Toronto Harbourfront 1688 – 2013* is Verstappen's first animation, a medium that allowed her to play with the sense of time, tell history through shapes, and set static perspectives in motion.

"I made this work a year ago, at the time I'd only been living in Toronto a few months. I come from a very small country so I guess I was feeling pretty overwhelmed. I was trying to gain mastery over this huge city, and trying to understand how it can come about, why it was shaped the way it was."

The saying that "art is life" applies here in a very literal way. The animation shows the movement of capital, people and goods over hundreds of years as a physical force through mere slight movements of sand. With those researched movements, Verstappen charts a Torontonians Anthropocene – the current era where humans have become a geological force.

Her choice of stop motion sand animation to do so forces her to work directly under the camera so the last image is always the *template* for the current one. It smacks of "transformation." This is in contrast to traditional drawn animation where the last image is just a visual *reference* for the current one, which is not physically attached to its predecessor. The artist in that case can do what they want relative to the reference, whereas in *Toronto Harbourfront 1688 – 2013* Verstappen has no choice but to work with

the template provided by the last image. In this sense, Verstappen makes a deeper case for what the Anthropogenic transformation of Toronto's waterfront has really been.

-Britt Wray